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***‘Doing, feeling, thinking rope’: a comparative analysis  
of rope bondage scenes in London, Berlin and Paris.***

**Iris Carmina Ordean**

This thesis is submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of Modern Languages and Cultures

Department of Geography

Durham University

2023

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## Acknowledgements

It has certainly been one great adventure getting here. There are so many people that I would like to address my thanks to, for their help, support and contribution in the production of this thesis.

I would like to thank each and every one of the people in the rope scene who listened, talked, interacted, experienced and brought their own unique and wholehearted contribution to this project; none of this would *ever* be possible without you, and I am truly grateful for your trust and for opening me doors to a very special part of your lives. Each conversation, interview, workshop, jam session, recording, walk and tying experience has helped shape the outcome of this project, and has helped me grow as a person.

I would like to offer my sincere thanks to my three thesis supervisors, Professor Tom Wynn, Dr Rachel Colls and Dr Fusako Innami for their input, help, advice and guidance throughout these years. I especially value your enthusiasm for my project and I am extremely grateful for your patience, empathy and support during less comfortable periods. I would also like to thank Professor Divya P. Tolia-Kelly for her supervisory support during the first year of my PhD.

I would like to thank the Centre for Visual Arts and Culture (CVAC) and Professor Ludmilla Jordanova in particular for helping me give this project a home, and for creating an atmosphere of camaraderie among CVAC cohorts. I am thankful to my CVAC colleagues whom I shared so many moments with, and who helped me in so many different ways. I'm also taking the opportunity here to thank the Leverhulme Trust, whose financial contribution has made this research possible.

I wish to thank my co-author and 'partner in crime' Heath Pennington for the extremely valuable work they are doing, and for their pertinent attempts to contribute to BDSM and rope bondage's legacy in the academic field; I cherish greatly our Parisian late summer night discussions, pivotal in shaping some concepts I'm advancing in this thesis. Many thanks also to the 'worker bees' who helped me a lot with the transcription of close to 70 interview hours: thank you for your time and energy. Thank you Adina for keeping the spirits high and the conversation interesting throughout the write-up period.

I would also like to mention all those who have mentored me 'curatorially' throughout these ten years, and who directly or indirectly inspired me to use some of the research methods, as well as to include Chapter 6 in my thesis. Thank you to my great colleagues Anne and Roxana for your support and for having faith in me. Finally, an enormous thanks goes to my family and friends. Thank you so much for all your love and support. I could not have done it without you.

## Abstract

Rope bondage is an activity gaining popularity throughout Europe. However, the practice is still marginalized within society. It also remains understudied and sidelined within kink literatures and cultural studies. The thesis brings these literatures together by exploring the relationship between 'lived' experience, 'situated' knowledge and identitarian positions within the practice of rope bondage. It provides an account of motivation and experiences of participating in rope bondage negotiated encounters in the forms of private sessions, rope jams, practice evenings, workshops, festivals and masterclasses.

The research was conducted at rope bondage venues in London, Berlin and Paris with 45 participants, from which 11 participants were 'riggers' (people who tie), 10 participants were 'models' (people who get tied) and 24 participants were 'switches' (people who enjoy both tying and getting tied). It used a multi-methodological qualitative approach, drawing on participant observation, auto-ethnography, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, and artistic research in order to investigate rope bondage practitioners' 'lived' experience mediated through affective mutuality within these three settings.

The thesis highlights the complex ways in which people understand, experience and situate in relation to the practice of rope bondage. First, the thesis examines the ways in which the practice of rope bondage be mobilised to address narratives pertaining to cross-culturality (East / West), and the politics of 'kink'. Second the thesis attempts to devise an inclusive, horizontal and rhizomatic theoretical framework through which the practice can be examined. Third, the thesis examines the positionality of the researcher-participant within the theoretical framework. Fourth, this research adds to the ongoing initiatives aimed at integrating BDSM studies into academic discourse, which involves moving away from discussions around de/pathologization of kink, establishing rope bondage as a practice in its own right and contributing to interdisciplinary scholarship on Deleuzian theories, cultural studies, sexual cultures, affect, and curatorial theory. The thesis concludes with a call for further research on identitarian positionality and the way in which 'lived' experience impacts processes of knowledge-production within the practice of rope bondage.

# Table of Contents

Statement of Copyright.....	1
Acknowledgements.....	2
Thesis abstract .....	3
a. Privacy notice .....	9
b. Coding the fieldwork places .....	10
c. Transcription conventions.....	10
d. Glossary of terms.....	11
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction.....</b>	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.15</b>
1.0. Introduction .....	16
1.1. The practice of rope bondage and research on BDSM / kink .....	16
1.2. Partnership and ‘the curatorial’ .....	18
1.3. Personal Rationale .....	20
1.4. Research Design, Aim and Questions .....	22
1.5. Fieldwork overview .....	23
1.6. Thesis Structure .....	25
<b>Chapter 2: Literature Review.....</b>	<b>29</b>
2.0. Introduction .....	30
2.1. Kink literatures .....	31
2.1.1. General overview.....	31
2.1.2. A genealogy of kink .....	33
2.1.3. Ethnographies of kink .....	38
2.2. Rope bondage: primary sources .....	44

2.3. Literatures on ‘Japaneseness’ .....	49
2.4. Conclusion .....	53
<b>Chapter 3: Methodology .....</b>	<b>55</b>
3.0. Introduction .....	56
3.1. Research design and approach .....	56
3.1.1. Situating the Self .....	58
3.2. ‘Multiplicity’ and the creative-critical research framework .....	61
3.3. Field sites .....	64
3.3.1. Adjusting field roles .....	69
3.4. Participant recruitment .....	70
3.5. Research methods .....	74
3.5.1. Participant observation .....	76
3.5.2. Autoethnography as research-creation .....	78
3.5.3. Interviewing .....	83
3.6. Data analysis .....	90
3.7. Conclusion .....	93
<b><i>Interlude: the continuum</i> .....</b>	<b>95</b>
<b>Chapter 4: The Cultural continuum .....</b>	<b>100</b>
4.0. Introduction .....	101
4.1. Situating cross-culturality .....	104
4.1.1. Performing cross-culturality in rope bondage practices .....	109
4.2. The emergence of the cultural <i>continuum</i> .....	115
4.2.1. Problematizing the ‘historical canon’ .....	117

4.2.2. Conjuring the <i>continuum</i> .....	122
4.3. Language and cultural affinity .....	123
4.3.1. Jargon's role in crafting 'authenticity' .....	124
4.3.2. 'Shibari', 'Kinbaku', 'rope bondage': markers of culture .....	128
4.4. Conclusion .....	133
<b>Chapter 5: The Kink Continuum .....</b>	<b>136</b>
5.0. Introduction .....	137
5.1. Situating 'kink' .....	139
5.2. The space of the rope bondage <i>continuum</i> .....	145
5.2.1. Shifting 'positions', ways of 'being' and 'becoming' .....	145
5.2.2. The role of agency in identitarian positioning .....	150
5.3. Rope Bondage's relationship with the kink <i>Continuum</i> .....	155
5.4. Language matters (?) .....	157
5.5. Conclusion .....	163
<b>Chapter 6: Curating <i>continuums</i> .....</b>	<b>165</b>
6.0. Introduction .....	166
6.1. Situating the curatorial and the creation of the curatorial continuum .....	169
6.2. Case study: notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope and 'becoming'-creator .....	173
6.2.1. 'Curatoriality' .....	174
6.2.2. 'Constellation' .....	181
6.2.3. 'Transposition' .....	186
6.2.4. 'Hospitality' .....	193
6.3. <i>Conclusion</i> .....	200

<b>Chapter 7: Conclusion .....</b>	<b>203</b>
7.0. Introduction .....	204
7.1. Summary of the research findings .....	204
7.2. Key contributions of the research .....	208
7.2.1. Concepts .....	210
7.2.2. Methods .....	212
7.3. Suggestions for future research .....	213
List of illustrations .....	218
Appendix A .....	226
Part I .....	226
Part II .....	250
Part III .....	257
Appendix B .....	260
Part I .....	260
Part II .....	267
Part III .....	273
Bibliography .....	275

*I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand?*

Spradley (1979: 34)

#### a. Privacy notice

- ✓ Unless otherwise specified, interview partners and other practitioners mentioned throughout this research are anonymized.
- ✓ All field contributors to this thesis will be referred to using ‘the plural pronouns *they*, *them*, and *their*, to refer to singular persons of any gender’ (Williams, 2012: 263). Similar solutions have been adopted by kink authors whose research bears many similarities with this thesis, such as H. Pennington, who cites the American Psychological Association’s resolution to declare the singular ‘*they/them/their*’ appropriate in their research (2017: 2, note 5), or Barkas, who adopts a similar solution, having confidence in the fact that ‘gender is 100 % constructed, and further that the sex of a person does not lead to any difference in the following topics’ (2016: 16). The use of ‘*they*’ neutralizes and protects my interview partners, but is also used to subtly bring ‘queerness’ to the fore: while the overwhelming majority identify as queer and / or distance themselves from gender normativity, a couple of people have even changed gender identification while fieldwork was in progress. I see no better way to honour this diversity. As Williams once said, ‘the traditional forms reflect a gender binary to which I do not subscribe’ (2012: 263).
- ✓ Interviews have been conducted in English, French and Spanish. Some passages quoted in field notes have also been translated from Romanian and German.
- ✓ English is not the first language of all my interview partners. In order to preserve that individual flavour, transcriptions will be respecting those particularities. Where errors are noticeable, they are marked using the convention: [sic].
- ✓ Strong language appears in some transcribed passages, not only due to the dedication towards preserving the original speech style, but also for highlighting an aspect of the scene culture, which often use derogatory language in BDSM and / or rope bondage play.
- ✓ When referencing Japanese names, surnames are followed by the given names.
- ✓ Some of the primary material, and a couple of academic works will be cited with an alias, usually the scene name of the authors (for example: Hedwig, 2011; Master K., or 2015; Midori, 2001). This coincides with the publishing name, and this thesis will also be following that coding.

## b. Coding the fieldwork places<sup>1</sup>

To protect the identity of the places in which I conducted fieldwork, the following coding conventions were used:

- ✓ **The Barn**, a well-established and popular kink festival organised twice a year in Berlin.
- ✓ **The Hangar**, a former Berlin kink space, whose activities, atmosphere, participants and administration board were often intertwining with The Barn. For several years they ran in parallel. A number of interviews make reference to this important space of Berlin's rope scene.
- ✓ **The Garden**, the leading rope bondage space in London at the time this thesis was written is the same code name that Galati (2017) has used in their dissertation. In agreement with the author and the owners of the space, it has been agreed that the name should remain the same, as the materials gathered by both this thesis and Galati's project is of complementary nature, and is therefore beneficial for all future research purposes.
- ✓ **The Greenhouse**, for a now-former Parisian kink place with a specific interest in rope bondage, which became deeply controversial and finally dissolved, after its owner was publicly accused of abuse and numerous other systematic consent violations. These incidents unfolded during my time in the field in Paris.
- ✓ **F\*** stands for an island in the Mediterranean Sea where participant P.A. is based. Although I met P.A. at The Barn in Berlin, we decided to integrate a creative duo and worked together on the artist dossier *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope*. The project is described in Chapter 6.

## c. Transcription conventions

word followed by comma (,) = short pause;

word followed by dash (-) = self-interruption;

ellipses (...) = long pause;

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<sup>1</sup> With the exception of the code name The Garden which I adopted from previous research (Galati, 2017) on the same London venue, all other code names were given using this author's personal affective associations with the places of fieldwork, and therefore illustrating a place's capacity for acting and being acted upon. In this sense, the coding mirrors Massumi's 'meaning encounter', explained as '[a] set of affects, a portion of the object's essential dynamism' which is 'drawn in, transferred into the substance of the thinking-perceiving body' (1993: 18 and 36, quoted in O'Sullivan, 2006: 21). Code names are nothing else than transference of certain meanings my thinking-perceiving body, as part of the field.

bracketed ellipses [...] = words omitted;

*italics* for emphasis;

single quotes within the transcribed text = re-enacting air quotes, or voice inflexions suggestive for the use of quotes;

use of words inside bracketed ellipses (for example: [laughs], [gesticulates]) = indicate nonverbal and sometimes paraverbal language which complements the written text in meaningful ways.

- ✓ When citing from an interview file, the following coding will be used: *L.2 / 21.01.2019*, where L. stands for London (the place of the fieldwork), the ensuing numbers representing the filing order and the date of the interview. In this case, *L.2 / 21.01.2019* is the second interview conducted in London, which took place on the 21<sup>st</sup> of January 2019.

#### **d. Glossary of terms**

This thesis will use a mixture of Japanese and English terms, reflecting the diversity present in the rope bondage scene. It is also important to note at this stage that this glossary should by no means be seen as exhaustive for rope bondage or kink-related practices, but rather as a brief notation of some of the most used terms which will be encountered in this thesis. The majority of the terms are internationalised jargon, that demonstrate the researched scene interpolates attributes of rhizomatic geographies (Deleuze, Guattari, Pérez & Larraceleta, 2003). More complex terms or concepts are further explained in footnotes throughout the thesis.

Most of the glossary entries have been most generously shared with me by researcher-practitioner B.A. (who I am very grateful to). This terminology is used by rope bondage practitioners worldwide. Other meanings come from my field notes and / or were further explained to me in the field.

Word (including the Japanese character)	Meaning
<i>Bottom /bunny / Submissive / sub / s / bottom / model</i>	Various kink names to designate the person who is being tied during a rope encounter.
'Doing' rope	The practice of tying and being tied. More than its materiality, rope becomes an action to be performed, to be 'done'.
<i>Dojo</i> 道場	Literally 'place of the way' in Japanese. It represents a place of embodied learning and meditation. It is traditionally used in martial arts, but more recently also in other fields, such as meditation and, of course, rope bondage. Rope bondage 'dojos' do not necessarily respect the traditional dojo architecture to the letter.
<i>Dominant /dom / D / top / rigger / Master</i>	Various kink names to designate the person who is being tied during a rope encounter.
<i>Ebi</i> 蝦	Literally meaning 'shrimp'. It is a trying position in cross-legged seat, while the upper body is tied towards ankles. It comes from a torturing position during the Edo Period in Japan.
<i>FetLife</i>	Social media platform dedicated to kink practice.
<i>Floor scene / floorwork</i>	A tying encounter in which there is no suspension. All bodies involved in the scene remain at the level of the floor.
<i>Futo momo</i> 太股腿 (sometimes written as one word)	A tying position with the leg bent and tied together.
<i>Hojo</i> 術 used in <i>Hojōjutsu</i> 捕縄術	Literally 'to catch with ropes' and the 'technique of catching with ropes' respectively. A technique extensively used in the Edo period to catch and torture prisoners. Special attention will be further given to this technique in Chapter 4.

<i>Kinbaku</i> 緊縛	Tying with anticipation or excitement. The word also implies a subtle sense of punishment. In practice, 'Shibari', 'Kinbaku', 'rope bondage' and 'rope' (as in 'doing rope') are often used interchangeably. In the rope bondage world, each word carries certain cultural implications (see discussion in Chapter 4).
<i>Munch</i>	A term used mostly in BDSM, to denote an informal gathering for the people interested in this activity. It usually takes place in public places such as bars or restaurants, or in a private room. Munches are mostly a place to socialize, with rare occurrences of brief demonstrations or presentations. This research, for instance, has been presented at a Women's munch in Brussels in 2017.
<i>Nawa</i> 縄	Rope.
<i>Nawagashira / rope bight</i> 縄頭	The middle of the tying rope, one of the first things the tying person must identify when starting to tie someone. For some ties, it is used as a reference point.
<i>Nawajiri / rope end</i> 縄尻	The end of the tying rope.
<i>Play</i>	Discussed in detail in Chapter 5, 'play' is in this context used to describe kink-related practices. Newmahr (2010) describes play as 'serious leisure'.
<i>Rope scene (I)</i>	An encounter between one or more bodies, involving the use of rope in any way.
<i>Rope scene (II)</i>	For the purposes of this research, the rope scene includes all participants in rope bondage-related activities, irrespective of geographical localities.

	This research goes against the hermetic understanding of 'community', and uses the word 'scene' instead.
<i>Sakasa / inverted suspension</i> 逆さ	Tying position implying inversion / head down
<i>Seme nawa</i> 責め縄 (sometimes written as one word)	'Tormenting rope'. A special style of tying using one single piece of rope. It is usually more painful than other techniques, hence the word 'tormenting'. 'Seme' can also be translated as 'blame', and it contains the character for 'responsibility'.
<i>Shibari</i> 縛り, noun of 'shibaru'	A tying, or a tie in itself. It has evolved to denote the entire practice of rope bondage, with certain cultural implications (see Chapter 4), and it is often used interchangeably with 'kinbaku' and 'rope bondage'.
<i>Switch</i>	Term which describes a practitioner's ability and preference to both tie and be tied, but also fluctuate between the two.
<i>Tsuri/zuri</i> 釣り	Suspension. It is written 'tsuri' if there is no word before, and 'zuri' if there is a word in front (as in <i>yoko zuri</i> ).

## ***Chapter 1: Introduction***

## **1.0. Introduction**

This thesis engages on an explorative quest regarding identitarian positionality and the influence of 'lived' experience on knowledge-production processes within the realm of rope bondage in the scenes from London, Berlin and Paris. Due to a great variety of styles, personal philosophies and affinities rope bondage practitioners exhibit, there is a need to devise a robust research model capable to account for these idiosyncrasies, account for the pitfalls pertaining to hierarchies within the scene, and simultaneously offer a platform where practitioners' voices can be heard. To accomplish this, a multi-case study design employing a multi-methodological qualitative approach was devised. I conducted fieldwork at three rope bondage venues in Western Europe: The Garden in London, The Greenhouse in Paris and The Barn in Berlin. The research incorporated participant observation, along with semi-structured and unstructured interviews conducted with 45 participants: 11 'riggers', 10 'models' and 24 'switches'. Additionally, data was gathered from an island in the Mediterranean Sea, where practitioner P.A. is located.

The thesis explores the intricate ways individuals comprehend, experience, and position themselves in relation to the practice of rope bondage; it interrogates the ways in which rope bondage can be utilized to address narratives concerning cross-culturality (East/West) and the politics of kink; it formulates and posits the *continuum* as an inclusive, horizontal and rhizomatic theoretical framework; it investigates the researcher-participant's positionality *within* this theoretical model.

In this introductory chapter, I provide context and discuss the research rationale. In Section 1.1. I situate the research within literatures on BDSM / kink. In Section 1.2. I situate the research within literatures on artistic partnerships and curatorial studies. Then, in Section 1.3. I draft my personal rationale for undertaking this research. In the subsequent Section 1.4. I outline the research aims and questions. In Section 1.5. I discuss the fieldwork overview, and finally, in section 1.6. I map the structure of this thesis.

### **1.1. The practice of rope bondage and research on BDSM / kink**

Although increasing attention has been given in recent years to the study of BDSM and kink, in a notable attempt to de-pathologise these practices, yet the practice remains understudied. Over the previous decades, inquiries into the world of kink practices had significantly intersected with inquiries into deviant behaviour, perversion, or paraphilia. During late 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, 'sodomasochism' was widely considered a 'peripheral sexuality', perverse and 'abnormal', its adherents widely stigmatized. Studies on kink remained closely intertwined with the field of clinical medicine, perpetuating the idea that kink is a

dangerous practice (Foucault, 1978: 17, 37-44; Rubin, 2011: 109, 132). Postmodern thinkers like Michel Foucault (1978; 1989) or Gilles Deleuze (1989) advocated for disentangling kink (and human sexuality in general) from clinical concepts of 'disorder' or 'disease'. A few studies since are attempting to report or devise psychological portraits of kinksters (Donnelly and Fraser 1998; Sandnabba et al. 1999; Nordling et al. 2006; Nordling and Sandnabba 2006), while others utilize online platforms and virtualised accounts (Ernulf & Innala, 1995; Cross & Matheson 2006; Langdrige & Butt 2004; Taylor 1997). Importantly, a handful of scholars have militated for liberating kink from under paraphilia (Beckmann, 2009; Downing 2015b; Kleinplatz & Moser, 2006; Kleinplatz & Moser, 2007; Langdrige & Barker, 2007; Luminais, 2012; Newmahr, 2011; Weinberg, William & Moser, 1984). In response to this research, recent ethnographies have asserted that other non-sexual contributing factors such as bodily expression, aesthetics or rope-induced states of trance, motivate 'doing' kink. Sexual gratification cannot, thus, remain the only factor by which scene is deemed successful or not (Beckmann, 2009; Newmahr, 2008; 2010; 2011; Pennington, 2018; Tuulberg, 2015; Weiss, 2011). Some of this research has called for a phenomenological (Galati, 2017; Newmahr, 2011), or an affective approach to researching kink (Pennington, 2018); these strategies permeate the 'academic distance', and enable practitioners to express themselves directly. In addition, some researchers adopt the role of researcher-participant, sometimes progressing into that role (Luminais, 2012; Newmahr, 2011), and other times assuming a kinky identity from the outset (Hedwig, 2011; Galati, 2017; Pennington, 2018). With one exception (Pennington, 2018), ethnographies present evidence from one research scene, therefore engaging locally. This research addresses this gap in literatures, by engaging in the analysis of the rope bondage scenes in London, Berlin and Paris and therefore looking at these three scenes comparatively. Additionally, this research contributes to kink ethnographies of people's experience in practicing rope bondage, by offering a comprehensive and comparative account of rope bondage practitioners' 'lived' experience, that considers both sexual and non-sexual factors motivating in the practice. As such, this thesis does not claim to inscribe itself or 'take sides' in the 'sexual /non sexual' dichotomy, but rather to account for variety and diversity inside the scene, and reject rigid, hierarchical or essentialist assessments of the activity.

'Doing rope' (see Glossary) continues to inspire practitioners to also engage with the practice theoretically, and forums, websites and social media platforms abound with such testimonies, opinion pieces and debates. Within instruction manuals, authors engage in lengthy analyses in an attempt to frame the practice intellectually (Harrington, 2009; Midori, 2001; Master K, 2013). To this day, researcher-practitioner Georg Barkas's book *Archaeology of personalities: a linguistic approach to rope bondage* (2016) remains a unique contribution to both research and the practice of rope bondage, straddling the

intersection of academic and grassroots literature. The volume rejects exclusionary identitarian structures, stating that rope bondage can be practiced with or without necessarily having to adhere to other kink or sexual activities. On the other hand, there is very limited academic literature engaging with bondage and/or rope bondage as a practice (Alexander, 2000; Hedwig, 2011; Galati, 2017; Ordean & Pennington, 2019; Pennington, 2017), despite the rising interest in researching kink interdisciplinarily and intersectionally (Cruz 2016; Holland, 2012; Howard, 2020; Nash, 2014, 2018; Reynolds, 2007; Sheppard, 2019; Weiss, 2021). Even less literature engages with shibari / kinbaku, independent of the BDSM framework. Ordean and Pennington (2019: 68) have recently addressed this gap in literature affirming the need to devise an inclusive theoretical framework able to account for the diverse realities of the field. Thus, the research attends to this need directly. That is to say, it first collects and presents evidence indicative of an existing identitarian variety among people who engage in rope bondage activities. Secondly, it will attempt to construct a horizontal, 'rhizomatic model, in order to account for this diversity in a democratic way. Thirdly, it will apply this model along three main coordinates – culture, kink and artistic partnership, in order to better understand how processes of knowledge-production influences identitarian positionality within the practice of rope bondage.

## **1.2. Partnership and 'the curatorial'**

There has been an increased interest over the last few years for incorporating rope bondage in literature, the visual arts and performance. Some scholars have also noted that in the West, kink is becoming more integrated and visible in popular culture (Weiss, 2006; 2011). On the other hand, literature on performance and participation has looked at how 'space' is created, performed and negotiated in the artistic discourse (Bay-Cheng 2010; Betterton, 1996; 2012; Carr, 1993; Frieling, 2008), in relation with the politics of spectatorship (Bishop, 2006), or with embodied presence and audiences (Lehmann, 2006; Fewster, 2010), and in relation to immersion in the digital culture (Davies, 1994; Vanhoutte & Wyants, 2010). Considerable thought has been given to exploring intimacy (Barton, 2010), situating bodies as models for performing subjectivity (Jones, 1998), but also at how 'space' and 'identity' converge in artistic partnerships, mediating and transmuting subjectivity (Biesenbach, 2010; Carlson, 2004; McEvelley, 2010). Nonetheless, most scholarship is concerned with the exploration of the artist as an individual figure, and not that much attention has been given to artistic partnerships. While this thesis does not intend to inscribe *all* rope bondage interactions as artistic encounters, it seems appropriate that more should be known about the potentiality of the rope bondage practice in the context of artistic research.

In recent years, curatorial studies have been preoccupied with theorizing ‘the curatorial’ – a concept coined by curator Maria Lind (2012). Different from ‘curating’ – understood as an act of collecting, assembling, care and creating exhibitions (Rogoff, 2006), where the curator is a human enabler, – ‘the curatorial’ is a theoretical framework employed to look at the methodologies employed by artists focusing on the postproduction approach and other material and immaterial phenomena within a specific time and space-related framework. ‘The curatorial’ encompasses elements of choreography, orchestration, and administrative logistics (Lind, 2012: 11-12); it also extends beyond the curated object to reveal the research fieldwork, methods, and processes of meaning-making (O’Neill & Wilson, 2015). Curators and thinkers have used this framework in order to examine and renegotiate the role of artists, curators (Bauer, 1992; Rogoff, 2006; Smith, 2012), exhibitions and biennials (Martinon, 2013), institutions (Falguières, 2017; O’Neill, 2007; 2012; also see Fraser, 2005) in contemporary discourse, looking critically at the interaction between human and non-human participants within networks (Krysa, 2015), while also emphasizing that ‘the curatorial’ can very well operate beyond the outlines of the exhibition (Malm, 2017), and even beyond the field of art (Bismarck, 2008; 2010; 2012; 2015; Rogoff & Bismarck, 2012). Important to the argument this thesis is advancing, ‘the curatorial’ has also been mobilized as a framework aimed at investigating/curating research and in particular artistic research. Practice as research (PaR),<sup>2</sup> a mode of research which moves off from traditional methods of investigation, reflection and sharing of original ideas, now enjoys reputability within academic institutions (Allain & Harvie, 2014 [2006]; Holert, 2020). Recent debates have claimed ‘the curatorial’ as directly embedded into the processes of artistic research and knowledge-production (Bismarck, 2022a; O’Neill & Wilson, 2015; Graw, 1990; Sheikh, 2015; Fowkes, 2015; tranzit.hu, 2015). Nevertheless, there is scope for exploring the relationship between ‘the curatorial’ and ‘artistic research’ from an empirical, embodied perspective, and specifically through using mixed ethnographic methods such as unstructured interviews, autoethnography, and examining the processes involved in collecting data from artistic content (texts, audio-video material, sketches, drawings) and shared field notes.

### **1.3. Personal rationale**

As it will become apparent from the very lines of this thesis, kink culture and rope bondage specifically have been subjected to much debate, dissensions and misjudgement. A more important and perhaps less

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<sup>2</sup> Not go be confused with PAR, which stands for the method of Participant Action Research.

researched aspect, is that rope bondage has been a generous source for a significant amount of heterogeneous visual culture products which emerged particularly in the last couple of decades. As a scholar with a background in performance art theory (with an interest in endurance and shared lived experience), and as a long-standing consumer of subculture visual material at large, I like to think that my encounter with rope bondage was inevitable.

In the autumn of 2015, almost one year before the start of this project, I was invited by a friend at a private party which – he said, ‘involved some really cool body stuff’, which, my friend was sure ‘I would be very much into’ (retroactive field notes, Oct. 2016). Without knowing what to expect, but animated by his proposal, I accepted the invitation, and shortly after I found myself sitting on a couch in his living room, completely mesmerized by what I was seeing. My friend and his female partner were sharing what seemed to me as an intimate moment, using rope and other BDSM accessories.

I felt like an intruder. An intrigued intruder. Paired with the surprise of witnessing a rope bondage scene in the most unlikely of places – in a rather conservative city in South-East Europe, at first, I did not know what to make of it. Although it was not the first time I had seen rope bondage (by then I was thoroughly acquainted with Nobuyoshi Araki’s work, and had some knowledge of Japanese comic book erotica), I had never considered the *performative*, *participative*, and *affective* nature of the practice, but rather judged it through aesthetic and, most importantly, *static* vectors. That is to say, I understood rope bondage to be solely a *means* by which aesthetic triumph could be achieved, drawn, photographed, and not as the very versatile and dynamic practice, as I came to understand later on. I decided to start searching.

An image search online revealed a number of things. Firstly, searches on ‘shibari’ revealed visual material in which commercial photography, photos of some rope manual covers and some anime stills were all mixed together; on the contrary, when searching for ‘kinbaku’, imagery shifted to predominantly artistic photography, Japanese archive photography; when searching for ‘rope bondage’, however, the search results were almost exclusively pornographic material.<sup>3</sup>

To my dismay, further searches for academic material on the subject revealed very little, but told me very much. A search for published articles brought little satisfaction, aside from a couple of undergraduate dissertations (Hedwig, 2011; Engström, 2015), and a rather outrageous article entitled *Shibari: Double*

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<sup>3</sup> An image search 5 years later revealed much richer visual material, although regarding the style of the image selection for the three terms, not much has changed (field notes, November 2020).

*Hanging During Consensual Sexual Asphyxia* (Rome et al., 2013)<sup>4</sup> which essentialises rope bondage into a dangerous and life-threatening practice, by exemplifying with a case study where participants were under the influence of drugs and alcohol and which resulted in the death for one of the suspended persons. In their conclusion, Rome et al. advise the need for further investigation on ‘living participants in such games’, in order to ‘to shed light on this practice’ and successfully ‘facilitate treatment’ (*ibid.* 895). Not a word about corporeality, nothing about the historical, artistic or ritualistic aspects, undeniably embedded in the very core of the practice. Furthermore, I could not find any comprehensive research which pointed towards any separation between rope bondage practices and BDSM practices – although I discovered later how complex this separation actually is, in lived reality and in practice.

I realised in that moment the immense research potential that rope bondage has. I strongly feel that the ‘lived experience’ and the realities of the rope bondage field are worthy of close examination, and that this rich field has an enormous body of knowledge to offer, for discovery, investigation and research. In response to my first impulse, and as this thesis will demonstrate, I was later able to establish a research model which responded to these pressing issues, while striving to reflect as accurately as possible the realities in the field. I believe that a research project focused on the lived realities of rope bondage practitioners could add insight to a cross-disciplinary understanding of affective embodied practices, while generating situated knowledge, invaluable in the creation of a research model with cross-disciplinary applications in varied fields such as sociology, anthropology, human geography and visual culture.

I finish this plea with a quote from Patti Lather, so pertinent and appropriate to the purpose of this research: ‘when a study aims to supply both evidence and ground to contest against social prejudice, the research process itself becomes praxis and advocacy’ (Lather, 2004 cited in Li, 2008: 110).

#### **1.4. Research design, aims and questions**

This thesis uses qualitative case study design (see Chapter 3), as well as auto-ethnographical inserts (see Chapter 6). I have chosen three main fieldwork sites: London, Berlin and Paris, as the scenes here were large, vibrant and welcoming, since all three locations are well connected. Equally, the European rope

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<sup>4</sup> In response to this, Lee, Klement, and Sagarin (2015) published an article, in which they denounce the pathologizing, inaccurate and judgemental manner in which Rome et al. present the practice. Lee, Klement, and Sagarin emphasize on the incompatibility between poor mental health and having healthy and consensual BDSM relationships. This article is a much-needed intervention regarding many aspects of kink studies as a whole.

bondage scene in general seemed to be looking up to these three places as poles of knowledge-sharing and creative melting pots, and many people I interviewed travelled in from elsewhere for classes or events (further discussed in the next section, and in Chapter 3).<sup>5</sup>

The practice of rope bondage is in most cases observed through the lens of a single domain, and rarely considered as an autonomous practice in its own right. Thus, an objective of this thesis is to examine the various ways in which rope (as a material) and rope bondage (as a practice) appear, in academic literature, specialist non-academic literature, and in visual and performing arts. This contextualisation becomes the foundation upon which the two main research questions rest, and, thus, opens up new territory into future attempts at redefining rope bondage literature. The main research aims of this thesis are to understand the role rope bondage practices plays within larger narratives concerning BDSM / kink, transcultural exchanges East / West, and to devise a research methodology that is equipped to include myriad voices, perspectives and creative outputs (Chapter 4 and 5), as they are embodied, experienced and produced in the rope scenes from London, Berlin and Paris (with the exception of the case study: *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope*, Chapter 6, section 6.2.). I have been particularly keen to understand the coexistence of different positionalities, and how these are negotiated and worked through – not without some limitations – until reaching common ground in the pivotal moment of *presence* and *affective contagion* (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010: 8, 18) within a consensual rope bondage scene. Additionally, Chapter 6 is an exercise in refining this research model, not only through the inclusion of my own positionality as a researcher-participant, but also as a temporary member of a creative duo together with P.A. An assessment of literature from various fields was necessary in order to situate this research in specialist literature (Chapter 2).

Thus, the research questions I am aiming to address are:

1. How can the practice of rope bondage be mobilised to address narratives pertaining to cross-culturality (East / West) and the politics of ‘kink’?
2. What research model can be devised to include myriad voices, perspectives and creative outputs as they are embodied, experienced and produced in the practice of rope bondage?
3. How do I position myself in the theoretical framework as a researcher-participant?

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that this thesis relies on field data that has been collected up until the first trimester of 2019, and cannot account for any changes that might have occurred in the scene in the context of the covid-19 pandemic and afterwards.

These research questions permeate the three empirical chapters of this thesis. The first question is tackled in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, which address how ‘Japaneseness’ is embedded within the practice of rope bondage and the processes of knowledge-production (Chapter 4), and the *continuum* model in relation to practices from the sphere of ‘kink’ (Chapter 5). The second research question is addressed by the employment of the *continuum* research framework in the thesis as a whole, from Chapter 3: Methodology to the research evidence brought in Chapter 4: The cultural *continuum*, Chapter 5: The kink *continuum* and Chapter 6: Curating *continuums*. Finally, the third question is addressed in Chapter 6: Curating *continuums*, where I am assessing my own positionality within the research model through a constant shift of roles inherent throughout the curatorial process.

### **1.5. Fieldwork overview**

In order to address these aims and questions, I used a flexible and ethical approach to fieldwork. As a participant in this activity, the rope bondage practitioner becomes a thinker-feeler, producing, embodying and transmitting knowledge from a positional perspective, which is ‘situated’ within a specific context or environment, be it historical, societal, cultural, personal, body-related or embodied (Haraway, 1988: 583). I used a qualitative research approach drawing on participant observation, semi-structured and non-structured interviews conducted with selected participants, or autoethnography on my own body as a researcher-participant. In sensitive situations, the interview method had to be adapted to meet the needs of the specific situation, while caring for the wellbeing of the interview partner; I develop this last point further in the methodology section.

Importantly, the aim of this thesis is to take distance from the idea of the field as a unitary, compact body, as this standpoint would fail to take into account the multiple strata embedded in this creative embodied practice. My proposed solution involves devising a research model where ‘situated knowledge’ works hand-in-hand with identitarian positionings on a case-by-case basis, and therefore, my approach to the field must illustrate the same concern. In this sense, conducting this research always felt like moving and growing side by side with the field, adapting and ‘flowing’ along. This state of ‘flow’ (which I have more than once suspected to be the result of an ‘affective contagion’ which transcends the space of a rope bondage scene into the body of the researcher) is foremost represented by the tools I have chosen to collect data from the field (described in detail in Chapter 3). I have chosen three fieldwork sites while being fully aware of the fact that the rope scene is exceedingly dynamic, that people travel very often,

and therefore that the exchange of knowledge goes well beyond the outlines of a city. Nevertheless, the scenes from Berlin, London and Paris offered a suitable infrastructure for knowledge exchange, and therefore facilitated access to local and non-local practitioners who travelled often to events and rope jams, and share the same affinities regarding the trying culture. Consequently, while interviewing practitioners who were based in one of these cities, it was also important for me to interview people who were based elsewhere but were often traveling in, and immersed themselves in a space. Furthermore, I travelled myself a couple of times to the interviewee's place of residence (one example is to a Mediterranean island where P.A lives, after a few exchanges that took place in Berlin), as I had ascertained the natural environment to be a powerful source of inspiration and a factor in the construction of the practice and the accumulation and transmission of 'situated knowledge'. Relatedly, throughout this thesis I will replace the word community with 'field' or 'scene', in accordance with interview partner B.A., who attributes a sociological understanding of the difference between community and field (I.F. Berlin 9 / 13.03.2018, also see Appendix A, Part 1 for the longer quotation):

B.A.: A community has in my understanding much more defined borders than a field. So, would much rather go with the term field than community [...] when I speak academically about it I would rather speak about the idea of a *field*.

Bessant (2018) writes of two distinct approaches to the concept of community: *intentional community*, grounded in communion, shared values, and beliefs, and *communities of practice*, emerging from a shared base of collective experience, knowledge, and the exchange of information. Jones (2023:66) claims that both types of communities can be found within rope bondage practitioners, sometimes overlapping and often having 'qualitatively different impacts on their lives'. Elsewhere, she claims and that the word 'community' in itself 'can in fact hold contrasting meanings depending on its usage and context'. Jones exemplifies (2022: 129):

This definitional conflict was apparent in participants' accounts as their definitions could, at times, be in direct tension or contradiction with one another. For example, if one participant believes that community members must share values, while another believes that their community includes anyone in the world who does rope bondage, we cannot easily reconcile these two perspectives and establish a boundary for what rope bondage community actually *is*. Instead of avoiding this messiness, I opt to embrace it, and utilize "community" in a way that allows it to remain a concept with multiple, sometimes-overlapping, sometimes-contrasting meanings.

Similarly, a number of my interview partners have spoken about belonging and communion beyond the geographical confines of their place of residence: in that sense, a rope bondage practitioner travelling in to the Barn from Bucharest would have more in common with another practitioner travelling in from a mid-sized town in the Netherlands, than with their neighbours back in Romania, with whom they do not share the same values, beliefs or experiences (personal communication with Bucharest-based rope bondage practitioner B.I., Berlin, March 2018). Because of the multiple interconnections and transmutations happening within the rope bondage scenes, I will prefer to refer to ‘fields’ and ‘scenes’, rather than communities. I am drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of a field (1993; 1996; also see Hilgers & Mangez, 2014) as a dynamic and fluid social space in which individuals can simultaneously belong to multiple fields. For instance, an individual can belong to the rope bondage field, while also being part of the academic field, among many others. Each of these fields has its own cultural characteristics, language, and governing norms. Communities, by contrast, tend to have more clearly defined boundaries, making it more difficult for individuals to belong to multiple communities. In the sociological sense, membership in a field is more flexible. For example, individuals from the BDSM field may also be part of academic, musical, or artistic fields.

Also concerning the three field sites, the ‘growth’ factor needs to be discussed here. When I first came in contact with the scenes in Berlin, London and Paris, the level of development in each site (i.e. how long they had been operating for, number of regular participants in weekly jams, internal structure of the organisation) was not equal. While Berlin’s cartography was much less polarised, and more attuned to the idea of different scenes that coexisted horizontally,<sup>6</sup> I observed the scene in Paris to be much more centralised around The Greenhouse, with very little happening outside of it (except for private interactions that I rarely had access to, and which do not constitute an object of inquiry in this thesis). On the contrary, the scene in London was somewhat in-between the other two, but the space in which I chose to conduct my fieldwork was rather young and growing at the time. Throughout this research timespan, these spaces have evolved considerably: while Berlin’s ‘scenes’ underwent some dissolutions, there was little changing in the outline of The Barn (possibly due to it being a biannual festival and not a permanent space); The Greenhouse organisation in Paris imploded sometime in spring 2018, its former members initially opting for gathering in much smaller private events, or taking a break from the practice altogether. London’s The Garden, on the other side, grew exponentially, and had to change location at some point,

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<sup>6</sup> C.F., one of my interview partners in Berlin has tackled this subject: ‘[...] I think there will be a lot more of different scenes. In Berlin we have this privilege of the Berlin scene being so big, that we have different scenes in Berlin.’ (I.F. B. 4 / 11.11.2018). Also see part 1 of the Appendix.

as it was unable to cater to the large numbers of practitioners that wanted to join. Taking into consideration this plasticity within these three scenes and predicting more probable future changes, I have treated 'the field' as an organism which is permanently morphing, and its practitioners constantly 'becoming'. More than once I had to rethink and adapt my methods to match the changes that were happening in the field at the same time. This is another reason that prompted the search for an inclusive model that I imagine as a magnifying glass or a non-filter (as a point of focus and not selection, as the action of filtering inherently does). The research methodology is discussed in further detail in Chapter 3.

Lastly, as a researcher-practitioner, I have more than once looked upon my own self as a place of field research. At some point in the research process, I have understood that my role as an 'outside' onlooker was not sufficient – guided by curiosity, my body asked to take part in this experience. Intuitively, I also understood that my position within the scene would be consolidated once a favourable decision had been taken: my knowledge of the object of research would go as far as my own positionality allows it, by which I 'bec[a]me answerable' (that is to say, knowledgeable and responsible) inasmuch as I can 'learn how to see' (Haraway, 1988: 583). As a curator, I reflected critically on the function of art and the production of cultural products and bodily experiences in this field. I expand upon this notion in Chapter 6, where I also utilise the concept of 'the curatorial' – as posited by Maria Lind (2012), and developed by a handful of other scholars such as Irit Rogoff, Paul O'Neill, Beatrice von Bismarck, Dorothee Richter, amongst others – as a method of investigation, providing rich insight into the intimate world and surroundings of rope bondage practitioners.

## **1.6. Thesis structure**

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. In Chapter 2, I review and situate my research within literatures on BDSM/kink, exploring primary sources and situating the work within discussions on 'cultural appropriation', 'fetishization', and 'transculturation'. I advocate for the imperative of tracing a kink genealogy, emphasizing its relevance to the positionality of my interview partners. I map the primary sources I use in the research, highlighting on its importance in bringing forth aspects that helped me understand better the 'kink style' or the 'Japanese style', comprehend jargon, observe stratifications (and occasional polarizations) based on tying 'style', and make informed assessments of the field site's affiliation with specific tying styles, in navigating challenging times in the field, or structuring data collection strategies. Then, I argue that 'Japanese style' rope bondage should be considered within

literatures exploring the relationship between cultural exchange and the 'Japan cool' export market. Furthermore, I outline recent debates on 'cultural appropriation', 'authenticity' and argue that in this research I will relate rope bondage to language, jargon and cultural or identitarian affinity.

Chapter 3 proposes an overview of the research methodology. First, I describe the research design and approach (a multi-case study in three field sites in London, Berlin and Paris). I reflect, then, on the issues and implications of doing research aimed at comprehending the 'lived' experience, affect, and emotions of individuals involved in rope bondage practices. To address this, I advance the concept of 'multiplicity', which I adopt as an overarching concept encompassing diverse variations of the rope bondage continuums. I argue that 'multiplicity' serves as a model supporting the fluidity of identitarian positionality, evolving and changing based on the accumulation of 'situated' knowledge derived from 'lived' experience which I am putting in dialogue with the creative-critical research framework I am using to transition from the *continuum* to the analysis based on artistic research. After this, I provide an overview of the field sites: The Garden in London, The Barn in Berlin, The Greenhouse in Paris, and the Mediterranean island of F\* (home to practitioner P.A.). I also outline the intricacies of my reflexive positionality as I navigate the field as a researcher-participant. Then, I describe the processes of participant recruitment within each field sites. Afterwards, I itemize and reflect critically on the data collection methods used: participant observation, autoethnography (generating 'situated' knowledge), semi-structured and unstructured interviews. Finally, I describe the grounded approach to data analysis, and the way in which data generated at each of the field sites using mixed methods are drawn together throughout the analysis chapters.

Chapter 4, 5 and 6 discuss my research findings. In *Chapter 4: The Cultural Continuum* I partly address the first and the second research question. This chapter is divided into 3 sections. In the first section, I begin by investigating concrete manifestations of cross-culturality in the context of Japanese-inspired rope bondage. I identify four ways in which cross-culturality and cultural exchange function in processes of knowledge production in the practice of rope bondage (for example, through the analysis of the interplay between language, and 'authenticity'). I argue that through mobilizing 'authenticity' a number of practitioners concoct a 'historical narrative' which claims uniformity and leads to the creation of a 'Japanese-style' in rope bondage. I focus on how this cultural construct operates within the field, facilitating the perpetuation of a specific pedagogical 'style'. I then delve into the contextual meanings of terms such as 'fetishization,' 'cultural appropriation,' and 'authenticity' within the realm of rope bondage and cross-cultural exchanges. I examine how these concepts are outlined in academic literature and mass

media, before investigating how in the sphere of Japanese-inspired rope bondage practiced outside Japan, 'cultural appropriation' involves mechanisms of 'fetishization' and discussions surrounding authenticity. I advocate for the inclusion of cultural exportation in conjunction with 'cultural appropriation,' given the exportation of various Japanese elements to diverse Western spaces, interconnecting with 'authenticity' and 'capital.' Afterwards, I argue that the model of the 'historical canon', a model some practitioners use in order to assert historical continuity is insufficient; as such, I introduce a horizontal, inclusive model of research, which I call the rope bondage *continuum*. I further argue that its rhizomatic, non-linear, non-hierarchical, and fluid structure, renders it an inclusive and horizontal alternative that validates all affiliations and perspectives. Lastly, I apply the continuum's theoretical framework to discuss the role of language and terminology in establishing cultural affinity, belonging, and determining the politics of 'authenticity.' I use a comparative analysis of commonly used terms such as 'Shibari,' 'Kinbaku,' and 'rope bondage,' in order to reveal how each term implies association with distinct groups. Finally, I challenge the arborescent model and advocates for a more inclusive, horizontal positionality in the rope bondage scene, and I exemplify with field data from one of the venues.

*In Chapter 5: The Kink Continuum*, I partly address the first and the second research question. This chapter is divided into four sections. First, I apply the *continuum* further to discuss identitarian positionality and kink. I argue in favour of keeping the concept of identity, as it is a 'lived' reality within the field; instead, I argue for using identitarian plasticity that can exist both within and outside the kink or sexual spectrums, termed as individualized 'foldings' or 'positionings'. Returning to literature, I argue in favour of a wide-ranging understanding of both literatures that associate rope bondage with BDSM, as well as to those which suggest thinking in a broader spectrum. Second, I assert that rope bondage practitioners should be viewed as thinkers-feelers with fluid positionalities. Through the use of interview extracts, I exemplify different identitarian positionings, and therefore argue for the validity of each and the exclusion of none. I argue again in favour of the *continuum* as enabler of non-hierarchical identitarian positioning, stemming from 'lived' affective experiences and situated knowledge production. I also argue that these positions are not fixed (as identities exist in relation to other identities), but that they can change and overlap with other positions over time. Third, I discuss how 'multiplicity' is a meta-model with the potential of comprising any number of *continuums*; I also prefigure here the third application of the *continuum*, which will be illustrated in the next chapter. Finally, I return to language, as I argue it continues to play an important role also in identitarian positioning. I examine how language assists in identitarian positioning, placing practitioners in a state of constant 'becoming', and drawing from ideological/discursive formation, affective (im)materialities, and subjective 'lived' experience.

In *Chapter 6: Curating continuums* I address the third research question making use of the creative-critical research tools. This chapter is divided into three sections. Here, I extend on the research model by introducing the third and the last, the curatorial *continuum*. I argue that in borrowing the theoretical framework of 'the curatorial', I can explore identitarian positionality *vertically* within the *continuum*, as it pertains to the stratification of the self at a certain moment in time. I exemplify with a case study of artistic research. I focus on investigating identitarian positionality using my own body, which enters into a partnership with practitioner P.A. I argue that research practices and 'the curatorial' are interconnected through a dense transdisciplinary network of knowledge and artistic production, comprising material culture, processes, affects, ideas, and perspectives. As such, I argue that I contribute directly to the research model, through a meticulous interrogation of my evolving positionality within the continuum and the ways in which it generates 'situated' knowledge. I argue that through diverse artistic research tools intertwining and altering within the curatorial process, a continuous transformation of my body during fieldwork, shifting between various roles such as practitioner, learner, thinker-feeler, producer/consumer of knowledge, researcher, creator, or curator was enabled. To illustrate, I argue for the use of a four-part inquiry model inspired by Beatrice von Bismarck in her work *The Curatorial Condition*: 'curatoriality,' 'constellation,' 'transposition,' and 'hospitality,' interpreting 'situated' knowledge as a process involving accumulation, selection, incorporation, and transmission. This model structures the identitarian positionality within the *continuum*; to exemplify, I turn to the study *case notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope* (Iris + P.A.), which I argue reflects an engagement with curatorial relations through applied methods of research-creation. I bring examples from the partnership (and substantiate it with other interviews from the field) and further develop an inquiry model, examining the formation of the partnership, processes of selection, interdisciplinary inquiry, transposition, and the politics of care and generosity within the practice of rope bondage.

Finally, in *Chapter 7: Conclusions*, I provide a comprehensive summary of the research findings in relation to the established research aims and questions. I assess the distinctive contributions made by this thesis to various academic domains, including BDSM / kink literature, visual culture studies, and performance and identity studies. I argue that, whether through content, research design, or methodology, this research introduces a fresh perspective within each of these fields. Moreover, I assert that the incorporation of the *continuum* as a research tool adds originality and robustness, prompting the exploration of additional research and curatorial inquiries using this replicable research model. Finally, I put forward suggestions for future research and inquiry.



## ***Chapter 2: Literature review***

## 2.0. Introduction

This chapter undertakes a comprehensive review and contextualization of the thesis within existing literatures on BDSM/kink, examines primary sources and situates the research alongside debates on ‘cultural appropriation’, ‘fetishization’, and ‘transculturation’. In section 2.1, I give an overview on kink’s current state of research in academia. I argue for the necessity of tracing a kink ‘genealogy’, emphasizing on its significance in shaping a complete picture of a contested field. Then, in section 2.1.1. I outline this genealogy, bringing forth some key texts, as well as some tensions in the research field. I argue that despite the fact that the subject is gaining academic popularity, it remains an understudied field. Furthermore, I argue that very limited attention has been given to rope bondage within kink literature, and I argue that my contribution will fill this gap in research. In Section 2.1.3. I give an overview of recent kink and rope bondage ethnographies, explaining the research methods and theoretical approaches they used. I situate my research alongside those approaches, and discuss the key contributions of this thesis in literature. In section 2.2. I map the most important contributions in rope bondage I used in my research. I argue this research approach is necessary, as it provided me with a framework and helped me familiarize with the jargon, aesthetics, key themes in the rope bondage scene and foregrounded some concepts I later focused on in the field. I highlight the instrumental role online platforms and forums had in navigating challenging moments during fieldwork and adjusting my positionality accordingly. Finally, I argue that engaging with manuals and various publications on rope bondage enabled me to structure my data collection strategies.

In section 2.3, I delve into recent sources on cross-culturality and ‘cultural appropriation’, particularly on cultural surveys that engage with the exportation of ‘Japan cool’ products. I argue for including ‘Japanese-style’ rope bondage among ‘Japan cool’ products, and emphasize on the thesis’s response to calls from cultural theorists to explore the intricate relationship between cultural exchange, appropriation and the market. Furthermore, I assert the thesis’s contribution to literature on ‘cultural appropriation’ in an unexplored subject. Finally, I discuss its indirect contribution to post-colonial scholarship that examines cultural ‘domination’ and ‘exploitation’.

## 2.1. Kink literatures

### 2.1.1. General overview

For the better part of the last 50 years, the inquiry into kink practices has considerably overlapped with the investigation of deviant behaviour, ‘perversion’, or ‘paraphilia’<sup>7</sup> and bore different names: sadomasochism, BDSM (an acronym designating Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission and Sadism and Masochism), or simply *kink*. Brame (1996) and Bauer (2014) have noted that ‘BDSM’ is a term which appeared online in the late 1980s, as a more inclusive alternative to the binary ‘SM’ or ‘sadomasochism’ (also see Pennington, 2018: 1). Lin (2017: 318, note 1) claims:

*kink* has a slightly broader definition that encompasses fetishism and other forms of alternative sexual expressions.<sup>8</sup>

Pillai-Friedman et al. (2014: 198-199) claim that ‘the words kink and kinky sex emerged more organically, created by early minorities without relying on medical or scientific jargon’. Ortmann and Sprott, (2013: 18-19) claim that it is important to honour language which has been created by the community to describe itself, and not impose from the outside. Simula (2015) has argued that ‘being kinky’ is means, in fact, having multiple kinks, some of which do not circumscribe to the BDSM acronym (such as fetishism, voyeurism, exhibitionism, age or gender play). In response, Pohtinen (2019: 86) argued that ‘different kinks may or may not have to do with sex, yet they are always characterised by consensuality and mutual agreement’. In the following analysis, when I reference literature, I will employ terminology found *in situ*, which may fluctuate between references such as ‘kink’, ‘SM’ and ‘BDSM’. In the other chapters of the thesis, and in concordance with my interview partners who loosely use both terms, I will be using the terms ‘kink’ and ‘BDSM’ interchangeably.

Within academia, various disciplines engage with the themes of kinkiness and sadomasochism, encompassing fields such as criminology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and sometimes literature. Luminais has argued that much of this literature ‘does not overlap, each occurring as if in a vacuum [...] and then veer off on their own agenda’ (2012: 22). Luminais continues:

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<sup>7</sup> Lisa Downing suggests that continental sexology preferred the term ‘perversion’, while Anglo-American psychiatry utilized ‘paraphilia’ (2015b: 45). John Money sees paraphilia as a ‘biomedically impartial synonym for the morally judgemental term ‘perversion’’ (Money, 1986; Money and Lamacz: 1989: 17, in Downing, *id.*).

<sup>8</sup> Lin also posits that BDSM practitioners ‘refrain’ from using sadism and masochism ‘as identity markers’ (*id.*)

Most of the academic literature ignores entirely the copious amounts of literature produced by sadomasochists for sadomasochists, from musings on the nature of existence to practical how-to guides. Finally, articles in popular media, usually focused on sensational and salacious details, also inform the state of knowledge on sadomasochism.

Kink is becoming more visible in Western cultures, increasingly integrated into mainstream culture. Sission (2007) and Thompson (2012) have looked at how kink has been commercialized and commodified within consumer culture i.e. marketed into the 'mainstream', notably in films, television, blogs, or news articles. Weiss (2006; 2011) and Beckmann (2009) have also looked at this aspect; while Weiss has been critical of this process, arguing that it leads to the commodification of kink, Beckmann has noted that it still did not lead to a more inclusive understanding and openness towards the practice, as it remains selectively criminalized. A reality remains that kink is becoming more visible in Western cultures, increasingly integrated into mainstream culture (Wignall et al., 2024; Sundén, 2023; van der Beek & Thomas, 2023), Participation in kink cultures is rising among the general population, and these cultures have diversified regarding interests, dynamics, and geographic locations (Wignall, *ibid.*: 1; Boyd-Rogers et al., 2022; Walker & Kuperberg, 2022). Meanwhile, the APA (American Psychiatric Association) has published the DSM-5, stating that engaging in BDSM or fantasizing about it does not inherently qualify as 'paraphilic disorder'. Wright (2010; 2014) has reflected on the legal consequences of this change (especially in child custody cases), and Lin (2019: 303) has observed that this redefinition is 'a step closer towards the demedicalization of various stigmatized sexual expressions', but that nevertheless, 'the processes leading to the current policy changes as well as how it may affect the prospects of kink remain unclear'. More recently, Sheff (2021) is examining the ways in which kink has been featuring more and more in legal and policy discussions.

A survey by Thomas Weinberg called *Research in BDSM: 40 Years Along* provides a comprehensive picture of the state of current research in BDSM, after almost half a century of intellectual effort (2023; for early analyses see Spengler, 1977; Weinberg, 1978, 1984, 2020), and with the help of a constant flow of literature reviews roughly every decade (Weinberg, 1987, 1994, 2006). Weinberg notes that in the two decades since the last review was published, there has been significant advancement in the work on BDSM in sociology, social psychology, psychology, anthropology, and evolutionary biology (2023: 22), and admits that 'research on BDSM subcultures is extensive, illustrating that although they are tremendously varied, subcultures all serve the same functions for their members of accessibility, normalization, protection, and affiliation' (*ibid.*: 31).

Progressively, more research tools are being introduced in order to make sense of the increasing amount of data pertaining to kinksters. Williams et al. (2014) introduced the ‘4Cs’ framework—Consent, Communication, Caring, and Caution—for negotiating participation in kink activities. This framework is supported by other researchers (Kaak, 2016; Lindemann, 2011; Wignall & McCormack, 2017), who reflect on the role communication and care play in emotional and social care. Yet, some scholars are interested in investigating how kink organizations and clubs manage these dynamics (see Sagarin et al., 2019; Weiss, 2011), while others are looking specifically at how risk and consent are negotiated among kink practitioners in digital or ‘casual’ environments (Coppens et al., 2021; Zambelli, 2017), especially when ‘the kink activities occur in private rather than the public or semi-public spaces of kink community venues or events’ (Wignall, 2020: 67). Wignall et al. (2024: 1) have developed the Kink Orientation Scale (KOS), ‘a novel short tool for measuring different aspects of kink sexuality’; having three phases of implementation, the purpose of the KOS is to prove useful in ‘measuring kink engagement holistically’.

In the next pages, I present a ‘genealogy’ of kink (Pennington: 2018: 9). This is important for two reasons: first, as it offers an overview of the evolution of research from different domains, arguing that it should not exist ‘in a vacuum’ (Luminais, *id.*). This endeavour situates this thesis within these literatures, while also highlighting its contribution. Secondly, tracing a genealogy of BDSM/kink implies tracing histories of pathologization, on the one hand, and accounts of ‘lived’ experience within the practice, on the other, linking literature to contemporary psychological and sociological investigations (Newmahr, 2011). The main concepts it will raise are linked to the dynamics in some of my interview partners (some positioning themselves as ‘kinky’, others rejecting the label), and therefore, directly to my argument in favour of the kink *continuum* theoretical framework, from Chapter 5.<sup>9</sup>

### **2.1.2. A genealogy of kink**

An exponential increase of sexual discourses in the second part of the nineteenth century, which resulted in a growing interest for exploring ‘peripheral sexualities’, ‘perversions’ and ‘abnormalities’ throughout the twentieth century (Foucault: 1978: 17, 37-44) rendered kink indissolubly linked with sexual behaviour. In 1886 the German psychologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing published a compendium of sexual disorders called *Psychopathia Sexualis*. In it, he appropriated the term ‘sadism’ from the name of the Marquis de

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<sup>9</sup> I am not stating here that social identity is the *only* determining factor in kink positionality, but that it does play a role. ‘Lived’ experience is the other important factor, and my preoccupation in Chapter 5 has more to do with the latter.

Sade's *120 Days of Sodom* (1785) and the 'masochism' from Austrian author Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* (1869); thus, sadomasochism, now classified as a psychopathy, was described in terms of the binary 'aggressive' sadism vs. 'submissive masochism'. Sigmund Freud further built on this binary to inscribe all sexual 'perversion' within developmental issues in childhood (2000 [1905]); this legacy was enduring.

Theorising the politics of kink practices remained inextricably linked to clinical medicine, and generally an exceedingly difficult task, more so since 'the politics of sex in general' were 'so depressingly muddled', and since 'the idea that S/M is dangerous' kept 'self-perpetuating' (Rubin, 2011: 109, 132). Theorists like Michel Foucault (1978 - 1989) and Gilles Deleuze (1989) have militated for the separation between human 'sexuality', 'sadomasochism' and clinical notions of 'disorder' or 'disease'. Michel Foucault claimed that 'it's very difficult to carry on the struggle using the terms of sexuality without, at a certain point, getting trapped by notions such as sexual disease, sexual pathology, normal sexuality' (2014 [1978]: 140).<sup>10</sup> Deleuze denounced 'treat[ing] sadism and masochism on a level with the plague, leprosy and Parkinson's disease', arguing in the disfavour of 'the word disease', as it 'is clearly inappropriate' (1989: 16). During the feminist 'sex wars' of the 70s and 80s, 'second wave' feminists such as Andrea Dworkin (1974, 1981, 1987) and Catherine MacKinnon (1979, 1987, 1898) – aligned with the Freud's legacy – condemned all forms of pornography and sadomasochism, considering it patriarchal and damaging women everywhere. Kink, in their view, was particularly so, as it re-enacted the struggles women everywhere were facing. Gradually, *kink* became an umbrella term for 'sexual practices and relationships that are sadomasochistic, fetishistic [sic], or otherwise 'outside the box' of what most people consider to be 'normal' homosexual or heterosexual sexuality and relationships' (Bettinger, 2002: 94). Works such as *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis* (Linden et al., 1982) and *Unleashing Feminism: Critiquing Lesbian Sadomasochism in the Gay Nineties* (Reti et al., 1993) encouraged anti-BDSM activism, denouncing kink activities as cloaked mechanisms of oppression and internalised violence (Hart, 1996: 50). Lynda Hart concluded (*ibid.*: 48):

They [i.e. 'second wave' feminists] level all experiences and histories into the same, uncritically endorse and privilege empiricism, repeat and perpetuate the notion of an unmediated access to

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<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere, Foucault has also denounced the saprophyte relationship between sexuality and 'perversion': I believe it's very difficult to carry on the struggle using the terms of sexuality without, at a certain point, getting trapped by notions such as sexual disease, sexual pathology, normal sexuality [...] the theme of pleasure [...] seems to me to escape these medical and naturalist connotations and which have the notion of sexuality built in them. After all, there is no 'abnormal' pleasure; there is no 'pathology' of pleasure' (2014 [1978]: 140-141).

the truth of perception, and, once again, knowing collapses into seeing. Take your pick: sadomasochism looks like – and therefore *is* like – Slavery, the Holocaust, Heterosexist Patriarchy, the Jonestown Massacre.

To this, the ‘third wave’ kink feminists posited an open approach to sex, pornography, and kink, which was seen as liberating from heteronormative sexual practices (Patrick Califia 1980, 1994; Gayle Rubin 1982, 1984, 1991). Rubin in particular claimed that SM is much more stigmatized than homosexuality, and argued for acceptance of diverse sexualities and for a de-pathologization of kink practices. Other prominent scholars have also militated for kink’s liberation from sexual discourses and clinical perversion (Foucault, 1994; Martin, 2018; Steinbock, 2014).

In scientific circles, similar discussions took place, and kink remains a contested field, ‘maintaining a discourse of deviance and pathology’ (Luminais: 21). The authoritative nature emanating from these scientific disciplines provided fertile ground for kink-phobia. For instance, Gagnon & Simon (1967; 1970) characterised sadomasochism as ‘pathological deviance’, distinct (and therefore worse) than ‘normal deviance’. This classification places them alongside highly stigmatized behaviours such as incest, child molestation, and punished accordingly for anti-state transgression. The term ‘paraphilia’ soon infiltrated medical forums, scientific treatises, and the discourses of many scientists during this period. Later, reputed psychologist and sexologist John Money defines paraphilia as a non-normative compulsive condition, ‘a perversion or deviancy’, otherwise known as ‘kinky or bizarre sex’ (1986: 267). The body of the ‘paraphiliac’, now carrying ‘socially unacceptable’ mental stimuli, is positioned outside the boundaries of what is considered acceptable and normative. The connection between kink and pathology persists to this day, as reflected in international standardized documents for diagnosing and treating psychiatric disorders. Documents like the American Psychiatric Association's DSM-5 and the World Health Organization's ICD-11 still link certain ‘kinks’ or kink elements with mental disorders or paraphilias, although some clinical researchers have militated for its revision (Reiersøl and Skeid, 2006, also see Revise F65).

Nevertheless, recent quantitative (Ernulf and Innala, 1995) and qualitative (Gupta and Iantaffi, 2007; 2013) research has done much in the way of arguing for a broader understanding of BDSM practices, removed from the burden of paraphilia and stigma. Psychology and clinical research has argued for repositioning in order to better understand all aspects of BDSM practice and those who engage. Castleman (2019) has argued that ‘BDSM players are as sexually and emotionally healthy as the general population’ (ibid.: online resource), while Bettinger (2002: 95) asserted that ‘involvement in kinky sexual

practices is not indicative of a mental disorder', and that much many have adopted the term 'sadomasochism' instead, in order to distance themselves from 'paraphilia'.

Other qualitative research has become key literature for recent research on BDSM. Researchers such as Baumeister concludes that sadomasochistic practices are, along with other spiritual practices, drug consumption and alcoholism, ways of escaping 'the burden of selfhood' (1988: 29; also see Baumeister, 1997; Greenberg, 2019). Other scholars have also expressed dismay (Downing, 2015b; Langdrige and Barker, 2007; Ortmann & Sprott, 2013). For example, Lisa Downing (2015b: 161) concludes that:

the question of *why* [original emphasis] paraphilias that harm no nonconsenting person should be eradicated along with the criminal ones goes problematically unchallenged.

Downing argues that the flaw in refusing a cultural reformation where non-normative and non-reproductive sexualized would de-stigmatized and socio-culturally accepted is in overpassing how such changes could affect the social and mental state of a 'person experiencing such a desire'. Ortmann and Sprott (2013: 8) claim there is insufficient research to prove BDSM a pathology, especially since

[m]any of the statements about underlying mental illness were presented without much systematic observation and testing to support the statements, and some of these [unsupported] statements were adopted into the manuals that guide clinicians in diagnosing mental disorders.

In *The state of our knowledge on SM* (2006: 2), Charles Moser and Peggy Kleinplatz claim:

[i]t is not clear why SM has not engendered more attention from researchers' especially since 'it is reasonable to assume that this abundance of [BDSM] media would not be produced unless there was a market for it [...] yet it is still virtually understudied scientifically.

Others have noted that interest in investigating BDSM / kink-related subjects is on the rise (Sabo, 2020; Sisson, 2007; Sprott & Berkey, 2015; Taylor and Ussher, 2001) and called for action (Ling et al.: 2022). On the other hand, literature on BDSM/kink pertaining to cultural studies, ethnography, psychology and clinical research is on the rise. Notably, Moser and Kleinplatz have argued extensively in favour of de-stigmatizing the practice (Dancer, Kleinplatz and Moser, 2006; Kleinplatz and Moser, 2006; 2007; 2014; Moser, 1989; Moser & Madeson, 1996; Moser, 1999; Moser, 2005; Weinberg, William and Moser, 1984). Moser has argued that a sadomasochistic interaction carried out consensually between two partners should not be classified as psychopathological or even criminal, simply because it falls out of socially normative sexual practices currently accepted (Moser in Wright, 1999: 49).

Moser and Kleinplatz critically examine the inclusion of specific paraphilias in the DSM, contending that such classifications pathologise and stigmatize individuals with non-normative sexual preferences; consensual and non-coercive sexual behaviours should not be labelled as mental disorders merely due to their atypical nature; they also stress the need to differentiate between paraphilias involving non-consensual, harmful, or criminal actions and those occurring within mutually consensual and ethical contexts.

Sandnabba, Santtila, Alison, and Nordling (2002) explore the potential adverse effects of diagnosing individuals with paraphilias, including heightened stigma, restricted sexual expression, and unnecessary psychological distress. They propose a shift in diagnostic criteria to focus on harmful and non-consensual behaviours rather than solely on the atypical nature of sexual interests. Yost and Hunter (2012) and Sprrott et al. (2021) explored how BDSM practitioners conceptualized their initial interest in BDSM, and to which extent this interest is integrated in the formation and development of the kink persona. Bezreh et al. (2012: 48) also explored this issue by interviewing 20 respondents about the process of coming out, revealing that participants feared being labelled or stigmatized. Some chose not to disclose their BDSM identity, while others evaluated the safety of disclosure based on their perception of whether someone would be judgmental or open-minded. Recent literature has investigated the difficulties some individuals face in developing a kinky identity. For example, Meeker et al. (2021) examined the intersection of feminist and submissive identities, investigating how women navigate these seemingly contradictory positions; they found that participants managed this tension through identity compartmentalization (such as concealing BDSM interests from non-BDSM feminists), by surrounding themselves with like-minded individuals, or by redefining submissiveness as compatible with feminism through the lens of choice. The main challenge BDSM practitioners face in identity development remains managing information disclosure. Researching the relationship between kink and disability has also proved complex. Stiles and Clark (2011) investigated how individuals involved in BDSM navigate the challenges of managing a potentially discreditable identity, particularly in light of the stigma associating this behaviour with abuse and mental illness.

Much work has been done to de-mystify and de-stigmatise the practice and to adopt a more liberal approach to kinkiness, since Langridge (in)famously declared that in order to make BDSM more socially acceptable, it is necessary to 'reduce the emphasis on sex and violence, the two main taboos for citizenship' (2006: 380). In doing so Langdrige observed that members of BDSM communities were actively challenging the resistance to the acceptance of BDSM and its practitioners in various ways.

However, as Faccio et al. (2014) demonstrate, destigmatizing BDSM can be a formidable challenge. Their research revealed that a quarter of participants described their own sexual practices within a framework of normality versus abnormality. Pohtinen (2019: 104) argues that secrecy is, to a certain degree, essential to kink and that:

the feeling of being a member of a secret society might render the kink experience more exciting. The secretiveness becomes part of the excitement when the secret is a shared one. In addition, it appears that it can be satisfactory to engage in something that is considered somewhat dark and mysterious. Therefore, it may be preferable for kink to remain in the closet to a certain extent.

In certain ways, Pohtinen argues, keeping a shared secret contributes to strengthening the bonds between members of the community; moreover, while keeping a secret can be burdensome, it can simultaneously function as an empowering aspect of a stigmatized identity and serve as a survival strategy in everyday life. During their research, Pohtinen observed that participants were divided between remaining 'in the closet' or 'coming out' proud. Individuals from the first category move in the world wondering whether the spaces they inhabit are conducive to their safety.

Recently, there is also significant progress regarding research on consent in kink. Pennington (forthcoming) is looking at 'consent work', a multi-faceted concept borrowed from BDSM terminology encompassing communication, negotiation, and boundary-setting practices. They discuss how this concept is becoming essential for supporting bodily autonomy in the portrayal of intimacy and nudity across film, television, theatre, and live art. Wignall is investigating how risk and consent are negotiated in online contexts, noting that participants tend to prioritize concerns about the risks of meeting others online, such as catfishing, over the risks associated with kink practices (2020: 69).

Advancement has been made recently in addressing issues of race and inclusion in kink. Conducting research interviews with 25 respondents and engaging in discussions with 32 participants in an online forum, Martinez (2020) has written about the 'overwhelming whiteness of BDSM', which he attributes to the discursive practices of white BDSM participants that function to obscure their own white privilege. Cruz (2016) explored how Black women navigate the intricate and often contradictory dynamics of pain, pleasure, and power in their participation within the fetish realm of BDSM; she emphasizes that, despite the expansion of BDSM scholarship, the experiences of Black women in the practice remain underexplored. Cruz examined the role of race play in BDSM from the perspectives of Black female practitioners, noting that not all Black/white BDSM interactions are perceived as race play. Race play, as

highlighted, is a complex practice requiring specific skill and training. Norman (2023:223) asserts that historical narratives and racial privilege, rooted in social disparities between white and Black individuals, create a fundamental contextual barrier to mutuality. In BDSM activities, racial inequity can affect individuals' choices regarding the roles they assume and their play partners, resulting in a noticeable gap in negotiation practices. For racial and sexual minorities with diminished social power, expressing their needs and boundaries within the inherently power-imbued context of BDSM can be both complex and risky.

### *But where's the bondage?*

Most of this research mentions 'bondage' among other kink-specific practices, therefore offering an overview of the current state of the literature was important. However, kink literature has not made significant advancement into researching bondage (not to mention *rope* bondage) *per se*, independent from other kink activities. Some research (Stroller, 1991) mentions rope bondage as 'hanging. Other research (Roma et al., 2013) concludes that (consensual) rope bondage is dangerous and deadly (a response to that: Lee, Clement, Sagarin, 2015).

Interestingly, Baldwin attempted such a distinction in a sense, when he proposed an alternative evaluation to SM, where S stands for 'sensuality' and M for 'mutuality'; according to Baldwin, those who still prefer 'sadism' and 'masochism' will opt for engaging in 'scenes where the intensity of the stimulations can be stronger, perhaps bull whips, the heavier electrical toys, needle scenes, fire and / or ice, to name a few', while those who adhere to the 'new' concepts 'will generally stick to the pleasure road in their scenes, engaging in bondage, fisting, sensual whipping, wax play or abrasion scenes' (Baldwin, 1993: 10). In this way, Baldwin makes a first (subjective) separation, including bondage into a category of emotion and affective mutuality. LGBTQ+ scholars such as Jonathan Alexander noted the scarcity of volumes which 'have been written solely about it [i.e. bondage]', in spite of 'the prevalence of bondage in most relationships' (2000: 92). Instead, Alexander remarks:

'the topic often appears in books about sadomasochism (S-M), the leather / fetish community, sex guides and sex manuals [...] books devoted to sadomasochistic or fetish practices that contain significant discussion of bondage and those with titles that seem to suggest they are primarily about bondage, but that are instead more general guides to sadomasochistic activity' (ibid.).

Even so, insufficient effort has been put towards examining bondage *outside* of the purview of BDSM. Elsewhere (Ordean and Pennington, 2019: 69-70) it has been remarked:

practitioners who profess to have ‘kinky’ identities or to practice ‘authentic Japanese rope bondage,’ for example, may inadvertently reify rigid definitions of both BDSM and rope bondage which work to deny access to those who do not align themselves similarly [...] While some rope bondage practitioners utilize identitarian vocabulary to define their orientations toward their rope practices or themselves as BDSM practitioners, others do not.

While the act of binding or restraining individuals (or objects) has often been widely utilized and deemed a valuable element in BDSM play, a notable portion of rope bondage practitioners globally either do not align with or only loosely associate themselves with this framework. The aspect of rope bondage practice where practitioners intentionally distance themselves from BDSM and narratives with sexual connotations has received limited attention. Addressing this absence becomes crucial when considering these dimensions. Thus in this research I contribute to the existing literature, by responding current efforts and calls for action, which strive to de-stigmatize and bring more attention to the intricacies of kink practice. In addition, I am hereby advancing the idea that (rope) bondage can be included among other kink practices, but also examined outside of the purview of BDSM.

### **2.1.3. Ethnographies of Kink**

Recently, there has been an increased interest in using ethnographical methods to investigate kink and rope bondage communities from an ethnographic standpoint. In this section, I engage with notable ethnographies on kink and rope bondage from recent years, notably from a methodological perspective. Since this research attempts to investigate the ‘lived’ experience of rope bondage practitioners, on the one hand, and to posit the *continuum* as a rhizomatic model of inquiry, on the other, it is important to examine recent ethnographic literatures from a methodological perspective. In the following pages, I discuss these literatures and argue the ways in which this thesis contributes to current debates. I will examine at length Hedwig’s (2011), Galati’s (2017) and Pennington’s (2018) contributions, as they engage with researching the practice and the communities of rope bondage specifically.

Early ethnographers such as Margot Weiss (2006; 2011; 2016), Andrea Beckmann (2009), or Staci Newmahr (2010; 2011) examine, analyse, and dissect various issues, including consent, trust, acceptable behaviours, power dynamics, and power in BDSM. Each researcher reflects on their body in the field, and

on how the communities – and the practice – have shaped the research. Reflecting back, ten years after its publication, on the exciting (and challenging) fieldwork she undertook for the seminal volume *Techniques of pleasure: BDSM and the circuits of sexuality*, in the San Francisco kink community Margot Weiss asserts (2021: 815):

I know that I have learned a tremendous amount from BDSM—not only about BDSM, but about intimacy and vulnerability; methodology, embodiment, and pleasure; race, gender, and power; autonomy, desire, and ideology. I don't think it is too much to say that BDSM taught me how to think.

In her doctoral thesis *In the habit of being kinky: practice and resistance in a BDSM community, Texas, USA*, which focused on the Cactus kink community, Luminais confesses (2012: 279):

I have learned innumerable lessons from the Cactus kinky community, some personal and some anthropological. I am touched that I was able to share in their lives for my own liminal experience of fieldwork. I have been shaped by my experiences and I can only hope that it has been an equally positive experience for the people with whom I worked.

Staci Newmahr's widely cited ethnography *Playing on the Edge: Sadomasochism, risk, and intimacy*, an extensive ethnographic research spanning four years into the BDSM scene of Caeden in North-eastern US, delves into BDSM sexualities, framing them predominantly within the concept of identity.<sup>11</sup> Newmahr's ethnography underscores the need to consider the ethnographer's body as a source of data and a tool for meaning-making in understanding BDSM. She concludes her study asserting that BDSM is a recreational –albeit 'serious leisure' activity rather than a deviant one. 'Serious leisure' is defined as a dedicated pursuit requiring specialized skills and resources, offering specific benefits. Newmahr also explores ethical considerations arise regarding the tension between ethnographic responsibility and the ethnographer's right to privacy. The study raises essential questions about ethnographic representation, privacy, distance, authority, and audience expectations. Newmahr asserts (2011: 15):

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<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Newmahr explores how BDSM practitioners form localized communities while simultaneously connecting with broader networks in the American kinky scenes. Caeden is characterized as reflecting a larger, national sense of community, extending beyond local boundaries to engage with both local and international networks; it is a melting pot for individuals sharing common outlooks, experiences, or desires, providing a sense of social acceptance beyond normative sexual cultures.

This kind of research demands attention to my body as a source of data and a tool for meaning-making. As both the site of what I wish to understand and how I will understand it, my body will function as subject, object, and method, for there is no way to understand SM, or its participants, without a sense of what it feels like to engage in it.

And concludes by saying (*ibid.*: 199)

[A]t what point, and in what contexts, do insights into the ethnographer's emotions become a desire or expectation on the part of the audience, and how reasonable is this expectation? What does the ethnographer "owe" her audience in her representation of a community or of her experience? The realization that readers may want more—not about the community, but about me—underscores questions about representation, privacy, distance, authority, and competing ideas about what does and what does not constitute violation.

The research prompts considerations of when insights into the ethnographer's emotions become an expectation, what the ethnographer owes the audience in representation, and the balance between insights into the community and personal experiences. The realization that readers may desire more information about the ethnographer underscores the complexity of representation in ethnographic research. While Chapter 3 of this thesis engages with some aspects of positionality and reflexivity as I engage with the field, Chapter 6 offers a comprehensive exploration of 'my body as a source of data', as it engages creative processes of 'meaning-making'.

Andrea Beckmann's *The social construction of sexuality and perversion: deconstructing sadomasochism* (2009) engages with contemporary debates around the body and sexualities from a criminological perspective. Her fieldwork in a kink community in London illustrates how the construction of gender and sexuality in kink contexts influences discourse around BDSM. Beckmann adopted a more cautious position in relation to the community (2009: 66-67):

As part of the 'reflexivity of the research process' (May 1993, cited in Beckmann: *id.*) I decided to adopt the role of 'participant as observer'.

Noting, however, that (*id.*):

My identity as a researcher was certainly and necessarily not a detached one and I frequently encountered the problem of ‘multiple identities’ that ethnographic fieldwork poses for researchers. Through my presence in the Scene for the collection of observational data and through the many interviews I conducted, I had become a trustworthy ‘contact-person’ for some people. On some occasions individuals, who were in need of help and support, contacted me in order to ‘talk things over’. During my fieldwork I got to know many different people in the Scene that evolved around consensual ‘SM-bodily-practices’ who sometimes did not know each other. On a few occasions I therefore was able to introduce people to each other, which in one case helped to organize the set-up of a consensual ‘SM-workshop’.

Nevertheless, Beckmann reflects on the ways in which she was often misidentified as a kinkster, by members from within and outside of the field (*ibid.* 70-71):

While researching, I had to often deal with the phenomena of being in the role of what Becker (1963, cited in Beckmann, *id.*) termed the ‘falsely accused’. Even though my ‘deviance’ only went as far as to be conducting a research on the topic of consensual ‘SM’, a lot of the people in my social environment as well as on the Scene (of consensual ‘SM’ and ‘Fetishism’) in London labelled me anyway. This experience allowed me an insight into the rigidity with which people apply labels and how a label changes the way people interact with an individual once labelled. Although my commitment to consensual ‘SM’ ‘body practices’ reduces itself to the level of professional research interests, my parents and my ex-partner believed that I was actively engaged with consensual ‘SM’ ‘bodily practices’ because I studied it. The psychotherapist whom I interviewed in London’s ‘Institute of Human Sexuality’ was interested to find out about my ‘SM-elements’ as I was carrying out this specific research project. These are only a few of the many situations I encountered within the role of the ‘falsely accused’ which provided me with a ‘lived experience’ of the potential impacts of processes of labelling.

Even though I approached the field as a researcher-participant – and therefore could not have the opportunity of mobilising ‘false labels’ from my interviewees, I did encounter such instances in other parts of my life: my fellow colleagues from academic circles, my friends, or former romantic partners. Just as

Beckmann, I was also prompted to reflect extensively; in Chapter 3, Section 3.1.1 I engage at length with this topic.

Hedwig's dissertation *Sense & shibari: a sociological re-evaluation of the knowledge of rope bondage* (2011) engaged in a six-month fieldwork in London, Japan and Berlin, with the aim to explore the tactile 'lived' experience of rope bondage, particularly that of a sensory kind, as it is felt on the skin and in the hands during a rope encounter. Hedwig's investigation determined that rope intensity on the body is immediate, not only for the purposes of restraining the body, but also as a communicative and interpersonal tool, akin to an extension of the rigger's hands. Hedwig's positionality as a practitioner prior to the start of the research determined a reflexive approach as a researcher-participant. Hedwig asserts (2011: 14):

As an 'insider' prior to the research and as a participant observer, clearly my position was different from someone who would come into it as a field of research for the first time. This presented me with some advantages, as I could use my unique position and what I already knew within a familiar context. I knew the codes of conduct, how to move physically, verbally and socially, gaining trust and establishing rapport was not a problem.

During fieldwork, Hedwig reflected further on their experience as a researcher-participant (*ibid.*: 15)

[T]he sensing body became literally entangled in the research itself in which the intimacy of the encounters were [sic] powerful and could elicit very strong reactions, both physical and emotional. A strong response is not unusual for studies concerned with the experience of sensory research.

Although not an 'insider' prior to starting this research, I have also approached the field with curiosity and kept an open mind regarding tying. Unsure what to expect, or how far I could go, I allowed myself time and space to experiment. Just like Hedwig's body, my own 'sensing' body became enmeshed rope, emotion and friendship. In Chapter 3, Section 3.5.2. I offer a detailed account from my field notes to this avail.

Hedwig's dissertation finishes with a plea for research; among the proposed themes, two stand out in the context of this research: examining the relationship between cultural authenticity and Shibari and focusing on the perceived tensions between 'authentic' Japanese Kinbaku and Western practices as possible avenues of research (*ibid.*: 29). Chapter 4 of this thesis contextualizes precisely these debates.

In her dissertation *The therapeutic impact of rope bondage: a case study in the UK* (2017), Mirabai Galati noted that there is a notable absence in the exploration of the lived experience of rope bondage. Starting from the question 'What is it like to participate in rope bondage?', Galati embarked on a five-week fieldwork at the London rope bondage venue The Garden. The central focus of her research revolved around the therapeutic impact of rope bondage, as reported by individuals participating in the Garden community. The research was conducted using a phenomenological approach, Galati explored the 'lived' experiences of rope bondage participants, specifically focusing on embodied experiences during rope bondage scenes, namely sensations perceived while tying or being tied. Importantly, Galati approached the field as a researcher-practitioner (ibid.: 23):

I was a bottom, as well as an interviewer and an observer. I used my own body to reach an understanding not only of the practice but also of the people and their position in the community. Through this intertwining of bottoming, critical reflection and theorisation, I adopted a new role within the researched community. In fact, I have been tied – either before or after the interview – by some of the riggers that I interviewed. This allowed me to create a deep and closer connection with them. I used this relationship as a mean to clarify and dig further some aspects of rope bondage that I was experiencing with them.

The engagement in rope bondage, Galati states, is associated with a desire to temporarily escape everyday worries, and engaging in leisure activities, offering a respite from the stress of societal responsibilities. Galati calls for a collaborative, multidisciplinary, and non-pathologising approach to engage with sexual and bodily practices, advocating for a better understanding of their implications in society. My research aligns with Galati's methodologies, as I have also reconsidered my positionality during fieldwork (see Chapter 3). Galati's account of social interactions with the people she was tying with, are instances familiar to me from my own fieldwork. This thesis responds to Galati's call for a cooperative, interdisciplinary, and non-pathologising approach through a multi-case qualitative study aimed at understanding the formation of identitarian positioning mediated through the rope bondage practice, and implicitly, at how this positioning relates to the ton societal environment of each participant.

Heath Pennington's dissertation *Reframing exclusionary identities through affective affinities: a comparative study of BDSM community formation in Budapest and London* (2018) is a comparative study exploring the manner in which BDSM communities in Budapest and London coalesce based on affective affinities that diverge from the exclusionary frameworks of identity politics. Pennington's objective is establishing an expansive and indistinct definition of kink, advocating for the portrayal of BDSM as an

affective praxis that can transcend normative identity constructs. In acknowledging their positionality as a researcher engaged in the kink community, Pennington challenges traditional categorical distinctions between practitioner, academic, and activist roles. Pennington soberly states (*ibid.* 25):

Acknowledging my own positionality as a kinky scholar, I break down categorical distinctions between practitioner, academic, and activist, and write into a body of work which aims to bring taboo or understudied sexual subjects into the academy [...] What does set my work apart is my willingness to own my ongoing involvement in the sexual culture I study, while some ethnographers refuse to disclose the extent of their involvement in kink beyond research.

By remaining open to affective impact, Pennington attentively assesses the 'vibe' of the kink events and the 'ethos' of kinky communities. Importantly, this understanding comes from the fusion of personal commitment to the scene and academic drive: their familiarity with the practices, both as a participant and observer, shapes their research, emphasizing the interconnectedness of physical presence with the events under analysis. Although not specifically detached from kink, Pennington conducted research at a BDSM event in Hungary that caters for *shibari*; furthermore, both Pennington as Galati conducted fieldwork in London's rope bondage venue The Garden, one of the research field sites this thesis examines. This thesis contributes to and builds up of that scholarship, bringing new data to the fore.

Finally, Zoey Jones' doctoral thesis *Pleasure, community, and marginalization in rope bondage: a qualitative investigation into a BDSM subculture* (2020) is an essential recent addition to the plethora of rope bondage ethnographies informed by symbolic interactionism, feminism, critical disability studies, and critical race theory. Drawing on 23 qualitative interviews with practitioners from Canada and the United States, Jones aims to investigate their engagement with rope bondage practice and subculture. The research findings indicate that the rope bondage subculture encompasses experiences of profound pleasure, belonging, and joy, as well as conflict and discrimination at both personal and structural levels; fully grasping the nuances of pleasure in rope bondage requires attentively listening to how practitioners conceptualize their own desires, pleasures, and lived experiences.

Jones asserts that the rope bondage world is a vibrant social world that also reflects broader societal issues, such as racism, ableism, sexism, homophobia/transphobia, and classism. The perspectives of disabled and racialized research participants shed light into both forms of oppression and resistance within these marginalized demographics. Interestingly, Jones positions herself rather critically in relation to her status as 'insider' (48):

This project was particularly tricky from a methodological perspective due to several factors: my insider status, which some academics consider a controversial position from which to conduct research; the sensitivity of researching a stigmatized, potentially vulnerable, and underground demographic in a robustly ethical manner; and potential clashes between university ethics and community ethics. Each of these elements played a part in investigating my main research question: How do rope bondage practitioners navigate, explore, and experience rope bondage practice and community?

Elsewhere (87), Jones explains further:

There are limitations to the structure of this research project. The most prominent is that some parts of academia consider insider research to be a limitation. While I argue that my position was a strength more than a weakness, it did affect a great deal. For example, I knew almost all of my participants, and their knowledge of me clearly influenced interviews.

This reasoning highlights the complex challenges faced in conducting research within the rope bondage community. Jones identifies their 'insider status' as a potential point of contention, as some academics argue that being part of the community may bias the research. Additionally, the sensitivity surrounding the study of a stigmatized and vulnerable demographic necessitates a careful ethical approach to avoid harm. There is also a recognition that university ethics guidelines may not always align with the ethics upheld within the community itself. Together, these factors complicate the exploration of the primary research question regarding how practitioners engage with and understand their practices and community.

Nevertheless, both Pennington and Jones call for continued efforts in scholarship that de-pathologises kink which use interdisciplinary theories and methods, and reflexive ethnographic practices; I am hopeful that my contribution fills a part of that void in research.

## **2.2. Rope bondage: primary sources**

While researching this topic, I have spent a significant amount of time exploring non-academic sources in various formats, as they provide rich insight into the aspects this thesis is addressing. Some of the ethnographies discussed in the previous section emphasise on the importance of non-academic sources in contextualising the practice (Pennington: 2018; Galati, 2017; Weiss, 2011). Sisson (2007: 18-19)

attributes kink's rise in public visibility to the proliferation of the internet in the late 1980s and especially in the 1990s, which prompted BDSM practitioners to form into communities, transforming what had previously been loose networks of affiliation into more cohesive and organized structures. Call (2013) and Rubin (2014) argue this rise was propelled in the context of the AIDS epidemic and a concerted attack on alternative sexualities orchestrated by conservative political leaders in the United States at the time, as well as due to the surge of the 'sex wars', or to the establishment of organizations like Samois, a lesbian-feminist BDSM support group in San Francisco.

The world of rope bondage from the scenes researched in London, Berlin and Paris is somewhat polarized. Practitioners who affiliate with kink tend to research, collect and archive BDSM accessories, attire or paraphernalia, whereas those who practice rope the 'Japanese style' are diving into other sources, which conform to their taste and interests. However, as fieldwork data I engage with in Chapter 4 and 5 is demonstrating, affiliating with rope bondage practiced the 'Japanese style' or to rope bondage practiced the 'kinky style' are not necessarily mutually exclusive for my interview partners, and multiple interests and avenues of research can spark their interest (field notes, London, 217). Nevertheless, familiarizing myself with 'kink style' and especially 'Japanese style' material has helped me integrate and understand how rope bondage is constructed in the imagination of my research participants through material culture, and how it *looks like*.

Additionally, engaging with this material has helped me in four ways: first, I used this primary material in order to familiarize myself with the world of Japanese-style rope bondage, particularly because I did not have physical access to the Japanese scene; second, to determine the extent to which claims to rope bondage's 'historical' continuity is based, in fact, on fragmentary evidence; third, in order to learn about different types of aesthetics and 'traditions' within the 'Japanese-style', and thus, to discover stratification even within the same 'style'; fourth, in order to be able to detect this stratification while conducting research, and thus to have a better grasp of the dynamics and the tendencies in the scene (for instance, field notes from May 2018 and January 2019 reflect rope bondage practitioners from The Greenhouse preferred the style of a specific Japanese 'master', as opposed to practitioners from The Garden, that have a more liberal approach to styles and affiliations).

Accessing online kink/rope bondage platforms during research is a recurring practice. Hedwig (2011: 15) asserts:

Web-pages and blogs were continually accessed, before and after the dates stated in order to keep up with news and topics of discussion relating to the practice of Shibari.

Pennington (2018: 39) used online interactions as a way to connect affectively to kinksters unknown to them, and geographically out of reach:

The affective community support I received while researching this project attests to kinky bonds which span regional divides. For example, one practitioner to whom I reached out on FetLife offered to burn and mail me a copy of a DVD. Another, to whom I addressed a fact-checking inquiry, answered my message like an old friend and offered to help me with historical research on any future projects I might undertake. I had never met either of these people; in fact, they live on different continents. These kinds of interactions enrich my work as scholar-practitioner, and support the idea that kink communities can be simultaneously local and global.

While Galati (2017: 23-24) states that:

Additionally, I used social media – such as Instagram, Facebook and FetLife – to find events and meetings. These websites have the benefit to be public or semi-public – in order to gain access to the profiles, I had to ‘follow’ or ask for ‘friendship’. This method of research, particularly FetLife, allowed me to access explicit pictures that are censored or rejected by other sites.

Contemporary digital archives such as *Kokoro-Kinbaku*, *Kinbaku Today*, *Kinbakunomicon*, *Japanese Rope Art*,<sup>12</sup> or *Tokyo Bound* contribute significantly to the ‘Japanese style’ rope bondage world. These archives collect, translate and republish material on SM and rope bondage. Users get digital access to magazines such as *Yomikiri Romance*, *Kitan Club Magazine*, *Fūzoku Sōshi*, *Bizzare* or *Uramado* (Master K, 2015: 41; also see Bienvenu, 1998; Essex & Swanson, 1996; Seves, 2017).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> For example, the website JapaneseRopeArt.com, which provides a series of talks and interviews, as well as selling rope and various Shibari merchandise, creating a database of rope references in Japanese cinema – especially in connection to Hōjōjutsu - and publishing articles on the oral history of Shibari. See <http://japaneseropeart.com/RopeArt/>, accessed 7.09.2016.

<sup>13</sup> Most of these magazines were published and popularized in the years following the US Occupation after the Second World War, and, were, thus, circulated outside Japan, especially in the US. *Kitan Club Magazine* and *Uramado* in particular, have shaped bondage-inspired pulp magazines and fetish publications in the United States, owing to figures like Charles Guyette of Irving Klaw, as well as photographers and fetish artists like Eric Stanton, John Willie, Gene Bilbrew, and fetish models such as Bettie Page.

Surging interest in these materials corresponds to the rising popularity in practicing ‘Japanese style’ rope bondage non-Western communities. These platforms are usually curated by a small team of editors, who have acquired a longstanding status of ‘Japanophiles’ in the rope community. Some materials consist in interviews with prominent members from the Japanese rope bondage scene. Others are copying in the translated article, respecting the original format of the publication. Sometimes the archival entry uses photographs of the collected item which now forms part of the author personal collection. Freely accessible, they are a point of reference for many readers who are interested in the ‘historical’ and ‘Japanese’ aspects of the practice, most of whom would not benefit from easy access to the original publication due to language or geographical constraints (personal communication with the archive managers, 21.10.2020).

In the last years, there has been an increasing interest in the digital publication of audio-video and/or written material on personal websites and social media platforms; most of this material serves as instructional material,<sup>14</sup> while other websites such as *Tokyo Bound*,<sup>15</sup> O.S.’s personal blog (a European practitioner naturalised in Japan) collect and translate material from Japanese to English audiences; some tackle issues such as style and aesthetics in relation to the practice in Japan, but also more complex notions such as ‘shame play’, or drawing parallels and differences.<sup>16</sup> The ‘about’ section of *Kinbaku Today* reads:

*kinbaku Today* was founded in 2014 to promote kinbaku, the art of Japanese erotic rope bondage, to the Western-speaking world. Since its inception, [Z.N.] has served as the founding editor for the site, publishing contributions from authors in the US, Europe, Australia, and Japan. The goal of the site is to provide a forum where people can read announcements about events, books, and video releases, read interviews with Japanese *bakushi* and models, study tutorials, view galleries of both Western and Japanese rope artists, and learn more about the history of the art of *kinbaku*.

Written testimonies from online forums or kink social media platforms such as *FetLife*<sup>17</sup> or podcast channels such as *Ropecast* bring evidence pertaining to ‘lived’ tying experience, ask for advice, power /

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<sup>14</sup> For example: [https://osadasteve.com/studio6\\_en.html](https://osadasteve.com/studio6_en.html), <https://www.study-on-falling.com/workshops> , <https://gestalta.co.uk/teaching> (last accessed: 1.11.2023).

<sup>15</sup> Now under <https://osadasteve.com/> (last accessed 29.11.2023).

<sup>16</sup> I think of practitioners like O.S. as cultural correspondents.

<sup>17</sup> FetLife functions as a social networking platform catering to individuals with an interest in BDSM, fetishism, and kink activities. Comparable to Facebook, it is primarily operated and utilized by members of the kink community. Access to FetLife is exclusive to registered members, requiring sign-up for usage, and the platform is freely accessible. Upon becoming a member, users have the option to create their personal profiles.

play dynamics within a negotiated scene.<sup>18</sup> Ropecast's programme, for example, is structured similarly to a radio show and contain interviews with kink practitioners. It tackles social aspects such as discrimination, racism, misogyny, homophobia or emotional manipulation and suggest possible solutions; it rarely deals with questions surrounding aesthetics or performativity.<sup>19</sup>

Sometimes, these platforms are used denounce consent violations and give full accounts of the experience. I used this material in order to familiarize myself with the jargon, codes of conduct and sometimes even to navigate difficult situations in the field (for instance, in Chapter 3 and Chapter 5 I describe how after some consent violation accusations The Greenhouse had to close its doors in May 2018. Among much confusion, I reverted to online social media platforms in order to make sense of the situation and to start thinking about readjusting my positionality in the field; field notes, May-June 2018).

Much attention has been given in recent years to publications, or 'manuals' on rope bondage (Arisue Go, 2009; Clover, 2016; Harrington, 2009, 2015a, 2015b; Master K, 2015; Midori, 2001; Miumi-U, 2016; Two Knotty Boys, 2006, 2009; Vane 2014a, 2014b). They circulate widely and are referenced often among rope bondage educators in the Western rope scenes. For instance, The Garden in London recommends the publications by Miumi-U (2016) and Clover (2016) as a good starting point for everyone who wants to start practicing rope bondage. Both publications are available for online purchase, but can also be procured from the aforementioned studio (fieldwork notes, October-November 2016). Most of these publications include instructions on technical aspects of the practice of rope bondage, including basic knots and bindings, suspension techniques,<sup>20</sup> safety considerations during tying or being tied, consent and negotiation, 'after-care',<sup>21</sup> and guidance on finding a suitable rope partner, among other practical advice. For instance, in the introduction of *The little guide of getting tied up (including suspension tips)*, author Evie Vane states (2014: vi):

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<sup>18</sup> Non-kink social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Imgur, Tumblr, etc. is just as popular. Nevertheless, navigating the social media community regulations is often a slippery slope, and many profiles get banned or deleted for regulation violations

<sup>19</sup> See <http://www.ropecast.com/>, (last accessed 1.09.2016).

<sup>20</sup> A 'suspension' in rope bondage entails the act of hanging a restrained individual from one or more overhead suspension points. Suspension can be performed by a rigger on a model, but can also entail 'self-suspension', where a practitioner ties and suspends themselves from a suspension point.

<sup>21</sup> An important affective component in a rope bondage session after the rope is detached from the tied body. It can involve a series of activities such as cuddling, laughing, crying, laying still and waiting to come back mentally from the 'rope space'; it is often accompanied by a conversation, where the tying partners are debriefing each other on their emotions and/or rememorzse some moments in the tying scene (field notes, London, October 2016).

much of this book is subjective; it's based on my experience and what's come across my radar [...] every single body is different, and you should never do anything that does not feel right for you or your body. I'm not a doctor, an anatomy expert, or a fitness pro. My tying skills begin and end with my shoelaces [...] I'm not claiming to be an expert on rope bottoming [...] I just love it and do it regularly, and was heartbroken by the number of preventable injuries happening. I've made many dangerous mistakes because there was no book like this [...] hopefully reading this will help you stay safe.

Other works such as Master K's *The Beauty of Kinbaku* (2015), Harrington's *Rope, bondage, and power* (2009), and Midori's *The seductive art of Japanese bondage* (2001) attempt to retrace more robustly rope bondage's 'historical' origins; they incorporate elements from Japanese folklore, religion, everyday life, rituals, military practices, and various artistic traditions in an effort to construct a narrative that supports the continuity of rope-related activities in the archipelago over many centuries. Master K's, for instance, claims that (2015: 7-8):

Anyone who has been struck by the beauty of a Shibari image, thrilled to the concept of binding a lover or of being bound oneself, or been curious as to how such a unique, exotic, dramatic and beautiful form of bondage art could develop as part of the history and culture of Japan will, I hope, find some value here [...] In this book I discuss many of the famous Japanese 'rope masters' of history and today.

Surveying these publications has helped me understand the written culture surrounding the practice of rope bondage in a few ways. First, the biggest advantage these publications present, is that they are written from *by* practitioners, and *for* practitioners. I approached the material affectively, paying attention to how and where jargon is employed, what type of emotions are conveyed and in what contexts, what moments in the tying scene is signposted and why. Second, this material has helped me chart the territory of the rope bondage, and thus, prepared me for entering the field on the one hand, and for structuring some content for the interviews, on the other. Third, I detected a 'turn to tradition' in terms of what was 'collected', who was collecting it and what that meant more broadly for the dynamics of the scene. Fourth, in analyzing this material I observed a preoccupation for the aesthetics of rope, an aspect which I then further investigated in the field. I expand and discuss all these points at length in Chapter 4.

### **2.3. Literatures of 'Japaneseness'**

There has been a paradigm shift in Cultural Studies on Modern Japanese Culture in the last 15 years, with myriad studies debunking the idea that Japan is a mono-cultural society with minimal internal cultural divergence and stratification, on the one hand, and little cultural permeation from 'the West', on the other. Scholars like Yoshio Sugimoto have undertaken extensive research in order to understand cultural dynamics within Japanese society '[s]ince Japanese culture is a problematical construct rather than a given reality' (Sugimoto, 2009: 5), (2010), and since there seems to be a tendency towards relativisation and homogenisation of Japan's ethnic diversity (2014). Equal significance has been attributed to the role the exportation of Japanese products has played in establishing Japan as one of the most important 'soft powers' in the world. Sugimoto (*ibid.*: 14) has asserted that:

'Japanesey' cultural products are increasingly visible around the world, ranging from Japanese anime, manga, karaoke, sushi, and fashion to martial arts. So are such knowledge commodities as Sudoku games, the Kumon methods of education and the Suzuki methods of teaching music. For Japan's trade business, these cultural goods are as important as 'physical' commodities like cars and electronic appliances. As the Japanese state attempts to establish itself as a leading 'soft power' in the world, Japanese capitalism finds its largest market in the so-called 'Japan cool' products.

Elsewhere, Sugimoto (2020: 303) noted that establishment of the Japan Cool market has been coordinated industrial, governmental and mass-media effort. Mouer and Norris (2009: 353) further question why 'the export of Japanese-style management declined' throughout the world, while 'the export of Japanese popular culture has flourished'. Scholars such as David Howes have noted that 'culture is constructed through consumption, not just production' (Howes, 1996: 8). Others have engaged in extensive discussions regarding the detrimental impact of delineating 'the cultural' and 'the economic' on a comprehensive comprehension of the intricate processes shaping 'culture' (see Gregson, 1995; Sayer, 1994), as well as advocating for seeing the relation between production and consumption in a broader sense, ranging 'from the local to the global' (Jackson, 2002: 5). Alternatively, other research has analysed the role of cross-cultural consumption plays in global markets (Howes, 1996), whilst some have even advocated for transcending the separation between 'the cultural' and 'the economic,' viewing them as interconnected categories involved in a dialectical relationship (Sayer, 1997; Urry, 1994). My contribution to these literatures lies in arguing in favour of integrating Japanese-style rope bondage as a 'Japan cool' product, alongside other popular activities such as 'karaoke', 'martial arts'. Since to the best of my knowledge such examination has never been attempted before in English-speaking scholarship, it

responds to calls from cultural theorists to expand on the understanding of cultural exchange and the 'Japan cool' market (Mouer & Sugimoto, 2015). In substantiating with empirical evidence, I make an original contribution to scholarships which explore the relationship between culture production, consumption and the market. More specifically, I apply this framework to analyse how identitarian positioning forms at the intersection of these three vectors for rope bondage practitioners who both affiliate and reject the 'Japanese-style'; regardless, their choice impacts the market and the circulation and exchange of 'Japanese cool' rope bondage products. I signpost, nevertheless, the need to conduct more research in these aspects, especially concerning how rope bondage practitioners move and travel to experience, to teach or to learn rope.

Extensive research has been conducted with the purpose of linking cultural production, exchange, capital and 'cultural appropriation', since 'culture is constructed through consumption, not just production' (Rogers, 2006: 8). There has been a growing concern with the ethics surrounding 'cultural appropriation' and 'authenticity' (Ferrara, 1998; Taylor, 1991; Vannini & Franzese, 2008; Vannini & Williams, 2009; 2016). Some scholars examining the ethical implications 'cultural appropriation' has on both the appropriating and the appropriated culture in various fields, from empirical knowledge and material culture as it manifests in the arts and archaeology, museums, and religion (Young & Brunk, 2009), to indigenous cultural customs and behaviours which are 'borrowing power' (Ziff & Rao, 1997), or to the arts, with a more liberal stance which asserts 'cultural appropriation' can be acceptable for aesthetic or moral reasons (Young, 2010). Scholars like Susan Wright (1998: 10) recapitulated that 'culture itself is permanently contested, negotiated, endorsed, transformed'; scholars like Straub (et al., 2002; 2012) view culture as closely connected to social identity, while other scholars such as John Street (1993; 1997) considered the potential of culture (and especially popular culture) as a practice of resistance, enabling protest, the spread of populism, censorship and nurturing political action. Discussing tattoos featuring East Asian calligraphy on Western individuals, Christensen (2012) contends that the wrongful exoticization of another culture for personal gain involves extracting 'language' and 'symbolism' from their 'original context,' resulting in oversimplification or complete loss of meaning, and thus resulting in 'cultural gibberish'. Mannie (2014: online) posits that appropriating certain forms of gestural expression from the black female community by the white gay community is a means of reasserting power but may diminish the essence of the community from which these elements are borrowed. McWorther (2017: online) responds to Mannie, stating that black women are not left without their culture after the 'theft,' and gay white men are not 'out-black' the women they 'stole' from. Berg (2015: online) vehemently dismisses the negative aspects of cultural appropriation, asserting that 'the history of culture is the history of

cultural appropriation.’ According to Berg, what is perceived as traditional national or ethnic cultures today is the current manifestation of a long evolutionary process, and appropriating culture adds meaning, creating complex new rituals and relationships. Focusing solely on the negative aspects of cultural appropriation within a closed-off binary system may inadvertently support a conservative model of culture.

On its neighbouring concept, ‘transculturation’, scholars have written extensively ever since Fernando Ortiz coined the term in the 1940s (Ortiz, 1947), mapping how cultures move, morph and transform within the ‘contact zones’ between different cultures (Pratt, 1992), and thus, cultural difference is commodified (Cook and Crang, 1996; Taussig, 1996 [1980]). Notable and relevant for this thesis, in his article: *From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation*, Richard A. Rogers (2006: 499) claims that:

Cultural appropriation is inescapable, but that is not to say all acts of appropriation are equal. Acts and conditions of appropriation vary in terms of the degree and relevance of (in)voluntariness, (in)equality, (im)balance, and (im)purity [...] Cultural exchange recalls an ‘innocent’ era or context in which cultures freely and without power implications mutually share cultural elements, perhaps with the effect of greater cultural understanding and creativity. Cultural domination and exploitation are modelled on dominant – subordinate relations roughly equivalent but not entirely reducible to historical models of colonization [...]. Finally, transculturation is an effort to theorize appropriation in the conditions of global capitalism in a neo-colonial and postmodern era. It still draws, therefore, from the domination–subordination model of cultural domination and exploitation while working to acknowledge complexities in culture, power, and appropriation that question the possibility (or desirability) of a (re)turn to cultural exchange.

This thesis contributes to literatures on ‘cultural appropriation’ and ‘transculturation’ in a number of ways. First, I contribute to scholarship on cultural exchange, in parameters not yet explored: there is a considerable amount of cultural exchange that takes place between rope bondage scenes in East / West, which broadens inter-cultural understanding and activity. I situate this examination through the comparative study of rope bondage scenes in London, Berlin and Paris, and observing the ways in which cultural import / export is assimilated and embodied within those scenes. Secondly, this thesis argues that for some rope bondage practitioners, collecting, and displaying / wearing Japanese paraphernalia, ‘vintage’ SM magazines, attire, photographs, illustrations, art on Japanese erotic and/or bondage subjects are ways of integrating ‘Japaneseness’ into their rope bondage identity. As such, this thesis could

indirectly contribute to scholarship on cultural domination and exploitation, as it reinforces a colonial practice popular in Japan in the years of the US occupation. I signpost here, however, that more research and comparative study needs to be conducted in this direction.

Sociologists have looked at the ways in which language serves as either an agglutinating or a differentiating agent for groups of different cultural and social backgrounds (Bernstein, 1971; Bossard, 1948; Brown, 1958; 1965; Kluckhohn, 1964). Basil Bernstein in particular claimed that the way in which language is used and the type of speech adopted is directly influenced by the relationships which are established within a group. In *Class, Codes and Control* (1971: 76), Bernstein argues that:

Forms of spoken language in the process of their learning initiate, generalize and reinforce special types of relationship with the environment and thus create for the individual particular forms of significance.

Roland Barthes (1953; 1957; 1973; 1977a; 1977b) has also written about how language and discourse influences processes of 'function' and 'meaning-making'. Thompson et al. (1994: 434) conducted research on jargon, which they determine to be 'an interpretation that is based on cultural traditions of meaning'; within multicultural groups, it becomes 'a shared language'. In this thesis, I apply the framework advanced by this scholarship to examine the role of language, and jargon in particular, the use of which impacts the dynamics of rope bondage practitioners in the field sites I have conducted research in. Research-practitioner Georg Barkas made a sociological inquiry into the role 'language' plays rope bondage, which he deemed eminently 'erotic'. In the volume *Archaeology of personalities: a linguistic approach to erotic rope bondage* by Georg Barkas (2016). Drawing from post-structuralism and (auto)ethnography, Barkas used the metaphor of the 'interview' to describe various ways to 'read' rope bondage sessions, but also as a method or a tool for 'doing' rope, 'communicating' intention, exercising 'power' and mutually exploring personalities. I align myself with Barkas's postulations, which I particularly make use of in Chapter 4 (Section, 4.3.2), where I examine the role of language in relation to social hierarchies within the scene. Thus, in this thesis I aim to expand on this existing literature, and bring new and detailed examples from the field to extend the understanding of the ways in which language is employed to exercise cultural affinity, creating hierarchies and tension in the field.

## **2.4. Conclusion**

To conclude, in this chapter I have reviewed and situated this thesis within literatures on BDSM/kink, I have reviewed some primary sources, and I have situated the thesis within literatures concerned with 'cultural appropriation', 'fetishization' and 'transculturation'. In section 2.1. I have argued for the necessity of tracing a kink genealogy, as some of the issues presented there are linked to the positionality of my interview partners. Then, I have argued this thesis contributes to existing literatures by advancing the *continuum* as a horizontal and inclusive theoretical model, with which the practice can be examined outside of the purview of BDSM. After that, I argued this thesis makes an original contribution to kink literatures, by addressing ongoing initiatives and appeals for action aimed at destigmatizing and shedding light on the complexities of kink practice.

In section 2.2. I mapped some primary sources I used in my research. I argued that acquainting myself with how 'kink style', and the 'Japanese style' rope bondage *looks* like has helped me navigate the scene; understand the jargon; observe the stratification (and sometimes polarisation) of the rope bondage scene based on the tying 'style'; and make assessments on the field site's affiliation to certain 'styles' of tying. Then, I argued that access to online platforms and forums helped me navigate and make sense some difficult moments during fieldwork and adjust my positionality accordingly. Finally, I argued access to rope bondage manuals helped me chart the 'territory', and structure my data collection strategies.

In section 2.3 I have reviewed recent sources on cross-culturality and 'cultural appropriation'. I have argued in favour of viewing 'Japanese-style' rope bondage as a 'Japan cool' product, alongside other popular activities such as 'karaoke' or 'martial arts'. Then, I have also argued that this thesis responds to calls from cultural theorists to expand on the relationship between cultural exchange and the 'Japan cool' market. Then, I argued this thesis's contribution to literatures on 'cultural appropriation' on a subject not yet explored. After that, I argued that this thesis contributes indirectly to post-colonial scholarship which examines cultural 'domination' and 'exploitation'. Finally, I argued this thesis contributes to literatures which explore the relationship between language, jargon and cultural affinity.

## ***Chapter 3: Methodology***

### **3.0. Introduction**

This chapter provides an analysis of the research methodology. In section 3.1. I present the research design and approach, for the realisation of which I used a multi-case study design using multi-methodological qualitative approach. This research design aims to examine and understand the ‘lived’ experience, the affect and the emotions of people engaging in rope bondage practices. In section 3.2. I tackle the concept of ‘multiplicity’ which I appropriate and use as an umbrella-concept which encompasses a multitude of variations of the rope bondage *continuums*, and foregrounds the empirical chapters of this thesis; I argue that the ‘multiplicity’ is a model which can support the fluidity of positionality, which evolve and/or change, based on the accumulation of ‘situated’ knowledge as a result of ‘lived’ experience. Section 3.3. moves on to describe the field sites in London (The Garden), Berlin (The Barn), Paris (The Greenhouse), and the island of F\* in the Mediterranean Sea (where practitioner P.A. is based). In this section I also outline the complexities of my own reflexive positionality, moving through the field as a researcher-participant. Section 3.4. explains the processes of participant recruitment within the field sites. Section 3.5. enumerates the data collection methods I used: participant observation, autoethnography (generating ‘situated’ knowledge), the interviewing process and the types of interviews used. The last section of this chapter, section 3.6. describes how data was analysed (transcribing and coding).

#### **3.1. Research design and approach**

Research design is that ‘framework or structure’ within which data is collected and analysed (Bryman, 2016: 695). A robust design testifies to the fact that ‘methodological coherence’ is attained, and will ‘ensure congruence’ between various parts of the research, from ‘viewpoint’ to ‘theoretical position / perspective’, chosen methods, the research questions, and the field data (Mayan, 2009:13; also see Morse, 1999c). This research is comprised from a multi-site case study design, through field data collected from three sites (Berlin, London, Paris) and from the island F\* where one research participant is based. Fieldwork was conducted intermittently over three years, most intensively during 2018 and the beginning of 2019 (see section 3.3. and section 3.4.); this is also when the majority of the interviews took place. I propose a multi-methodological qualitative ethnography, utilizing participant observation, autoethnography, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, and visual and written research as evidence for investigating shared positionality (see section 3.3.1 and Chapter 6, section 6.2.). I argue in

favour of ‘assembling a combination of ethnographic and case study approaches’ (White, Drew and Hay, 2009: 22; also see White & Drew, 2011), helpful in ‘deepen[ing] our understandings, enrich[ing] our analyses, and facilitate[ing] our communication with diverse audiences’ (Culhane, 2017: 12). These methods were chosen in order to foster a comprehensive understanding of practitioner’s motivation to engage in rope bondage, their ‘lived experience’ and the manner in which ‘situated knowledge’ (Haraway: 1988) influences identitarian positionalit(ies); these perspectives bring evidence in support of the idea that ‘reality is complex and many-sided’, while ‘allow[ing] the original multiplicity of stand-points to be recreated’ (Thompson, 2009 [1988]: 28). Therefore, I devise a theoretical research model, a *continuum* which does not privilege a single theory, method or tradition as the only form of generating knowledge (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), as I recognise that knowledge is ‘situated’ (Haraway: 1988). As it is with writing ethnographically ‘there are multiple ways in which we might experiment’ but at the same time ‘remaining committed to an ethnographic narrative, one that emerges from in-depth, collaborative, rigorous fieldwork, which aims to engage and transform’ (Elliot, 2017: 24). I argue that knowledge is ‘politically, historically and culturally created’ and as such, ‘it incorporates the social location and contextual advantages of the researcher in the research process’ (Schmitz, 2020; cited in Richter and Kolb, 2022: 43). Tools such as participant observation (field notes), interviews, autoethnography and analysing visual and written evidence assist in exploring affective embodied corporeal ‘lived’ experiences of the tied and tying body, and attempts to understand how this embodied, ‘situated’ knowledge mediates identitarian positioning on the *continuum*.<sup>22</sup>

As a model for identitarian research, the *continuum* comes into being as a result of the appropriation of a theoretical position responsive to concepts first advanced in the work of philosophers Deleuze and Guattari. I am, thus, also reflecting here on the *continuum* and ‘multiplicity’ as a broader theoretical framework of the thesis (see Interlude). In section 3.2. I posit the idea of multiplicity as a ‘constellation’ of factors and situations which determine a non-hierarchical and non-exclusionary classification, favouring a constant expansion of the rope bondage *continuum* through ongoing processes of accumulation of knowledge, as it is experienced during the ‘lived’ time (Tampio, 2010, also see Linstead and Thanem, 2007). I do not particularly distinguish ‘theory’ from ‘method’ (Mayan, *ibid.*: 17), and

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<sup>22</sup> It is not my intention to offer ‘a taxonomy of rope bondage’ (Ordean & Pennington, 2019: 68), to describe the complete experience of each practitioner I have interviewed, nor to account for a complete ‘lived experience’ of *all* rope bondage practitioners in the field. I rather attempt to get a bit closer to my research participants. This research remains ‘in the strongest and most powerful sense of the word, subjective.’ I therefore, posit that ‘multiple realities and multiple truths exist’ and that this thesis presents ‘just one possibility’ (Mayan, 2009: 25; also see Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

therefore I chose a flexible, reactive and contextual research approach, adapting the research design as the work progressed and more data was collected (see Mason, 2002: 5). In practice, this implied adapting the methods to different field sites and to different situations. Keeping ethically committed while navigating the field sometimes meant 'walking a tightrope' and making necessary adjustments that treated those engaged in the research with respect and minimized harm (Li, 2008: 109), while keeping a flexible approach that helps me adjust to any kind of situation that I might encounter in the field (Cragg & Cook, 1995). For example, section 3.3. is discussing the particularities of each field site, while the entire section 3.3.2. is dedicated to the discussion of my positionality as a researcher in each field site; Chapter 6 is borrowing from recent curatorial theory in order to adapt to the specific needs of the shared work partnership for the purpose of creating a co-authored artist dossier. I also took a reflexive approach to interviewing, remaining attentive and sometimes adapting the interview structure to meet the needs of my interview partners, other times creating a compassionate atmosphere where emotions that came out while talking about difficult subjects could manifest freely (discussed further in section 3.5.4.). Furthermore, I attempted to think critically and reflexively about my positionality in the field in all stages of this research (see section 3.1.1.), especially so since I argue that autoethnography is a tool for research creation (see section 3.5.2). Other than providing me with valuable embodied knowledge, field notes (from participant observation and self-observation) helped develop some aspects of reflexive positionality; maintaining reflexivity has shaped the manner in which I related to the research collaborators on the field-sites, and defined the possibilities (and the limitations) of my research 'within the context of institutional, social, and political Realities' (Farhana, 2007: 376). I position myself against the idea that autoethnography and reflexivity is creating 'research bias', especially so for a subject which is still under-studied. To use Maria J. Mayan's words:

'when a phenomenon is unknown, then we sample for the best examples of the phenomenon. We want to gather as much bias or a variety of experiences with the phenomenon so that we can describe it in its fullness. In other words, we deliberately seek out bias; participants' bias is exactly what we need to hear about' (2009: 19; also see Morse, 2006).

Moreover, as this research is benefiting from a mixture of methods which generated a plethora of different types of data, a critical and continuous examination of the production of knowledge, starting with the researcher, where research often originates is necessary. An important ethical consideration has been to reflexively engage with the self and the research process, alongside a critical inquiry into how knowledge is produced, whose knowledge is represented, and for what purpose it is constructed. I explore

the concept of 'reflexivity' in relation to 'situatedness' or the 'politics of location' to highlight the embodied researcher and their intersubjective connections with embodied participant collaborators and research communities (Bryant, 2016: 17).

### *A first attempt at assessing risks*

In the process of making stories visible, especially when dealing with complex or tense subjects, researchers 'often face ethical dilemmas and moral choices that cannot be easily resolved with general ethical guidelines' (Li, 2008, 110). I realised quickly into my research how important it is to consider all ethical dimensions in the most comprehensive and holistic way that I could, especially so given the context in writing and the subject of my research. Bauer (2020) speaks about how in certain respects, the ethical standards within the kink community surpass those set by formal ethics review boards, as kink etiquette and consent practices often emphasize the nuanced micro-interactions between individuals. Jones (2023: 61) agrees, adding that progressive kink communities and spaces increasingly emphasize respecting and using correct pronouns, obtaining explicit consent even for minor physical interactions, maintaining transparency regarding motivations and intentions, and prioritizing enthusiastic, informed consent that is ongoing and revocable at any time. These are all guiding principles which at the heart of this study. Throughout this chapter, I will draw attention to specific ethical issues within the context of the fieldwork and data analysis, with its methodological quirks and limitations. I chose to embed ethical aspects directly when discussing each method, data collection and analysis, so that each aspect I discuss is contextualised and exemplified accordingly. This also appears throughout the presentation of data in the empirical chapters.

In presenting and sharing the findings of my critical multi-sited ethnographic research, my objective was to represent the experiences of my participants in a manner that avoided misrepresentation, artificial uniformity, or hierarchies among different tying cultures, elements that my study sought to challenge. As a researcher, I have a social responsibility to my participants, their social environment, and how I represent them in my work (Fine et al., 2003). By interviewing rope bondage practitioners, I did not seek to 'burden of the story-truth' (Trinh, 1989: 94, cited in Fusco, 2008:162), but rather aimed to employ methodologies that investigate the social world without striving to uncover an unmediated truth about specific subjects or objects. Similar to Caroline Fusco (2008: 160) I focused on examining how truth claims about the social world are constructed, substantiated, and mediated within and through particular

cultural discourses. On the other hand, confidential research interviewing can be an occasion for letting out repressed psychological or emotional hardship (Berger, 2015; Li, 2008). After the consent violation accusations emerged at The Greenhouse, some interview partners in Paris cancelled scheduled interviews, on the basis of being too affected by the turmoil. Others did not withdraw consent entirely, but requested a postponement of the interview (field notes and personal communications, Paris, May-June 2018). Even though I sometimes felt trapped between my own compassion, participants' needs and time commitments, I prioritized participants' needs before my own. Demonstrating I understand multiple points of view and being flexible, and being prepared to respond to unforeseen circumstances in an appropriate manner 'soothe[d] the way to dealing with some pitfalls that revolve around sensitive topics' (Laine, 2000; p. 93), and field disturbances.

Even though the project was approved my department's ethics board, I had to assess further risks, beyond the standardized language of ethics forms (also see Fusco, 2008:165) and directly related to the way in which I moved through the three field sites and the people I interacted with in this world. These considerations helped be prepare mentally for entering the field, and self-regulating throughout this time. For example, I understood that no matter how many safety nets I set in place, rope bondage can be a physically challenging activity, that practicing it implies some degree of risk; for this reason, I have never consciously put myself in harm's way, or tried to push my physical limitations without extensive prior negotiation. While the rope bondage interactions I engaged in during fieldwork could be easily considered as 'light', I was always making sure that I am safe and free to stop a session at any point. I never tied outside of the three rope venues, and refused any invitation to do so, no matter how harmless it seemed. Even so, rising tensions followed by the dismantling of The Greenhouse (to which I will refer often throughout this chapter) presented me with new challenges to which I had to adapt, and this included discussing potential risks and potential limitations to the research together with my supervisor.

### **3.1.1. Situating the self**

Throughout this research I have adopted the position of researcher-participant (see Coffrey, 1999; Hertz, 1997; Li, 2008; Newmahr, 2011; Galati, 2017; Stanley: 1993; Pennington, 2018), situating myself at the intersection between theory and practice; while not fully inhabiting the label of 'practitioner' and never having tied before starting this research, I decided to let myself be tied. After a few sessions, I started to enjoy some aspects of the practice, and as I progressed in my empirical research, I started to

differentiate between what I enjoyed and what I did not. After a few months in the field, I evaluated I had enough knowledge about the practice and about myself, so that I can negotiate a rope scene with confidence and give informed consent. Le Compte and Preissle (1993: 91-92; cited in Coffrey, 1999: 3) assert:

[the] most affecting conduct of qualitative research is the investigator's identity as the 'essential research instrument' [...] the identity of the data collector mediates all other identities and roles played by the investigator.

As such, this research is 'necessarily subjective' (Pennington, *ibid.*: 25), and that my 'lived experience' and emotional responses add valuable data (Crang & Cook, 2007), as I embarked on an 'anthropology of experience, to which individual meanings, emotive forces and bodily practices are central' (Whitehead, 2004: 2).

Studying a misunderstood and/or misrepresented topic now and then marked as 'inappropriate', 'deviant' and often sexualised is no easy task. Kink researchers have documented their experience in their academic circles and in their social world. Tuulberg describes her experience:

I am also affected by the stigma when communicating my research topic to the outside world. When telling people about my project and BDSM, I sense scepticism, judgement and bewilderment; I have experience how the outlooks on the scene are rather narrow (2015: 14).

Confronted with similar reactions, Beckmann gives a detailed account of the 'labelling' which happened in the London-based community she conducted fieldwork in:

even though my 'deviance' only went as far as to be conducting a research on the topic of consensual 'SM', a lot of the people in my social environment as well as on the Scene (of consensual 'SM' and 'Fetishism') in London labelled me anyway (2009: 70).

Pennington offers a bold answer, openly positioning themselves as a scholar-practitioner:

I continue to undertake such methods voluntarily, because I enjoy BDSM as both a professional area of study and a personal interest. As a scholar-practitioner, my analysis is necessarily subjective (2018: 25).

Throughout my time conducting research in the field, practitioners and people from my social and academic circles have often asked me whether I intend to tie or be tied myself. Within the scene, these

questions started from the premise that it would be a difficult task to write about an embodied practice which has not experienced first-hand; the choice was, thus, related to identitarian positioning and whether I, the researcher, would consider 'becoming' a researcher-participant. Outside of the scene, the situation was overall more judgemental and I often received uncomfortable questions and comments interrogating the necessity of such a study. Repeatedly, I found the validity of my thesis brought into question due to what was labelled 'controversial'; often, I felt pressed into being adopting an apologetic attitude, and felt I was called out due to the tense atmosphere that my research topic created (see Ordean, 2018a). To what degree these kind of questions sprung from poorly formulated curiosity, or rather from a place of social normativity, this goes beyond the scope of this thesis. One could speculate that behind this tireless quest rests a 'rigidity with which people apply labels' which speaks volumes about 'how a label changes the way people interact with the individual who has been labelled' (*ibid.*). Rather than setting me back, these instances only proved the extent to which the practice of rope bondage is misunderstood and misrepresented outside of the scene; this only attests to the usefulness of this contribution. Some other academics, friends and fellow kink scholars were very supportive of the research, talked about their own experience and offered advice. Between the recorded increasing popularity of kink in mainstream popular media (Weiss, 2006a), and the 'lived experience' of myself and interview / discussion partners, there is still work to be done around the politics of representation and misrepresentation in BDSM, kink, or rope bondage. On more than one occasion, talking about my research felt like 'coming out', and I always had the urge to explain the research framework in detail in order for people to take me seriously. I shared these thoughts on several occasions with some practitioners I felt close to.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, during my time in the field, I have never felt marginalised or discriminated against, regardless of how I identified and the frequency with which I chose to enter a negotiated rope scene. Aspects related to my personal experiences and to how I reacted to interview partners and tying partners (during negotiated rope sessions) were important factors to consider in terms of my positionality

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<sup>23</sup> Some interview partners were sympathetic to this, and also talked about the difficulties of 'coming out'. For instance, interview partner T.P. talked about 'coming out' as a kink practitioner, and having difficulties feeling accepted (I.F. Paris 17 / 27.06.2018):

You can't come out like only someone who does rope [...] you can't just say 'hey, by the way, I tie people up but it's not sexual at all it's really safe and casual.' You can't say that because the next thing that person is going to do is type *shibari* in Google Pictures and see images that are absolutely hard-core of women being tied up. So, that's a very complicated thing to do, to come out of rope [...] I am not ready to be confronted by people about it, so no, it's not possible. But also, for me I couldn't stop and just explain why I do ropes. I'd need to explain very carefully what it is and I would need to say that it's linked to BDSM and power play, because I can lie to people and tell them that it's yoga. I know some people, some friends of mine, get away with telling their colleagues that it's something like Yoga and that's their way to be accepted. But I would need to be accurate.

in the field. They made me consider shifting positionality, from observer to research-participant and later co-author, as these new positions were better suited and benefited the research. When I set off, I did not consider myself a rope bondage practitioner in any sense of the term, nor did I consider myself a member of any kink community, or a practitioner of kink in general. Soon after my first visits to field sites in London and Berlin, the question of whether I should continue practicing, and therefore become a participant-researcher became very important. While negotiating project participation, I was asked more than once whether I do wish to continue practicing rope, or whether I would like to enter consensually negotiated play scenes during my fieldwork; it became clear to me that accepting would strengthen relationships of trust and professional intimacy that were in the course of forming, and will create common ground through relatable shared lived experience. Simultaneously, it was important to critically consider my shifting perspectives also for ethical reasons, and assess whether these changes are bringing me further or closer to the research participants, as well as how it could influence the dynamics of research relationships. I arrived at the conclusion that in accepting to engage in rope bondage scenes at different times throughout the research, I thus, 'de-territorialized' my own identity, and re-engaged with the field in a different capacity. Another important motivation came from my own prior experience with body practices (such as dance, yoga and choreography), which proved valuable in understanding, or rather 'feeling', embodying certain pressures, movements or body positions, as well as talking about them using a plethora of shared meanings (Crang and Cook, 2005: 26; also see Jordan 2002; Twyman et al. 1999). Having only observed rope bondage from afar prior to starting this project, my 'lived experience' of the practice had been fairly limited; nevertheless, my understanding of my body was not.

### **3.2. 'Multiplicity' and the creative-critical research framework**

In Chapter 1, I propose 'multiplicity' as an inclusive research meta-model, namely the 'qualitative multiplicity' (ATP: 1982; Deleuze, 1988). This model has provisional qualities and temporarily attains consistency – in other words, 'territorialises' (see Albrecht-Crane, 2005: 122)<sup>24</sup> – during the moments of shared affective mutuality within the rope bondage interaction. The capacity to accept and incorporate the flux of positionality elevates the rope bondage *continuum* to the state of 'multiplicity', that is to say

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<sup>24</sup> A distinction must be made here. Albrecht-Crane asserts that 'territorialisations provide us with social identities, with a social face' (*id.*), and quotes Deleuze in saying: 'we are always pinned against the wall of dominant signification, we are always sunk in the hole of our subjectivity, the black hole of the Ego which is more dear to us than anything' (Deleuze, 1987: 45). In the context of the rope bondage *continuum*, I employ 'territorialisation' as a way to explain the moment everything comes to a 'standstill'; that is to say, I argue that territorialisation (standstill), comes the moment self-actualisation takes place, whether it results from the interaction with someone else, or from working with the rope itself.

'a complex structure that does not reference a prior unity' (Roffe, 2010: 181), solely with provisional defining qualities, and attaining temporary consistency through acts of self-identification and through relational mutuality during a negotiated scene. This consistency influences identitarian positioning: I, the practitioner, identify in relation to my past selves (therefore, I 'become'), in relation to others, and in relation to feelings, thoughts and emotions embodied through the interaction with the materiality of the rope itself (which enables different experiences based on the way it is applied). Unpacking the notion of 'territorialised positionality' and its role in methodological inquiry requires a three-dimensional overview of all the potential agents involved in the process of occupying this territory.

Territorialisation also depends on the socio-political context of the field (Coia and Taylor, 2005), which sometimes required swift and quick adjustments, and other times, a complete repositioning and revaluation. Daily social realities are volatile, unpredictable and fluid as they are in part shaped by unforeseen circumstances that result from individuals who come in contact with each other (O'Brien, 2006). The same can be argued for the complex construction of social interactions in the field, social interactions which are intertwined with communitarian political realities. As an ethnographer, I had to adapt to the 'plasticity of field membership roles' and to 'adjust their levels of involvement and participation', to suit the 'ethical issues' that could arise at this time' (Li, 2008; p. 111). Central to the research I conducted in the field was a continuous critical evaluation of 'positionality' (see Clifford and Marcus, 1986) which acknowledges and recognizes the ways in which a 'position' can influence research processes and outcomes (Bradbury-Jones, 2007; Berger, 2015; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Pillow, 2003; Stronach et al., 2007). Personal characteristics like personal experiences, beliefs, biases, language, and emotional responses to participants, have a demonstrated influence in qualitative research (Berger, 2015; also see Bradbury-Jones, 2007; Crang and Cook 2005; Finlay, 2002; Horsburgh, 2003; Kosygina, 2005; Padgett, 2008; Primeau, 2003). This 'methodological self-consciousness' (Finlay, 2002: 210) traditionally used to locate the researcher's reflexive position in the field, was assumed in various modes and to different degrees the participants, according to their own level of engagement with the research, interest and dispositions. Furthermore, according to Finlay, reflexivity – unlike 'reflection', a mere consideration *post factum* – 'taps into a more immediate, continuing, dynamic and subjective self-awareness' (2002a, p. 533). In other words, 'reflexivity' involves the researcher being mindful, perceptive, and critically aware of how her personal experiences influence her perspective on the world (Finlay, *ibid.*; see also Hertz, 1997). Bryant (2016: 16) talks about reflexivity as a process which necessitates the intentional creation of a space for critical self-reflection, allowing the researcher to step back and interrogate their role as both questioner and answerer.

This is 'accumulation' of the field information collected, and its existence in current form in relation to the positionality assumed by participants, is justified vis-a-vis the politics of the field where and when the data was collected. Grønseth & Støa (2020: 174) argue that 'knowledge is generated in a complex web of relations between people distinctly positioned within social structures, cultural values and meanings, emotions and the imagination', and that these relations continuously affect the recognition and decision of what is 'valuable knowledge' in a given context'. Braidotti & Bignall write that 'knowledge-production is a multiple and collective affair that emerges 'alongside' the creative act of composition when conceptual elements are drawn together into novel combinations' (2019: ix). In the context of my ethnographic data, it can be argued that the participants' positionality is informed by the affective context in which the data collection is taking place, be it a rope bondage festival like The Barn, or an interview in the aftermath of an institutional dissolution. For instance, when interviewed during The Barn, most partners tended to include their relationship with this event in the assessment of their rope bondage practice; some would prefer to contextualize their examples by contrasting their experience 'at home' with their experience at the space of 'practice' and finding relational correspondences between the two (field notes, Berlin 2017-18). In the aftermath of inter-communitarian tensions in Paris, and after The Greenhouse closed its doors, when asked what they wished to discuss, many interview partners chose to align a large part of their accounts with current debates, which affected their decision of what was 'valuable knowledge' in this given context (field notes, Paris July-September 2018). On the contrary, one interview partner in Berlin expressed their wish that the interview would go in other directions than what was very much still an ongoing debate in the aftermath of the dismantling of The Greenhouse, not because issues relating to consent is according to them something to be taken lightly, but rather because they felt they can also contribute to the conversation on other aspects, which are of equal importance in their practice (interviewed in Berlin, 24.11.2018; unrecorded).

Nevertheless, neither relational mutuality nor identitarian positioning are intrinsically fixed concepts, but rather subjected to flux and flow. Throughout this thesis, I often reflect back to my own positionality. As I assumed different roles in the field (see section 3.1.1 and sections 3.3.1), I reacted differently to each site, each participant interaction, and different types of rope that were applied to my body. A field journal entry from The Barn (12.03.2018) attests to this:<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> While I acknowledge the opinions of interview partners like A.B. and F.R. say: 'I don't crave the touch of jute material on my shoulder. It's meaningless to me.' (A.B.), and 'The rope is a kind of tool.' (F.R.), I *am* attentive to materiality, and it matters to me. Interview partner H.E. also concurs: 'Jute [...] is softer and digs in and it kind of feels like it's part of you when you're tied in it'. See also Ordean and Pennington: 'Concentrating on the application, pressure,

I subscribe to the opinion of those interview partners who attest to the influence the rope itself has on the embodied experience. I, too, have analysed the way in which my body reacts to different rope textures, as an *affective* agent. For instance, in my case jute rope on 8 mm width is preferable to the 'standard' hemp rope of 7 mm.; while I am fascinated by the coarseness and aesthetic attributes of coconut rope, I cannot sustain it for very long. I find cotton rope unappealing, and I have never tried fluorescent synthetic rope so far.

Aspects of my subjectivity become 'territorialized' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980) from field site to field site, from participant to participant, from researcher to participant(s), and from how the research is presented to the world. It is continuously moving, 'territorialising' and 'de-territorializing', depending on the positionality assumed (of the participants, the researcher, the field, of how the perception of the practice evolves in society throughout time, and other factors external to the practice itself, but intrinsic to the lives of practitioners outside of the practice).<sup>26</sup> The research field assumes constant shifts, unmaking and remaking processes, 'de-territorialisation', and 're-territorialisation', because this accumulation is never a fixed and stable constellation, but rather always coming together and moving apart (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980; also see Wise, 2005). Also important in structuring the research was to use the creative-critical approach, which combines ethnographic methods with artistic research. A growing number of contemporary anthropologists and artists are increasingly focusing on creative methodologies, exploring the intersection of ethnography and artistic practices within the research process, and engaging in the co-creation of ethnographic knowledge. The methodology presented here is grounded in theoretical frameworks that posit ethnographic knowledge as emerging not from objective detachment, but through interactions, dialogues, and various forms of exchange among individuals within complex, entangled contexts. Therefore, this ethnography's methodology is also an inquiry into 'collaborative' and 'co-creative' knowledge production (Culhane, 2017: 7).

### **3.3 Field sites: The Barn in Berlin, The Greenhouse in Paris, The Garden in London, the island of F\***

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movement, and intensity of rope on skin, and the variety of affective sensations which arise from that material contact' (2019: 71). *Everybody is different*.

<sup>26</sup> For instance, partner H.K. spoke to me about how they went from being 'completely open' about their practice to starting to keep it a secret, as they went through a professional reconversion and had now a position socially incompatible with this lifestyle (personal communication, 13.03.2018).

I conducted fieldwork at four field sites: The Barn in Berlin, The Greenhouse in Paris, The Garden in London and the island of F\* (in the Mediterranean Sea). The Barn is a 10-day rope bondage and kink event happening twice a year in Berlin (in spring and in autumn), and which started off as an afterthought of the kink space The Hangar (which for a while operated out of practitioner F.R.'s living room), and quickly grew into a festival in its own right. The Greenhouse was the biggest rope bondage space in Paris, to where rope practitioners and educators from all over the world often travelled; in spring 2018 the space closed, after multiple practitioners accused the owner of consent violation. The Garden is the biggest tying space in London, which was started off in June 2015, about a year before this research began. In 2018 it moved to a bigger space, and hosts local and international rope practitioners, educators and kink enthusiasts. Finally, the island of F\* was chosen after discussing with P.A. and realising that much of their practice is embedded in their everyday life, and that 'living' locally and engaging with the territory morphs the practice in ways that required full immersion in the field. I gave named these sites 'affectively' (with the exception of The Garden, pseudonym used by Galati (2017) in previous research), using personal associations with the place (also see section a., from Chapter 1).

I chose three spaces of research in three important European capitals, because they all have different 'house' rules, yet invite international teachers and regularly receive people from various places of the world. While The Garden and The Greenhouse are spaces designated for tying and open throughout the year (until spring 2018, in the case of the latter), The Barn is a rope bondage festival which takes place for seven days, two times per year, and for this reason people from all over the world travel in for a dense week of practice, learning and exchanging.<sup>27</sup> These spaces offer different 'lived' experiences for practitioners, as they embody particular spatialities (for example how the space 'looks' or smells, what light source it has, how many suspension points and/or bamboos there are, how crowded it can get, all influences the experience), socialities, philosophies and approach (including 'house' rules), diverse workshop formats and subjects. Conducting research in these places enabled me to explore positionality,

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<sup>27</sup> The festival's subtitle was: 'European Rigger Exchange' until 2016, when it changed to 'European Rigger and Model Exchange', in order to be more inclusive. Since 2018 The Barn has a permanent location in Berlin, and since 2019 it has been incorporated into the umbrella organisation *IKSK – Institut für Körperforschung und sexuelle Kultur* (IKSK – Institute for Body Research and Sexual Culture). The IKSK website states as mission:

'The Institute for New Body Research and Sexual Culture believes that the elementary experience of physical plurality, i.e. plurality and diversity with regard to, among other things, ethnic origin, body shape, age, gender identity and sexual orientation, promotes the acceptance of otherness and diversity in general. This holds out the possibility that the acceptance of diversity concerning the body can also contribute to the solution of other social conflicts, such as in the areas of socio-economic injustice, social segregation, gender oriented violence or crime [...] This results in the necessity of a multifaceted learning space, within which, on the one hand, the possibility is given to experience, explore and develop the individual physical self-relationship' (accessed 10.10.2022).

relations, experiences and motivations that people associate with the practice. However, throughout this thesis I argue that practices are not 'localised', in the sense of associating a space with a tying identity. This research is, in consequence, not employing a comparative case study methodology exclusively (i.e. demonstrating that people from Berlin tie *this way*, or people from Paris tie *that way*), but rather strives for 'assembling a combination of ethnographic and case study approaches' (White, Drew & Hay, 2009: 22) to examine how certain ideas, approaches or tendencies are implemented *across* some venues in Western Europe. This methodological approach is applied to the non-hierarchical outline of a rhizomatic 'structure of connection' (Ordean & Pennington, 2019: 70), linking similar identitarian positionalities and simultaneously overwriting 'local specificity'.<sup>28</sup> In the field, this is visible by observing the manner in which people move (i.e. travel for workshops, festivals, or simply for 'meeting up with rope friends'),<sup>29</sup> and the way in which tying cultures form (for discussion, also see Chapter 4).<sup>30</sup> In consequence, the empirical chapters provide evidence from all field sites to support an idea, not the specifics of a place.

### Access to the field

Ethnographic research often implies spending an extensive period of time in the space of inquiry (Delamont, 2004). I was aware that the ethnographic method is particularly suited for investigating sensitive (Li, 2008) or understudied issues such as rope bondage. Access to the field was secured through gatekeepers (see Denzin and Lincoln, 2005), and keeping an informed schedule with plenty of informal and formal visits was essential. Prior to the 'official' start of the fieldwork, I had already made contact with the space managers and attended a few rope jams and classes, in addition to hosting two presentations in which I discussed my research aims and got feedback from the participants (described further in Section 3.5.2). In the following paragraphs, I will provide a short description of each field site:

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<sup>28</sup> Deleuze and Guattari assert that '[p]rinciples of connection and heterogeneity' through which 'any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order' (ATP: 7)

<sup>29</sup> Practitioner B.I. from Bucharest told me they often travel to other places in Europe to join friends from the scene, in private or at jams or festivals (personal communication, 12.05.2019). For instance, we were first introduced at The Barn in Berlin in autumn 2018.

<sup>30</sup> I have interviewed people who incorporate *some* elements from Japanese aesthetics throughout all the sites I conducted research in. Another good example is The Barn festival, which gathers people from all parts of Europe; some even travel internationally to attend.

## 1. The Garden (London)

The Garden is the leading rope bondage venue in London and opened in June 2015. It focuses on learning (in this sense it is an educational space), tying experiences (in this sense it is a performance and event venue), and cooperation and connection (in this sense it is a 'safe haven' for people from all backgrounds). The Garden's website states the following:

The studio was born in June 2015 as a hub for learning and practicing Japanese inspired Rope Bondage. F.H. and A.B. aim was to create a relaxed place where people could connect, meet like-minded folk and practice rope. Born essentially out of their home, the current space maintains a living room sort of cosy feel despite the impressive custom metallic frame that hangs above it. (accessed 12.10.2022).

The Garden is a field site where both Pennington and Galati conducted research. Describing the space, Pennington (2018: 34-35) explains:

The events which take place at [The Garden] are not parties, do not change location, and are themed around rope (though the studio recently advertised its first non-rope event, an introductory class called *Kink 101*).

Three years after it opened, in June 2018, the studio moved to a bigger space inside a railway arch. During our interview, I asked A.B. to describe the moving process and their view on the space (I.F. London 2 / 16.01.2019):

A.B.: in terms of the space it had to be close to my house, because I am here every day. And we wanted it to be a railway arch because in terms of property it's pretty safe in London in the current climate [...] We wanted it to be super safe and we wanted to show people a document if they had any questions: we wanted to have all the things: this is the lease, this is that, this is the structural engineer signing off on it. We wanted it to be like an open plan and just keep it as open as we possibly could, and make it as cosy as we possibly could. Because we wanted people to feel like in a living room, which is the devise we are going by, because it pretty much started in our living room so the devise is still the same.

I attended events regularly in The Garden one of the strongest motivations. I mostly attended rope jams, classes, and a few performance nights; I paid regular entry for classes and performance nights.<sup>31</sup>

## 2. The Greenhouse (Paris)

The Greenhouse was a leading rope bondage venue in Paris. I was aware of it since the start of this research, and I asked A.B. for an introduction. It opened in 2014 as a permanent space, and before that, it hosted for one-year monthly rope jams. Its mission was the same as the space in London, and it also looked similar.<sup>32</sup> The Greenhouse's website (still) states the following:

It all started with a monthly jam, back in 2013. A year later, the project evolves, and becomes a full time space, dedicated to rope bondage. After 4 years of a crazy ride, the space closes it's [sic] door, while the local community divided itself and the place became financially unstable. As off 2019, [The Greenhouse] is an online shop for the best rope you can find in the world if you are an erotic rope bondage aficionado. And we're shipping worldwide.

I attended rope jams, performances, workshops, life drawing sessions, observed a couple of private sessions, and two rope treatment sessions;<sup>33</sup> I was granted free access to all events. I also worked at The Greenhouse as a trainee on communication for three months.<sup>34</sup>

## 3. The Barn (Berlin)

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<sup>31</sup> When asking for permission to attend a workshop by someone who is also participating in this research, A.B. was reluctant to offer it. The main concern was related to the comfort of the attendees who 'might feel observed' and whose experience might be altered.

<sup>32</sup> A.B. mentioned that The Garden's first venue was inspired by The Greenhouse (personal communication, 16.01.2019).

<sup>33</sup> Both The Garden and The Greenhouse treat and sell 'treated' rope worldwide. 'Treatment' consists in cutting the rope to a certain length, and soften it with different types of oil. Sometimes the 'bight' (the middle of the rope thread) is also marked; this makes tying easier and visually symmetrical.

More information via: <https://ro.shibaristore.com/blogs/news/choosing-an-oil-for-rope-treatment> (accessed 20.11.2023)

<sup>34</sup> This traineeship was a compulsory part of my degree, and had to be in a place whose activity was related to my research. Please refer to:

<https://www.durham.ac.uk/study/postgraduate/research-degrees/research-opportunities/doctoral-training-partnerships/> (last accessed 1.12.2019).

Unlike The Garden in London or The Greenhouse in Paris, The Barn in Berlin is an international festival which takes place twice a year for a week. It is structured similar to the unconference<sup>35</sup> (Greenhill & Wiebrands: 2008), with an daily open schedule which is suggested by the participants. Both 'presenters' (i.e. those invited) and 'students' (i.e. attendees or 'newcomers') can propose activities or topics they want to learn more about, or share with the others. F.R.'s personal website has a page dedicated to The Barn (fragments):

There is a lot of creative and innovative rope bondage in Europe today. Many individuals are developing their own approaches. A sort of emancipation from the Japanese masters is happening, not a rebellion or opposition, just people recognizing the importance of gaining autonomy in their artistic process. [The Barn] wishes to provide a platform for these individuals and to develop the technical, artistic and philosophical aspects of the practice, by confronting traditional Japanese *Shibari* with our European cultural heritage. Western techniques and skills, ideas from art, science, psychology & medicine, from bodywork & performance, from BDSM & Sex-Positive Culture- all those things might be offered at [The Barn], in order to give new impulses to the practice. [The Barn] is also a sociography, an experiment that proposes a sex-positive, kink-friendly space, where attentiveness and empathy, consent, gender equality, diversity and inclusion, ecological and political awareness are highly valued and put into practice. [The Barn] wishes to provide a space where clear, honest and constructive communication is a permanent collective effort.

I attended three editions of The Barn, two times as a 'presenter' and one time as an observer. I was offered free entry and access to all the spaces. The first edition I attended, in spring 2017 took place in one of Berlin's most remote neighbourhoods. Starting with 2018, The Barn assumed a new home in central Berlin and has taken place there ever since.

### **3.3.1. Adjusting field roles**

Reflexivity is an important tool in the process of positioning situated knowledge production within ethical parameters. Riach (2009) argues that reflexivity-in-practice is both situated and enacted by both the

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<sup>35</sup> Greenhill & Wiebrands explain: 'Unconferences are gatherings of people united by a passion, where the content and structure of the day is driven by the participants. An unconference [...] uses the four flow principles: whoever comes are the right people; whatever happens is the only thing that could have; whenever it starts is the right time; when it's over, it's over' (2008, online).

researcher and participants. These ‘sticky moments’ facilitate a shift towards a more participant-focused approach to reflexivity. In order to qualify as an open-ended process consisting in an ever-evolving critical self-evaluation of positionality, reflexivity must also imply active acknowledgement and analysis of how assuming various positions in and outside of the field may affect the research process and outcome (Berger, 2015, p. 220; also see Bradbury-Jones, 2007; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Pillow, 2003; Stronach et al., 2007). Berger claims that: ‘reflexivity [...] helps identify and explicate potential or actual effect of personal, contextual, and circumstantial aspects on the process and findings of the study and maintain their awareness of themselves as part of the world they study’ (2015: 221). After conducting fieldwork in Berlin, Tuulberg asserted:

‘I hope my work is taken as an acknowledgement that what I claim about others is always a negotiation and a mediation, it is others through me’ (2015: 21).

Tuulberg makes this statement in connection to the ‘narrative-centred’ ethnographic method she employs, a method which enables her research participants to contribute directly to her own expanding and transformation. It only follows then, that the author’s reflexivity draws from a deeply personal – and a deeply reflexive perspective. Although this research does not set out to taxonomize an auto-ethnographical experience, it is impossible to avoid writing oneself into the ethnography and to ‘establish the links between our own lives and the memories of fieldwork (Coffrey, 1999:112; also see Scheyvens, 2003). Reflexivity remains, thus, embedded in the research process, and I did not experience discomfort or having to deal with the ‘dilemma of familiarity’ (Coffrey, 1999: 20). Reflecting on ‘inter-agency’ (i.e. the exchange between individuals and objects which highlights the dynamic power and potential in how they come together to generate unforeseen outcomes and bring new realities into existence; see Bryant, 2016: 16) as a fluid and adaptable development, positions research as a process of individual transformation and celebrates its role in the production of new knowledge and objects. Through undertaking this research, my body enters an assemblage, a ‘constellation’ sensitive to affective mutuality and affective contagion, influencing various ways in which situated knowledge is produced. In this context, non-hierarchical positionalities do not simply claim to fill the void between the researching and the researched bodies (in which case reflexivity will be of little importance). Similar to Bryant, I also explore the concept of ‘reflexivity’ and its connection to ‘situatedness’ or the ‘politics of location’ to highlight the embodied researcher and their intersubjective relationship with the embodied participant collaborators and groups (2016: 17). By utilizing my own body as a site of research, I argue that reflexivity is very much subjected to plasticity of the plural positions I occupy within the parameters of the methodological model employed.

This includes instances of performative reflection used in putting together field notes; agreeing to enter in negotiated rope bondage sessions; entering into a collaborative partnership during field research and sharing common knowledge resources (with practitioner P.A.). Different situations demanded assuming different roles, which in turn ask for a continuous reassessment of the ways in which this reflexivity is envisioned, embodied and performed. Similar to Beckmann, who gives a sober account for herself throughout the fieldwork phase, I was fully aware of the fact that I had to perform ‘multiple identities’ and therefore embrace different positionalities as I reflected on their placement on the rope bondage *continuum*. This is a common situation in ethnographic work (Beckmann, 2009, p.66). I constantly navigated between the identities that I positioned during the interactions with different social and professional circles: my non-kinky social circle, my academic circle, my identity in the rope world which was constantly reshaping as I progressed with the research and my practice. In the field, sometimes, I was a ‘presenter’ (two editions of The Barn); other times a quiet observer; and other times, I was ‘doing rope’. A number of practitioners I met during fieldwork became close friends and collaborators and followed my work closely, while others knew me tangentially. During interview sessions, I always adjusted the content of my speech to suit my different positionality in relation to my interview partner.

### **3.4. Participant recruitment**

I dedicated extensive time to recruiting participants, paying attention to the role they played in the field. I also tried to get to know my future partners as much as possible prior to our interview sessions, although that was not always possible. A few times I entered into negotiated tying sessions with my interlocutors prior to our scheduled interview, which created intimacy and trust already before the ‘sit-down’ session. In Berlin, my status as a ‘presenter’ conferred at the very beginning of fieldwork helped popularise the research among festival attendees. I approached most people at The Barn directly, explained my research, handed over the Participant Information Sheet and the Consent Form; everyone I approached was very happy to participate in the project. In some cases, I sat down for an informal chat before we started the recording.

F.R. introduced me to A.B., the owner of The Garden in London. I was, again, invited to host a session of Rope Talk which happened every other Saturday in The Garden. People approached me after the event and offered to participate in the research. Interview partner R.U. was also instrumental in recruiting other participants, offered advice and was generally very helpful and open. Everyone was handed the research documentation (Participant Information Sheet and the Consent Form) prior to the start of the interview session and informed of the research aims. Everyone I asked was happy to participate in the project.

I went to The Greenhouse for a rope event with K.I. (a well-known Japanese rigger) in March 2017 and introduced myself to C.G., the owner of the space. They welcomed me and agreed to the traineeship scheme, which was due to commence the following year. This provided me with inside knowledge from a double perspective (researcher-participant & trainee), as I further reflected on my positionality within the field (also see Coffrey, 1999: 30-31). Through a 'snowballing' process (Morgan, 2008), I recruited participants based on recommendations from T.B., A.R. and C.G., who were involved with the administration of The Greenhouse. After the space closed, I relied on recommendations from my interview partners for recruiting other participants; some came to me 'to chat' (formally and/or informally), to tell their 'side' of the story, also as a way to reflect their involvement with The Greenhouse. We used the interview, in this case, as a tool to reinforce one's position within the scene, to reflect further on one's practice, and to process trauma.<sup>36</sup> I presented the Participant Information Sheet and the Consent Form and talked about my research aims before each interview session. In Paris three participants I asked postponed our interview, on the grounds of needing more time to process trauma. I proceeded with care and was context sensitive, and allowed *them* to reach me back *when* and *if* they felt ready.

P.A. and me tied together and discussed at length during three editions of The Barn in Berlin. After receiving the invitation, I went to the island of F\* and embarked on a 10-day common project. P.A. and me had ample time to explore and develop the research aims of our partnership. This working method was unique within my project and therefore required 'methodological flexibility' (Manning, *ibid.*: 53-54).

Before the start of each interview, I explained my research questions, how the data will be collected, stored and used, who will gain access to the data and explained that all the names and names of places will be anonymised, in order to protect the identities of all interview partners. Although some interlocutors expressed no concern over the use of their names in the research, I chose to use acronyms in order to protect the identity of all participants as a whole. Several participants expressed discomfort when asked about their sexual orientation, as they felt that rope practice was unrelated to sexuality. In light of these ethical concerns, I opted to omit this aspect from the research to avoid singling out participants. Instead, I focused on their preferred pronouns. The diversity of pronoun usage also serves as an important indicator of the varied and inclusive nature of the rope bondage field. The letters used in

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<sup>36</sup> I am by no means claiming that the interview replaced any form of professional therapy, nor do I possess the necessary abilities to qualify as a therapist. Nevertheless, for some interview partners this was an occasion to think through some aspects of their practice, but also to think back and work through some experiences. Some interview partners confessed that it 'felt good' and that 'it was helpful' to be able to talk with me (personal communication Paris, 11.06.2018 and 18.06.2018).

the acronyms only have meaning to me. I explained each time that consent can be withdrawn at any point, and the file will be deleted from my records. Some interview partners told me information 'off the record' and therefore, those fragments are erased from the transcripts. A couple of times I stopped the recording during the interview, to allow some time for the partner to gather back their thoughts (also see section 3.5.3).

## SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Fieldsite	Pseudonym	Age	Pronouns (at the time the interview was recorded)	Role	Interview file coding
Berlin	A.S.	mid 20s	she/her	switch	Berlin 1 / 22.10.2023
	B.A. & A.T.	early 40s	they/them	switch + model	Berlin 2 / 17.03.2018
	B.E. & K.A.	31 and 28	she/her	switch + switch	Berlin 3 / 16.03.2018
	C.F.	43	she/her	model	Berlin 4 / 11.11.2018
	E.Z.	late 30s	she/her	switch	Berlin 5 / 20.10.2018
	P.A.*	early 50s	she/her	rigger	Formentera 1 / 10.10.2018
					Formentera 2 / 10.10.2018
					Formentera 3 / 11.10.2018
					Formentera 4 / 12.10.2018
					Formentera 5 / 12.10.2018
					Formentera 6 / 14.10.2018
					Formentera 7 / 14.10.2018
	F.R.	52	he/they	switch	Berlin 7 / 03.11.2018
	F.L.	40	he/him	rigger	Berlin 8 / 14.03.2018
	B.A. & H.K.	early 40s + 57	they/them and he/him	switch + rigger	Berlin 9 / 13.03.2018
K.M.	44	she/her	switch	Berlin 10 / 04.12.2018	
M.A.	26	she/her and they	switch	Berlin 11 / 15.03.2018	
R.I. & A.F.	23 + 21	they/them	switch + switch	Berlin 12 / 17.03.2018	
T.A.	early 30s	he/him	rigger	Berlin 13 / 17.10.2018	
H.K.	57	they/them	rigger	Berlin 14 / 17.03.2018	
V.I.	62	they/them	rigger	Berlin 15 / 16.03.2018	
London	A.N.	mid 30s	they/them	switch	London 1 / 13.01.2019
	A.B.	30	all pronouns	switch	London 2 / 16.01.2019
	B.L.	24	all pronouns	switch	London 3 / 17.01.2019
	H.E.	mis 50s	she/her	rigger	London 4 / 16.01.2019
	R.U. & L.A. & D.A.	41 + 38 + 32	he/him + she/her + they/them	switch + switch + model	London 5 / 18.01.2019
	S.O.	55	she/her	model	London 6 / 23.01.2019
	V.J.	34	they/them	model	London 7 / 15.01.2019
Paris	A.L.	28	she/her	model	Paris 1 / 08.07.2018
	A.N.	33	she/her	switch	Paris 2 / 29.05.2018
	A.R.	24	they/them	switch	Paris 3 / 11.06.2018
	A.D.	mis 50s	he/him	rigger	Paris 4 / 11.08.2018
	B.T.	24	they/them	switch	Paris 5 / 22.06.2018
	B.P.	34	all pronouns	switch	Paris 6 / 20.08.2018
	C.L.	30	she/her	switch	Paris 7 / 22.06.2018
	F.A.	41	she/her	model	Paris 8 / 04.07.2018
	G.E.	43	he/him	rigger	Paris 9 / 19.07.2018
	H.C.	24	all pronouns	switch	Paris 10 / 08.04.2018
	K.I.	27	she/her	model	Paris 11 / 18.06.2018
	M.R.	28	all pronouns	switch	Paris 12 / 22.08.2018
	M.L.	26	she/her	switch	Paris 13 / 12.08.2018
	R.O. & M.T.	44 + 41	he/him + she/her	rigger + model	Paris 14 / 18.08.2018
	S.A. & F.A.	54 + 41	he/him + she/her	rigger + model	Paris 15 / 04.07.2018
	S.A.	54	he/him	rigger	Paris 16 / 04.07.2018
	T.P.	33	he/him	switch	Paris 17 / 27.06.2018

### 3.5. Research methods

In this section, I describe the research method used: participant observation, autoethnography, semi-structures and unstructured interviews, artistic research. Mayan (*ibid.*: 12-13) argues that:

the *complexity* of qualitative research can be represented by a kaleidoscope: multifaceted, ever evolving, and colourful with bright and bold colours. As the researcher moves around, the shapes and meanings change [...] The researcher uses all five senses to work creatively and flexibly through a process that is rarely neat and linear. Connecting with people, taking risks to explore new ground, and managing the unpredictable nature of qualitative research can produce rich and important knowledge about our social world [...] The important point [...] is to work horizontally.

Section 3.5.1 describes the types of data collection strategies I employed while doing participant observation. In section 3.5.2. I discuss auto-ethnographic analysis methods, and how they can be employed as research-creation. Section 3.5.3 explains the interview processes used throughout the field sites.

*(previous page) Table 1: Summary of research participants*

*(next page) Table 2: Summary of research methods used*

Field site	Dates of field research	Number of participants	Research method: participant observation, shared ethnography and autoethnography	Research method: Semi-structured interviews and Video reflection interviews (P.A.)
Berlin (The Barn)	September, 2016 to December, 2018	* 14 interviews with 17 participants (3 riggers, 2 models, 9 switches) * 13 unrecorded informal conversations	* participated in 3 editions of The Barn. In the first edition I only had unrecorded informal conversations * during two editions (autumn 2016 and spring 2018) I was invited as a 'presenter' and held focus groups with 35-50 participants * tied in private sessions 6 times, always as a model * observed a total of 21 festival days * held written and recorded field journal	* conducted 14 interviews during 3 editions of The Barn (30-90 min) * follow-up interviews with participants H.K. and B.A. * from October to December 2018 I was based in Berlin full-time and conducted 5 additional interviews (90-180 min)
Formentera	October, 2018	* study case of a negotiated partnership between me and P.A., a queer rigger and filmmaker	* shared ethnography consistent with a common working partnership * participant observation of P.A.'s working routine and interactions with L.L., H.L. and neighbours * held written and recorded journal and a common working journal with notes, drawings, images, videos * reflecting critically on my own implication in the project *the 'curatorial' as a research method	* held 7 interviews with P.A. over the course of one week (20 to 100 min) * ca. 35 hours of unrecorded informal conversations * ca. 10 hours of filmed footage (in post-production)
London (The Garden)	intermittently September, 2016 to January 2019	* 7 interviews with 9 participants (1 rigger, 3 models, 5 switches) * 5 unrecorded informal conversations	* observed various 'rope talks', classes and rope jams (52 hours) over the course of 2016-2017. * tied in private sessions 8 times, always as a model * held written and recorded field journal	* in January 2019 I was in London full-time and conducted 7 interviews (90-180 min) with people affiliated with The Garden
Paris (The Greenhouse & private interactions after it closed)	April, 2018 to July, 2018 (placement scheme) July, 2018 to September, 2018 field research	* 17 interviews with 19 participants (4 riggers, 4 models, 9 switches) * 15 unrecorded informal conversations	*during my placement scheme I helped the day-to-day running of the place. In charge of communication and PR strategy. Responsible with the communication with foreign * observed various workshops, classes and rope jams (150 hours) between April and October 2018. * never tied in The Greenhouse, very cautious or private sessions after the consent violation event. Tied 2 times, always as a model * tied in private sessions 8 times, always as a model * held written and recorded field journal	* conducted 17 interviews with participants affiliated with The Greenhouse (24-210 min). I was based full-time in Paris April to September 2018.

### 3.5.1. Participant observation

Schensul, Schensul & Le Compte describe participant observation as ‘a process of learning through exposure or to involvement in the day-to-day routine activities of participants in the research setting’ and which is an advantageous research method, as it offers ‘the opportunity to witness events that outsiders would not be invited to attend (*ibid.*: 91-92; also see Bogdewic, 1992). One of the top priorities of this research has been constant field immersion. I came into this research with very little knowledge of the subject and with no tying experience of my own; at the same time, while the practice itself was now new, both the Greenhouse and (especially) The Garden were relatively young organizations, so I felt like we were somehow growing together. As my research grew and the methods refined, so did the places, I felt. I carried out participant observation in all four field sites, assisting to workshops, masterclasses, rope jams, performances and private sessions intermittently from September 2016 to January 2019. In Berlin, participated in a total of 21 festival days (roughly from 10 a.m. to midnight); in London, I observed rope jams and classes, participated in 1 Rope Talk (moderator), and attended 3 more Rope Talks; in Paris, I observed 150 hours of workshops, weekend masterclasses, private parties and private sessions (including administrative hours during my traineeship, and including going on occasion to other tying locations or private events after The Greenhouse closed). *Table 2: Summary of research methods* presents an overview of these numbers.

Mayan claims that ‘[p]articipant observation is the process of personally participating in the research setting’ (*ibid.*: 76), while Schensul, Schensul & Le Compte assert that ‘for the most part, observers are not full participants in the community life’ (*ibid.*: 92). The more I spent in the field, the more I questioned my role within it. In conducting research with rope bondage practitioners from the US and Canada, Zoey Jones approached the field ‘as an insider’ with a methodology based on participant observation, but soon thereafter decided to change her strategy to a more integrative approach. During my time in the field, the methods underwent some changes, as my position within the field was shifting. Starting off as a ‘participant as observer’, I gradually shifted to a ‘complete participant’, as I became ‘fully immersed in the setting’ up to the point where people started considering me as ‘part of the organisation’ (Mayan, *ibid.*: 79). I attempted to distinguish moments of observation from moments of active participation, even though this was not always easy or straightforward; it often happened that I would leave my apartment to go to a rope jam without knowing whether I would be entering a negotiated tying session or not that evening. Consequently, I relied heavily on field notes and audio recordings, which helped me keep track and make sense of my ‘lived’ experience as I was living it. On the field site, I often jotted down ideas, or

brief descriptions (Morse & Field, 1995: 112), sometimes only words that would trigger my memory. There were also (rare) moments in which writing was not possible at all: in that instance I resolved to taking a photo of an object, of an item of clothing, or make an audio recording of some key points which would jump start my memories when writing the 'full field notes' (Bryman, 2016: 444). My field notes described 'reflections, feelings, ideas, moments of confusion, hunches, interpretations [...] about what is observed' (Mayan, *ibid.*, 77). Notes were taken and edited as soon as possible after the observation; I used a technique recommended by Morse and Field (1995) which favour relying on your stream of consciousness, and leaving the editing for a later stage. My field notes from the island of F\*, on the other hand, also include extensive visual material. It is important to remember that *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope* is a collaborative project, and therefore the data collection methods were produced jointly by me and P.A., therefore the ethical reflection on the writer's subjectivity was different (also see Banks, 2001: 121-122). My full immersion in the field setting was, beyond any doubt, the most complete and intense of all the field sites. I intentionally attempted a dissolution of the researcher 'self', who now became a part of a creative duo (also see Chapter 6, section 6.2). As a consequence, field notes and other visual materials (photos, videos, drawings, sketches) are also components of collaborative artistic research.

Participant observation is not limited to describing places and people in a detached manner, but also carry the 'fingerprint' of the researcher (Mayan, *ibid.*: 78; Schensul, Schensul & Le Compte: *ibid.*, 114). During fieldwork, I became aware that my positionality as a 'complete participant' implied entering into the *continuum* myself, and considering my positionality therein. If a Deleuzoguattarian approach to methodology I propose includes the researcher's functioning organism within the *continuum*, then auto-ethnographies are also subjected to reflexive practices. Aside from describing my own experiences in the field, it was important to monitor the impact my own biases and beliefs, and to analyse of how they influence the research (see Marcus, 1986; Zenker and Kumoll, 2010). Two examples illustrate this point in different but relevant ways. After the experience of a few tying sessions, I started to write down what I liked, what I would be open to try, what my physical and/or psychological limitations were at that moment. I also started thinking through my 'lived experience' in order to understand how to go about theorizing what the practice 'meant' to me. I wrote regularly in the field notebook about what I found positive or what I didn't like about an experience (see Li, 2008), and used it later 'to be attuned to [my] own reactions to respondents' (Berger, 2015, p.221). in the next section I reflect further on the auto-ethnographic contribution to this research.

Due to health issues, I had to step out of the field for about half a year; while attending to my health, I continued recording and taking notes in the field journal, which became a personal confessional space, where I had full liberty to ‘describe decisions and dilemmas’ (Finlay, 2002, 210). I reflected upon strategies and researched for tools that could help me maintain contact with the field. My biggest concern was losing the fieldwork flow, so I continued to keep regular contact with some of my closest contacts from the field.<sup>37</sup>

### 3.5.2. Autoethnography as a method of research-creation

Using the researcher’s own body in the production of knowledge is something well recorded by ethnographers (Geertz, 1983; Denzin and Lincoln 2005). Techniques utilizing the ethnographic Self include autobiography, autoethnography, narrative co-construction, and reflexive ethnography (Pensoneau-Conway and Toyosaki, 2011; Wint, 2011). Studies on kink<sup>38</sup> are no exception (Beckmann, 2009; Hedwig, 2011, Galati, 2017; Newmahr 2008, 2011; Pennington, 2018; Turley, 2022; Tuulberg, 2015). I position this research within these narratives, and argue that it is through the field research I conducted, that I was able to comprehend the practice of rope bondage and to bring forward the ‘lived’ experiences of the participants I engaged in research with.

While immersing in the field, there are various degrees to which the researchers choose to actively participate and engage in autoethnography (see Coffrey: 1999). For instance, while using a system of overt research, Beckmann does not participate in any kind of SM experience herself, claiming the ‘commitment to consensual ‘SM’ ‘body practices’ reduces itself to the level of professional research interests’, and that her “‘deviance’ only went as far as to be conducting a research on the topic’ (*ibid.*: 70-71). In engaging with the day-to-day activities of the venues she was conducting fieldwork in, and in becoming a confidant and adviser for some of her informants, Beckmann inherently contributed to the community. On the other hand, Tuulberg (2015, unpublished dissertation) uses ethnographic narrative and proposes a more

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<sup>37</sup> All my contacts were very supportive and understanding. One participant wrote to me: ‘we inquire after and protect our own’ (personal communication, 12.11.2017). This reassuring attitude made me reflect further on the role I was gradually occupying in the field and it spoke about how my research partners saw me: I was becoming a part of ‘the rope family’.

<sup>38</sup> Although the number of studies utilizing these strategies is still relatively reduced (Luminais, 2012: 20; Tuulberg, 2015:16; Weiss 2011: vii), their popularity is increasing (Newmahr, 2008: 625-626). Newmahr asserts that the number of kink researchers who have conducted fieldwork on ‘real-life field sites’ is still ‘quite small’ (2011: 5); this could very well be the why researchers opt for exploratory rather than investigative approaches (Ortmann and Sprott, 2013: 5), and why Weiss (*id.*) sees it as a lack of engagement with how the notion of kink functions within communities.

integrative approach, where she uses her personal experience in the field as a methodological tool: ‘I became my own main informant and the main character of this writing’, writing collective experiences: ‘mediating the experiences of me and my informants’ (p. 21), while practicing *RACK – Risk Aware Consensual Kink* (p.15). Her ‘narrative-centred ethnography’ (p. 6) can be interpreted as a report of her research-creation processes. Newmahr (2008; 2011) used her body ‘as a source of data and a tool for meaning-making’ (2011: 15),<sup>39</sup> which brought her closer to understanding BDSM through her own embodied experience, while her status in the community shifted. Newmahr notes: ‘over a short time, my role as a participant seemed increasingly more salient in the community than my identity as a researcher’ (p. 12). Galati (2017, unpublished dissertation) talks about her experiences in the field while tying or being tied: ‘during my time in the field, I experienced being tied and, just on rare occasions, I tied. Thus, I was a bottom, as well as an intervener and an observer’ (p. 22). Conducting fieldwork in cross-cultural kink communities in London and Budapest as a ‘kinky’ scholar, Pennington sees BDSM ‘as both a professional area of study and a personal interest’, and whose involvement in the practice informs quite a distinguishable body of work, informed by what they call ‘willingness to own my ongoing involvement in the sexual culture I study’ (2008: 25; also see Pennington, 2018b). Building on this approaches, my involvement in the rope bondage scene happened in increments. Firstly, I was drawn in due to my own involvement with body practices and informed by background in performance art theory; in this phase the body, movement, shapes and visual compositions fascinated me. Afterwards, I made my way into the world of rope work, often catching myself wondering about sensations and emotions, about what and how ‘it feels like’. It was in this phase of the research that I first visited The Barn in Berlin (March 2017), and where I had some conversations which determined me to move further into the practice. An excerpt from my field journal is tells this story (field notes, Berlin, 10<sup>th</sup> of October 2016; also see full text in Appendix B, Part II):

Across from me, S.H. is smoking a cigarette. She smiles and asks me what I think of ‘all this’ [...] At first, [they were] curious to learn more about my own experience with rope, and upon learning that I had, indeed, very limited experience myself, encouraged me to think about expanding this experience. I do not feel [they] coerced or pressured me in any way to do this. It just feels like a genuine recommendation which could help me create a common language with the people that I

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<sup>39</sup> Full quotation:

‘This kind of research demands attention to my body as a source of data and a tool for meaning-making. As both the site of what I wish to understand and how I will understand it, my body will function as subject, object, and method, for there is no way to understand SM, or its participants, without a sense of what it feels like to engage in it’ (*id.* 15).

would be researching with, and which surely will be helping us establish a stronger bond [...] She also wasn't the only one with whom I had this conversation that week: during the first focus group,<sup>40</sup> the subject of suspension came up fairly regularly. My interlocutors were using a very particular set of characteristics to describe what they claimed to be a very particular sensorial experience for both rigger and bottom [...] I started giving the idea some thought. I was recommended to try modelling, and it was somehow implied that I would learn more from the experience of being tied. This and some brief conversations I had about the rigging technique lead me to conclude that modelling would be the most appropriate way to start my rope journey with.

During my first visit at The Barn, I took the time to talk to as many participants as I could, and I was thrilled that people came at the workshop I organized (see footnote below). At one moment during the discussion, participants took turns and shared specific experiences from past suspension scenes. This was a topic that I could not contribute to, never having 'lived' this experience myself. Nevertheless, as I was already considering asking for a suspension session myself, I proceeded by asking my co-participants whether they think it would be important to have this experience (and in general to continue tying during my fieldwork. Another short excerpt from my field notes describes the interaction (field notes, Berlin, 11<sup>th</sup> of October 2016):

... So I asked them directly: 'do you think it would be *necessary* to try out suspension? Is it different from other types of rope [practices]?'

People responded almost automatically S.H. smiled, and took my hand: 'you must' [they] said. It's such a different thing. But don't hurry into it, choose wisely.' Others commented on the fact that it would be almost impossible to talk about how they *feel* in suspension, if I haven't tried it myself. A.S. said: 'of course, it doesn't mean that you will feel the same as I or [gesturing towards someone else] feels. Everybody's different. But still, there's rope, and then there's *rope*. X.P. said: I'm not sure otherwise if you'll be able to understand what we are talking about, because you won't know how this *feels* like'. He continued: 'it's not really important what positions you will choose [i.e. positions I would be suspended in, see glossary], but rather that you *get* [oral emphasis] suspended.' Finally, S.H. concluded: 'it would [be important], but it's really up to you. You should not do it if you don't feel like it. It's very personal'.

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<sup>40</sup> While using focus groups is not part of my methodology, workshops at The Barn were structurally very similar to focus groups. The invitation to be a 'presenter' honoured me, and I used the opportunity to gather valuable insight, even if I did not use this collection strategy further in the thesis.

Later that day, I negotiated a suspension session with a participant from The Barn. We discussed for a long time about what my body can and cannot do, physical and psychological limits (or at least as far as I could tell at that time!), and possible injuries. We decided to go on a simple suspension with hip and chest harness, and build it from there. The moment my body left the ground, I let out a deep sigh. What was it: relief, fear, surprise adrenaline, pain? All of them and none. I could not tell exactly. The only thing I could really do was to focus on the present moment. And to breathe.

After this encounter, I decided on crafting a methodological model which would take into account my active participation in the field. My body, now a place of embodied experience, 'became' a site of research. The history of researching with the project participants is interwoven with the research history on my own body as an active participant in the production of knowledge. A while after the story described above, interview partner from London H.E. and me were starting off our interview. After 'setting the mood' (Mayan, 2009: 70), I asked H.E. to describe the relationship between rope's materiality and intensities derived from its application on the body. To this, H.E. replied (I.F. London 4 / 16.01.2019):

*Iris: Are you happy to talk to me a bit about rope materiality and frictions and tensions and that kind of thing? I've heard you speak about this in class [i.e. during a tying workshop] and I was wondering if we can chat about it.*

H.E.: Absolutely. Don't just chat – *do it, feel it, see it, think about it, talk about it* [my emphasis].

The interview with H.E. was held a couple of months after *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope* was finalized. Having felt like coming full-circle (all the way to embodying half of a creative duo during my time in F\* with P.A.), H.E.'s words sounded very familiar. Over the better part of two and a half years up to when this interview was recorded, I had been talking, doing, seeing, feeling and thought about rope incessantly. From moments of timid consideration (Berlin) to moments of co-authorship (F\*), I, as Coffrey once did: 'found it impossible to divorce my fieldwork self from my other selves'. My 'new' identity as a research participant took over, and 'continued to be so after the formal end of fieldwork' (1999: 30).

It is important to point out that the evolution of my identitarian positioning generated new avenues of inquiry, which were coded and analysed throughout this thesis. It is, primarily, in this sense that autoethnography functions as a method of research creation. The example above shows how, in accepting to be suspended at The Barn in Berlin, my body became a medium channelling creation and in equal measure producing affective knowledge. After this moment, I began adding separate entries in the field

journal in which I chronicled my personal thoughts after every rope bondage session, and when the situation allowed, I audio recorded these experiences. After each rope session, a great deal of practitioners chose to enter the stage of ‘aftercare’, which can include moments of physical contact or verbal communication. Customarily, I would opt for these ‘aftercare’ sessions, as these sessions helped me ‘come out’ of the ‘rope headspace’,<sup>41</sup> and which helped me reflect on what had happened in a focused manner, and which I could later use to test various test working hypotheses (see Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, 191). Although this section of the field notes sometimes read like a confessional tale (see Liebow, 1967; Rabinow, 1977; Van Maanen, 1988), they allow me to have ‘an ongoing conversation about the experience while simultaneously living in the moment’ (Hertz, 1997; p. viii; cited in Bondi, 2009; 329). In some instances, these audio recordings capture that which Manning (2015) calls ‘extra-linguistic’ forms of knowledge, sighs, cries, laughs, moments of meta-language which form part of my own affective response to a rope bondage interaction.

In the chapter *Against Method*, Erin Manning asserts that research-creation ‘generates new forms of experience’, which often cannot be explained using ‘normative modes of inquiry’, because it creates ‘extra-linguistic’ forms of knowledge which need new strategies that can ensure a ‘mobile positioning that take[s] these new forms of knowledge into account’ (Manning, 2015, p. 53). Manning attributes research-creation to a cross-disciplinarian category of artists engaging in ‘art-based research’ (*ibid.*: 52), the working method P.A. and me utilized during *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope*. Manning understands ‘art’ as a ‘way’ and not the final representational ‘object, form or content’ (pp. 53-54). The ethical implications associated with this research approach redirects attention from a strictly scientific model of data collection and analysis, albeit more ‘traditional’ methods are also used throughout this thesis (such as participant observation or interviewing). Adopting a reflexive positionality and utilizing autoethnography and artistic research as methods of research-creation also means moving beyond previous frameworks in ethnographic work on kink, and explore alternative research methodologies (also see Elliott & Culhane, 2017: 3). Chapter 6 tackles aspects related to the creative partnership as a *method* of sharing and generating ‘situated’ knowledge. It becomes, then, vital not only to track the changes in the Self, and how the Self contributes to the creation of knowledge, but also to critically engage in analysing the factors that trigger these changes, why these changes are triggered, and what insights into the embodied practice of

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<sup>41</sup> ‘Rope space,’ ‘top space’ or ‘bottom space’ are words used to denote one’s mental state during or immediately after a rope session. Some rope practitioners interviewed use it interchangeably with the term ‘altered states of consciousness’ (field notes, 2017-18).

rope bondage they reveal. In my time experiencing rope bondage in different field sites, the fact that I was conducting research became a channel of creation, and vice versa; conducting ethnographies of experience of the self, hence, creating new forms of embodied knowledge which transforms my own body into a site of processual learning. Like Manning, I asked myself 'how practices produce knowledge' and how can these forms of knowledge 'be captured within the strictures of methodological ordering' (p. 52). This method aligns with new tendencies in ethnographic work (Bryant, 2016; Elliott & Culhane, 2017; Gallager, 2008), where collaborations among anthropologists, artists, and artist/scholars animated by shared critiques of their respective disciplinary histories opens up exciting avenues, new possibilities and visions of possible futures (see Schneider and Wright 2005, 2013).

### 3.5.3. Interviewing

For this research I made extensive use of in-depth interviews.<sup>42</sup> I relied on recorded material which was later transcribed in full, as the oral account demonstrates an immediacy and evidence of thought, reflection and individuality (Bornat, 2006 [2001]: 461). This simply could not have been grasped fully in writing (Portelli, 1999 [1979]: 34).<sup>43</sup> I have conducted a total of 40 semi-structured and unstructured interviews (also see table from section 3.4.). By conducting interviews, I aimed to better understand the rope bondage world, locality and globalism, what motivated people to practice rope bondage, internal politics; we discussed emotions, affects, 'lived experience' and in some cases looked together at the visual material they (or we) produced. Culhane (2017: 9) asserts that critically examining the relationships between researchers and research participants has deepened our intellectual and political commitments to reflexivity. Adopting this focus has also sharpened our analysis of power dynamics and how they influence the process of ethnographic research. Riach (2009) claims that recognizing interview participants as active, reflexive subjects can address wider ethical concerns regarding their role and positioning within the research process. Schensul, Schensul & Le Compte attest that 'an in-depth interview is a special kind of conversation', as 'it requires a reciprocal relationship between the interviewer and the

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<sup>42</sup> It is worthwhile referencing here as well the 'interview metaphor' used by Barkas to explain the negotiation phase of the rope bondage session. Barkas states: 'I suggest using the picture of an interview. The tying person interviews the tied person, i.e. they ask the questions and the tied person answers. These questions as well as the answers are of course not (necessarily) verbal' (2016: 35-36).

<sup>43</sup> Portelli also states: 'Oral sources are credible, but with a different credibility [original emphasis]. The importance of oral testimonies may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge. Therefore, there are no 'false' oral sources (*ibid.*: 37).

interviewee, one that honours the rules that people normally follow for good conversation in the given cultural setting' (1999: 135; also see Levy & Holland, 1994).

Given how the practice was perceived in society at the moment this research commenced, I thought it necessary to first visit the three field sites and engage in participant observation, informal discussions, attend workshops and tie, all before approaching potential interview partners (also see section 3.3.). The fact that I had been invited as a 'presenter' in The Barn and to speak at a Rope Talk in The Garden very early into the research phase helped considerably, as my presence there was validated and everyone knew who I was. On the contrary, my immersion at The Greenhouse in Paris did start with a work traineeship, but as problems surfaced very shortly after and people scattered, it was considerably more difficult to connect to the field site and to recruit interview partners, and therefore I felt the need to invest more time and energy into the process.

In Berlin I conducted 14 interviews with 17 participants (3 riggers, 2 models, 9 switches; 4 interviews were held with 2 tying partners) and held 13 unrecorded informal conversations. In Paris I conducted 17 interviews with 19 participants (4 riggers, 4 models, 9 switches; 2 interviews were held with 2 tying partners) and held 15 unrecorded informal conversations. In London, I conducted 7 interviews with 9 participants (4 riggers, 4 models, 9 switches; 1 interview was with 3 tying partners) and held 5 unrecorded informal conversations.<sup>44</sup> During field immersion in the island of F\* I held 7 interviews, ca. 35 hours of informal conversation and ca. 10 hours of filmed footage (also see table 2 from section 3.5.). I approached most interview partners directly; I waited for an appropriate moment to approach others, as they had busy schedules. A few times interview partners made recommendations and helped me reach other people in the scene whom I could talk to, or who might have expertise in one or the other topics I was asking about. It was important to me that participants play an active role and have the chance to express ideas, experiences or give advice (Walmsley, 2004: 64), so I welcomed the recommendations. Some were very enthusiastic and offered to speak without me having to issue an invitation; very few were reserved about participating, and only wanted to speak off the record, or simply had very busy schedules and were unable to accommodate me. I gathered valuable insight from both interviews and informal / unrecorded

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<sup>44</sup> While interview partner numbers from Berlin and Paris are relatively balanced, in London the number of interview partners is considerably smaller. This is not due to any difficulty, nor did I feel any reluctance from anyone in the London scene, but rather has to do with the fact that the material was rich and comprehensive. I evaluated it as sufficient.

discussions and personal communications, and it helped me understand and move through the field with ease and confidence (Richard & Morse, 2007).

### Meet the participants

In her doctoral thesis *Pleasure, community, and marginalization in rope bondage: a qualitative investigation into a BDSM subculture*, Zoey Jones offers a comprehensive ‘holistic’ introduction to each of the interview partners in an attempt to help the reader ‘understand each participant as a full person, and not only a BDSM practitioner’, especially due to the fact that ‘in many cases their other life experiences influence their experiences of rope bondage, and vice versa’ (2020: 109-110). In the following lines, I, too, shall offer a brief description of each interview partner who was interviewed during fieldwork, alongside short quotations meant to complete the portrait of each participant; few alterations were necessary in editing this material in order to protect anonymity. Within these pages I also occasionally other mention other voices whom I did not conduct an interview with per se, but who nevertheless offered rich insight during my data collection phase through informal conversations, online verbal or written communication, or voice notes. In these cases, I shall include relevant information on the spot, alongside their quotations.

### Berlin

**A.S. (she/her)** is a mid-20s switch who was living in The Netherlands at the time of the interview. A.S. was very involved with a prominent Dutch rope organisation, the one being delegated and assist with most of the events, particularly the drawing event and the ‘mix and watch’, which is designed to help people meet and switch around. At that time, A.S. had been involved in the rope scene for about two years, and called herself a ‘kind of a rope baby’. A.S. described the encounter with rope bondage as life-changing, as the ‘whole life kind of started to recollect itself around rope’ since that moment. A.S. tied for up to eight times per week. She was participating in The Barn for the second time.

**B.A. (they/them)** is a non-binary polyamorous rope switch in their early 40s, a prominent figure in the rope bondage scene worldwide. B.A. describe themselves as a ‘professional’ making a living exclusively from teaching and performing. Trained initially as an academic, B.A. explains that ‘the moment I had enough money with ropes I was done with politics in academia’. Originally from Europe, B.A. moved to North America with their life partner A.T., and together they opened a local rope bondage dojo which

offers beginner classes, suspension workshops, serves as a venue for social events, brunches, life drawing sessions, and more. At the moment of the interview, B.A. had been tying for more than a decade. B. A.'s tying approach is inclusive and philosophical: 'I don't tie somebody I tie *with* somebody [original emphasis]. I see rope bondage as one possibility for personal development that can include what you have referred to as 'hard sex' or not, that can be, my style is, I hope diverse enough to include the psychological, the erotic, the sexual, the aesthetic, the cultural, arts and crafts, all in one'. Their international reputation was consolidated the moment a volume on rope bondage (quoted often throughout this thesis) was published.

**A.T.** (they/them) is B.A.'s life partner, a model and rope bondage educator in their early 40s living in North America, and frequently travelling to Europe to perform and teach together with B.A. They co-own a local rope bondage dojo. A.T. is a curious investigator, often reflective of their affects and experiences in rope: 'I think any good rope, or kink, anything important and core-moving like that ... you have to invest in it, you have to question it, and develop it for as long as we develop ourselves, otherwise it's a habit not an act of intention. It kind of has to be evolving'.

At the time of the interview, B.A. and A.T. were guest artists in the Barn, with a scheduled performance and a couple of workshops. This was part of a greater European tour, which they both engage in once per year; every such tour lasts for at least one month, and London, Paris and Berlin were the first places mentioned.

**B.E.** (she/her) is a 31 year-old sexually fluid switch based in Berlin, an academic researching kink and sexuality from a philosophical perspective. B.E. and I had met in The Garden in London two years before the interview was recorded, and often exchanged ideas around shared research interests. In Berlin, she introduced me to some local practitioners, and was previously very involved with The Hangar. She describes herself as having a 'non-dogmatic' approach to kink and rope bondage, organises rope workshops and getting around quite a bit, absorbing different 'methods and techniques' as they provide her with 'a lot of inspiration about how to find the special words, to convey information, feelings, a certain approach to rope'. At the time of the interview, B.E. was participating in The Barn for the second time.

**K.A.** (she/her) is a 28-year-old switch living in Germany, and travelling often for rope bondage events. She had been involved with the rope bondage communities from other two previous cities she had lived in, in Central Europe. The moment the interview was recorded K.A. was participating in the Barn for the first time, and was impressed with its diverse approach to the tying cultures. For her, the biggest

challenge has been to tie with strangers, as she was at that moment 'not sure if I still lack the confidence, and I am too nervous to actually enjoy it, or if it's something just too personal for me to do with people I don't know'.

**C.F.** (she/her) is a 43-year-old model and inequality relationship educator and a former ballroom dance teacher. In her words: 'I did a lot of research on how to teach leading and following and partnering and things like that, which also influences what I do, like when I give workshops. And I think it also influences how I do rope'. Our conversation was very extensive and ranged from consent and negotiation dynamics, to the cultural history of Berlin, to issues of representation. C.F. has been getting tied since 2008, and is looking for rope interactions which tell a story. Due to her profession and her interests in articulating her needs and communicating her boundaries, interviewing C.F. felt like a rope bondage scene. Every detail was very carefully discussed and negotiated before, during and even after conducting the interview. C.F. put a great deal of thought into explaining to me what her limits are, what I can and cannot ask, what goes on the record and what doesn't. The word that came to my mind after our interview was 'clarity'.

**E.Z.** (she/her) in her late 30s, is a circus acrobat and is relatively new to the world of rope bondage. Four years before the interview was recorded, E.Z. injured herself while performing, and she was constrained to reorient to a different practice. After trying out a few practices, E.Z. discovered rope and was intrigued by the many possibilities that the body could be in, while inside ropes. E.Z. and I talked a great deal about the body, sensations and the performative dimensions of rope bondage. I was surprised to see this duality of performer/researcher, but she told me that many people from her circus company had intellectual preoccupations.

**F.R.** (he/they) is a 52-year-old gender fluid performer and former ballet dancer, who discovered rope bondage in 1999. In 2007 he opened The Hangar, a place for rope bondage and alternative sexual practices which attracted members from the international scene, until it closed 9 years later. Since 2012, F.R. is organising The Barn. Drawing from his knowledge and experience in the field of dance, he applied this understanding to techniques typically shared within the inner circles of BDSM communities, underground esoteric studios, or artistic contexts. He came into kink through rope bondage, which he finds more 'socially acceptable' because of its aesthetic qualities. F.R. sees his approach as 'unconventional' and he maintains that 'does not follow any particular style. My ties adapt individually to each partner and each situation, I compose with body, rope, time and space in unpredictable ways. At the moment I call it contemporary *shibari*'.

**F.L.** (he/him) has been a member of the Berlin rope bondage scene for more than a decade. He doesn't commit neither to the Japanese-style, nor to incorporating other BDSM elements into his practice: 'rope satisfies everything that fascinates me about BDSM stuff'. Nevertheless, he maintains a high interest in photography, and venturing into bondage was a way of enhancing the possibilities of photography. We talked at length about body and representation, about how the tying body and how it changes according to the situation in which a rope interaction is performed (rigger as photographer vs rigger in an intimate rope scene).

**H.K.** (he/him) is a 57-year-old rigger from The Netherlands, who travels very often to Berlin for classes and rope jams; attending the Barn for the fourth time. He entered the rope bondage scene seven years prior to our conversation, and discovered the Japanese-style one year later. He describes his style as 'intimate' yet versatile: 'playing with senses which might be soft senses such as touch, light touch and tickling, but it can also be much harder and much harsher depending on the setting and the person I'm with'.

**K.M.** (she/her) is a 44-year-old sex worker from Berlin, who integrates tantric rituals and BDSM elements to create 'sensual domination'. Rope bondage is an important part of her work, which she uses to guide clients into deeper states of surrender, sensation, and embodied feeling. K.M.'s approach to bondage is also informed by her background as a dancer and performer. She has developed a method of practicing and teaching rope that emphasizes a kinaesthetic experience, deeply involving her own body when tying others. K.M. has a very intricate philosophy about the body, sexuality and spirituality which she shared with me during our conversation.

**M.A.** (she/her & they) is a 26-year-old gender fluid switch from the Netherlands, exploring polyamory and travelling very often to Berlin and Paris for rope bondage. She started tying when she was a teenager, and at the time this interview was recorded, she identified 'mostly as a bottom', although she likes to switch from time to time. She is a rope 'community leader', as she organises meetings in various cities in The Netherlands. M.A. shared with me thoughts about community dynamics and how travelling for rope opens horizons and improves the practice.

**R.I. & A.F.** (they/them) are two non-binary Berlin-based switches of 21 and 23 years of age, respectively. They are both members of the core team from The Barn, and a large part of our conversation centred on finding more about The Barn, its hierarchies and the role it plays as a melting pot gathering

different styles and cultures of tying into one place. Both practitioners identified strongly with the venue, and therefore their primary interest was to present it in all its complexity.

**T.A.** (he/him) is a transgender rigger in his early 30s, who had started rope four and a half years before our interview, in Stockholm; having been already a part of the local BDSM scene, T.A. was initially not that attracted to rope, but fell in love with it after being 'introduced to it in a community context'. Now living in Berlin, T.A. became a professional 'kinbaku artist and instructor', turning it into a full-time profession and the main source of income, alongside sex work. T.A. doesn't see himself as a switch, although he does switch in rope; while he usually favours more the 'top/dominant' side, he discovered that in rope bondage he enjoys masochism in sexual contexts but also in the sense of pushing the body's limits. At the time of the interview, T.A.'s international reputation was growing, and he travelled often for teaching, performing or photo-shooting. Together with another practitioner, he ran a small business selling bondage ropes for a while. We discussed at length about kink dynamics, pain and other sensations, identity and the 'Japaneseness' of rope bondage which he greatly admires.

**V.I.** (they/them) is rigger from Belgium by my approximation in his early 60s, that I know very little about. He insisted on interviewing together, and assured me that all of the biographical information he will give to me is made-up, and therefore similar to 'play'. Intrigued by this approach, I accepted. This made the interviewing experience quite unique, and provoked me to think even more creatively than before. Conversely, V.I. calls himself a 'rope traditionalist'; he shared with me thoughts about affective transmission, connection and intimacy.

## London

**A.N.** (they/them) is a rope switch in their mid-30s, who had been practicing rope bondage for three years before our interview was recorded. More than anything else, A.N. appreciates the sense of conviviality and the social aspect of the rope community, and is present at every event at The Garden. In their own words: 'I think, for me, it comes down more to the people who come there than the rope itself. I could go to The Garden for a jam, I don't really care if I end up tying or not [...] I'm quite happy to sit and talk to people and just enjoy'. A.N. shared with me anecdotes from The Garden, but also thoughts about representation and gender or embodied sensations.

**A.B.** (all pronouns) is a 30-year-old rope switch, a former academic and the owner of The Garden. At the time of the interview, A.B. had been practicing rope for six years, having discovered rope in the final year of her PhD. Two years later The Garden was opened. As an individual, A.B. is a firm believer that rope is a BDSM practice, and she often uses it to enhance other her sexual play; as a space owner and mentor A.B. is encouraging every member of the Garden to discover their own path in ropes. This dual role that A.B. allows her to explore rope from multiple points of view, and she is very pleased with the fact that she can experiment freely. We had a very long and very informative conversation about the Garden, community dynamics, consent, terminology, embodied sensations, sanitised rope and kink, among others.

**B.L.** (all pronouns) is a 24-year-old polyamorous rope switch with a keen interest in diverse bodies. B.L. entered the rope bondage scene two years before through the FetLife website, mostly due to sexual dissatisfaction and curiosity. After a few months in the rope scene, they decided to open a group celebrating diverse and diverse-abled bodies in rope, in an attempt to raise awareness about representation and marginalised groups in the scene. She shared with me that the community responded very positively to her initiative, and she felt very supported. B.L. and I talked overwhelmingly about representation and inclusion, although we also touched on different other subjects like identity and embodied sensations.

**H.E.** (she/her) is a rope rigger and educator in her mid-50s, who chose not to disclose details about her personal life. For her, keeping two separate identities is very important. She has been practicing kink and rope bondage for over fifteen years, and is one of the most respected kinksters from the UK scene. H.E. has a vast knowledge about kink and rope bondage, and has travelled Japan in order to better her practice. Our conversation felt very comfortable and was very extensive, ranging from discussing types of rope for different tying styles (jute, hemp, of different thicknesses), to travelling for rope, and from representation and identity, to UK community dynamics.

**R.U. & L.A. & D.A.** requested to be interviewed together. **R.U.** (he/him) is a 41-year-old polyamorous rope switch with an academic background and a high-status job. He is very careful to keep these two identities separate, although he trusts the rope world enough to use his real first name. He is a 'house cat' from The Garden, practicing 'feminist rope', and having started rope bondage six years prior to our interview. He started learning rope bondage for bedroom play, and after a relatively slow first year, he got very involved into both the kink and the rope scenes. **L.A.** (she/her) is R.U.'s main partner, a 38-year-old polyamorous switch who started exploring rope bondage together at the same time but with

'less intensity'. For the majority of the years, L.A. tied only with R.U., as she found it very hard to connect with strangers, or even sometimes friends at such an intimate level; shortly before our interview, L.A. started experimenting rope with a larger group, and was in the process of discovering her interests and her limits. **D.A.** (they/them) is a queer rope model of 32 years and a close friend of the pair. They started rope bondage around three years prior to the interview. D.A. describe themselves as a shy and 'not funny' person, who needs time to connect to a space or to people. Because they disliked the atmosphere of dungeons and dark places, they chose to incorporate into the group of regulars at the Garden instead, as it seemed friendlier.

**S.O.** (she/her) is a 55-year-old polyamorous rope model for whom bondage was an integral part of sexual play, until she discovered *kinbaku*, four years before this interview was recorded. S.O. chooses a lifestyle with no relationships, but rather with play partners that she can connect through rope: 'I do have play partners as I do have friendships, but I don't have relationships or dynamics in the traditional sense. So for me, rope works extremely well because I can connect through rope. Even if I don't have a huge connection with an individual, if they have the same love and passion for rope that I do, we can connect on that basis'. S.O. identifies as a masochist, and in BDSM terminology as a slave; due to her current lifestyle, she Our conversation revolved a lot around identity, embodied sensations, sanitised rope and cultural appropriation.

**V.J.** (they/them) is a 23-year-old rope model who discovered rope after the end of a long-term relationship. Initially V.J. approached the Garden community with very much reserve, and after a while she started to feel like she fit in: 'I just find it very welcoming and I feel kind of welcomed there'. V.J. is not taking that many classes, but mostly enjoys getting tied at rope jams. Together we talked about community dynamics at The Garden, ropes and sexuality, consent, gender, 'lived' experience in rope.

## Paris

**A.L.** (she/her) is a 26-year-old model, who had been modelling for photographers and draftsmen for eight years prior to when the interview was recorded. A.L. has 'always been attracted by the idea of representing my body, and basically, I've been discovering ropes through photography and through the relationships between photographers and models I've been growing in this Parisian environment'. She was introduced to the rope bondage milieu by S.A. two years before, and was a regular at The Greenhouse. A.L. is deeply interested in the way rope bondage can facilitate an exchange in energy, and create an

intimate connection without the need to share any other social details with the tying partner. Rope is for A.L. enabling a specific ‘way of being, moving, talking’, and being tied is like ‘a journey to self-discovery’ but also ‘a way of learning what your intuition tells you’.

**A.N.** (she/her) is a 29-year-old switch and the life partner of G.E.; a feminist academic with a background in psychology, an active feminist militant, and involved in an important international feminist association and many advocacy initiatives throughout the country. As a practitioner of both ropes and BDSM/kink, A.N. sees them as separate activities, and she shared with me many details about both communities. She started getting interested in rope and kink since she was twenty-one, but was afraid to practice it until the year before our interview took place. She entered the BDSM scene ‘long after’ starting rope, and she keeps the two worlds totally separate. A.N.’s understanding of rope is phenomenological, and deeply informed by her feminist approach, and she commented on this several times during our conversation. She also has a very traumatic personal experience from her early adolescence, which is ‘heavy and takes a lot of space’, making her ‘conscientious of what femininity is, how it is constructed, etc.’. In this way, doing rope has been therapeutic, helping her to process, let go and overcome her trauma.

**A.R.** (they/them) is a 24-year-old polyamorous switch who had been practicing rope for over four years prior to our conversation. A member of the core team from the Greenhouse, A.R. had asked before we started the interview to avoid this subject. Consent was, however, an important part of our conversation and the first thing A.R. chose to talk about, albeit touched upon in a more general manner; they presented me with a new perspective of consent, from the side of the rigger, which I rarely heard talk about: ‘I am doing things gradually and sometimes people don’t understand. And I’ve been feeling some consent violation on my side as a rigger when sometimes the bottom is pushing you to go harder, when you were planning to do soft things’. With a background in fine arts and tattooing, A.R. is interested in visuality, shapes and aesthetics; rope is an art form. In the Greenhouse, they were involved in a weekly rope bondage life-drawing event.

**A.D.** (he/him) is a well-known mid-50s professional rigger in the francophone world with increasing international reputation, notably among adepts of the Japanese-style rope bondage. With an experience of more than fifteen years, teaching and performing are his main source of income; when I interviewed him, A.D. had just opened a new rope venue in a middle/upper middle-class suburb of Paris. Our conversation was very extensive, and we touched on many subjects: BDSM/kink, Japanese-style rope, safety, consent, gender, teaching and aesthetical philosophy, audience dynamics, etc. A.D. has very clear

rules about what constitutes *shibari*, *kinbaku*, and what is ‘simply bondage’, although he expressed tolerance towards diverse practices and different approaches. He is nevertheless critical about the ‘mainstreaming of rope’. A regular of The Greenhouse before its dissolution, we spoke at length about the subject, and generally about the French rope culture.

**B.T.** (they/them) is a 30-year-old switch born in Paris, who discovered ropes through a flatmate who was practicing kink. B.T. describes themselves as a very curious and athletic person, practices various endurance sports such as long-distance cycling and rock climbing; overall we discussed at length about the relationship between sensation and the body. Regarding ropes, B.T. talked to me about the search to connect to ‘tradition’, to explore ‘role play’, and to ‘create a bridge between my interest in the Japanese culture, because I’m a very big fan of that’ and the rope practice. B.T. is highly careful to produce highly aesthetical images, both as rigger and model. They were reserved when asked about dynamics at The Greenhouse, therefore I didn’t push further on this aspect.

**B.P.** (all pronouns) is a 34-year-old polyamorous switch, a prominent figure in the international rope bondage scene. His ‘rope name is a way to control identity’, a name play which allows him to ‘dissolve into the rope identity’. He got interested in kink and ropes since he was a young child, and practices during years by himself, before discovering The Greenhouse four years before the interview was recorded. He and A.R. discovered The Greenhouse together, and at the time of the interview, he was teaching and performing very often with M.R. B.P. has a very complex understanding of rope bondage, speaks very precisely and is constantly trying to expand his rope philosophy by extensive reading and deep reflection. Due to the fact that he was part of the core team in The Greenhouse, we approached this subject very carefully. B.P. and I discussed at length about safety and consent, physical and emotional wellbeing, without mentioning people or specific situations.

**C.L.** (she/her) is a 30-year-old feminist polyamorous switch who is very preoccupied by issues around consent, safety, and women’s role within the rope bondage scene. C.L. also plays a very active role as an activist, and is involved regularly in public manifestations and protests marching for equal rights, and anti-violence. The interview with C.L. was recorded very shortly before the implosion of the Greenhouse, yet C.L. was mentioning already ‘tensions’ and expressed concern over ‘the treatment of women who get tied by men in Paris’.

**G.E.** (he/him) is a 43-year-old South American rigger, with a background in the libertine community. The life partner of A.N. at the time of the interview, G.E. got curious about rope bondage

three years before this moment, through seeing some friends tie together. He finds tying an ‘ultra-sensual’ activity, which he associates ‘with the sensation of having an intense massage’, a ‘mixture of energies’, a curious association given his firm positioning as the tying partner. He ties only with women, but none of his ropes are placed with a sexual intention outside of the relationship with A.N. He rejects ‘hard ropes’, i.e. séances with edge play, and prefers a gentle and tender approach to the practice.

**H.C.** (all pronouns) is a 24-year-old East Asian switch, visual artist, tattoo artist and *domina*, who comes from a very traditional family. She discovered rope bondage on the internet at a young age, through Japanese manga, and later during her fine art studies through the photographs of Araki which she hid from her family. Moving to Paris meant ‘freedom’; she became well-known in the international scene due to her drawings: ‘when I draw *shibari*, it becomes very personal, informed by my own experience. The more I experiment, the more I develop’. Modelling often for Japanese ‘masters’ that came to teach or perform in Europe also contributed to her reputation. H.C. believes her high tolerance to pain comes from her very strict upbringing: ‘I like rough, when power is being taken away from me’.

**K.I.** (she/her) is a 27-year-old model and visual artist from Paris, who had gotten into ropes three years before the interview was recorded. She built very quickly a career from rope modelling. K.I. sees a rope encounter as ‘very personal, is very like intimate, about trust, it’s about how I feel with a person during the tie’. This is also informed by her quest in finding solace in the practice after a traumatic break-up. She doesn’t tie with people she doesn’t know very well. This interview was recorded very soon after the implosion of the community around The Greenhouse, and K.I. was very visibly affected by the ordeal. Our conversation is overwhelmingly about consent, rape and safety; for ethical reasons, and in spite of getting informed consent, large parts are intentionally not quoted throughout this research.

**M.R.** (all pronouns) is a 28-year-old polyamorous switch who had been practicing rope for over four years prior to our interview. With a background in sculpture, she discovered The Greenhouse through a friend who ‘was eager to learn’, and had a deep fascination for the ‘human body tied in different visual situations’; she was one of the few women riggers at the time, which contributed to raising her popularity. Later, she became together with B.P. one of the most prominent figures in Parisian community. Due to her ‘clean’ ropes and splendid technique, M.R. got invited to teach and perform regularly in Europe. After following her and B.P.’s activities for years, I finally met the pair in the first edition of The Barn I was invited to as a ‘presenter’. M.R. paid a very important role as a gatekeeper for me into the Parisian scene.

**M.L.** (she/her) is a 26-year-old pansexual switch living in Brussels. She is an important figure in the local kink scene, organising the women's munch and other events related to sexual health, safety and consent, 'discovering BDSM in a safe way'. At the time of the interview she had been a part of the kink scene for little over one year. She travels very often to Paris to learn and practice. For M.L., the most important experience in rope has to do with caring for another, 'letting go' and the physical sensation of ropes holding the body: 'you don't need to hold yourself, it's the ropes who are holding you'.

**R.O. & M.T.** (he/him and she/her) are a Parisian couple of 44 and 41 years of age, who got into rope bondage for the purposes of spicing up their love life. To them, rope bondage is very much a kink practice, and they tie exclusively with each other. In public, they tie for the purposes of learning, and almost never for enjoyment; this is reserved for the intimacy of the house. For them, learning to do rope was a difficult ordeal, as the Greenhouse was not offering many courses from the perspective of models, and as such the couple was missing a holistic feedback. At the time of the interview, they were appreciating dynamic and playful approaches to bondage.

**S.A. & F.A.** (he/him and she/her) of 54 and 41 years of age respectively, living in a non-exclusive partnership. S.A. is also a filmmaker and we had already been acquainted from the industry, prior to starting this research; progressively, S.A. switched his interest to portraying kinkier subjects, and this change brought him acclaim from the francophone rope community. When asked about participating in my research, they offered to do a joint interview, to which I agreed. Overall, S.A. proved to be the dominant voice in the interview. At the time it was recorded, The Greenhouse was already dissolved, and they were in the process of opening a new studio in a middle-class arrondissement of Paris, a militant artist squat fighting against the rapid gentrification in the area. I visited this new studio while recording my data.

**T.P.** (he/him) is a 36-year-old switch with a background in literature; this influences the way he thinks about rope bondage, which he approaches as storytelling. At the moment the interview was recorded, he had been practicing rope bondage for little over a year, even though his interest in kink started from long before. While he initially understood bondage as a tool people used during sex, he enjoyed very much discovering a way of practicing that doesn't necessarily have to include sexual elements. Throughout the interview, he speaks of 'powerful sensations' which arise from tying, and which are not linked to sexual desires: 'I was ready from the start to differentiate what sex is and what I want in sex, about the people I want to have sex with and the people who I want to have ropes with, [...] when I

tie, I am in a place where people do ropes and I have no sexual feelings at all. I am not aroused, it's just ropes'.

### The island of F\*

**P.A.** (she/her) is a Spanish lesbian rigger in her early 50s, who has gained considerable international reputation due to her creative, ludic and inspirational approach to rope bondage. With a background in filmmaking, P.A. lives isolated from the rope bondage world, in the island of F\*, but travels extensively to western Europe to perform or teach. P.A.'s approach in bondage is very poetic, heavily influenced by the aesthetics and performativity of post-war art, to which she juxtaposes personal histories. She got into the milieu of rope bondage eight years before the interviews were conducted, through a former lover who was interested in the practice. She shared with me the story of the first time she got suspended, and how this moment of intense physical pain made her sing out loud a resistance song from the times of the dictatorship: *Lo importante es seguir luchando* [The most important is to keep fighting].

Since my work with P.A. is considerably more complex than my interactions with the other interview partners, the last empirical chapter of this thesis contains significantly more details about her background. During our time together, P.A. and me shared a great deal from ourselves, and I am examining this further in Chapter 6; for this vignette, I chose a concise yet pertinent fragment to illustrate her character:

I was born in the dictatorship [i.e. Franco] and these are big words. It is a barbarity. A dictatorship is an unacceptable barbarity, absolutely unacceptable [...] my personal history ... for a time I was very politically active, like everyone else, like all young people, I spent a lot of time going from one side to the other of the most extreme parties, like any young person in Spain, in the left-wing parties, and then I became disenchanted and isolated, tremendously lonely. And I didn't know how to re-join society. And so I began to work by myself, to contribute in my own way how I could. from my defects, from my fear, which is a big defect; from my virtues, such as courage and daring or ... the creative drive [...] And the work I do with the films, that is my individual contribution, it's me, it's me, it's my therapy for myself and it's my individual contribution. And the work I do with the strings is the same. It is me, my therapy and my contribution to society.

These fragments provide just a brief insight into the personalities and personal contexts of those who contributed to this research. Reading these brief descriptions is indicative of the diversity and variety of rope bondage styles, roles, purposes, and experiences present in the scene and discussed in this thesis.

### Stepping into the interview

Once engaged in the interview, establishing a relaxed and trustworthy atmosphere was a matter of utmost priority. Before the start of each interview, I handed over the participant information sheet (which explained the research), and the consent form (see Appendix B, Part I); the Personal Information Sheet which explains the purpose of the study, and outlines various participation scenarios, including risks and benefits of their participation (Coughlin, Smith & Hernandez, 2017; Crang and Cook, 2007; Li, 2008). In addition, I explained the participants what the interview will be about, what main subjects I would like to cover, and got consent for recording the interview; I also reminded everyone that participation is voluntary, and we can stop the interview at any moment. Simultaneously, I paid attention to some subjects I knew beforehand that the interview partner was interested in, or to their position in the field, or even to some details about their profession that I knew shaped their understanding and/or practice. For instance, I asked interview partner A.B. from London about The Garden, as they are the owner; I asked interview partner E.Z. to go into more detail about their experience in circus, as they got into rope bondage as a way to train their circus technical skills; I asked B.A. about their academic background, since they are a published author with a volume on rope bondage. As warm-up (Mason, 2002), I usually asked my interview partners to introduce themselves or, in case we needed full anonymity, I encouraged them to find something interesting to say about themselves (for example: 'Can you tell me your name or nickname, and where you are from?'; 'Do you want to tell me some things about you?'). This put them at ease, and created a comfortable setting for the conversation to unfold in a 'conversational manner' (Longhurst, 2010: 107) and kept it in flow. Some interview partners such as K.M. (she/ her), a 44-year-old switch used the opportunity to settle in comfortably (I.F. Berlin 10 / 4.12.2018):

K. M.: Is it ok, that I seat here, because ...? (pointing to the fact that they sit on the other side of the room).

*Iris: Absolutely, sit wherever you feel comfortable!*

Other partners like F.R. entered into a playful mood straight away (I.F. Berlin 7 / 3.11.2018):

*Iris: We have to set a timeframe.*

F.R.: I think it's a good tool. Because then, you know, 'now we start ... and now we finish'. And when you see we have ten minutes left, you go 'oh!' (gestures).

*Iris: Yeah, so we press the stop button.*

F.R.: It puts a bit of stress [on us] to get to the point.

*Iris: Sounds good. Sounds a lot like rope (laughs).*

F.R.: (laughs) Yeah. Have fun! So now it is 9:24 [P.M.]. So, an hour is enough?

*Iris: Sure.*

F.R.: Good. Let's make it forty-five minutes.

*Iris: (jokingly) I think at least an hour twenty-five.*

F.R.: (laughs) Let's say an hour. And then we can renegotiate. If I have fun, maybe we can do another hour.

Portelli asserts that '[m]any narrators switch from one type of rhythm to another within the same interview, as their attitude towards the subjects under discussion changes' (2006 [1979]: 34). I, too, adapted to each of my interview partners and paid attention to 'respondents' needs and personal situations' in order to 'ensure an open flow of communication' (Schensul, Schensul & Le Compte, *ibid.*: 143). In the case of the interview with K.M., I made sure that they were fully comfortable before starting the conversation; whereas in F.R.'s case, the short game at the beginning created a friendly and laid-back atmosphere and set the mood for the entire session. In a few cases, participants opened up about traumatic experiences and treated the interview as an opportunity to 'get things off their chest' (undisclosed personal communication, 18.06.2018). I remained context-sensitive (Mitchell, 1991; Tedlock, 2000) and encouraged participants to behave freely and consider the space of the interview as a 'safe space'. Furthermore, a couple of times I stopped the recording for a few minutes to give the participants time to gather their thoughts and recover from painful recollections. I repeatedly made sure they knew I was going to anonymize responses and that I was going to leave out those 'sensitive' parts of the interview from my analysis.<sup>45</sup> Here, the need for reflecting on ethical considerations played an important role, due

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<sup>45</sup> In reference of sensitive contexts, Schensul, Schensul and Le Compte reference the example conducted by 'an experienced interviewer' that conducted research with participants with a history of alcohol and drug use; the authors

to the participants' need to articulate with precision, and convey sensitive information. Other times, I reacted quickly (and ethically) to situations, such as in the case of an interview partner from Paris, for example, who decided to share a very painful story with me, on the record. At some point, I decided to stop the recording a few times during our session out of consideration for their pain, even though I was not explicitly asked to do it. Another time, a participant from Berlin asked me if I wanted to tie together before the interview, in order to create a sense of familiarity; this put me in a very uncomfortable position, as I was not inclined to tie with them at all. I worried that refusing them could hurt their feelings, but accepting them would hurt mine. I politely declined, and was happy to see that we could still hold the interview while I could remain true to my own experiences. Other interviewees spoke to me at length on and off the record about stories of physical and psychological abuse, that happened in their childhood and teenage years. Hearing these stories was at times very difficult, and I tried to keep a sympathetic attitude, while also considering my own wellbeing. As an empath with a complicated personal background, I sometimes needed to remind myself to disassociate, and other times I was grateful for being given to perform this exercise, even though felt completely exhausted afterwards. In conducting similarly 'loaded' interviews, Jones made a list of activities meant as coping mechanisms, and ranging from 'recognising labour as emotion work', to 'including emotional reactions in the field notes, reaching out to a friend or a mentor for emotional support, and employing self-care tactics when things got overwhelming (*ibid.*: 98-100). I recognise myself in some of these strategies, especially when reflecting upon my own transformation during the time I spent in the field (for more details about the field journal see section 3.5.1, and section 3.5.2. about my personal development while conducting fieldwork). And now coming back to interviewing. While I initially prepared a sheet with questions with the intention of conducting semi-structured interviews, most ended up to be unstructured interviews, where the participant was asked a few broad questions and were encouraged to respond freely and at their own pace. Some participants requested we 'have a chat' instead of me asking questions; others felt shy in the beginning and relaxed after some verbal encouragement. I adapted my responses accordingly, and for most of them I also took an active part in the discussion. As such, some interviews read as a discussion, and less as a 'standardized' question / answer, as 'our perspectives were brought together and knowledge was constructed' as a result of the interaction (Mayan, 2009: 71; also see Gubrium & Holstein, 2003; Richard & Morse, 2007). Within discussions roles often change, and it may happen that an interview partner takes

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applaud the interviewer's ability to 'obtain information'. While I applaud this skill, in the context of my research I evaluated that soft skills were much more efficient and empathetic in relating to my interview partners. I got all the responses I need to my research questions, and I did not feel I was obtrusively pushing for information (1999: 139-141).

the lead over the other for a short while in the spirit of creativity and cooperation (see Thompson, 1999 [1988]: 30). I turn again to Jones (2020: 89), who describes instances where the participants were unable to disassociate between Jones the researcher/interviewer, and Jones the practitioner/friend: ‘when I asked a question I would reasonably already know the answer to, she burst into peals of laughter’. I found this not to be the case for me. On the contrary, some participants even entered teacher-mode, nodding at my questions, and visibly making efforts to articulate their answers as best as they could; it seemed to me as if they understood that even if I knew some of the terminology, or had ‘lived’ some rope experience, my role is now ‘switched’ (pun intended) to that of an (almost) clueless interviewer. In earnest, part of this difference in attitude could also be due to the fact that, while Jones acknowledged her position as an ‘insider’ prior to starting this research, I had been introduced to the three field sites directly as a newcomer-researcher, as almost nobody knew who I was, nor was I residing in any of those cities prior to starting the research; it was therefore possibly easier to associate me with the role of a researcher, and less with the role of ‘insider’ that researchers.

During some of the interviews, I felt the need to ‘step in’ and share my own reflections, sometimes as a way to position myself regarding what was being said, and other times in order to get even closer to my interview partner or to encourage more reflection (especially about difficult or complex topics). Culhane writes that in adapting a creative-critical approach when doing sensory ethnography, interviews become specialized dialogues between co-creators, where the context, the level of commitment to the research project, and the relationships between researchers and participants play a pivotal role in shaping the content (*ibid.*: 12). One instance with interview partner T.P. (he/him), 33 year-old switch and a former core member of The Greenhouse team is concluding in this regard (I.F. Paris 17 / 27.06.2018):

*Iris: What is the consent limit [i.e. referring to the closure of The Greenhouse] – that if you trespass in your practice regardless of what position you have – after which anything else that you do is not okay anymore ... some [people] have been talking about it openly ...*

T.P.: So at what point do you lose trust or the right to have trust?

*Iris: Yes, indeed ... I’ve been thinking about it because as a female who models, this question impacts me. On the other hand, because I’m conducting research, I need to ask all of these questions, like: ‘what is the limit, that if you’re trespassing, you’re really in a no-zone?’ And ‘how far do you have to take things until you cannot practice rope in that community anymore?’ What I also found interesting, were some online conversations which pointed fingers at one person [tone*

*emphasis], whereas there is a lot of – not only online, also the people I’ve interviewed or discussed with – who told me: ‘it’s good that this happened and there’s a lot of people who would have done the same thing and have the same problem’. Maybe [they’re right], or maybe to a different extent. Or maybe not. And it makes me wonder two things: should we generally make more room for people to be reflexive about their practice? And secondarily, I am thinking about the fact that every scandal needs a face. So, I’m ... I’m just thinking that it’s [also] political. I am asking myself all these questions, but I’m also taking a personal stance in my mind, where it’s really bad what he did. And I’m asking myself another question: did he embody – quote on quote – everything that is wrong with rope communities, so he was pushed away? Is it only him who did that? Is he a particular case? Why have we not heard of anyone else, in all of these years? [...] So, my question, in light of these reflections, is: what are, and who establishes the boundaries that people must not trespass? What conversations need to happen in order to establish one boundary where we all go: ‘this is a definite ‘NO’.*

T.P.: Okay, let’s inbox this.

*Iris: Sorry, it’s a long reflection ...*

T.P.: No, no, it’s great! It’s just that it’s so complex, there are a lot of things I want to say about it in response.

Although they were not frequent, instances like the one above reveal considerable information. Firstly, it reveals that my efforts to create a relaxed atmosphere in the interview space also reflected back on my subjective experience, as I became comfortable enough to open up to in such a profound way to my interview partner T.P. Moreover, reading back through this section of the interview, I realized that at that stage I already felt a sense of belonging to the rope community; not only did I see myself as ‘a female who models’, but I also felt it pertinent to ask questions about safety and voice concerns about my own body as a *participant* in the rope bondage scene. I referred to this by using the plural ‘we’ several times, but also thinking about ways that ‘we’ – as a collective – can actively participate in the improvement of field dynamics in rope bondage localities. My ‘subjectivity’ as a researcher-participant (Mayan, 2009: 25; also see Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Geertz, 1998) comes to light like never before, in the midst of difficult field dynamics; as my interview partners were getting comfortable around me, so was I getting comfortable around them. This long reflection during the interview also made me consider my reflexivity, brought clarity, and provided me with the opportunity to think back critically about my research interests, and the

way in which the researcher on the one hand, and the research participant on the other, can create a story and generate knowledge together (Mayan, *ibid.*: 19, 137; also see Davis et. al., 2004). Secondly, researchers are not cold, objective individuals, and sometimes ‘turning in on oneself in a critical manner tends to produce awareness that there are no absolute distinctions between ... the ‘self’ and the ‘other’” (Foley, 2002: 473; cited in Mayan, *id.*). As such, as a person who occasionally engaged in rope bondage, I felt an urge to position myself ethically regarding the fact that another fellow ‘model’ went through a traumatic experience connected to consent violation. I put myself in their shoes, and I asked myself what would constitute my limits, and wondered out loud whether we should ‘generally make more room for people to be reflexive about their practice’. I regarded this not as a moment of unprofessionalism or as ‘breaking character’, as denouncing categorically an injustice or abuse *is* in my character. Finally, my reflection, although not premeditated, had a positive effect on my interview partner and encouraged them to reflect even further on the subjects at hand: ‘no, no, it’s great! It’s just that it’s so complex, there are a lot of things I want to say about it in response’.

While interviewing, and later, analysing the recorded material, I constantly put myself in the position of those interviewed: ‘Is this the way in which I wish to be addressed?’ ‘Would I be more comfortable with this certain approach, or would I prefer something else?’ ‘Are the specifics of my situation handled with sufficient discretion and delicacy, if I were to be interviewed instead?’ All these were questions that I perpetually asked myself before, during, and after each interaction.

#### *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope: a different interview framework*

Having gotten acquainted over the three editions I attended at The Barn in Berlin, rope bondage practitioner P.A. and me became closely acquainted and started talking regularly throughout the days we spent at the festival. More than a ‘deep – hanging out’ (Geertz, 1998: 69), I used this time to try to understand P.A.’s practice more. Described as having a ‘unique’ style by peers, P.A.’s presence intrigued me, and we took immediately a great liking to each other. We found common ground in our preoccupation for art, philosophy and film, and we used these perspectives when we discussed the practice of rope bondage. P.A. also invited me to tie together a few times, and it was in the light of these ‘lived experiences’ that we started to think about the creative possibilities of a creative duo. During our time on the island of F\*, P.A. and me decided to create a common body of work, the contents of which I analysed for this

research.<sup>46</sup> Part of the data we produced also included unstructured interviews; these we not ‘long and unfocused’ material, but rather ‘a special kind of conversation’, for which ‘a reciprocal relationship between the interviewer and interviewee’ is required (Levy & Holland, 1994, cited in Schensul, Schensul & Le Compte, *ibid.*: 135).

### 3.6. Data analysis

Overall, the chapters of this thesis rely on the same type of data collection strategies from the three main field sites (London, Berlin and Paris), namely on field notes and audio recordings of semi-structured and unstructured interviews. In the case of the creative duo I was a part of for the project *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope*, I also collected data in the form of visual material: video recordings, sketches, photographs and text, all of which was generated collectively with P.A. However, for the purposes of this thesis, I did not analyse the visual material collected there from a formalistic perspective, but rather considered the material I gathered together with P.A. as a whole. I concentrated instead on exploring identity positionality through partnership as a *method*, rather than as an end goal (see Chapter 6). Nevertheless, I constantly reflected on *how* data could be written or how to bring different types of data into a coherent body. More importantly, I often reflected on the things I pay attention to – and the things I leave out – when jotting down field notes as well as I was writing more complex pieces (Rothman 2014, cited in Elliott 2017: 24).

#### Transcribing

Transcribing was an important part of the data analysis after the interviews were collected, as it provided clarity and the chance to observe closely the data through repeated listening (see Bailey: 2008). I was aware that the manner in which the transcription process unfolds, influences the research data (see Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999, Tilley, 2003). In reality,<sup>47</sup> having so many hours of recorded footage was a challenge, and therefore I collaborated with a few trusted contacts who helped me transcribe parts of the material. Prior to starting the transcribing process, I signed confidential agreements with all the

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<sup>46</sup> Our common vision for *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope* goes beyond the scope of this thesis. See Chapter 6, section 6.1. and Chapter 7, section 7.3.

<sup>47</sup> Mayan admits: ‘Although you cannot underestimate the importance of transcribing your own interviews and how to begin to think about your data as you do it, there is a reality that if you are funded, you will likely hire a transcriber’. (*ibid.*: 75)

collaborators (see Appendix B, Part II) by which we established upholding professional standards: to maintain the anonymity of the participants (including names, dates, places or facts), to restrict sharing or disclosing the information contained in the recordings to third parties, adhere to standard intellectual property rules, and return all documents and recordings back to me once the transcription is finalised. Nevertheless, an important part was ‘developing a key outlining’ of ‘what particular symbols represent’ and ‘referring to appropriate transcription conventions’ (Mayan, *ibid.*: 75); in this sense, the transcription conventions are stated at the beginning of this thesis (page 10). Transcribing was mostly a joint venture, and I did not rely solely on the ear and understanding of external transcribers. I listened to footage together with transcribers many times, in order to transcribe as accurately as possible. We paid attention to the intonation, pauses, hesitations, laughs, and/or any other similar sounds and transcribed it as best as we could. The fragments selected for discussion in this thesis reiterate this paraverbal communication in large parts, as it brings to the surface emotions and affective responses to the stories that are shared, or provide insight into the relationship established between the interlocutors.<sup>48</sup> In addition, some interviewees struggled to find the proper word in English, as English was not their first language. In this situation, when citing a fragment, I usually provide a closer alternative word in angle brackets (for example in I.F. Paris 17 / 27.06.2018, interview partner T.P. says: ‘They’re going to tell you that it’s about ‘climbing’ and ‘getting over oneself’ [i.e. surpassing one’s limits]). As the interviews were recorded in English, French and Castilian Spanish, I was also aware of some limitations that translation might offer (Lapadatu, 2000; also see Ordean & Pennington, 2019). In this case, I tried to provide the closest translation possible to the original meaning conveyed by my conversation partner. My assistance in the transcription phase was all the more valuable, since I was the one conducting the interview, had access to all of the languages the recordings were in, and had considerable knowledge about the jargon and the subject matter in general.

### Coding the data

The next step was to ‘code’ the transcribed data, the audio recordings / video footages<sup>49</sup> and the fieldwork notes. I used code names and symbols to refer to five rope bondage sites mentioned in the thesis: The

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<sup>48</sup> An exception to this would be, for example, interviews where a certain word is repeated very often in a sentence (‘ummm’, ‘like’, ‘uhuh’) to the point where a very accurate transcription would render it difficult to follow; in such situations, I preferred to indicate emotions (for example multiple ‘umm’ are transcribed as ‘hesitates’).

<sup>49</sup> This research is concerned with analysing the ‘lived experience’ and ‘identitarian positioning’ as the rope bondage practitioners themselves perceive it. Therefore, aspects related to aesthetic dimensions of the video footage are beyond the scope of this thesis. Exceptionally, working on *notas sobre cuerdas* / *notes on rope* did imply artistic input

Garden (London), The Greenhouse (Paris – now closed), The Barn (Berlin), The Hangar (Berlin – now closed), and finally F\* (Mediterranean Sea). I describe the places briefly in the beginning of this thesis (section b.). Equally, I coded the interview files according to where and when the interview was recorded (section c). I took time to go through all the material and code specific sections according to certain themes, concepts which came up recurrently. Mayan asserts that:

when you assign a word to a part of your data, when you write something in the margin of a transcript, when you underline a word in a document, when you focus on a specific part of a visual, you are coding [...] coding is the first step in being able to say something about the data, the phenomenon. It is the first step in enabling you to make comparisons among pieces of data (*ibid.*, 88-89).

I tried to make sense of the material – highlighting, underlining, labelling, separating, organising, sometimes using shorthand (Charmaz, 1983: 186) – in relation to my research questions. This inductive inquiry, present in qualitative research *par excellence*, enabled me to analyse the data in small incremental steps, as I was trying to piece the information together (Charmaz, 2000: 515; also see Mayan, *ibid.*: 86). Concomitantly, I engaged into recruiting more and more participants and continued taking field notes and thinking reflexively about my own position in the field and on the *continuum*. In other words, I went from the material to concepts, and from those concepts back to the material. In the case of the interviews conducted during *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope*, time constrictions did not allow me to use a similar come-and-go method. As the time I spent in F\* was very condensed, I used unstructured interviews exclusively, and tried to gather as much information as possible. Later, during content analysis, I tried to make sense of the material collected in F\* as a whole (recordings but also field notes, video notes, sketches, drawings, shared texts, etc. See Chapter 6), as the purpose of entering in a with partnership with P.A. was to investigate the fabric of shared creativity and affective mutuality, and the partnership as a working method.

During the write-up stage I went back many times to the written material. Rather than selecting data in a way which would ‘fit into preconceived standardized codes’, I paid attention to the manner in which themes emerged from the data as I was analysing it (see Charmaz, *ibid.*: 515). This step, however, presents itself with limitations, as the researcher’s subjectivity and academic rigor compels me to certain

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to a certain degree, as one of the desired outcomes is creating an art installation. I reflect further on this aspect in Chapter 7, section 7.3.

restrictions. While in the write-up phase, I realised that I must select *that* material which illustrates the best the issue at hand.

Throughout Chapter 4, 5, I engage overall in a balanced way with the material, offering accounts from all field sites. Chapter 6, on the other hand, focuses on *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope* as a case study, building up on accounts from other interview partners in order to contextualise some themes P.A. and me tackled. As such, case study is not ‘a methodological choice’ *per se*, but rather ‘a choice of *what* is to be studied’ (my emphasis; Stake, 2005: 443, cited in Mayan, *ibid.*: 50); it ‘focuses on the *case* and understanding the complexities of it’ (Mayan, *id.*). The purpose of this in-depth case study is to test the limits of research engagement and question aspects of agency, authorship and positionality. I argue there against a methodological separation between ethnography and case study, and ‘consider instead the possibilities of assembling a combination of ethnographic and case study approaches’ (see White, Drew and Hay, 2009: 22). Therefore, I engage in data analysis bringing comparative evidence from interviews, while looking at the particularities of my partnership with P.A. Throughout the thesis chapters, I also integrate other types evidence, such as field notes and personal communication summaries. Different types of evidence bring insight and fresh perspective and supports my argument. I also repeatedly analyse my own involvement in the research, as a discussion partner, an occasional practitioner, and sometimes as a confidante and a friend.

### **3.7. Conclusion**

This chapter exposed the research methodology. Section 3.1. discussed the research framework, namely a multi-site case study design undertaken using a multi-methodological qualitative approach, designed to contextualise and understand the ‘lived’ experience, the affect and the emotions of tying and tied bodies. Section 3.2. advanced the idea of ‘multiplicity’ as an umbrella-concept gathering variations of the rope bondage *continuum*, where the latter created as a result of affective mutuality and identitarian positioning (towards the present self, towards past selves, towards others, in relation to feelings, thoughts and emotions, mediated through the rope thread). Section 3.3 described the four field sites: The Garden (London), The Greenhouse (Paris), The Barn (Berlin), and F\* (island in the Mediterranean Sea); furthermore, I have attempted to sketch the complexities of my role as a researcher-participant and to explain the different roles I assumed in the field. Section 3.4 explained the processes related to the participant recruitment, while section 3.5. taxonomised the mixed methods I used: participant

observation, autoethnography (generative of 'situated' knowledge), and the interviewing process. Finally, section 3.6. explains the data analysis process (transcribing and coding).

In the following chapters, I move on to discussing the research findings. The research aims of this thesis are understanding the role the practice of rope bondage plays within social and cultural narratives pertaining to BDSM / kink, transcultural exchanges East / West and devising a research methodology that encompasses the diversity of embodied practices and perspectives. The study relies on field data collected from London, Berlin and Paris, and from the island of F\* in the Mediterranean Sea. The research aims are addressed in the following chapter as follows: Chapter 4 attempts to situate the *cultural continuum* model by contextualising trans-nationality and appropriation vis-à-vis the concept of 'Japaneseness' in the practice of rope bondage; Chapter 5 examines the 'lived' experience of rope bondage practitioner positionalities on the *kink continuum*, by observing the degrees to which people associate rope with BDSM/kink practices, or identify as 'kinksters'; finally, Chapter 6 is reflecting on the relationship between 'the curatorial' and the *continuum*, chiefly drawing examples from a creative partnership or artistic research formed between myself and practitioner P.A. Throughout these empirical chapters, I attempt to highlight the diverse and complex ways in which the practice of rope bondage is situated, embodied and produced within the everyday practice of people who engage in rope bondage.

## *Interlude: the continuum*

At this stage in the thesis, I open a parenthesis. So far, I have mapped rope bondage's legacy in literatures, carved the methodological framework and prepared for the analysis of the empirical chapters. Nevertheless, the rigorous structure of the thesis requires a *pli*. I use the French version of the term here, as I imagine this section inserting into the thesis similar to a fold in a pleated skirt. Before moving forward with my empirical evidence, I wish to reflect on the *continuum*, as the central concept stemming from this research.

The aim of the thesis is to create 'a way of collective self-inquiry and self-development leading to holistic awareness' (Guhathakurta, 2008: 511), examining the diverse styles, affinities and positions within the practice of rope bondage, as well as into the processes through which rope bondage practitioners position themselves as a result of 'affective mutuality'. By 'affective mutuality' I understand a complex process of interconnected sensations and emotions mediated through rope's material potential to convey intensity, and the capacity of *affecting* and being *affected* in the 'assemblage'<sup>50</sup> created by the rope and the body entanglements. Rather than creating objects and qualities, 'assemblages' as open-ended semiotic systems form 'lines' and 'speeds' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980: 504), 'non-corporeal relations that link signifiers with effects' (Wise, 2005, pp. 79-80). Ordean and Pennington (2019: 70) have asserted that:

[r]emaining attentive to these material changes and effects contributes to the affective orientations rope bondage practitioners have toward rope, orientations which reflect both rope's material vitality—its ability to affect even though it is a 'thing'—and a rhizomatic structure of connection. These orientations are not solely arranged in a tree-like, top-down manner running from practitioner to rope, but also form from rope to practitioner and from rope to rope in a network of reverberations and connections. Casting rope through space creates 'lines of flight', Deleuze and Guattari's name for destratifying marks of multiplicity which indicate rhizomatic

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<sup>50</sup> I use this term often in my characterization of the rope bondage encounter, and sometimes even when I speak more generally about the rope bondage scenes as a dynamic diverse body. Borrowing the term from Deleuze and Guattari, I refer to the assemblage not as 'a set of predetermined parts, that fit together to form an already conceived structure', but rather as 'a whole of some sort that expresses some identity and claims a territory' (Wise, 2005: 77). As the assemblage is never a 'fixed' or a 'stable' constellation (ATP, 1980), so is the fluid structure of the rope bondage scene, ever-evolving and permanently in motion, 'enmeshed in webs of affective contagion across networks of rope and corporeal entanglement' (Ordean & Pennington, *ibid.* 71).

connection (1987). Further, rope literally passes reverberations along its length, just as the emotional reverberations of those in rope affectively pass intensity from person to person through affective contagion (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010, 8, 18).

Mobilised through 'affective mutuality', rope bondage practitioners 'become', now, enablers of positionality. On the other hand, within these rhizomatic processes, a non-hierarchical, inclusive model, able to encompass and hold the extensive variation of possible positionings must be found. This thesis proposes the *continuum* as the suitable model.

In cultural studies, the *continuum* is a term first coined by Adrienne Rich (1982) to describe interactions and experiences which exceed normative genital contact. Rich chose the *continuum*, because it is a model which does not have clearly defined boundaries, and can thus accommodate the entire range of woman-identified experience, including various styles, techniques, relations and positions, which do not invalidate each other, and can change their place on the *continuum* over time.

Deriving from Rich's model, Pennington introduces the term 'abnormality *continuum*' a model whose name is not only reminiscent of the legacy of deviance and pathologization, but is also a suitable framework within which the author debates the legitimacy of 'kinknormativity', and further asserts 'the impossibility of 'vanilla' sexuality' (2017: 47). The 'abnormality *continuum*', Pennington claims, is 'like a [M]öbius, perhaps with 'abnormality'/abnormal on one side and 'normative'/normal on the other, interconnected where one side curves into the other' (*ibid.*: note 57). Positions attach themselves freely into the space, with some 'striv[ing] toward the hegemonic ideal', some choosing not to, some failing to, and some demanding that people 'doing' normalcy accept those who do not' while others 'attach especial value to perceived abnormality by taking pleasure in it' (*ibid.*: 46).

If every moment spent 'enmeshed in webs of affective contagion' (Ordean & Pennington, *ibid.* 71) implies a continuous production of knowledge, the accumulation (i.e. to be read as a process of 'assembling') of different moments of creative embodiments can generate a *continuum*. By definition, a *continuum* is an open-ended system characterized by repeatability, which cannot only be described by looking at the positions occupied within it, but can also be examined in terms of the relations between these various positions (see Oakes Haslam & Turner, 1994). In investigating the rope bondage practice, I, too, adopt the *continuum* model, to advocate for a nuanced perspective which surpasses restrictive binary

interpretations (for instance, when analyzing cross-culturality within the rope bondage scene, see Chapter 4). It not only does it validate all affiliations and perspectives but also highlights practitioners' choices regarding certain identitarian affiliations (such as affinities towards the 'Japanese-style rope bondage': Chapter 4, or affinities towards identifying as 'kinky': Chapter 5). The *continuum* model urges, thus, a nuanced comprehension of identities, endorsing a flexible positionality both within and beyond the constraints of the 'historical canon' or 'kink'. Within the *continuum*, these identitarian positions assume non-hierarchical postures, with the ability to exist autonomously or intersect with other positionalities within this realm. This non-hierarchical, reversible, and circular positioning epitomizes a three-dimensional model that recognizes and encompasses all expressions and alignments associated with rope bondage on the horizontal axis. The vertical axis introduces the potential for evolution and repositioning over time within the practitioner's involvement with the practice (as exemplified in Chapter 6).

Defined as a circular expanse 'of affects, more than one of properties' (ATP: 478-9), lacking edges or fixed points but imbued with the potential for reversibility, the rope *continuum* represents a 'smooth space' that is 'striated' (ATP, 1980) through the inclusion of the entire spectrum of experiences and identity positions associated with rope bondage. The presence of these identitarian striations, coupled with affective experiences, assumes non-hierarchical positions that can exist independently within the *continuum* or be juxtaposed to varying degrees over other positions. Beyond their non-hierarchical nature, these positions exhibit reversibility and circularity, stemming from intricate interconnections with other positions on the *continuum*. In practical terms, this manifests as a three-dimensional model that recognizes and encompasses all manifestations of rope bondage on its horizontal axis (i.e. the positionality of every practitioner in the field is valid and should be acknowledged), while also contemplating the potential for change and repositioning within the practitioner's engagement with the practice over time, on the vertical axis (i.e. I, the practitioner, can change and reposition myself over time, if the knowledge and experience I've accumulated enables me to do so).

Having proposed rope bondage *continuum* as an inclusive, non-hierarchical model encompassing the whole range of rope bondage-identified experiences, I shall now move on to reinforce an inclusive meta-model which encompasses plurality (i.e. all the current and the possible applications of the *continuum*), understood in the deleuzoguattarian terms of ‘qualitative multiplicity’ (ATP: 1980; Deleuze, 1988). Thus, in affiliation with Bergson and Deleuze, in this context I define a ‘multiplicity’ as a ‘sand dune in constant flux, though it attains some consistency for a short or long duration’, as having ‘porous boundaries’ and being ‘defined provisionally by its variations and dimensions’ (Tampio, 2010: online resource; also see Deleuze, 1991 [1966]; Linstead and Thanem, 2007). It is due to the rope bondage *continuum*’s polyvalent, non-hierarchical dimension, its capacity to accommodate the flux of identitarian positioning and re-positioning, and because ‘smooth’ and ‘striated’ spaces<sup>51</sup> in general are ‘spaces of multiplicities constructed through local operations’ (Lorraine, 2005: 164), that the rope *continuum* can be regarded as a qualitative multiplicity, ‘a complex structure that does not reference a prior unity’ (Roffe, 2010: 181), solely with provisional defining qualities, and attaining temporary consistency through acts of self-identification and through relational mutuality during a negotiated scene – solely because these acts create temporary ‘striated spaces’, even though neither identity, nor shared affective spaces are intrinsically fixed concepts, but rather subjected to *flux* and *flow*.

The permanent fluctuation in which the practice develops is ‘interrupted’ by ‘foldings’ in the multiplicity (Tampio, 2010: online resource; Deleuze, 1991 [1966]), as subjective experience accumulated through the practice as well as the relationship with the self can determine different practitioners to position themselves differently, according to the manner in which each individual appropriates the practice for themselves. As the same person can reposition differently over time depending on the ways in which their practice might evolve, the *continuum* expands, and so does the multiplicity. If the positionality can permanence over a longer period of time during the rope bondage practice, the consistency provided by the ‘affective mutuality’ does not outlive the duration of the scene. Thus, there are two level at which multiplicity operates: by creating a non-hierarchical identitarian positionings on the rope *continuum* which can fluctuate over time on one hand, but also by de-territorializing these identities in the aftermath of mutual relationality generated by affective contagion during a scene, on the other.

The *continuum*, and therefore, the multiplicity, become then, tools through which I will look at identitarian, inter-identitarian and relational positionings in a non-hierarchical, non-exclusive way, as

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<sup>51</sup> To be remembered again that ‘smooth’ and ‘striated’ spaces always exist in tandem with each other (Lysen and Pisters, 2012: 1).

these have been revealed and presented to me at those specific moments in time.<sup>52</sup> Importantly, the multiplicity can also be used as a way forward into exploring the rope *continuum's* expansion (i.e. effectively, in researching with more people), or the relationship with other identity-making *continuums* (i.e. applying the *continuum* model to look at other aspects of the practice). Because of the multiplicity's capacity to accumulate additional constellational dimensions which are 'experienced in lived time' (Tampio, 2010, also cf. Linstead and Thanem, 2007), the rope bondage *continuum* – and hence the multiplicity – has, thus, no particular beginning nor end, as it conserves the property of supporting perpetual additions of knowledge and experience. Think of the multiplicity as a three-dimensional construction, where the identitarian *continuum* occupies a non-hierarchical space and has supple 'porous boundaries' (ATP, 1987, Tampio, 2010) which are not fixed, but subject to perpetual addition and subtraction, according to different moments of attained consistency.

In the following chapters of this thesis, I shall apply the *continuum* in three different situations: to look at cross-culturality, kinkiness and subjective re-positionality. As such, the following three chapters form a multiplicity. These three examples have been chosen because they play an important role in the identitarian meaning-making and processes of knowledge-production within the practice of rope bondage. As such, they reflect some of the most vital realities of the field: 'subjective and intensive' (Tampio, 2010), points of collective consistency and intensity, but also of tensions and disruptions.

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<sup>52</sup> Due to the expansive and the dynamic nature which characterize the complexities of the multiplicity model, these findings do not lay any claim to permanency, but should rather be interpreted as time-stamped snapshots of a practice which is developing in real time, of positionalities which are can change and develop at any moment in time.

## ***Chapter 4: The Cultural Continuum***

#### 4.0. Introduction

This chapter lays the groundwork for the emergence of a sociocultural model that contextualizes transnationality by examining how ‘Japaneseness’ is embedded within the practice of rope bondage and the processes of knowledge-production. In this context, I define ‘Japaneseness’ as a cultural construction that considers ‘situated’ specificity (see Haraway, 1988), and ‘treats [the] Japanese culture as a unique and unparalleled product of racial, historical and climatic elements that underlies the essence of current social phenomena’ (Kowner, 2008: 170). The analysis of specialist literature<sup>53</sup> and field data<sup>54</sup> reveals close connections between elements of Japanese culture and the practices of some Non-Japanese rope bondage practitioners.<sup>55</sup> Throughout this chapter, various elements constituting the cultural construct of ‘Japaneseness’ are interwoven into these practices, for those who adhere to these narratives, and to a certain degree even for some who reject this label.

Drawing on Donna Haraway’s concept of ‘situated knowledge’ (1988; 1991), I adopt a hybrid epistemology which favours a ‘mobile positioning’ of the knower-thinker. This approach acknowledges and integrates power relations within the production of knowledge in the ‘apparatus of bodily production’ (Haraway, 1988: 595; also see Rogowska-Stangret, 2018). Bodies become active and self-aware knowledge producers, rather than being ‘innocent and waiting outside the violations of language and culture’ (Haraway, 1991: 192). Some practitioners I have interviewed throughout this research incorporate to varying degrees cross-fertilized Japanese cultural elements into their practices. Throughout this thesis, my focus is on constructing a theoretical model emphasizing performativity and socio-situated embodiment. However, it is crucial to recognize that some rope bondage practitioners construct their understanding of the practice as a result of the complex interplay between power, subjectivity, and language (Hunter, Rodriguez & Cajigas-Rotundo, 2019: 13). This reality, explored in the present chapter, sets up a particular way of performing rope bondage. I aim to use the tools practitioners identify with to understand the reality as they perceive it; it is a reality of the field which must be further explored, as it

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<sup>53</sup> While the specialist literature which has been consulted is largely authored by practitioners based in the US and Canada, this chapter formulates its claims using field data which has been collected in London, Berlin and Paris. More field research needs to be conducted in North America before such claims could be extended to those spaces.

<sup>54</sup> Examples gathered in the field offer a version that is limited to the rope bondage spaces in London, Berlin and Paris; it cannot speak about the way in which cultural appropriation unfolds in spaces outside of where the fieldwork has taken place. However, I acknowledge the crucial role that movement plays generally in the dispersion of knowledge throughout other spaces, due to practitioners who consistently travel from one rope space to another.

<sup>55</sup> Throughout this chapter, I will be using the construction ‘non-Japanese’ instead of ‘European’ in order to hint to the multiple transnational exchanges that take place between different spaces in the ‘West’. A taxonomy of the transmutation mechanisms of the practice in Western spaces outside London, Berlin and Paris is beyond the scope of this research.

sets up idiosyncrasies in the way rope bondage is practiced and performed. Therefore, I am concerned with finding a research model capable of exploring the ‘emergent socio-situated and affective work [...] rather than the effects of socio-cultural performance’, while accounting for ‘the complex relationship between power, subjectivity and language’ (*id.*). Drawing from Adrienne Rich’s use of the concept of lesbian *continuum*, I employ this model of research and apply it to debates on ‘cultural appropriation’, transcultural exchange and legitimacy, while situating ‘lived’ experience within processes of identitarian positioning and knowledge production. I engage with this research model to examine the ongoing social, cultural, affective and emotional aspects of the activity of rope bondage, while at the same time considering the complex relationship between power dynamics, personal viewpoints, and language.

This chapter delves into a comprehensive analysis of different cultures of tying. It demonstrates how complex cross-cultural mutations, exchanges, and the necessity to assess these parameters trans-textually (Sugimoto, 2009) create spaces, or rather *positions*, where knowledge is ‘situated’ and archived, or stored in the bodies (Haraway, 1988). The examination focuses on how transnational exchanges in the context of rope bondage, both in Japan and abroad, generate situated knowledge through trans-mutated, internationalized versions and archiving and dissemination processes. My analysis includes examining the role of ‘cultural appropriation’, ‘fetishization’, and the exportation of rope bondage as a ‘Japanese cool’ cultural products (Sugimoto, 2009). Practitioners mobilize positionality in practices that aestheticize or oppose cultural differences, contributing to a dichotomy central to the promotion and exportation of Japanese cultural products. This dichotomy coexists with narratives promoting the ‘Japanese way’<sup>56</sup> as the ‘one true way’ of performing rope bondage, validated through a ‘fallacious appeal to tradition’ (Ordean & Pennington, 2019: 68, note 4). A clear shortcoming of this approach is that ‘the one true way’ implies utilizing an ‘arborescent’, top-down framework (ATP, 1980), hierarchizing some practices over others in the name of ‘tradition’, limiting and silencing the voice of those practitioners who do not identify themselves nor their practice as pertaining to this framework.

In this chapter, I explore how cross-culturality manifests concretely. I identify four ways in which transnational exchanges associated with Japanese-inspired rope bondage serve as cultural currency, generating and storing ‘situated’ knowledge. I investigate how knowledge is being accumulated, collected

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<sup>56</sup> Throughout this chapter, I am deliberately using the construction ‘Japanese-inspired rope bondage’ instead of ‘Japanese rope bondage’ for two reasons: intra-communitarian, in order to hint to the complex relationship between the rope bondage that comes from Japan, and the Western scene’s construction of ‘Japanese’ rope bondage. Inter-communitarily to avoid confusion, because the term ‘Japanese rope bondage’ is often used by *Shibari / Kinbaku* practitioners in order to describe their practice as a whole, especially in relation to other kink practitioners who might use rope in other ways.

and stored in archives-collections, the relationship between language and authenticity, the mobilization of authenticity in constructing a seemingly uniform historical narrative. Finally, I examine how pedagogy and travel facilitate sociocultural exchanges, generate situated knowledge, and perpetuate the Japanese-inspired model.

In Section 4.1., I explore the contextual meaning of terms such as ‘fetishization’, ‘cultural appropriation’, and ‘authenticity’ within the realm of rope bondage and cross-cultural exchanges. This process, extensively problematized in academic literature (Howes, 1996; Rogers, 2006; Ziff & Rao, 1997; Young, 2010; Young & Brunk, 2012) and mass media (Berg, 2015; Christensen, 2012; Mannie, 2014; McWorther, 2016), remains a subject of debate with varying perspectives. Within the domain of Japanese-inspired rope bondage practiced beyond Japan, ‘cultural appropriation’ engages mechanisms of ‘fetishization’ (Cook and Crang, 1996; Jackson, 2002; Taussig, 1996) and discussions surrounding authenticity (Ferrara, 1998; Taylor, 1991; Vannini & Franzese, 2008; Vannini & Williams, 2009). I advocate for the inclusion of cultural exportation in conjunction with ‘cultural appropriation’ in the discussion. This consideration is essential as various Japanese elements are exported beyond Japan to diverse Western spaces, interconnecting with ‘authenticity’ (Scannell, 2011) and ‘capital’ (McWorther, 2016; Kabir, 2018, unpublished; Sugimoto, 2009).

In Section 4.2. I postulate a horizontal, inclusive model inspired by Adrienne Rich’s (lesbian) *continuum* (1982), and further instrumentalized by Pennington (2018). In my use of the term, I argue that the rope bondage *continuum* is a rhizomatic, non-linear, non-hierarchical, and fluid theoretical characterized by affective approaches to 'situated' knowledge-production, a 'smooth space' (ATP: 478-479) which is 'open to many styles and techniques' (Ordean & Pennington, 2019: 69, n. 7). Setting the background, I examine in Section 4.2.1. the formation of the 'historical canon' and highlight its shortcomings. In the rope bondage scene, the problematic use of the 'historical canon' by certain practitioners asserts hierarchical superiority, focusing on an imagined 'authentic' loyalty to the Japanese style and Japanese ‘masters’. I argue that in using this approach, certain elements, processes, events, or people are singled out and incorporated into a 'superior' narrative, gaining power and being instrumentalized for various purposes (Schroeder, 2008: 183). I further observe how this tendency disrupts the continuous flow of intercultural exchange, rendering the practices who do not align with it as either ‘less than’ or as ‘imitations’. With this in mind, in Section 4.2.2. I propose the *continuum* as an inclusive and horizontal alternative. I argue this model advocates for a nuanced analysis of cross-cultural exchanges in the rope bondage scene, validating all affiliations and perspectives, and promoting a fluid identitarian positionality within and outside the

'historical canon' (see Chapter 5). I advance the idea that the *continuum* model encompasses the entire spectrum of rope bondage-identified experiences and positionalities, occupying non-hierarchical positions that can exist independently or overlap with others. In using this framework, I advocate for a nuanced exploration of cross-cultural interactions within the rope bondage scene, which surpasses exclusionary binaries, and reinforces the validity of *all* affiliations and perspectives irrespective of whether practitioners opt to incorporate Japanese elements into their practice or not.

In Section 4.3., I apply the *continuum's* theoretical framework and discussed the role of language and terminology in establishing cultural affinity, belonging, and determining the politics of 'authenticity'. I demonstrate how the employment of particular jargon becomes indicative of belonging to a distinct group identity imbued with cultural significance. A comparative analysis is conducted on the three names commonly used for the practice – 'Shibari,' 'Kinbaku,' and 'rope bondage' – revealing how each term implies association with a distinct group. This comparative investigation demonstrates the interlacing of jargon with an arborescent model and argues against it, as it contributes to the emergence of the phenomenon of 'nationalism of rope bondage' (Barkas, 2016: 17). Nevertheless, I also offer an alternative to this rigid 'arborescent' model, exemplifying through field research carried out at The Barn. I bring evidence in favour of The Barn's inclusive, horizontal positionality in the rope bondage scene, and I argue that it aligns closely with the structures advocated by the *continuum*. Finally, I posit that The Barn represents and welcomes diverse approaches, contributing to the overall enrichment of rope bondage practices.

#### **4.1 Situating cross-culturality**

In the volume *Rope, bondage and power*, rope bondage educator JD, from the US-based<sup>57</sup> kink duo Two Knotty Boys argues (JD in Harrington, 2009: 72):

There are those who hold tight to ritual and protocol and feel a sense of wrongness the more they or another diverge from a pre-described way; and there are those whose ways are more flexible, more attuned to the moment and the needs of the now. These latter people might be said to be

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<sup>57</sup> With a few exceptions, the specialist material I am working with has been published in North America. Even so, not all the contributors from edited collections, such as *Rope, bondage and Power* are based here. While the claims of this research are contextualized in rope bondage spaces in London, Berlin and Paris where fieldwork was conducted, the theoretical frame draws from international authors and theoreticians of rope bondage.

more Zen. And, when these same people express their nature in the context of sensual rope bondage exchange, it could further be said they exhibit the way of a Zen rope master.

while in her book *The Seductive Art of Japanese Bondage*, the US-based rope bondage educator Midori states (2001: 5):

*Shibari*, that you see in those beautifully produced glossy coffee table books from Japan, is a bit different from the bondage that we'll be enjoying. Don't worry – I won't be watering down the authenticity for you. Rather, what I will show is Japanese-style rope bondage for real play and accommodating very real Western bodies and practical play concerns.

Both excerpts re-contextualize and appropriate elements of Japaneseness, whether this happens in the representation of rope bondage (Midori) or through non-representational, embodied experience (JD). Mobilizing cultural constructs belonging to ritual, tradition and presence, JD opposes a rigid attitude towards rope bondage, one that is heavily anchored in tradition, to a more flexible and open approach which is anchored in the 'now'. The latter, the author claims, is a practitioner who is more likely to achieve the state of zen, to become one with the rope and the partner they are engaged in a scene with (p. 73).<sup>58</sup> In rope bondage, JD asserts, it is only by breaking free of the constraints of ritual and protocol, that one can 'exhibit the way of a Zen rope master'. Even though the text is not overtly concerned with unpicking the relationship between Japaneseness and rope bondage, the author does organise the text following the main principles used in teaching the zen discipline, and even starts with a sort parable featuring two zen monks. Midori, on the other hand, promises to teach a type of rope bondage which is 'different' and 'real', but which will preserve its 'authenticity', catering for 'real' and 'practical' ties which accommodate 'very real Western bodies' and are adequate for 'real play'. By the rule of exclusion, the 'other' Japanese-style Shibari, is therefore deemed impractical, leaving one to wonder whether this is to say that Japanese bodies are not 'real', nor 'practical', save for the instances in which they can be admired, from afar, in 'glossy coffee table books' imported from Japan.<sup>59</sup> In direct or indirect ways, both authors utilize or allude

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<sup>58</sup> Having absorbed meaning from Chinese and Indian philosophies, the concept of Zen is inseparably linked to the Japanese culture, described as a way to achieve enlightenment, emancipation and freedom, and being a part of one's daily experience (Suzuki, 2016 [1959]: 13-16).

<sup>59</sup>It is important to acknowledge here another side to the argument which supports the idea that different body types require different ways of tying, and which Midori could have taken into account in her argument. During my time in the field, I have more than once reflected after witnessing how tying techniques change in relation to the type of bodies which are being tied. For instance, a field entry notes on how tying techniques had changed for a rope bondage practitioner who tied the same box-tie (takate-kote) pattern during a play scene with two models having different body types. Not only was the length of the rope different, but the places where the tie was placed was slightly different, as was the form of the final tie, adapted in order to accommodate the body size of the models (field notes,

to concepts which I will be using extensively throughout this chapter: “cultural appropriation”, ‘authenticity’, ‘validation’, ‘fetishization’, and ‘othering’.

In this context, I diverge from the conventional definition of ‘cultural appropriation’, defined as ‘the taking over of creative or artistic forms, themes, or practices by one cultural group from another, especially without showing that you understand or respect this culture’ (Drabble, Stringer & Hahn, 2007). This definition implies a power dynamic that does not resonate similarly within the scene. Instead, I align with Helene Shugart’s more comprehensive interpretation of the term, encompassing ‘any instance[s] in which a group borrows or imitates the strategies of another—even when the tactic is not intended to deconstruct or distort the other’s meanings and experiences’ (1997: 210–211). This perspective is consistent with arguments by Young (2010), who contends that ‘cultural appropriation’ can be acceptable on aesthetic and moral grounds, as well as insights from Berg (2015), Christensen (2012), Mannie (2014), or McWorther (2016; 2017).<sup>60</sup> Embracing a broader spectrum, Shugart’s assertion closely aligns with the realities observed in the field. Contrary to the idea that practitioners aligning with the Japanese style are lacking consideration or showing disrespect, those within the field who adhere to this style tend to fetishize and elevate elements from Japanese culture over other forms of tying (field notes, 15.03.2018). Consequently, ‘authenticity’ becomes a barometer, indicating whether a practice is considered authentic or ‘valid,’ a judgment made by a select group of practitioners assuming authority and attempting to ‘impose a master narrative of meaning’ (Cobb, 2014: 1).

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London 12.11.2016). On several other occasions, I documented conversations between practitioners on both ‘sides’ (i.e. riggers and models), which were centred around the need to have more training in tying different body types, complaining that most workshops are standardized for a very limited range of bodies. These conversations were not only referring to body size, but also to physical impairments and limitations, and to bodies with different anatomies from one another (for instance, male bodies opposing the cliché of the tied female body). However, none of these reasons justify the way in which Japanese model body types are being othered.

<sup>60</sup> Debating the subject of tattoos using East Asian calligraphy on Western bodies, Christensen (2012) argues that wrongful exoticisation of another culture for personal gain implies taking ‘language’ and ‘symbolism’ out of their ‘original context’, by which ‘the meaning is oversimplified or completely lost’. This stands at the very heart of cultural appropriation, and thereby in danger of creating ‘cultural gibberish’. Mannie (2014) argues that appropriating some forms of gestural expression pertaining to the black female community by the white gay community is a way of reasserting power, and ends up diminishing the very essence of the community where these elements are being borrowed from. Mannie’s argument is counteracted by McWorther (2017), who argues: ‘it’s not as if the black women are being left without their culture after the ‘theft’, or as if gay white men are somehow out there ‘out-blackening’ the women they ‘stole’ from’. Berg (2015) fervently dismisses the negative aspects of cultural appropriation, arguing that ‘the history of culture is the history of cultural appropriation. What we see as traditional national or ethnic cultures today are the just the current manifestation of a long evolutionary process’, and that the process of appropriating ‘add[s] meaning, creating complex new rituals and relationships’. Focusing on the negative aspects of cultural appropriation on a closed-off binary system end up encouraging a conservative model of culture.

While ‘fetishization’ in the context of this chapter, a series of cultural, psychological and social techniques in which a process, an idea or a set of elements are imbued with power, often in connection with sexual fulfilment, desire, or worship, where the fetishized object is often symbolic of a dual dynamic such as control and release, power and helplessness, sexuality and infantilism (Schroeder, 2008: 183). The process of ‘fetishizing’ has been connected with consumer culture (Fernbach, 2002; Jhally 1987; Schroeder 2002; 2008). My employment of the concept here illustrates its materialization in rope bondage’s cultural *continuum* in three different ways: through borrowing and appropriating elements from the Japanese language, through constructing and ‘consuming’ historical narratives, and through participating to the teaching / learning process involving Japanese masters. Cultural difference, thus, is commodified (see Taussig, 1996, cited in Cook and Crang, 1996; Pratt, 1992), through processes of ‘fetishization’ and ‘aestheticization’ in rope bondage consumer culture.

In the case of Japanese-inspired rope bondage, ‘fetishization’ appears the moment the grading system validating practices which borrow and integrate Japanese elements over others which do not adhere to this system, is set in motion. As we will see throughout this chapter, ‘Japanesey’ elements are part of the ‘Japan cool’ market (Sugimoto, 2009), as well as systems and processes are being fetishized; this can range from paraphernalia like music, photographs clothing or exclusively using certain rope fibres, to appropriating and ‘learning’ affects such as shame, and even to constructing entire systems, canons, and artificially linking historical elements.<sup>61</sup>

In agreement with Yoshio Sugimoto in his article *Japanese Culture: An overview* (2009: 199-200), I am critical of essentialist, colonialist comparisons that operate in arborescent dichotomous axes following binaries such as ‘foreign’/ ‘native’, ‘export’/ ‘import’, ‘inside’/ ‘outside’, ‘transmitter’/ ‘receiver’, ‘origin’/ ‘copy’, since such comparisons ignore the crucial ‘reciprocal trans-textuality’ plays:

In terms of crosscultural translation and adaptation, we prefer to speak not of adequate or inadequate copies of cultures seen as originary and normative, but rather of an unending process of reciprocal transtextuality. Our stress, therefore, is on the interactive and recombinant dialogism evoked by terms like revoicing, reaccentuation, indigenization, and mediation. At the same time, these dialogical mediations are shaped and produced within specific cultural contexts that imply a situated ‘take’ on the act of comparison itself [...] cross-cultural comparison risks

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<sup>61</sup> Racial fetishism is also an important component – however, this facet will be weaved into the other aspects which will be discussed and not addressed or examined directly, since field data collected on this subject cannot be used without breaking consent on information sharing given by my interview partners.

surreptitiously inscribing one cultural or national zone as original and the other as copy, one culture as ontological real and the other as phenomenal imitation, one culture as substance and the other as accident, one culture as normative and the other as aberrant.

Sugimoto challenges the notion of fixed binaries, proposing a perspective that views cross-culturality as the outcome of continuous cultural mutations marked by reciprocal exchanges and re-contextualization. Within this framework, processual 're-voicing', 're-accentuation', 'indigenization', and 'mediation' emerge as crucial factors. In parallel, this chapter seeks to dispel the misconception that the 'Western' rope scene mindlessly appropriates cultural elements from the Japanese counterpart, reducing it to a mere 'phenomenal imitation' or 'copy.' Contrary to such notions, this chapter, while adopting a critical stance at times, asserts that Japanese-inspired rope bondage in the Western scene is intricately woven into a web of 'reciprocal transtextuality'. It highlights the active contribution of members from the Japanese scene, exporting cultural products that shape the Western construction of Japaneseness. It is imperative to consider the roles of relativism and subjective interpretation, recognizing that what may be deemed condemnable by some is perceived as 'influence' or cultural syncretism, akin to 'postmodern hybridity' (Drabble, Stringer, and Hahn, 2007), often shaped by market demands.

However, 'cultural appropriation' is not static, but rather a dynamic process of 'taking' and re-inscribing meaning, 'making one's own of another culture's elements [...] in various ways, under a variety of conditions, and with varying functions and outcomes' (Rogers, 2006: 476). In this sense, we must look at the broader sociocultural context and the degree to which the both cultures are implicated in the process. As this chapter outlines, both Japanese and non-Japanese groups play an important role in the creation of the Japanese-inspired tying culture, through constant processes of import, export and exchange.<sup>62</sup> As such, I am contributing to the debates on 'fetishization' and commercial culture (Cook and Crang, 1996; Jackson, 2002), 'cultural appropriation' (Howes, 1996; Rogers, 2006; Ziff & Rao, 1997; Young, 2010; Young & Brunk, 2012), cultural relativism and cultural politics (Mouer & Sugimoto, 2015; Sugimoto, 2009; Yoshino, 1992). Rather than following a rectilinear trajectory of appropriator / appropriated, I am more concerned with 'the symmetry or asymmetry of power relations' and 'the nature of the cultural boundaries involved' (id.; also see Wright, 1998: 10, who claims that 'sites are not bounded - people draw on local, national, global links'), which is by far more nuanced than the binary above might lead to believe.

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<sup>62</sup> This chapter is drawing exclusively from fieldwork conducted in Europe, and therefore cannot make any claims regarding processes by which the Japanese scene has been changed by European influences. More research needs to be conducted in this direction.

I argue that the transfer of cultural knowledge in the non-Japanese rope bondage scene is a much more dynamic process, where relations of power and transference are constantly moving from one 'side' to another, largely informed by the demands of the cultural market. In employing a horizontal model, boundaries become blurred and rectilinear binary axes redundant; this prefigures the construction of a research model which is able to hold these directions, yet which professes horizontality.

#### 4.1.1. Performing cross-culturality in rope bondage practices

The Western rope scene exhibits a diversity of approaches and is influenced in varying degrees by appropriated or re-contextualized forms of Japanese rope bondage. There are many practitioners who refuse to circumscribe their practice into the Japanese-influenced narrative; I am considering here those who do incorporate elements from this narrative. It is also important to acknowledge that some Western rope bondage educators such as Vane (2014) discuss the numerous ways in which the West practice rope bondage in similar dualistic terms.<sup>63</sup>

This is not to say that tensions in the field do not exist; harmful consequences of those who appeal to 'tradition' in order to authenticate and elevate some forms of the practice over others (Ordean & Pennington, 2019: 68, note 4), and create a 'nationalism of rope bondage' (Barkas, 2016: 17) cannot be overlooked.<sup>64</sup> Interview partners such as the Berlin-based B.E.(she/her) and her companion K.A. (she/her) who visited Berlin frequently to learn and practice rope bondage, commented on the ethical implications of appropriation in the rope scene, which can lead to harmful behaviours (I.F. Berlin 3. / 16.03.2018):

B.E.: I always feel a bit irritated with Westerners wearing kimonos and giving themselves Japanese names, I don't know, it's...pffff.

*Iris: why does it irritate you?*

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<sup>63</sup> Evie Vane argues that 'the Western style actually covers a wide range of individual styles. I think of the Western like the Wild West – anything goes. It can look artistic, can be merely functional ('let's just get that bod in the air!'), can involve just a few ropes or enough to make you look like a mummy' (2014: 3).

<sup>64</sup> On their website *Kinbaku Today*, Z.N. asserts: 'The difference between Japan and the West, is that technique in the West was able to develop practically overnight. Our communities [i.e. Western communities] developed almost exclusively as communities of learning and practice, without an underlying culture of appreciation'. Z. N., 'Rope: Community and Culture', *Kinbaku Today* online blog <http://www.kinbakutoday.com/rope-community-culture/> (last accessed on 15.02.2017).

B.E.: I because it's also 'cultural appropriation'. And, like, I'm not dogmatic about it. First of all, this can be problematic and I want to underline that. It can be that you appreciate this culture and you're taking it seriously, if you know what the kimonos are for, then go for it. Also, of course you can play with it, and tie somebody up, and maybe have a 'ritualistic tea ceremony', ok, that can be [possible] if [people] aren't ironic about it; if you're charming and [are] doing it in a charming way, and without disrespecting the other culture, or rather making fun of stereotypes and clichés, I would say go for it. But I also think that Westerners and kimonos look ridiculous, just in my own aesthetic categorization. it's so weird. And it's like, do your own thing about it, why do you have to copy a culture that you're not from, that you don't know much about, maybe you've learned about it from book[s], but it's still not [the same as] being from this culture. Do your own thing, why do you have to do it this way. I feel more comfortable with people who take themselves seriously, and where they come from, what they are interested in and what are their intentions. I would always ask a person 'why [oral emphasis] do you wear a kimono? Why [oral emphasis] do you want to do it on tatami mats? Why [oral emphasis] do you *need* that?' And if [the answer] is just 'because this is the way it has to be', then it's really weird [shrugs]. We don't have to fetishize the authenticity of the practice.

*Interview partner K.A. echoed the same thoughts as B.L.:* K.A.: I agree with that - exactly! It's not about 'they do it like this in Japan, so it has to be done this way'. You're doing it here, you're not in Japan, please! [gesticulates in exasperation and rolls eyes]. So, if you *want* [original emphasis] to do it, the Japanese way, and you enjoy the aesthetics, then OK, but don't do it because it's the 'rule', or because it's not 'real' shibari, or not bondage. I mean, it already happened that we're all here, and everyone is doing shibari, it's *not* [original emphasis] what they're doing in Japan, so let's just...you know, *relax* [oral emphasis] a little bit about it, you know (giggles).

Other interview partners expressed more laid-back points of view. For instance, interview partner F.L. (he/him) who did not travel much outside of Berlin in order to practice rope bondage, speculated on the manner in which some ties could be products of cultural transfer, but did not give that much importance to the phenomenon (I.F. Berlin 8. / 14.03.2018):

F.L.: I mean, maybe this or this tie is the adaption, of the adaption, of the adaption, that someone learned from someone else who originally learned it from some Japanese guy, and so on, but who really cares?

On the other hand, interview partner A.L. was slightly more ambivalent. While expressing regret at the way in which only a certain type of style, the Japanese style, is considered marketable, A.L. refers to this style as the 'classical way' (I.F. Paris 1b. / 08.07.2018):

A.L.: The problem [is that] the Japanese heritage of kinbaku is used for commercial reasons [...] I disagree with that, we can do so many things with ropes, so many beautiful things, so I feel, it's even more important to explore. But of course, it's not because you are exploring a way, that you are going to erase the other way, the classical way. So yeah, we have to keep it.

The expressions of B.E. and K.A. introduce a range of complexities, highlighting the intricate interplay among appropriation, authenticity, group dynamics, and intentionality. Echoing sentiments previously articulated by JD, B.E. and K.A. assert that adopting an ironic stance, maintaining a relaxed approach, and eschewing rigid dogmas, coupled with a comprehensive awareness of one's cultural limitations, can mitigate the perceived drawbacks of 'cultural appropriation'. However, B.E. cautions against the illusion that appropriation can perfectly replicate the 'other' culture. Despite one's depth of knowledge, mimicking another culture does not equate to being *authentically* rooted in that culture, leading to the potential portrayal of 'Westerners in kimonos' as appearing absurd. The core of the issue lies in how situated knowledge is enacted (Haraway, 1988), intertwined with a nuanced understanding of the advantages and limitations inherent in one's position on the cultural *continuum*. Expanding on this, K.A. delves into the intra-communal repercussions of 'cultural appropriation', particularly when appropriated elements become tools for distinguishing between 'authentic' and presumably 'inauthentic' practices, contrary to the fostering of 'postmodern hybridity' in a space intended to embrace diversity (see Barkas, 2016; Ordean & Pennington, 2019). On the other hand, while cultural appropriation and transference seems to concern F.L. very little: 'who cares?', some other practitioners like A.L. subscribe to a binary of 'classical' / 'modern', albeit positioning themselves against 'arborified' structures which would give prevalence to either the 'classical' or the 'modern'. For practitioners like A.L., it is not about having a style as much as it is about performing, exploring, experimenting the practice; rope is a tool that harnesses creativity and curiosity, and not precluding it.

These interviews are also providing valuable insight regarding the aestheticization of 'difference' (Zukin 1995: 11) and the 'fetishizing of the authenticity of the practice', two processes actively employed in appropriation. The term 'authenticity,' in my understanding, encompasses a highly esteemed and desired process that plays a role in individual 'becoming.' Simultaneously, it represents an 'objectification of a process of representation' strategically invoked as a marker of status or method of social control, embodying an 'ideal or exemplar' situation (Vannini & Williams, 2016: 3; also see Cobb, 2014: 3; Jackson, 2002; OED; Scannell, 2011). In the realm of rope bondage, authenticity weaves together human and nonhuman actors, implicating both the objectified process of representation and the 'ways of being' in a rope scene. These dynamics may align or diverge from a dominant narrative that positions Japanese rope bondage as the supreme form of the practice. While acknowledging the significance of debates on 'authenticity', this chapter does not delve into what Vannini and Franzeze term 'the feeling and practice of being true to one's self or others' (2008: 1621). Instead, authenticity is circumscribed to sociocultural conditionings, revealing that the concept of 'authentic' Japanese-inspired rope bondage is a Western construct. This narrative attempts to establish 'genuine' connections between Japanese historical practices or events and rope. B.E. warns about processes involving 'fetishiz[ing] the authenticity of the practice', since exact historical and sociocultural contexts in which a cultural practice unfolds cannot be transmuted from one culture and replicated entirely in another.

Other interview partners such as A.B. from London discussed at length on the same subject (I.F. London 2/16.01.2019):

A.B.: The places where I have a question mark about stuff is when Europeans who practice and teach rope - not all of them, it really depends - talk about these Japanese concepts as if they'd really understood them. And actually, unless you grow up in that culture, that is not really accessible to you. We can talk about playing with shame all we want, but a European person will not tap into what shame is to a Japanese person. It's not the same [...] There are certain concepts, we can learn about them, but we can't actually feel them, with the whole, like, teaching shame as part of the rope practice and teaching people to do exercises and shame play in the Japanese way. I don't buy it. I really don't. I think we grow up as Europeans with different concepts, and we might really understand terms like proper punishment, like you've been bad and we'll punish you, because we're more likely to come from a part of the world that is Christian so guilt is a big thing. You confess your sins and then you get punished. That's one thing we play with, that's one thing we have the guilt [for]. Shaming isn't really something that we have, it's an Asian thing. So, I really

think there are certain things that cannot be borrowed: you can borrow the mats, the bamboo, the outfit, the music and to some extent the philosophy, but other concepts are going to be completely out of reach for us. And we should just be genuine to the feelings we can relate to.

With a strong background in dance, interview partner F.R. (I.F. Berlin 7 / 3.11.2018) offers his intake on cross-culturality, from the perspective of a performer-turned festival organiser:

F.R.: for me it's totally fine that people do and teach very traditional Japanese bondage, but also totally fine if you do other things. And bringing our European culture [...], going away from the pathways and from the practical things and going toward more conceptual things, you know? And then of course we also have a totally different approach to the aesthetics, you know, because the Japanese way, of the guy kind of anonymous with the sunglasses and the girls into stereotypes of either shame or (heavy breathing), you know? It's also a bit boring, from an artistic perspective, at a certain point. And, also the Europeans, they don't really know how to do it, you know? Because what I see in Europe is mostly, they go towards more pain, you know? Because that's the only expression, kind of, you know? That's what I love to observe when I see bondage performance.

Exemplifying with shame, an emotion deeply ingrained in the human consciousness and a pillar of the developing emotional individual (Tomkins, 2008: 363), A.B. declares not only that in non-Japanese rope scenes shame is a learnt emotion, but that it is also used as a marker designating 'authentic' expression in Western spaces. Alongside shame, interview partner F.R. comments on a cultural difference in taste: western audiences interpret performance through different frameworks of reference, shaped by distinct cultural and aesthetic norms. For example, performances by Japanese riggers, often focused on exhibiting technical skill, at some point become repetitive and 'boring from an artistic perspective'. Shame is concomitantly auxiliary and employed to inhibit the activation of other positive affects, such as enjoyment or interest (Tomkins, *ibid.*, also see Timár, 2019: 200), while also occupying a very important place in the Japanese cultural behaviour (Benedict, 2005 [1946]; Kent, 1999; Lebra, 1983; Sakuta, Yagi & McKinney, 1986; Shimada, 1994).<sup>65</sup> If some elements of culture can be borrowed and appreciated for their aesthetic value - you can borrow the mats, the bamboo, the outfit, the music and to some extent the philosophy - A.B. insists that appropriating shame in a culture in which they do not have the same meaning, cannot be

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<sup>65</sup> I acknowledge that a comparative analysis on the shame and guilt cultures deserves its own separate dedicated study, and specialist literature abounds with such material. However, for the purposes of this chapter, I am solely giving a short overview of the dual way in which shame could be framed interdisciplinarily, pertaining to both cultural and affect theories.

anything else but learned behaviours. The use of fetishized affects and behaviours to assert inherent 'authenticity' becomes a matter within the dynamics of the field – '[t]here are certain concepts, we can learn about them, but we can't actually *feel* them, with the whole, like, teaching shame as part of the rope practice and teaching people to do exercises and shame play in the Japanese way. I don't buy it. I really don't' (my emphasis) – and those who choose to incorporate them into their rope activities, and claim added validation over other forms of practice. F.R. is incredulous in the capacity of expressing shame altogether in European performances: 'they don't really know how to do it'; the authentic affect is this time, pain. Whereas the perception of pain is a product of psychological factors and 'cultural beliefs, norms and practices' (Okolo et. al., 2024; also see Losin, et. al., 2020; Yoshikawa, et. al., 2020), recent research has, F.R. believes 'pain' to be the 'only' true 'expression' of an authentic experience in European rope bondage interactions. The digital world is rich with discussions that explore the connection between the boundaries of appropriation and the dynamics of the scene. In a social media posting, European rope bondage practitioner X.N. challenges the clichés associated with the 'one true Japanese way' of practicing rope bondage, and prefigures these debates will bring an identity crisis. Prior to making this public statement, X.N. reclaims knowledge and respect for foreign cultures, as they had been practicing other two Japanese disciplines prior to rope bondage. Nevertheless, the practitioner reflects on the implications of a cross-cultural exchange on a personal level and within the scene (public statement on social media, accessed on 3.11.2019):

I am not Japanese, I keep remembering this to myself very often [...] Can I still call what I do Kinbaku (even if I am not this Japanese man, I do not wear any kimono and I do not have any suspension point[s] at home, and I do not live in a house with paper walls and pictures with kanji at [sic] the walls [...]) Should I take distance then from this traditional Kinbaku way? Should I label myself with [sic] Bondage artist instead? I feel that every time I do not do [sic] a step in a direction which does not correspond to a pre-existent group identity I take the risk to make enemies, to be not respected [sic] anymore or to be seen as a 'traitor', or a 'mystifier' [sic] who mixes the traditional teaches with some Western way to make 'art'. And I am afraid to lose closeness with friends, still because of that 'us and them'. What should I do at this point? And I see that the entire world of Bondage (then let's call it like this) is obviously full of this subtle hate [...] if you see me around doing ropes I am not trying to offend anyone, nor trying to destabilize any group identity or steal any secret technique, [n]or trying to make more money with ropes than the ones who 'deserve' that. And if I do, it will be for sure because I worked hard to reach that. It's not me your enemy.

X.N.'s excerpt functions as a concise summary of the identity crisis which arises the moment 'cultural appropriation' creates hierarchies based on a paradigm which fetishizes authenticity. X.N. asks whether failure to comply with certain cultural norms be sufficient motive to encourage exclusion from groups of 'real' kinbaku practitioners, or whether a more generic appellative such as 'bondage artist' be more appropriate. Furthermore, X.N.'s testimony serves three additional purposes. First of all, it reflects on the practitioner as a vessel producing socio-'situated' knowledge (Haraway, 1988), tirelessly interrogating the mutating boundaries which perpetually reframe the cultures of tying: 'Can I still call what I do Kinbaku?'; 'Should I take distance then from this traditional Kinbaku way?'; 'Should I label myself with [sic] Bondage artist instead?'; 'What should I do at this point?'. Secondly, it unearths a side of the scene dynamics which creates exclusionary situations, which employ arborescent mechanisms of fetishizing and othering, particularly in situations where a constant flow of hybridized cultural elements denounces fixed monolithic cultures (see Cook & Crang, 1996, cited in Jackson, 2008: 9). Thirdly, it references a phenomenon, vital to the existence of 'cultural appropriation': the distribution of capital.

The field data highlights notable resistance to prevailing narratives, spotlighting the dubious nature of employing authenticity as a measurement for rendering one practice valid. K.A. vehemently opposes this point, declaring, '[y]ou're doing it here, you're not in Japan, please!' and emphasizing that 'it already happened that we're all here, and everyone is doing *shibari*, it's not [original emphasis] what they're doing in Japan'. Dismissing these approaches proclaims 'a liberation from both the physical shackles of the real object and from the ideological controls of meaning' (Cobb, 2014: 1), as well as from the illusion of timelessness and universality (Straub, 2012: 13). In essence, arguments positing authenticity as a defining metric for the quality of a practice, do not only sustain a fabricated system of controlled meaning, packaged as aligned with a supposedly 'real' and 'truthful', a 'one true way' of practicing, but also perpetuate a fantasy that misleadingly champions 'authenticity' as transcending the constraints of time and space. As this study aims to construct a deleuzoguattarian model dismantling identitarian hierarchies (ATP, 1980), and proposing an affective approach to the practice of rope bondage as a viable alternative; such an approach is more aligned with the 'lived' experience of the tying / tied body. In this context, positioning against hierarchies of space and time translates into advocating against a narrative favouring space (Japan) and time ('the grand historical narrative') as definitive qualities of a 'good' rope practice.

Since the mechanisms involving import and export are constantly feeding into each other through the exchange of cultural currency, it becomes paramount to briefly mention capital, an aspect into which appropriation and authenticity are carefully imbued. Authors and scholars such as McWorther, or Kabir,

ask the readership ‘what does it mean to ‘steal’ someone’s culture when we’re not talking about money?’ (McWorther, 2017: online), and emphasize that ‘cultural appropriation’ cannot exist outside of the ‘capitalist machine’, which both determine the structure of that which is being appropriated, and designate its intention (Kabir, 2018: unpublished).<sup>66</sup>

If culture and capital cannot be separated, we must then turn our gaze to those who ‘act out’ culture, those who observe it, and those who profit from it. This is no easy task, since roles are often not very well-defined and not fixed, since the purpose the exercise serves for changes constantly, and since culture itself is permanently contested, negotiated, endorsed, transformed (Wright, 1998: 10; also see Street, 1993; 1997). Upon a closer look at the rope scene, however, dualist approaches which separate ‘the cultural’ from the ‘economic,’ production from consumption, the local from the global, become unsuitable frameworks for analysing a milieu in which cultural practices are imprinted upon the ‘rational calculus of the market’ and where associations can be made ‘between production and consumption’ and ‘between a variety of scales from the local to the global’ (Jackson, 2002: 4-5).<sup>67</sup>

As the present research relies on data collected from European rope bondage practitioners, more cross-cultural fieldwork is needed in order to assess the complex relationship between what Hobsbawm and Ranger called ‘invented traditions’ (also see Holmquist et. al., 2019)<sup>68</sup> and the market, for both sides participating to the cross-cultural exchange. For instance, recent fieldwork data analysis from rope bondage communities in Japan show that appealing to ‘tradition’ is a relatively new concept in the rope bondage scene there, most practitioners referring to ‘doing ropes’ (縄をする) rather than using ‘shibari’ or ‘kinbaku’. However, in recent years, a number of Japanese riggers with growing international reputation have started to market themselves as practicing ‘shibari’, or being ‘shibari artists’, in order to cater better to audiences outside Japan, where they often travel to perform and/or teach.<sup>69</sup> The new

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<sup>66</sup> Kabir states: ‘when we have all these [cultural] genres so intricately tied in the very workings of the capitalist machine, we have to be very mindful of the ways in which we are now calling cultural appropriation, always accompanied by its history [...] once we understand the motivation, we then have to look at the incrustation of capital.’ (*ibid.*)

<sup>67</sup> Other scholars have long debated on the devastating effect the separation of ‘the cultural’ and ‘the economic’ can have upon a thorough understanding of complex processes which form ‘culture’ (see Gregson, 1995; Sayer, 1994), while others have militated for a transcendence of ‘the cultural’ and ‘the economic’, as separate categories, arguing that they engage in a dialectical relationship (Sayer, 1997; Urry, 1994).

<sup>68</sup> Hobsbawm and Ranger (2000: 1) utilize ‘invented tradition’ as a concept which encompasses both traditions that are deliberately invented, constructed, and formally established, as well as those that emerge more organically within a relatively short and identifiable period (a few years) and quickly gain widespread acceptance.

<sup>69</sup> A series of private exchanges took part between 2019 and 2024 between me and PJC, a cultural theorist researching rope bondage in Japan.

question becomes, then, whether we can talk solely about ‘cultural appropriation’ in a context in which elements of the Japanese culture are constantly being exported from Japan into non-Japanese spaces, and become entangled with the complexities of re-contextualization, trans-textuality, and the inner workings of the market (see Sugimoto, 2009). Moreover, since in the consumer market, elements of ‘Japanese’ rope bondage can fusion with personal idiosyncrasies as well as rebranded ‘Japanese’ in order to increase their value on the market by the Japanese practitioners themselves, in a way in which the resulting practice can barely be defined as ‘Japanese’ anymore (see Cook & Crang, 1996).

#### **4.2. The emergence of the cultural *continuum***

Throughout this chapter, I have partially contextualized rope bondage’s cultural contribution. I looked at ‘fetishization,’ ‘cultural appropriation,’ and ‘authenticity’ within the framework of rope bondage and cross-cultural exchanges. That is to say, in the context of Japanese-inspired rope bondage practiced outside Japan, ‘cultural appropriation’ involves mechanisms of ‘fetishization’ and dialogues pertaining to ‘authenticity’. I argued in favour of the integration of cultural exportation in tandem with ‘cultural appropriation’; this inclusion is deemed crucial as various Japanese elements are disseminated beyond Japan to various Western spaces. The Western rope scene, influenced by appropriated or re-contextualized Japanese rope bondage, displays diverse approaches. Nevertheless, narratives promoting the ‘Japanese way’ as canonical imply a rigid hierarchy in the name of tradition, limits and silences practitioners who don’t conform to this framework.

It is essential to note, however, that not everyone from the communities I conducted fieldwork in identifies with the Japanese-inspired rope bondage or confines their practice within this ‘arborescent’ framework. Some practitioners consciously move away from such cultural associations, creating new syncretism they consider as their ‘own.’ Others appropriate ‘Japanese’ elements to varying degrees, while remaining aware of the power relationships they are mobilizing, and their position in the ‘material-semiotic nodes of knowledge production’ (Haraway, 1988: 595).<sup>70</sup> Both categories embody situated knowledge and actively contribute to its generation. Debates and discussions in the field question situated knowledge production in relation to power and ‘otherness,’ acknowledging their infrequency compared

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<sup>70</sup> Even though during my fieldwork I have occasionally crossed paths with practitioners who believe in the ‘one true way’, none of my interview partners have openly aligned with this ideology on record. Some did acknowledge that appropriating Japanese elements is an important side in their practice; others were critical of such associations. I am not interested in unmasking or pointing fingers, but rather to acknowledge the realities of these debates.

to other subjects discussed but emphasizing their importance.<sup>71</sup> Unfortunately, these discussions often lack representation in specialist literature, which tends to take a neutral or integrative stance, or avoids the issue altogether (see exceptions noted in Ordean & Pennington, 2019; Pennington, 2017).

Thus, Section 4.2.1. will examine some aspects related to the formation of the ‘historical canon’, and signposting some of its shortcomings. In its place, I will argue in section 4.2.2. for utilizing the *continuum*, as a suitable inclusive and horizontal alternative. First, this model argues for a nuanced approach to the examination of cross-cultural exchanges present in the rope bondage scene beyond exclusionary binary comprehensions. Secondly, it validates *all* affiliations and perspectives, regardless of whether practitioners choose to integrate Japanese elements into their practice or not. Thirdly, the *continuum* research model argues for a nuanced approach to identities (see Chapter 5 and to a degree also Chapter 6), advocating for a fluid identitarian positionality both within and outside of the ‘historical canon’.

#### 4.2.1 Problematizing the ‘historical canon’

During our interview at The Barn, B.A. asserted (I.F. Berlin 9 / 13.03.2018):

B.A.: With Japanese rope bondage, everyone is referring to *Hōjōjutsu*, everybody is referring to Itoh Seiu-San. I think these are intellectual singularities. Who were there, but who were separated, but you can’t call them *bakushi*, or riggers and so on. They were singularities, that are nowadays used as a justification for legitimization, to be a separate field.

In *The Beauty of Kinbaku* Master K draws examples from Japanese folklore, religion, everyday life, rituals, military or various artistic practices, and argues:

‘[The Japanese culture is] a culture where tying and the use of rope for significant, even religious activities, has been an integral part of life for centuries. This is the first important reason why *Shibari / Kinbaku* must be looked at quite differently than Western bondage. It is part of an artistic aesthetic that has many deep historical, religious and cultural resonances rather than just a means of restraint [...] examples of these close connections between tying and the Japanese culture might be useful.’ (2015: 10).

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<sup>71</sup> This assertion has been made purely on the basis of data which was collected in the field, and does not claim to universality in all of Western spaces.

Two different perspectives are brought together here. Master K's asserts that rope's cultural backdrop as a practice deeply intertwined with historical, religious, and cultural dimensions distinguishes *Shibari/Kinbaku* from Western bondage, positioning it as more than a mere method of restraint; *Shibari/Kinbaku* is, thus, embedded in a broader artistic aesthetic with profound cultural resonances. Seen from this perspective Master K pleads for a nuanced understanding that considers its cultural and historical roots. On the other hand, B.A. references *Hōjōjutsu*<sup>72</sup> and Itoh Seiū<sup>73</sup> as 'intellectual singularities', rather than an activity or a person that sit along many others on the rope bondage pantheon. The problem, as B.A. sharply analyses, is that these figures and practices are utilized by some as a justification for establishing legitimacy or to carve out a distinct identity within the broader field of rope bondage.

As an output of 'fetishization', processes, events, people or certain activities are singled out and included into a distinct 'superior' narrative – therefore assigned power – and then instrumentalized for various purposes (Schroeder, 2008: 183). In here, I will refer to the ensemble of these elements of material culture, people, events, activities as the 'rope bondage canon'. Gregor Langfeld defines the 'canon' as 'a process in which specific aspects of culture are established as crucial, of the utmost importance or exemplary'; as such, 'a canon lays claim to permanence, as it is thought to be valid independent of time and place' (2018:1). Unfailingly, the 'canon' is an artificial construction that selects, presents and legitimizes certain elements over others; thus aspects 'that in their day were locked in an irreconcilable struggle with one another exist harmoniously side by side in the neutralised state of the canon and enter

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<sup>72</sup> *Hōjōjutsu* (捕縄術), also known by the name *Torinawajutsu* (捕縄術), or just *Nawajutsu* (縄術) is a martial art consisting in restraining a prisoner with the use of rope. While learning and passing on the knowledge was the responsibility of the Samurai class, who had an important duty in assuring peace and administering appropriate punishment to those who were found guilty of various crimes, according the 'correct' and 'honourable' Confucian moral attitude (see Beasley, 1999: 58; Davies & Ikeno, 2011: 44-46). The way in which the future prisoner would be apprehended and the aspect of the tie depended massively on their gender and social status (Botsman, 2010: 32; Russo, 2016:7, 45-48 and 50-54).

<sup>73</sup> Seiū Itoh has become the image of a symbolic solitary genius male figure, and is widely referred to as the 'father of modern *kinbaku*'. Itoh is a link between two generations. Having established a solid reputation as an artist and draftsman with illustrations from the old Edo era in his six-volume work *Edo to Tōkyō Fūzoku Yashi* [History of Edo and Tokyo Manners] (1927-1932), Itoh realizes corpus of work which creates a counterbalance with ero guru and with the general feeling of depression which engulfs occupied Japan. He is profoundly influenced by ukiyo-e, kabuki theatre, and a few volumes on torture techniques, which he then blends in illustration and photography. His appellative and the regularity of his citation in both spoken and documented narratives underscore Seiū Itoh's enduring significance within the annals of *kinbaku* history, resonating within the cultural consciousness of both Japanese and non-Japanese spheres. In Japanophile rope bondage circles, Itoh is often referred to as a singularity. Nevertheless, Master K. reveals that other artists active at this time were also linking SM and art: 'it should be pointed out that Itoh Seiū wasn't the only artist exploring the nascent connections between art and SM at this time. There were others.' (2015: 37).

history' (*id.*). In the rope bondage scene, the 'canon' is often problematically instrumentalized by some members used to claim hierarchic superiority of some ways of tying and being tied over others according to their ability of being 'authentically Japanese', because it means accepting there are forms of tying which set a certain standard from which other works are judged (see Duro & Greenlagh, 1992:73; Harris, 2006: 45-46; Locher, 2012). The issue with 'canonization', is that it negates the continuous flow of intercultural exchange that has and continue to exist, and renders any other form of practicing as invalid or a mere act of replication. Furthermore, it plays into the market, by indirectly assisting exportation as a 'Japan cool' product.

The endeavour to interconnect various facets into a seemingly cohesive historical narrative of rope bondage by referring back to the 'canon' is a recurring theme. However, the lack of comprehensive research poses challenges in unequivocally establishing these linkages. Nevertheless, this apparent scholarly gap does not hinder certain influential figures within the scene from invoking the notion of 'tradition' as a means to legitimize the practice, as noted by Ordean and Pennington (2019: 68). As it has been demonstrated, more research is needed to prove that historical continuity and inter-cultural connections are valid forms of analysis. Moreover, when considering the dynamics of discourse, the validation and prominence of statements are intricately tied to their positioning and capacity for dissemination within the discourse economy (Foucault, 1989: 56). That is to say, certain assertions prevail over others based on their ability to resonate within the market of ideas. Consequently, within the quest for constructing a linear chronology of rope bondage, certain events, artistic influences, or historical occurrences are triumphant over others, overshadowing the alternative narratives. This same mechanism explains the formation of the 'canon', where specific individuals and styles enjoy greater visibility, determined by their potential for assimilation into the market's prevailing tastes and preferences.

I will address these issues by using a concrete example. Let's discuss, for example, the way in which *Hōjōjutsu's* 'Japaneseness' is used to justify rigidly including *kinbaku* in the category of practices produced by the Japanese mind. Firstly, a historically supported parallel between *Hōjōjutsu* and modern-day rope bondage is yet to be drawn, although *Hōjōjutsu* is accepted as 'quintessentially Japanese art that is a unique product of Japanese history and culture' (Woodman, 2013: 17). In the foreword of the volume *Hōjōjutsu: the warrior's art of the rope*, Christian Russo asserts that although having uncertain origins, in Japan *Hōjōjutsu* was developed before the Tokugawa Shogunate, in the 15th century. Martial artist Shihan Woodman also hints to the obscure historical origins of the practice (2013: 19). Ordean and Pennington

write that Hōjōjutsu ‘likely arose during Japan’s Warring States Period, though historical support for this position remains fragmentary’ mainly ‘because Hōjōjutsu’s origins are unclear’ (2019: 68 and footnote 4). Midori claims that ‘it’s widely believed that our current Japanese erotic rope restraint techniques originated during this period’ (2001: 14).<sup>74</sup> At the opposite end, Ordean and Pennington write that ‘beyond the uncertain evolution of this supposed root of Japanese rope bondage, historical evidence does not confirm with certainty that rope bondage developed from Hōjōjutsu’ (2019:68). Clearly, more research needs to be conducted in order to assert with certainty that a firm connection between *Hōjōjutsu* and the practice of rope bondage exists. Nevertheless, this does not impede using the practice in rope bondage contexts to justify historical continuity. During my initial field visit to The Garden in London, I engaged in the introductory discourse designed for newcomers within the local scene. Master K’s *The Beauty of Kinbaku* was highlighted as a valuable point of reference for individuals intrigued by the ‘historical’ approach to the practice and *Hōjōjutsu* was mentioned as one of the practice’s origins (field notes, 1.08.2016, London).<sup>75</sup> In Paris, The Greenhouse hosted *Hōjōjutsu* classes held by a certified martial artist twice a month; attendance to these classes was separate from the rope bondage ones;<sup>76</sup> participation was encouraged on the grounds of practice betterment and the acquisition of new technical skills (field notes Paris, April 2018). During the second edition of The Barn one of the workshops I attended was about the ‘history of rope bondage’; the presenter insisted upon a link between *Hōjōjutsu* and rope bondage, declaring ‘our’ practice as ‘a few centuries old’, and creating quite a bit of a controversy among the attendees (field notes entry, Berlin, 21.03.2018).

The subject also came up during the interview with R.U. (he/him), a London-based switch highly involved in the group around The Garden (IF L. 5 / 18.01.2019):

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<sup>74</sup> It is worth mentioning that aside from the evident use of the same material for its execution, rope, only a few ties and body positions in *Hōjōjutsu* have been assimilated into modern-day rope bondage, most of whom were adapted to suit the body safety regulations. For instance, even if *Hōjōjutsu* ties demonstrate an astounding level of understanding human anatomy, most of these ties were used for inflicting pain and producing potentially irreparable damage on the body which was being tied, aside from having an effective restraining capacity (Fujita, 2000 [1964]), while ties in *shibari* / *kinbaku* have been adapted to insure absolute physical safety of the person who is being tied (Russo, 2006: 32).

<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, it must be mentioned that the approach I’ve experienced at The Garden was quite balanced.

<sup>76</sup> They were paid separately, and most but not all the participants in the *Hōjōjutsu* class were rope bondage practitioners (field notes, Paris, April 2018).

R.P.: [Japaneseness is] definitely a marketing thing and there are people who are stringing on the areas of cultural appropriation or rely on cultural stereotypes to sell a product which is interesting and complex.

*Iris: Do you think this happens form both sides?*

R.U.: Yes, I've seen some examples, some which verged on the comical, and also there are big Japanese names, and a lot of things came back because of people who went to Japan and came back, just like the ones we've been discussing. And that's coming back through a filter of Western values. If there's a grading system, which is not a Japanese thing, it's something that O.S. [i.e. German rigger living in Japan] put in. The martial arts and that background, and I'm repeating things I've heard from other sources, but I was told that he got feedback from his [European] students because they wanted a grading system. So, he did what he knew form martial arts and put in a grading system. And I do find the mildly entertaining [...] one of the interesting things is like how *Hōjōjutsu* is at the origin of it. Because you've got quite a big gap though, apart from a few patterns. I don't know how accurate this is but apparently the term 'rigger' comes from physical rigging, rather than some sort of wholesome *Hōjōjutsu* type of person. That's from where it came from, and bondage actually responds to [the culture of] US porn magazines, which came in in 1945 after the defeat of Japan. So, it's all a product of multicultural fusion. And it has been retransmitted back, Western bondage I mean, to the West.

R.U.'s sober analysis touches upon a few points. Firstly, blending of Japanese and Western elements in rope bondage practices is mainly shaped by Western perspectives. R.U. recognises the import of 'Japanese' cultural products pertaining to rope bondage as strategic marketing approach. For example, the introduction of a grading system,<sup>77</sup> which is not a Japanese custom, was introduced by practitioner O.S. because it was required by the students. This change reflects O.S.'s background in martial arts and shows how Japanese practices adapted to fit Western education. Another layer to this story is the influence of U.S. porn magazines in Japan after 1945, impacting the development of rope bondage

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<sup>77</sup> The website stipulates: 'O.R. is a complete Shibari and Kinbaku system, developed by O.S. based on his 20+ years of working as a professional rope artist in Japan, as well as training with some of the Grandmasters of Shibari [...] The system is designed with *Kyu* (grades), like in traditional Japanese martial arts. There are requirements to pass each level, with criteria including technical competency, fluidity, efficiency, flow, communication, and aesthetics. Each level teaches techniques and concepts that are then built upon in subsequent levels. The techniques taught are not designed for "tie and giggle" tying, but rather are building towards the students reaching a level of competency equivalent to that of a professional Japanese rope artist.' See [https://www.osada-ryu.com/?page\\_id=234](https://www.osada-ryu.com/?page_id=234) (last accessed 25.11.2023)

practices. This connection emphasizes how external cultural factors shape these practices over time. Describing this narrative as a result of ‘multicultural fusion’ captures the intricate interaction between Japanese and Western elements, leading to the creation of a unique *Western* rope bondage culture. Finally, R.U. arrives to *Hōjōjutsu*, which they also question. Aside from ‘a few’ similar patterns, contemporary rope bondage is quite removed from the geometry (and certainly the intention) of *Hōjōjutsu*. Even the terminology is misaligned, with the term ‘rigger’ originating from physical rigging, not the virtuous image associated with *Hōjōjutsu* practitioners. R.U. is making a persuasive argument in favour of dismantling the ‘canon’.

With their assessment of cross-cultural exchange between Japan and the rest of the world, interview partner H.E. (she/her) exemplified beautifully Sugimoto’s concept of ‘reciprocal trans-textuality’, where ideas and ways of tying from Japan have travel around, morph, only to reach Japan again and enrich the cultural landscape there. It is due to this continuous movement and adjustment, that a standardization of the rope bondage tying styles is unlikely to occur. In H.E.’s words (I.F. London 4. / 16.01.2019):

H.E.: It's not a case of ‘there's always been a distinct camp’, you know, it’s a cross-fertilisation of ideas. And even in that time and with the limited number of people that I've seen and met in Japan, the way that rope was taught ten years ago in Japan and was brought over to Europe, has changed so much. And things that have been in the intervening years that have been developed in the UK, for example, have travelled back to Japan and have now adapted styles over there. And are now coming back to Europe again. So there'll always be that exchange, absolutely. And I think that's a good thing. Whether it will disappear down in one unified track and there will be one style of rope bondage in 50 years’ time? I hope not. I hope everybody will keep doing the diverse things they like doing and keep going with new and creative things, rather than blindly copying things from the past.

Towards the end, H.E. also warns that relying exclusively on a ‘blindly’ reiterating past techniques instead of focusing on fostering creative tying techniques or developing new styles can lead to a very flat international rope bondage scene. What is more, in the world of rope bondage, the problematic use of the ‘canon’ by certain members is wielded to assert hierarchical superiority in tying techniques and practices. This assertion centres on an imagined ‘authentic’ act of loyalty towards Japanese norms, establishing a standard against which other approaches are judged. The drawback inherent in the process of ‘canonization’ is apparent primarily in its tendency to negate the ongoing and fluid dynamics of

intercultural exchange. This dismissal of alternative practices renders them as either invalid or imitative.<sup>78</sup> The pursuit of constructing a cohesive historical narrative in rope bondage by referencing the 'canon' is recurrent, yet the lack of comprehensive research renders establishing these historical linkages challenging. These insufficiencies require devising a new permissive and horizontal theoretical model capable of accommodating these complexities. In the following section I attempt to build such a model.

#### **4.2.2. Conjuring the *continuum***

The horizontal model of the *continuum* I aim to situate in this section – and through this research in general – contrasts the pursuit of 'authenticity and its implication of a single origin point, untouched by the adulterations of commodification, with its chimerical world of stable, unchanging, unitary cultures' (Jackson, 2002: 9; also see Cook and Crang, 1996). Recognizing that a binary model can no longer accommodate 'cross-cultural translation and adaptation', this research proposes a horizontal rhizomatic mode of inquiry, abandoning the repetitive quest for 'authenticity' (see Crang & Cook, 1996).

The '*continuum's*' initial purpose was to capture interactions and experiences that surpass normative genital contact. Adrienne Rich's *continuum*, devoid of rigid boundaries, accommodated the entire spectrum of woman-identified experiences, allowing for diverse styles, techniques, relations, and positions that neither invalidate one another nor remain static over time. Expanding upon Rich's framework, Pennington (2018: 45-46) introduces the concept of the 'abnormality continuum,' a model delving into the legitimacy of 'kinknormativity' and challenging the notion of 'vanilla' sexuality. Pennington's '*abnormality continuum*' accommodates diverse positions, some aligning with hegemonic ideals, others resisting, and some embracing perceived abnormality. Pennington discusses:

Positions on the continuum of abnormality vary extensively. Some do not strive toward the hegemonic ideal, some choosing not to, some failing to, and some demanding that people 'doing' normalcy accept those who do not. Some attach especial value to perceived abnormality by taking pleasure in it. There are also positions labelled 'abnormal', yet displeased by this abnormality. Then there are positions indifferent to the abnormal label, but aware of the difficulties being labelled as such may pose, and therefore wishing to alter the label, change the boundaries that demarcate 'abnormality', or destroy the category

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<sup>78</sup> If anything, it is the grading system from O.S.'s dojo that would qualify as an imitative practice. I'm thinking also at certain cyclical and repetitive movements (such as the *kata* sequence in Karate) that martial art students are required to exercise over and over for technical betterment.

altogether. I build up on these two approaches my own understanding of the rope bondage *continuum*, a rhizomatic, non-linear, non-hierarchical and fluid space characterized by affective approaches to ‘situated’ knowledge-production rather than fixed properties; ‘[h]aving no clear edges’, this model ‘is open to many styles and techniques’ (Ordean & Pennington, 2019: 69, n. 7). Also akin to a ‘smooth space’ (ATP: 478-479), the *continuum* incorporates the entire range of rope bondage-identified experiences and positionalities. These positionalities occupy non-hierarchical positions, capable of existing independently or overlapping with other positionalities in this space. This non-hierarchical, reversible, and circular positioning reflects a three-dimensional model acknowledging and incorporating all manifestations and alignments attuned to rope bondage on the horizontal axis. The vertical axis introduces the potential for change and re-positioning over time within the practice of the same body.

As this chapter illustrates, rope bondage practitioners align themselves differently with regards to certain cultural narratives, rejecting certain narratives while embracing others. This diversity supports non-hierarchical identitarian positioning on the rope *continuum*, emphasizing the rhizomatic plethora of imaginable identitarian positionalities and embodiments enabled through the practice. As Ordean & Pennington assert (2019: 73):

Belonging to one or multiple frameworks in the rope bondage continuum need not invalidate others within the rhizome, thus it cannot be contained in a system of hierarchies. Instead, a plurality of voices and approaches expand the rhizome, rejecting the idea that ‘one true way’ of practicing can exist.

Within the rope bondage *continuum*, individuals may identify with one or multiple frameworks, and might align their practice with those frameworks. Such affiliations, claim the authors, do not necessarily render other perspectives invalid. This is advantage presented by the use of the rhizome structure: it caters to a decentralized and interconnected structure that defies hierarchical categorizations on the one hand, and serves as a metaphorical representation of the diverse and interwoven nature of approaches within the rope bondage community, on the other. It rejects the notion that there is a singular, superior way of practicing rope bondage which is rigid and dogmatic. Finally, it encourages an open-minded acknowledgment of the richness that arises from embracing various perspectives and methods. Instead, it advocates for a recognition of a multitude of voices and approaches, suggesting that diversity and plurality enhance the overall landscape of rope bondage practices. I align my use of the *continuum* research model – and by extension this research as a whole – within these parameters.

In the following sections, I use this liberal approach to further discuss cultural affinity and affiliation. The examples I will be using are indicative of further tensions and debates within the Western rope bondage scenes. I use the example of language and terminology and offer an exciting counter-example extracted from the philosophy of The Barn.

### **4.3. Language and cultural affinity**

After asserting the *continuum* is an inclusive model, capable of holding diverse cultural approaches to rope bondage, in the following I will demonstrate its usefulness in the context of language, terminology and cultural affinity. The contemporary socio-political landscape, marked by the globalization of language, intricately moulds subcultures. Early research has delved into the pivotal role language plays in socialization, serving as an indispensable force that amalgamates cultural backgrounds with the imperative of social interaction (Bernstein, 1971; Bossard, 1948; Brown, 1958; 1965; Kluckhohn, 1964). Roland Barthes posited the centrality of language and discourse in the processes of function and meaning-making (1953; 1957; 1973; 1977a; 1977b). However, dissenting voices, such as those of Henri Bergson or Deleuze and Guattari, have challenged the supremacy of language, integrating affect into the analysis of human interaction and power dynamics. Language, they argue, is no longer absolute; instead, it may be saturated with subtle nuances, continuities in time, memory, creativity, and the embodiment of power and situated knowledge (Cole, 2011; also see Deleuze & Guattari, 1984).

While positing that in corporeality, affective intensities precede language or cultural signifiers (Massumi, 1995), it is acknowledged that language can hold significance in knowledge access and embodiment politics (ATP, 1980; Butler, 1990; 1993; Derrida, 2001 [1967]; Foucault, 1972 [1969]). In specific rope bondage groups, the utilization of certain jargon becomes indicative of belonging to a particular group identity, imbued with cultural meanings. Nevertheless, cultural identity plays a substantial role by delineating the framework within which the affective experience unfolds. (i.e. if a rope bondage practitioner affiliates with a certain group in the scene, they are more likely to find and practice with others who identify in the same way). The debate is that the intrinsic nature of the practice, rooted in affect, remains unaltered by linguistic or micro-cultural affiliations. While the affective nature of the experience remains constant, the cultural conditionings influencing the construction of the experience may vary.

#### 4.3.1. Jargon's role in crafting 'authenticity'

Tensions arise when cultural and linguistic signifiers are used to upraise some practices over others, and to fetishize the culture of 'origin.' Linguistically, this happens then jargon is used excessively in social interaction or in the transfer of knowledge in the scene. In general, jargon is the result of 'an interpretation that is based on cultural traditions of meaning', and has, as such, become a common denominator within multicultural groups (Thompson et al., 1994: 434). In the case of rope bondage, most of the jargon is borrowed from either Japanese or the kink cultures. For example, a few names for ties or suspension poses retain their Japanese name and are used as such cross-culturally in non-Japanese environments (such as *takate-kote*, or *futumomo*; also see Glossary). Some of these names are describing the tie, while others have a completely different meaning in Japanese altogether. In the field, I have often come across Japanese words which were used to describe ties (field notes, March 2017). While in this sense the beginning was a struggle, I slowly came to recognise the names of certain ties or patterns, as I familiarized myself with the jargon. A field note passage from the beginning of my fieldwork attests to my efforts:

I asked X.Y. if they spoke Japanese, since so many Japanese terms were being thrown around, and I was starting to have trouble following conversations. They looked at me and laughed: 'no, not at all!', they said. 'It's just much easier to use these words [i.e. of Japanese origin] in the community – everybody will understand what you're trying to say, or what particular position you're talking about. This is why you heard so many Japanese words in the workshop earlier' (field notes, 15.03.17, Berlin).

Understanding this jargon eventually made me 'complicit in discourse and its evolving state' (de Burgh-Woodman & Brace-Govan, 2008: 95). Nevertheless, I did ask myself whether or not excessive use could not lead to obscurity and hermeticism, and indeed where should the line be drawn between the benign use of jargon in the rope bondage subculture, and its employment for fetishist and self-referential reasons. Sometime after, I asked one of my interview partners who was complaining about excessive jargon, whether or not there's a need to reinvent the Western rope bondage vocabulary altogether. To this, K.A. responded (I.F. B. 3 / 16.03.2018):

K.A.: No, I don't think we need new words for non-Japanese people. I think there's some really common words, like *futumomo*, or *takate-kote* where everyone already has an idea of the shape it's supposed to be, and that is totally OK with me. But then again, I've seen some people deliberately use absolutely crazy Japanese expressions for ties [in order] to explain what their

workshop it going to be [about], and it was for beginners ... so, you would have to google what each one of these ties mean to understand what is going to be happening, and it made absolutely no sense for me to do this inside Europe, it does not ... this is where fetishizing of the other culture comes in, it made no sense for me. So, I don't think it should be another vocabulary necessarily, I just feel we should try to make sure that we translate things into something that is commonly understandable.

My apprehensions resonated with the sentiments articulated by K.A. Although acquiring familiarity with certain jargon denoting ties and positions that have achieved international recognition may be straightforward and practical, an excessive use of such specialized terminology can have a counterproductive effect, fostering intimidation and rendering certain aspects of the practice obscure rather than elucidating. The phenomena of 'fetishization' and 'exoticization' manifest when an excess of jargon is employed with the intent of emphasizing the exotic origins of the practice, or indeed, to perpetuate its clandestine and enigmatic allure.

An additional motivation for the adoption of such linguistic practices is rooted in the pursuit of authenticity. The heightened use of specialized jargon is often perceived as indicative of the practitioner or educator's authenticity and legitimacy, thereby elevating their status within the scene. Subsequently, I initiated a thread on social media with non-Japanese practitioners of rope bondage, a few of whom were proficient in the Japanese language, with the explicit aim of elucidating the intersection between language and identity politics. In conveying my inquiry, I specified my interest in comprehending the utilization of the Japanese language within the context of rope bondage, both in Japanese and non-Japanese milieus. Additionally, I solicited instances of Japanese names employed by these practitioners, names that deviate from their original form in Japan. This investigative approach sought not only to gauge the extent to which the Japanese language is contextualized within non-Japanese rope bondage scenes but also to critically interrogate the foundational premise of the pursuit of 'authenticity' in this domain (online social media communication, 15.06.2018).

The first response copied in here came from P.J.C, a Japan-based French practitioner and cultural theorist who had been active in the rope bondage scenes of both Europe and Japan:

PJC.: Most (if not all) of the names for ties / positions used in Japanese are actually literal descriptions of the said ties / positions / body parts that are going to be tied. For example: 後手縛り: *Goteshibari* (literally: hands-in-the-back tie), 高手後手: *Taka te Go Te* (literally: hands high,

hands-in-the-back), 縦吊り: *Tate Zuri* (Literally: vertical suspension), 横吊り: *Yoko Zuri* (literally: side suspension), 柱吊り: *Hashira Zuri* (literally: pillar suspension), 逆さ吊り: *Sakasa Zuri* (literally: reversed suspension), 太もも(縛り): *Futomomo* (literally: thigh / legs tying), 指縛り: *Yubi shibari* (literally: fingers tying). In the case of *Gyaku Ebi*, it's originally a position that you can find in martial arts and wrestling (Boston crab) and that recall[s], well, the shape of a shrimp (*ebi*) [...] I know there are some kind of 'metaphorical' naming patterns too, that are related to cultural stuff (such as *Tanuki* Suspension, *Tengu* Tying that might be linked to *Hōjōjutsu*, etc.). Then, each *bakushi* will be free to give names to the position they will use. If you have a look at H.K.'s Instagram, you will see names like 'Swan position', 'Dragon's Fly harness' and so on. To the best of my knowledge, he only decided to use those names because they are cool. And to some extent, saying in Japanese that you like 'shibari' won't be really clear to Japanese people, as you just say that you like the action of tying (tying things, not necessarily a human being). So, to respect social scripts, people will understand it first in the SFW [Safe for Work] definition of the word, and you will need to explain them that you mean *shibari* as a discipline / art / way of life and so on (then, use the word *Kinbaku* and watch them running away).

In the same social media thread, Z.N. says<sup>79</sup>:

Z.N.: My experience has been that the names from Japanese ties are almost always entirely descriptive. (e.g. 後手, *gote*, hands behind the back). Sometimes you get cute names for things that remind you of something else (e.g. もも縛り, *momo shibari*, peach tie, which exposes the ass like a peach). But everyone uses these terms slightly differently, so one person's *gote* can be another person's *takate-kote*. Sometimes that means 'high hands' sometimes it doesn't. Depends on who you ask, when you ask them, and what you are doing at the moment. Then Western people come along and start using these words in completely different ways. *Futomomo* (太腿, which means thigh) gets put into Google translate and comes out as 'fat leg' and then shortened to 'futo' which means nothing in Japanese, unless you turn it into *futoru* (太る), which just would be calling your partner fat. Then you get really weird things like people in the US teaching a 'hands free *gote*' which is literally impossible. Not to mention some kanji that have lots and lots of different interpretations (e.g. 本, *hon*). 本 can be 日本 (*nihon*, Japan), 縛りの本 (book, as in a *shibari* book), or 本当 (*hontou*, as in true or 'really'), and more. So pop 本結び目 into Google

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<sup>79</sup> Both testimonies are reproduced here with the authors' permission (accessed on 20.05.2019).

translate and you get ‘book knot’ as opposed to something more like ‘basic knot’ or ‘true knot’ or as Wikipedia says (アメリカ英語ではスクウェア・ノット, ‘In American English it is a square knot’). And for a while, I think Japanese people were confused by the term TK, but now I think it is common enough that people use it everywhere, but I am not sure about that. In the West, we can’t even decide what to call ourselves: *bakushi*, *nawashi*, riggers, *shibarite*, rope tops, rope bottoms, bunnies, models, etc. My observation has, generally, been that the only thing Westerners like more than tying, is arguing about tying and words and that most Japanese don’t particularly care about names of ties or what words you use. Shibari definitions and glossaries seem to be mostly a Western obsession.

The prevailing consensus suggests that the majority of Japanese names for rope ties are descriptive labels, explaining the manner in which a particular tie is executed, encompassing the involvement of specific body parts in its performance. P.J.C. contends that certain names allude to a ‘historical narrative’ in a manner reminiscent of a tributary homage. Given Japan’s active role in shaping a constructed historical narrative (as discussed in Section 4.1.), names such as the *Tengu* tie not only become linguistic tributes but also artificially amalgamate otherwise fragmented historical fragments. This blend serves as an attempt to legitimize specific practices at the expense of others. The pursuit of identifying precise terminologies, as discussed by Z.N. in the latter part of the passage, is exclusive to non-Japanese spheres. It reflects a pseudo-nationalization of identity politics that transcends genuine cultural celebration.

#### **4.3.2. ‘Shibari’, ‘Kinbaku’, ‘rope bondage’: markers of culture**

A major debate in the rope scene centres around what the correct name of the practice itself is. The most common usages are the Japanese terms of *Shibari* 縛り or *Kinbaku* 緊縛, which are written using the same core kanji 縛, a reference to the action of binding. Due to the way in which the kanji alphabet is constructed, different words which are rooted in the same core kanji ‘can share many of the same meanings, ideas, and cultural conventions’ (see Kinbaku Today, 2014). In the more literal sense ‘shibari’ means ‘tight binding’, the noun from of *shibaru* 縛る, which designates the action of trying someone or something, while ‘kinbaku’ designates the suite of practices for which the closest translation in English

would be 'bondage'.<sup>80</sup> Both terms feature in rope bondage literature, where this semantic distinction is very often discussed.

Master K defines 'shibari' both as a verb and as a noun, while 'kinbaku' and 'kinbaku-bi' designate the entirety of erotic bondage practices, an 'art' which values aesthetic as well as erotic attributes (2015: 8-9 and 164-166). Thus, it remains implicit that no matter how one chooses to name one's practice, using either term imply a certain affiliation to Japan. Rope bondage educator Evie Vane uses the structure 'Shibari / Kinbaku', as a generic duo designating a Japanese-style practice, without making any particular distinction between the two terms (2014: 3). Educator Nawakari also asserts the same: 'Kinbaku – also known as Shibari – has become a symbol of Japanese SM' (2017: 1). Some of the glossaries used in rope bondage dojos define 'kinbaku' as a: 'wordplay', which designates the act of 'tying with anticipation or excitement', while simultaneously acknowledging that 'Shibari / Kinbaku' are 'often used interchangeably', that they are 'virtually synonymous', and that both have been used in Japan since a long time.<sup>81</sup>

A similar contention for precision defines the discourse surrounding the terminology of 'shibari' / 'kinbaku' / 'rope bondage' that Barkas openly addresses this debate in his work, *Archaeology of personalities: a linguistic approach to erotic rope bondage* (2016: 16-17).

in the following, I will often exchange the term 'kinbaku' with 'erotic rope bondage'. I do this because I want to emphasize my strong belief that there exists no sharp line between Kinbaku and other types or cultures of bondage. This border often only exists in people's minds, usually as a way of elevating one arbitrary group over another. One could call it flaming, or the nationalism of rope bondage. Either way, it's not a belief I hold.

Barkas clearly positions himself outside of the debate on what he calls the 'nationalism of rope bondage'. Instead, he uses the terms 'kinbaku' and 'erotic rope bondage' interchangeably, adopting a much more liberal view, released from political weights, which are, he claims, a fabrication of the mind. Barkas hints towards attempts at hierarchization which exist in the scene. The first place to look for these hierarchization beyond semantic differences, is by understanding how political and cultural meaning has been attributed to these terms in the West. The authenticity of the Western 'copy' is uni-dimensionally

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<sup>80</sup> Another way to write kinbaku is 禁縛, where the first kanji character gives the word a sense of prohibition, or punishment.

<sup>81</sup> With thanks to B.A. who kindly offered to share the glossary they use for teaching in their rope bondage space in Vancouver (online personal communication, 18.06.2019).

assessed in comparison to the normative 'original' (Sugimoto, 2009: 200). In the process of accepting only some labels over others, these cultures of tying supposedly become 'true' and 'authentic'. I am in agreement with Barkas, who proposes an interchangeable use of 'kinbaku' and 'erotic rope bondage', bringing East and West together in a culture which is always in movement, mutation and trans-mutation (Wright, 1998:8). A reading of Barkas' text also suggests there is no clear line between various types of rope bondage, which can come together, influence each other, or intentionally move away from each other (2016: 16-17). In this sense, we can speak about a de- and a re-territorialisation of various types of rope bondage that come together at any place in the rhizomatic structure (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980). A 'sharp line' between these practices cannot exist in any fixed form, as tying cultures evolve and morph at a high rate. Rather, the 'border' is a sociocultural construction, which Barkas, and others in the scene denounce its artificiality, and the hierarchic system it creates.

Even within one 'camp', internal divisions arise. During my fieldwork, I have engaged in discussions deliberating the validity of the practice concerning the *Shibari / Kinbaku* dichotomy. Reverting to semantics, where 'shibari' signifies 'tight binding,' designating an entire practice under this term is deemed overly simplistic. Conversely, 'kinbaku' carries inherent connotations associated with eroticism or punishment, rendering it a more apt descriptor for the practice. I spoke to interview partner T.A. about this at length (I.F. Berlin 13 / 17.10.2018):

T.A.: I think I started using 'kinbaku', because this is actually ... it means the *thing*. Like, I think the word 'shibari' gets thrown around a little bit more, and more randomly. Also, because it just means 'tying', while 'kinbaku' refers to the *actual thing*. I guess most people don't get the difference [...] but for me, when I say 'shibari', the feeling when I say it is that I mean the practice of the tying, and when I say 'kinbaku', I mean something larger, like the culture, or the fetish around it. Like, you can make a tie, but it's not *kinbaku* so much. *Kinbaku* is, like, *the whole thing*.

In T.A.'s perspective, the choice between using 'shibari' and 'kinbaku' implies distinctions in meaning. T.A. attributes a more specific connotation to 'kinbaku,' viewing it as encompassing the entirety of the practice, including its cultural and fetishist aspects. The term 'shibari,' on the other hand, is perceived as being more freely employed, 'more randomly'. For T.A., 'shibari' denotes the act of tying itself, representing a more material aspect of the practice. In contrast, when employing 'kinbaku,' there is a broader conceptualization that extends beyond the physical act of tying. T.A. acknowledges that this nuanced differentiation might not be universally recognized, and that the distinction is rather personal and

subjective. However, by articulating a specific association with each term, T.A. adds layers to the discourse surrounding the terminology of rope bondage.

A recurring cultural fetishist argument centres on the alleged correctness of naming the practice in alignment with Japanese conventions. As previously indicated in the communication with P.J.C., a Japanese individual might not precisely comprehend the reference if presented with the term 'shibari,' as opposed to 'kinbaku.' Although establishing the veracity of this assertion lies beyond the scope of the current research, the connection between legitimacy and the manner in which these groups formulate 'authenticity' is reiterated in this context. Interview partner A.D. also comments (I.F. Paris 4 / 11.08.18):

*Iris: What is the difference between Shibari and Kinbaku to you?*

A.D.: to me, 'Kinbaku' is much more, like 'Japanese' - so really deep emotions and really intense. And, the moment it starts to be just technical, it starts to become *Shibari*; to me is, uh, just to make the distinction. I don't make it really, but when we want to talk without explaining 'oh, in this case we have lots of emotions and in this case not', I'll just talk [sic]: 'ok, this was *Kinbaku*, and this was *Shibari*'. But it's just to make it easier for us to understand each other.

*Iris: What about 'rope bondage'?*

A.D.: To me 'rope bondage' is much more generic, like uh ... like you can include also American bondage inside, [or] maybe European[-style] bondage for some people. So, 'bondage' is more general, like 'kinbaku' in Japanese rope bondage? I think ... [the], um, London festival was 'Japanese rope bondage festival' or something like that. But to me rope bondage is not only about Kinbaku ... it's much more general.

Tapping into Japanese history and cross-cultural exchanges, A.D. continues the analysis:

A.D.: I think if I remember well, in Japan depending on who the rigger you're talking about or you're talking with [is], they will use it [i.e. naming the practice] in a different way. So, to me, most of them are much more [sic] talking about *kinbaku*. But, I think, uh, *shibari* is coming in lots of conversations in Japan, because is just said [i.e. they refer to the practice as *shibari* when], like, you are tied [in] the chicken-y style, so ... I think Western people went in Japan and they couldn't stay for months or years, and came back to Europe or America and bring [sic] *shibari*. And, um, to

me it was kind of mistake [i.e. choosing to name 'kinbaku' practices as 'shibari'], but we don't care about it [now]; it's not very important. I think if you talked with Y.H. sensei while he was still alive, he would have used more [the term] 'shibari', I think. And some others will have talked about *kinbaku*.

For T.A. the distinction is a matter of which cultural elements get included and which get left out. For A.D., this differentiation primarily concerns the expression of emotion and the intricate interplay between emotion and embodiment. Thus, 'doing' *shibari* is applying rope on a person in a technical manner and devoid of emotion; it is, according to A.D., performed in order to satisfy pedagogical and aesthetic needs. Practicing *kinbaku*, on the other hand, presupposes a different affective approach, one which is filled with emotion and affective intensity. The *Rope bondage* terminology is a western Euro-American way of practicing, 'generic', not necessarily distinct to the other two, but inexact. The confusion between *Shibari* / *Kinbaku* is, says A.D., related to the limited understanding of Westerners who went to Japan and came in contact with the tying culture there.<sup>82</sup> T.A.'s reasoning is not dissimilar; nevertheless, the difference between *shibari* and *kinbaku* doesn't have much to do with emotion, but it is rather a question of cultural integration, claims T.A.; it is only by integrating certain socially named and recognized cultural elements, 'fetishes', that *shibari* can 'become' *kinbaku*. The issue with either position is that it becomes exclusionary towards the 'other' form of tying, and neither reflect in reality the cross-cultural complexities which unfold in Western spaces. The danger of linguistic totalitarianism is that it can end up fetishizing the 'other', failing to reflect the realities around and instead clinging to fixed hierarchical 'arborescent' models (ATP, 1980).

The true question remains: what lies behind this constant search for a new vocabulary, each more 'precise' than the other? I asked rope bondage scholar and interview partner B.A. (they/them) tackled this question from a sociological point of view (I.F. Berlin 9 / 13.03.2018):

B.A.: If you say 'does the rope community want a new vocabulary?', then I say from a sociological perspective, yes. And from a field-entrance perspective, yes – like a beginner's perspective, yes. When you talk from a perspective [which is] from within the field, yeah: the borders of our

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<sup>82</sup> Japanese scholars have noted on how their Western homologues sometimes jump to hasty conclusions based on a limited time they spend in Japan. In her essay *In the Feminine Guise: A Trap of Reverse Orientalism*, Ueno Chizuko criticizes Roland Barthes' volume *L'Empire des Signes* [The Empire of Signs] which Barthes wrote after spending three weeks in Japan. Ueno suggests Barthes' understanding of Japanese culture could not have been extremely well-informed in such a short time (Ueno in Calichman, 2005: 240-241). Nevertheless, I would advise exercising caution, as A.D. offers an opinion, and not a rigorous research into the subject.

language are the borders of our world. So, there is already a vocabulary and like, if you have translation issues between cultural fields, there is a vocabulary so there can't be a need for a vocabulary because there is already a vocabulary. The thing is, when you say, 'do rope bondagers [sic] in the field ... does the field need a vocabulary?', then I would say the field has its ... how do you say? Turf wars, about this vocabulary. This is what I saw from outside. It looks like a hunt for a vocabulary. From the beginner's perspective it looks like an already established language which you just have to learn and then you know it. And when you already speak the 'language', so to speak, then it's a fight. It's a very brutal fight. About which terminology, about which vocabulary, which parts of the vocabulary which might, or like, are allowed to be used by and by whom? It's very tricky.

Curiously, a comparable intensity of conviction is exhibited the other way around, by practitioners who intentionally distance themselves from these particular groups. For instance, while conducting fieldwork in Berlin for the first time, partner F.R., the owner of The Barn Festival and a valued member of the rope bondage scene in Berlin demanded me to inquire about their preferred identification before delving into discussions. Until then, I had casually used the terms *Shibari*, *Kinbaku*, and *rope bondage* interchangeably, simple language codes which I used without a distinct differentiation or prior inquiry into any of my interlocutors' preferences. In their capacity as a member of The Barn's organizing team, they advocated for the use of the term 'rope bondage'. They suggested that employing 'rope bondage' or simply 'rope' more accurately encapsulates the nuances of European tying culture. Moreover, they conveyed that this preference concurrently served as a deliberate avoidance of pigeonholing the festival into a specific direction, and therefore preventing the formation of 'undesired' hierarchies. Their rationale was rooted in the festival's commitment to fostering a 'liberal and inclusive' atmosphere (field notes, Berlin, March 2017). Furthermore, the webpage dedicated to The Barn from F.R.'s website encourages further reflections on the Western 'emancipation'. The text reads:

There is a lot of creative and innovative rope bondage in Europe today. Many individuals are developing their own approaches. A sort of emancipation from the Japanese masters is happening, not a rebellion or opposition, just people recognizing the importance of gaining autonomy in their artistic process. [The Barn] wishes to provide a platform for these individuals and to develop the technical, artistic and philosophical aspects of the practice, by confronting traditional Japanese Shibari with our European cultural heritage. Western techniques and skills, ideas from art, science, psychology & medicine, from bodywork & performance, from BDSM &

Sex-Positive Culture – all those things might be offered at [The Barn], in order to give new impulses to the practice.<sup>83</sup>

The Barn's mission unfolds on a backdrop characterized by this transformative trend in contemporary European rope bondage. A surge of creativity and innovation is taking place, and practitioners are forging their unique approaches, signalling a departure from a strict adherence to Japanese masters. The shift is portrayed as an 'emancipation', emphasizing the 'autonomy' of the artistic process rather than constituting a 'rebellion' or 'opposition'. The Barn's goal is, therefore, to facilitate and foster this evolution. It aims to serve as a platform for practitioners who are venturing beyond 'traditional Japanese Shibari', and who wish to develop the technical, artistic, and philosophical dimensions of the practice. The Barn is also an interdisciplinary melting pot for Western techniques and skills, insights from art, science, psychology, and medicine, along with contributions from bodywork, performance, BDSM, and Sex-positive cultures. The Barn's emerges as a having strong identity characterized by inclusive, horizontal positionality within the rope bondage scene. By positioning this way, The Barn is coming very close to embodying the structures forwarded by the *continuum*, representing and welcoming the diverse and interwoven nature of approaches of the rope bondage practitioners that choose to attend. Lastly, The Barn contribute to enhancing the overall landscape of rope bondage practices.

#### 4.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have endeavoured to establish the foundation for a sociocultural model that contextualizes trans-nationality by investigating the integration of 'Japaneseness' within the practice of rope bondage and the processes of knowledge-production. I have illustrated how intricate cross-cultural mutations and exchanges between different the Japanese and non-Japanese scenes are, and at the same time I have signalled a need to evaluate these parameters trans-culturally (Sugimoto, 2009) and create positions where knowledge is 'situated' and archived or stored in the bodies (Haraway, 1988). Throughout this chapter, I have brought to the fore various components which shape the cultural construct of 'Japaneseness'; I argued that these elements are interwoven into the rope bondage practice, influencing adherents to these narratives and even to a certain extent, those who reject this label. In Section 4.1. I attempted to situate cross-culturality by investigating for some key concepts such as like 'fetishization', 'cultural appropriation', and 'authenticity' operate within the sphere of rope bondage and cross-cultural

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<sup>83</sup> Via <http://felixruckert.de/2015/10/01/eurix/> (accessed 12.11.2023)

interactions. I argued that some practitioners mobilize positionality in practices that aestheticize or oppose cultural differences, contributing to a dichotomy central to the promotion and exportation of Japanese cultural products. I looked at how this dichotomy coexists with narratives promoting the 'Japanese way' as the 'one true way' of performing rope bondage. Nevertheless, I argued in favour of broadening the discourse to encompass 'cultural exportation' in conjunction with 'cultural appropriation'. I deemed this discourse broadening crucial since various Japanese elements are disseminated beyond Japan into diverse Western contexts, entwining with considerations of 'authenticity' and 'capital'. In section 4.2. In Section 4.2, I introduced a horizontal and inclusive model inspired by Adrienne Rich's (lesbian) continuum (1982), further developed by Pennington (2018), namely the *continuum*. I argued that this theoretical framework is rhizomatic, non-linear, non-hierarchical, and fluid, and that it is characterized by affective approaches to 'situated' knowledge-production.

Examining the backdrop, Section 4.2.1 explored the formation of the 'historical canon' and exposes its drawbacks. Within the rope bondage scene, the misuse of the 'historical canon' by some practitioners asserts hierarchical superiority, emphasizing an imagined 'authentic' loyalty to the Japanese style and 'masters'. This approach singles out certain elements, processes, events, or people, incorporating them into a 'superior' narrative, gaining power and being instrumentalized (Schroeder, 2008: 183). I argue that this disrupts the continuous flow of intercultural exchange, marginalizing practices that do not align with it as 'less than' or imitations. Taking these aspects into consideration, in Section 4.2.2 I propose the continuum as an inclusive and horizontal alternative. I assert this model is preferable for a nuanced analysis of cross-cultural exchanges in the rope bondage scene, validating *all* affiliations and perspectives, and promoting a fluid positionality both within and outside the 'historical canon', regardless of whether practitioners choose to incorporate Japanese elements in their practice.

Finally, in Section 4.3. I looked at how the *continuum* employs language and terminology and establishes cultural affinity, belonging, and determining the politics of 'authenticity.' I examined how specific jargon signifies belonging to a distinct group identity imbued with cultural significance; to exemplify, I looked at how employing different terms like 'Shibari', 'Kinbaku', or 'rope bondage' reveals their association with distinct groups. However, I cautioned against using this reasoning, as it supports the 'arborescent' model. As a final point, I presented an alternative to this model drawing evidence from field research at The Barn. I showed the manner in which The Barn is inclusive and horizontal within the scene, and that such an alignment enriches and diversifies the rope bondage practices. The following Chapter will dive deeper into the *continuum*, applying this model to the discussion on identitarian positionality.

## ***Chapter 5: The Kink Continuum***

*'Bodies are wonderful objects to utilize and express ourselves through'.*

*(Tutti, 2014 [1993]: 137).*

## 5.0. Introduction

Having looked at the complex ways in which rope bondage practitioners position themselves in relation to the 'Japanese style', mentalities or cultural products, and having hinted at the need to examine these cultural variations and appropriations through the lens of a non-hierarchical identitarian *continuum* which consents to 'positionings' from the 'virtual' into the 'actual', rather than assuming fixed identities, this chapter further refines the *continuum* model in relation to practices from the sphere of 'kink'. Literature and field research imply strongly at the impossibility of investigating the practice of rope bondage, without looking at the ways in which it relates to kink practices. While the practice of rope bondage remains integrative of kinkiness, it does not necessarily limit its understanding only within the confines of this spectrum, nor does it sustain permanent definitions. The *continuum* hereby provides a useful lens through which rope bondage can be explored.

This chapter will attempt to understand the specificities of affective 'lived' experience as described and self-assigned by those who practice rope, whether it is understood as a BDSM, as a kinky activity more generally, or not; as field testimonies will prove, there is no definitive or fixed way of positioning oneself in relation to fixed labels which a definition would promote. The majority of literature that discusses rope bondage classifies it as part of BDSM practices, or as a kinky activity (Harrington, 2009; Newmahr, 2011; Pennington, 2018; Simula et. al., 2023; Vane, 2014, Wignall, 2022). Jones classifies rope bondage not just as a BDSM activity, but draws attention upon the fact that 'there is no such thing as safe rope', and that 'there are significant physical risks to even seemingly tame acts of bedroom bondage' (2020:46, n. 41). Barkas (2017: 20-21) specifies that 'Kinbaku denotes rope bondage with some kind of strongly embedded eroticism, and in many cases even sexualised connotations', choosing a more expanded definition; he continues 'in including eroticism in my understanding of Kinbaku, I am including or excluding certain types of interactions under the umbrella of Kinbaku'.

In the case of the present research field data analysis will support the idea that rope bondage activities and affiliative identities are often inscribed into kink activities, they can or cannot be practiced in conjunction with other kink practices, often has erotic connotations but can exist outside of the kink or the sexuality spectrum, whether this is done by positioning oneself away from the 'kink' or the 'sexual' labels, or by attempting to reframe one's practice within other artistic and performative discourses, and bringing those aspects heavily to the fore.

Attuned to Deleuzian philosophy, I shall call these interactions ‘foldings’,<sup>84</sup> a concept I use here to analyse the subjective experience resulting from rope bondage interactions, as well as a container of the rapport with the self. I argue for using ‘situated knowledge’ as a result of subjective experience and individualized ‘positionings’ rather than a general vector in knowledge production, emphasising subjective manifestation on a case-to-case basis. Inside the *continuum*, this variety of subjective experience occurs differently in each interaction; moreover, subjective experience is fluid and variable in the context of the same practitioner, as ‘foldings’ determine positioning and re-positioning according to the moment in time and space an experience occurs, and/or according to the nature of the human/more than human affective contagion. I advance the theory that the *continuum* is in perpetual motion and transformation, ‘open to powers and affects circulating in the universe’ (Tampio, 2010, online resource), materialized through interaction, ‘affective contagion’ (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010; Ordean and Pennington, 2019),<sup>85</sup> commonly negotiated or unexpressed fantasies and desires, taking into account any objects, attires and affective-corporeal practices which, although not necessarily sexual or genitally-focused, contribute heavily to the formation of the kinky identity, where kink is an identitarian component rather than an attribute of a sexual practice.

I’m positioning myself cautiously regarding the concept of ‘desire’, due to the exceedingly complicated cultural, clinical and philosophical load it carries. Philosophers like Foucault (2014) and Deleuze (1991 [1967]; with Guattari, 1977, 1994 [1987]) have discussed at length the problematics around desire in relationship with pleasure, clinical medicine, stigma and binaries normal’ vs. ‘abnormal, ‘sane’ vs. ‘pathological / ill’, ‘acceptable’ vs. ‘unacceptable’, particularly in relationship with sexual desire and sexual pleasure. Foucault (Foucault, 2014 [1978]: 140-141) stated that:

medicine and psychoanalysis have made extensive use of the notion of desire, precisely as a kind of instrument for establishing the intelligibility of a sexual pleasure and thus for standardizing it in terms of normality [...]. Tell me what your desire is, and I’ll tell you what you are as a subject.

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<sup>84</sup> In Deleuzian philosophy, the concept of the ‘fold’ is utilized to in relation to the ‘production of subjectivity’, in ‘human’ and ‘non-human’ forms (Sullivan, 2010: 107). While there can be many types of folds, like for example the folds of the body, of time, or of the memory, the fold expresses itself on two levels, corresponding to critiques of the most common characteristics of subjectivity, or used to contain affective relations one can nurture towards oneself (ibid.: 107-108; also see Conley, 2011: 192-203; Deleuze, 1993; Deleuze and Strauss, 1991: 227-247).

<sup>85</sup> I cannot omit from my analysis the studies of Freud on ‘contagion’, a group quality which sometimes overwrites individual experience. For Freud, in a group, experiences can be ‘contagious to such a degree that an individual readily sacrifices his personal interest to the collective interest’ (1921: 74). However, the comparison stops here, as the hierarchical power dynamic of the hypnotizer / hypnotized which Freud uses to describe the social construction of contagion is not consistent with the horizontal non-binary inquiry model I am trying to advocate for.

He then continues:

I'm quite frankly hostile to the pre-Deleuzian, non-Deleuzian notions of desire. But this is all, let's say, on the order of a methodological precaution. The main thing is this notion of an event that is not assigned, and is not assignable, to a subject. Whereas the, let's say, nineteenth-century notion of desire is first and foremost attached to a subject. It's not an event; it's a type of permanent characteristic of the events of a subject. I'll tell you if you're sick or not, I'll tell you if you're normal or not, and thus I'll be able to disqualify your desire or on the contrary requalify it.

Deleuze (and later with Guattari) stepped away from desire's psychoanalytical heritage, proposing desire as an open-ended and generative phenomenon. Desire is no longer a 'deviance' of human behaviour, but stems from lack; moreover, it is no longer attached to a specific subject position, but becomes rather a way of rethinking the subjective body (also see Beckman, 2009).<sup>86</sup>

However, it is almost impossible to discuss kink without acknowledging desire; in its most basic sense, the practice of kink or rope bondage is brought into existence by the *desire* – sometimes sexual in nature, sometimes not – to interact with another human or nonhuman element (also see Chapter 6). Degrees of involvement in the kink / rope session is dictated by the degree of desire. I call its counterpart 'limitation' whether it denotes physical or psychological limitations, performed through consent. My time in the field has shown that although having the capacity to de- and re-territorialize according to the specific requirements and characteristics of each negotiated rope interaction, neither 'desire' – nor 'limitation' are not and cannot be completely independent from some social and moral conventions, which in turn impact the sociocultural economy of the rope scene – regardless of whether these conventions are an extension of cultural, local (as in the local scene), or personal histories. Finally, even though this chapter deals with different nuances of sexuality and non-/more than-/ a- sexuality, and especially with de-stigmatization, I petition against sanitising kink or rope bondage practices to the level of a banal and mundane, uneventful human and non-human encounter. Not to mention that doing this would be excluding an entire segment of kink / rope practitioners who do identify differently. My writing (and my research in general) aims at being inclusive and acknowledges the need to redefine and reposition constantly in order for inclusion to happen.

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<sup>86</sup> It must be acknowledged that Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari were listed among other prominent French intellectuals who signed a petition in *Le Monde* in January 1977 'calling for the freedom of three men accused of sex with boys and girls between age twelve and fifteen' (Percy, 2022:3).

### 5.1. Situating 'kink'

Consensual kink and BDSM, designate a constellation of practices and relationships which are not limited to, but can 'be both erotic and non-erotic, sexual or non-sexual, and can involve dominance and submission, restraint / discipline, sensory stimulation, role-playing' (Tuulberg, 2015: 6), while also comprising any combination of 'consensual bondage, power exchange, pain / sensation play, leathersex, role playing, and fetish' (Weiss, 2008: 98). 'Kink' can encapsulate both BDSM and fetishism 'informed by the specific debates and positionings' of the practitioners where the research is taking place (Cardoso, Pascoal & Quaresma, 2023: 117). Jones notes that in recent kink scholarship, the term BDSM has increasingly been adopted as a broader reference for various forms of kinky behaviour, attractions, and identities (2020: 26). Some of the following literature is also discussed in Chapter 2, but as it pertains to the ensuing analysis, I will bring it once more to the fore.

Since there is great variation regarding the way in which kink is conceptualized and embodied in different communities around the world (Landgridge, 2006: 301; Jones, 2023; Weinberg et. al., 1984; Weinberg, 2006: 36; Wignall, 2023), as well as great variation in how knowledge situated in the practitioner's body is affectively distributed in the community, definitions of what kink is, of what it does or doesn't encompass, of where and how kink is practiced cannot remain fixed, but are rather in perpetual transformation and repositioning. Newmahr (2010) cautions that in spite of its frequent association with erotic elements, 'being kinky' goes beyond merely performing sexual activities with added spice; roles within BDSM can be perceived as identities extending beyond momentary roles assumed during sexual encounters. Simula (2015) asserts that beyond an adjective used to characterize a particular type of sexual activity or a precursor to engaging in sex, 'being kinky' holds a more nuanced and profound significance, which sometimes is not even associated with sexual acts.<sup>87</sup> Pohtinen (2019: 86) argues that commonly, the term 'kinky' might not have always been construed as indicative of identity; furthermore, Pohtinen rejects 'creating an unnecessarily narrow definition' of kink or kinkiness, and instead 'allow[ing] it to remain a fluctuating concept of self-identification'. Similarly, Wignall (2023: 39-40) claims kink is an exceedingly multifaceted practice, encompassing a broad range of activities that may be sexual for some individuals but not for others; attempting a definition of kink is an inherently imperfect task, subject to change, as kink is shaped by social contexts and the ways in which it is practiced. Jones writes that while

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<sup>87</sup> Simula (*ibid.*) also asserts that, in many instances within the BDSM scene, a partner is selected based on a specific type of kinkiness over a particular gender.

not everyone who practices rope bondage is involved in the subculture, a significant number are, and therefore the breadth of this social sphere is vast (2023:55).

I utilise the terms 'position', '(re-)positioning' and 'positionality' to define spaces, or acts of identitarian integration and actualization happening at certain moments in time. 'Positions' influence and are influenced by material and abstract knowledge, where knowledge becomes 'the product of a specific position that reflects particular places and spaces' (Sánchez, 2011: online resource), and in the case of rope bondage, I would add, also a product of affective economies which unfold as a result of various interactions with other practitioners, and with the rope itself. Positions are loosely placed on what will be defined in the following as the '*rope continuum*', and do not keep their form unchanged throughout time; because of their plasticity and flexibility, and their capacity to adapt as a result of the accumulation of 'situated' knowledge, they should be interpreted instead as 'narrative[s] of being and becoming' (Muñoz, 2006: 677).<sup>88</sup> Extremely useful when discussing identitarian development, the concepts of 'being' and 'becoming' characterize the BDSM scene more generally, with numerous attempts at defining what kink practices are, and who belongs to this category, and who does not. In spite of the fact that some research has attempted to develop a taxonomy of BDSM (Alison et al., 2001; Ambler et al., 2017), other BDSM scholars observe that 'boundaries between SM and non-SM interactions are not always clear', leading some practitioners to disagree on whether 'a particular interaction or relationship constitutes SM, each seeing it from a different perspective' (Moser and Kleinplatz, 2007: 35, also see Moser & Levitt, 1987; Thompson, 2001, Wignall, 2023). In the following, I will posit the idea that 'positionality' is a much more suitable framework for inquiring into both issues, since it is linked to processes of 'feeling', 'being' and 'becoming', and has a much larger capacity of encompassing the realities, complexities and transformations present in the field.

Another growing tendency is the demystification and de-pathologization of kink practices from inside-out, through community-led initiatives ranging from BDSM-positive campaigns, to mass-media appearances, to published material on the subject. BDSM is no longer 'a dark underground luring in unsuspecting victims', but has rather become 'a subculture with its own rules of participation' (Weiss, 2009: 182).

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<sup>88</sup> Muñoz is, in turn, indebted to Melanie Klein's work on object-relations psychology (1975 [1935]: 262-289), who sees 'positions' as 'less turgid trajectories of emotional development', and as 'provisional and flexible demarcations, practices of being' (Muñoz; *ibid.*: 680-81). In contrast to the much more fixed idea of 'stages. Building from Muñoz's idea which claims 'being and becoming' that 'can resist the pull of identitarian models of relationality' (Muñoz, *ibid.*), and from Puar's intake on 'becoming' and affect as methods of dissolving the 'binary frames' (2017: 56), Pennington uses affect in order to discuss community formation around the notions of gender and belonging, while pushing against the 'exclusionary language of identity' (*ibid.*: 8).

Academic research has also contributed to the emancipatory struggle: while Beckmann has examined how selective criminalization and social stigma determined dissociative binary identitarian positions of 'normal' vs. 'kinky' (ibid.: 7), Newmahr has been militating for a clear distinction between SM intimacy, and the intimacy associated with violent crime, arguing for the different way in which experiences of trust and violation change in a consensual shared experience, rather than in non-consensual violent interactions (2011: 177):

SM defenders use consent to argue that SM should not be understood as coercive, as violent, or as a mechanism of oppression. Anti-SM activists have objected to this on the grounds that it obscures the false consciousness that accompanies oppression [...] neglecting to unpack the ways in which emotional and psychological experiences change with consent—specifically, experiences of trust and of violation.

Tuulberg thinks that (2015: 12-13):

bewilderment around BDSM partly comes from the psychopathological and ideological legacy around sexuality and partly from people's incapability to imagine the co-existence of some dynamics in relation to sex, love and intimacy that we have been *taught* [original emphasis] to think of as contradictory (e.g. violence, pain).

Rather than arguing directly against pathologization, as the majority of kink research has done, Pennington proposes interrogating 'the frameworks which create stigma around BDSM embodiments in the first place', outside kink community groupings as well as inside – the latter through mobilizing the concept of kinknormativity, through which differentiation between 'good' kink and 'bad kink' is being made within the communities themselves. Moreover, Pennington argues, the existence of normativity is and always will entertain 'its inverse: pathologization' (2018: 43), whether this ends up being inter- or intra- communitarian; as long as the intellectual assessment of kink does not move forward from binary models, it will never be able to liberate itself from the shackles of stigma and pathologization. In this sense, the *continuum* model I am discussing in this chapter constitutes one way of positioning rope bondage – and kink more generally – outside such binaries, and hereby aiming to bring reputational emancipation to both the wide range of individualities within the scene, and to the scenes as collectives.

Methodologically, this pertinent scholarship which attempts to advance into the research gap surrounding BDSM / kink activities has also made substantial progress by actively integrating the voices of the practitioners in the research corpus; researchers have brought the voices of kink practitioners to the

forefront of the research, thereby reaching new insight as well as bringing these groups much closer to readers. An important number use ethnographic fieldwork and data collection strategies in BDSM and / or rope bondage communities (Beckmann, 2009; Galati, 2017; Newmahr, 2008; 2010; 2011; Ordean and Pennington, 2019; Pennington, 2018; Tuulberg, 2015), demystifying social preconceptions by presenting relevant ‘insights into the ‘lived’ experience of consensual ‘SM’ practitioners’ (Beckmann, 2009: 1).<sup>89</sup> This literature popularizes direct engagement with the field, and often involves the researchers utilizing their own bodies as a source of knowledge by trying out some elements of the practice; a certain closeness between the researcher and the practitioners in the field emerges through field immersion and long-term engagement, often complemented by embodied knowledge experienced first-hand by the researcher-practitioner. Thus, discourses have gradually become much more integrative, claimed by positions increasingly well interspersed in the field, which present the ‘lived’ realities as they occur in the field or are experienced by the researcher who sometimes involve themselves in kink practices first-hand (such as Galati: 2017; Newmahr: 2011; Ordean and Pennington: 2019; Pennington, 2018; Tuulberg, 2015). Similarly, my own research also comes together as a result of systematic engagement with each field site, and from negotiating occasional consensual rope bondage interactions where I became a researcher-practitioner, in an attempt to broaden my understanding of the practice, but also to surpass those discourses which once came from a binary position of ‘us’ / ‘them’, and which indirectly reinforced the borders between privileged, protected, ‘normal’ sexualities and pathological, incriminating, ‘abnormal’ ones (also see Weiss 2006: 105).

Although noteworthy progress has been made regarding repositioning and redefining kink away from the daunting inheritance of pathology, with very few exceptions (Hedwig: 2011; Galati, 2017; Ordean and Pennington, 2019; Pennington, 2018), and for a very long time, rope bondage has remained pigeonholed under the umbrella of BDSM and has partially gravitating around sexual discourses. LGBT+ scholars such as Jonathan Alexander have noted on the scarcity of volumes which ‘have been written solely about [bondage]’, in spite of ‘the prevalence of bondage in most relationships’ (see Chapter 2, Section 2.1.1.).

In the last years, myriad grassroots-led publishing initiatives and academic articles dedicated to rope bondage have appeared all over the world, most of which often mention other BDSM activities alongside rope bondage (Two Knotty Boys, 2009, 2012; Vane 2014a, 2014b). Little to no attention has been given to

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<sup>89</sup> Beckmann attributes the relevancy of her research to it being ‘one of the first academic pieces of work that de-pathologised consensual ‘SM’, but further as it was based on qualitative, ethnographic research that has been rarely conducted in this context’ (ibid.: 1-2).

that side of rope bondage practice where practitioners consciously move away from BDSM and sex-informed narratives, in a conscious attempt to occupy a different space on the kink or the rope bondage *continuum*. No matter how much prudence is exercised when examining literatures on desire, the inextricable liaison between desire and eroticism must be noted. Barkas's *Archaeology of personalities* (2016) is among the few grassroots-led volumes which treat the rope bondage phenomenon in itself, accommodating alternative discourses sometimes outside of the BDSM framework, but which do not necessarily negate the validity of this framework. Barkas understands rope bondage as an erotic activity, in agreement with the philosophy of Georges Bataille, who conceptualises the erotic as any human behaviour which is not 'rudimentary and purely animal' (Bataille, 1962: 29). I copy here a longer quotation from Barkas, briefly referred to at the beginning of this chapter (Barkas, 2017: 20-21):

Kinbaku' denotes rope bondage with some kind of strongly embedded eroticism, and in many cases even sexual connotations. Eroticism involves the discussion of *aesthetics, desires, sensualities* and *sexualities* [my emphasis]. In including eroticism in my understanding of Kinbaku, I am including or excluding certain types of interactions under the umbrella of Kinbaku. The adjective 'erotic' becomes either a precluding or a comprising subject of rope bondage, for it can be read as the adjective derived from the noun eroticism which also means a philosophical discussion of the [a]esthetics, desires and sensualities of sexualities.

Importantly, the author hints at practices which might look and feel similar to kinbaku, but which get included or excluded due to their different degree of eroticism. In doing this, Barkas does acknowledge different types of practices under the generous umbrella of rope bondage, even if the focus of the book is on those practices which do have an erotic component, and therefore qualify as erotic rope bondage / kinbaku.

During my interviews with partners from the three field sites, the relationship between rope bondage and kink and/or sexual practices arose very often. When asked whether rope bondage includes or is a sexual activity, very few interview partners were able to give a straightforward response. For most, sexual elements *could* be included, but don't necessarily *have to*. What is more, the boundary between what is sexual and what is not depends on individual preference (Wignall, 2023: 39), but can also change over time, or in specific circumstances. Interview partner H.K. expressed bewilderment in front of this ambiguity (I.F. 14 / 17.03.2018):

H.R.: The hard part is sex, because I found, we found out, that it's a fluid boundary. Whether you interpret something as erotic is hard to discuss, hard to establish where the line is.

Adding to this complexity is also the fact that two people engaging in a rope bondage interaction might not be looking for the same type of experience, or might even not use terminology to refer to the same things. In this sense, the conversation I had with interview partner C.F., whose social work expertise was illuminating in this regard (I.F. 4 / 11.11.2018):

C.F.: Crucial for me is that bondage can mean very different things to different people; that it's necessary to talk about what you're looking for, and to also encourage people to say 'no' or to say 'I don't know yet', if they have common ground. To be really honest with finding common ground and to say 'no' if they don't [...] or that what we're looking for isn't the same. If I'm looking for a 'dancey' experience and the other one is looking for a sexual experience, this won't work together. Or if one person is very much interested in sadism masochism and the other person is interested in something very sensual, this also won't work. So to make people aware – because many people come with a concept of what is bondage and think everybody is looking for the same thing. And for me, it took me a long time to understand that, how vastly different this is for many different people, and to understand that this is something you need to check before.

At a first level, C.F. emphasizes the importance of open communication, self-awareness, and honesty in the context of bondage. They point out that bondage can hold vastly different meanings for different people, which is why it is crucial to discuss intentions and desires before engaging in it. For example, someone seeking a 'dancey' experience could be incompatible with someone else who is seeking a sexual encounter; a person interested in sadism versus someone looking for a sensual experience. C.F.'s solution is spending time getting to learn yourself and be confident in expressing what you want to the other person, through proper communication, negotiation, and respecting the boundaries of the other.

Although discussing the politics of consent and negotiation is often alluded to throughout my interviews, it remains beyond the scope of this thesis.<sup>90</sup> Important for the purposes of this chapter is showing the

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<sup>90</sup> It is nevertheless important to insist on its importance within the practice of rope bondage. Again and again, this subject was approached and discussed with many interview partners. And while I advocate for the importance and the necessity of a separate study which deals with this very complex topic (also see Jones, 2022: 143), it is worth mentioning here that virtually no enjoyable and safe rope interaction would be possible without proper negotiation or respecting consent. Jones writes that 'the boundaries of what is and is not a 'consent violation' and what should be done with those who commit them is an ongoing topic of discussion within kink and rope bondage spaces (*ibid.*: 145).

diversity of rope bondage interactions, which illustrates the *continuum*, be they related to cultures of tying, association with sexual practices, BDSM/kink, artistic research, or having therapeutic or healing properties (see Blomqvist. 2022; Harris, 2023). However, I choose to move away from categorising rope as either one of those (while acknowledging the value of these perspectives), revealing instead in the following pages, how it can be *used* to express different *intentions*. This is not to say that I ignore processes of ‘rope sanitisation’ neither, nor why it happens; rope bondage scholars mention (Pennington, 2018; Ordean & Pennington, 2019; Jones, 2020) this phenomenon is attempting to legitimize the practice, but remain critical about potential dangers which might arise from doing this. Similarly, most of my research partners emphasized the fact that beyond its alluring or erotic appeal, rope bondage remains a high-risk activity. Interview partner S.O. believes that ‘sanitizing rope’ i.e. de-sexualising or playing it down to an entertainment activity can be very dangerous, as it can lower the perceived risk factor which can make practicing it unsafe (I.F. London 6 / 23.01.2019):

S.O.: overall it’s [i.e. rope] a high-risk, BDSM activity. No matter how much you water it down, it’s something that can kill you. It’s related to restraint, to bondage and all of these other things. I think we’ve gone too far and I think part for the reason for that is because we’ve sanitized rope and we say it’s ‘fun’.

Echoing S.O.’s sentiments, A.B. discusses at length the problems arising from playing down the risks that some activities can have on the human body, particularly so when a person is restrained and cannot have full control over their body (I.F. London 2 / 16.01.2019):

A.B.: Be aware of what you’re doing. You are taking an activity that is inherently linked to kink, sexuality and BDSM. Maybe transforming a little bit, but you’re still doing it. The other day I saw an image [...] on Instagram of someone tying another girl. And they were up suspended upside down in a TK. They were shoving her face in a bucket of water and they called it ‘water play’. The person who rigged said it is just having fun and that which he was doing is not BDSM.

Look at what you’re doing, you’re shoving someone who is tied up and defenceless into a bucket of water. That is by all concepts imaginable very much BDSM, very much kink, very much torture, that is not ‘water play’. That is waterboarding and drowning. Don't tell me you don't do BDSM because that’s utter horseshit. So, that really annoys me, like why are you telling your 33.000 followers that this is water play. It’s no water play, you’re drowning someone, this is torture.

People do this in like fucking torture camps. You know. This is very much like BDSM, very much edge play and if you didn't know what you were doing, you'd probably kill someone, you know?

Beyond issues of misrepresentation, A.B.'s severe criticism of the photograph depicting 'water play' is in fact a comment on how dangerous a situation can be, where a person is engaging in an activity that has elements of kink, BDSM, and edge play but refuses to acknowledge it as such. A.B. argues that the activity is, in fact, a form of edge play that resembles waterboarding or drowning—a highly risky and extreme form of BDSM. They express frustration at the misleading portrayal of such a dangerous act to a large audience, emphasizing that labelling it incorrectly can obscure the inherent risks and might result in serious harm if not handled with proper knowledge and care. My interlocutor continued:

So, that is the damage, people not being aware of the damage they can cause someone else by doing this kind of play. It's all well and nice how we are teaching each other how to tie little single column ties around their wrists and doing pretty patterns, but be aware that for the duration of that moment, you are potentially responsible for someone else's physical and psychological wellbeing. It's all fun and games until it isn't. Be aware that the line can be crossed very, very quickly. And I think if people are not aware of what they're playing with, if you don't realise that you're playing with fire, you're never realising that you could get burned. But if you do realise that you're playing with fire and you can get burned, you can say 'I am playing with fire and I can get burned - cool'. It's healthier and safer.

Awareness and responsibility are very important when engaging in certain forms of play, particularly in the context of activities like rope play or BDSM. Using an edge play element such as water boarding during a rope bondage session and calling it harmless play, can end up encouraging people to shied away from responsibility, or take kink play very lightly; while learning or practicing rope techniques, such as simple ties or patterns, may seem harmless, there is an inherent risk involved whenever one person becomes responsible for another's physical and psychological well-being. The main point is that even seemingly innocent activities can quickly turn dangerous if participants are not mindful of the potential risks. The metaphor of 'playing with fire' serves as a warning: if individuals do not understand the dangers, they may unknowingly cause harm. However, if they acknowledge the risks and proceed with caution, they create a safer and healthier environment. A.B. advocates for a mind-set where everyone involved is conscious of the possible consequences, thus fostering an atmosphere of respect, care, and informed consent. This perspective highlights the gravity of the responsibility one takes on in these situations, underlining the need for education, communication, and preparedness. Ordean & Pennington's article *Rope bondage and*

*affective embodiments* is a recent example of academic work where the authors incorporate cross-cultural testimonies in the field which move away from BDSM discourses, and which led the authors to conclude that:

[be]cause there are as many ways of understanding rope bondage as there are practitioners, answers to the question of whether rope bondage can or should be sexualized and/or classed as BDSM depend upon how practitioners choose to identify, dis-identify, or refuse the box of identity around rope bondage. For example, when discussing rope bondage some interview partners argue against an assumed connection between rope and sex, while others argue against an inherent link between kink and rope. Still others do not mention sex at all, instead focusing on BDSM to assert BDSM and rope bondage are inextricably interconnected. In other words, how rope bondage practitioners negotiate sexual and kinky narratives, and how they incorporate these narratives into their senses of self, reflects the diversity of embodiments and identifications rope bondage makes possible. (2019: 69).

As Ordean and Pennington suggest, framing one's identity as a 'kinkster' is further complicated by the intricate relationship tying and being tied has with sexual experiences and with kink or BDSM-informed narratives. I use here the term 'kinkster' to include people who have a kink component in their practice, regardless of what it is and to what extent it is embedded in the fabric of the practice. While in many cases the act of binding or restraining a person has been extensively used and considered as a valuable tool in BDSM play, a certain percentage of interview partners have either not identified, or have identified only tangentially with the BDSM framework, and their voices ought to be recognized accordingly alongside others.

Regardless of the position that one assumes, for owners and organisers it is crucial to maintain a sex-positive attitude within the spaces, as well as including sex as a possibility but not an obligation, in the space rules or the welcome/ introductory/ initiation talks. To this end, I have discussed at length with both F.R. from The Barn in Berlin and A.B. from The Garden in London, the only two space owners I had the chance to speak with from the three field sites. Before moving towards individual experiences and identitarian positioning, it was important for me to understand what climate is proliferated within the tying venues per se in terms of rope's affiliation with BDSM/kink, what is encouraged and what is not; where the level of tolerance is, and how that level differs in each of the field sites. Both space owners from the Barn and the Garden have talked about it to a large extent. Interview partner F.R. from the Barn

even commented on how important it is to remain tolerant to different ways of expressing and embodying rope, including those with sexual elements (I.F. Berlin.8 / 3.11.2018):

F.R.: having the sexuality in there as well, it's just another tool. Which I wouldn't exclude; because if you exclude something, it becomes more important [...] And also, we go along very well [at the Barn], because we always declare it, it's very clear, from the very beginning, it's written in the event description and in the beginning I say it, and then you know it.

Including sexuality as part of an activity such as rope play or BDSM, can be seen as just another tool or element within that practice, says F.R. They argue against excluding sexuality because doing so could unintentionally make it more significant or taboo, possibly creating tension or misunderstanding. As a space owner and a practitioner with a significant influence in the rope scene, F.R. highlights the importance of clear communication and transparency, particularly at events such as The Barn. By openly acknowledging the role of sexuality from the outset—in event descriptions and announcements—a mutual understanding among participants is established. This openness helps set boundaries, manage expectations, and foster a respectful environment where everyone knows what to anticipate.

As clear-cut as this might sound, social context also plays a very important role in how a venue is positioning itself on the market. In London, interview partner and owner of the Garden A.B. spoke to me about the challenges they faced, as the location of the first studio was not particularly suited for them to be advertising kink or sexual play (I.F. London 2 / 16.01.2019):

A.B.: When we opened that other studio, the one before this, we also were quite disconnected from labelling things like 'BDSM' and things like that. The main reason for it was because we were scared of losing the space, scared of potentially getting shut down [...] I suppose we were too scared of what that might do, if we were going too much down the BDSM and kink route. Both for our online presence and also because the space itself was kind of, an office unit-sharing walls with other people and we thought that, if they take offense to what we're doing, we might get shut down. And essentially the focus was, still is, but was the education. Presenting ourselves like a BDSM - kink play space was also not true. Because if any of the neighbouring people had actually walked in, they would've seen a lot of people in yoga clothing practicing knots, which is really innocuous. So we didn't want to make it sound like it's a dungeon when in fact everyone is sitting around drinking tea. You know what I mean?

The team at the Garden took a cautious initial approach when opening the first studio focused on rope practice. They deliberately avoided labelling the space as a 'BDSM' or 'kink' space due to fears of negative repercussions. The concerns were multifaceted: the risk of being shut down, the potential backlash from social media platforms and apprehension about how neighbouring businesses might react if they misinterpreted the studio's activities. In tune with the local rope bondage landscape at the time, the primary intention of the studio was to make the practice more accessible and educational rather than to present it as a traditional BDSM or fetish space. The choice to project a more neutral image was strategic as well as necessary, given the scarcity of spaces available for open practice at the time. In this way they managed to increase visibility and normalize the rope bondage practice without drawing undue scrutiny or stigma often associated with BDSM, as well as providing a safe space for the people to learn. This illustrates the delicate balance between practicing rope or BDSM-related activities and navigating societal perceptions and potential legal or social obstacles.

After reopening in the new venue, the Garden reached its full potential. Apart from the space being bigger and located in a more secluded area, the scope of the space also became more open, sex- and body-positive. A.B. admitted that in the new location, the Garden's target market became more refined: 'single, female wanting to explore her sexuality'. A rope venue functioning as a 'living room', doing rope here is encouraged in all forms, as long as consent and safety rules are respected. Safety, negotiation and consent aspects are very important, explains, A.B., because:

A.B.: we play with things that are very dangerous, that are taboo, we're flipping norms, we're going into very dark places, that we don't go in regular society [...] it's normal that people obsess more about the safety aspect when they're doing something so dangerous [...] we are playing with stuff that's more intense sexually than most other communities. It's normal that people are more clued in to aspects of consent and negotiations.

During our interview, A.B. pointed out to me that BDSM is not just about physical sexual acts but encompasses a broader exploration of intimacy, taboo, and playing with dangerous or dark aspects of human nature. In BDSM, individuals 'flip norms' and engage in experiences that are not typically found in regular society. This exploration of boundaries and the potential for harm is what brings increased scrutiny and a need for safety. Because BDSM involves intense emotional, psychological, and physical elements, people within the community place a higher emphasis on consent, negotiation, and safety protocols. This is why there's a greater societal focus on the risks and stigmas associated with the practice.

## 5.2. The space of the rope bondage *continuum*

### 5.2.1. Shifting positions, ways of 'being' and 'becoming'

This research attempts to contribute further to an open-ended definition of kink, recognizing the need to have a certain 'definitional plasticity' when dealing with kink phenomena, since 'there are virtually no specific or indisputable criteria for identifying who is a BDSM practitioner, or what kink is' (Pennington, 2018: 1-2, and note 1). Like Pennington, I will emphasize the shortcomings of giving definitional permanency and utilizing systems of interrogation based on binaries such as 'us' / 'them', 'normal' / 'kinky'; as it has been used in order to observe how rope bondage interacts with other sociocultural factors, the relationship between rope bondage and kink can equally be assessed with the help of the rope bondage *continuum* (see Rich, 1982), a model which can accommodate the permanent flux which characterizes rope bondage practices (Pennington, 2018: note 57; Ordean and Pennington, 2019: 69 and note 7).

Characterized as a circular space 'of affects, more than one of properties' (ATP: 478-9), without edges or fixed points but with potential for reversibility, the rope *continuum* is a 'smooth space', 'striated' (see ATP, 1987) by the inclusion of the entire range of rope bondage-identified experiences and identity positionings.<sup>91</sup> The presence of these identitarian striations, together with affective experiences, occupy non-hierarchical positions which can live independently on the *continuum*, or can be juxtaposed to a certain extent over other positions; aside from being non-hierarchical, these positions can also be reversible and circular, as a result of a complex inner web of relations with other positions on the *continuum*. In practice, this translates in a three-dimensional model which acknowledges and incorporates all rope bondage manifestations on its horizontal axis, while also entertaining the possibility of change and re-positioning within the practice of the same body in time, on the vertical one.

Interview partner A.B. from London discusses their relation to their kink identity – which they integrate in their rope bondage practice – invoking a series of positionalities very much akin to the idea of a *continuum* (I.F. London 2 / 16.01.2019):

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<sup>91</sup> In deleuzoguattarian imagination, a 'smooth space', is an 'intensive rather than extensive space, one of distances, not of measures and properties' an '[i]ntense *spatium* instead of *extensio*' (ATP: 479), such as that of a smooth body of water. However, 'filled by events or haecceities far more than by formed and perceived things' (id.), a smooth space never exists *de facto* in pure form, but always in conjunction with 'striated spaces', partitioned fields of movement where free motion is not possible (Lysen and Pisters, 2012: 1).

A.B.: I've recently made full-circle. My identity is submissive, all of my life, if I look back at all my relationships that was my main interest. Being dominated, being on the receiving end of things. When I came into the scene, I marked myself as submissive, when I had to pick a label on [BDSM website] and I also enjoyed tying and I also ventured into topping, just a little bit to try stuff out. And then I thought 'maybe I'm a switch', and then I discovered that 'hurting people'<sup>92</sup> is also kind of fun [giggles]. I changed my label to sadomasochist and from that point onwards, I slowly returned to marking myself down as submissive, to rope bottom and more generally to bottom and then submissive again. I'd describe myself as my primary interest being submission and bottom-y, but I would also tie and top people that I feel particularly connected to, but left my own devices I don't crave it [...] I never fantasize about it at all. It's not something that I would go off an explore that side of myself. If my partner would necessarily want to submit to me or bottom for me, I'd do that for them, but me personally I would not seek it out of my own devices.

*Iris: It's really interesting that you used the metaphor of the full circle, I was wondering what is this 'curve' about, in your opinion?*

A.B.: [...] When I was exploring kink in the beginning and discovering myself and trying stuff out, I sort of had this thought: 'maybe this is who I am and I am changing and transforming into something else'. I would change my label. And then I'd realise that I've done all these things and they were satisfying but my primary inner crave, that I identify with and fantasize about, and want in my life, is this. So, I just came back to it. But it was nice to have done that and not being so deep set on 'this is my identity forever' and now, I mean, ask me in 2 years, I am really open to change.

A.B.'s testimony provides vivid insight into the complex and sometimes circular universe of rope bondage practitioners, whose practice develops in different directions, or even comes back 'full-circle' as they progress into the practice over time. It also vividly testifies to the fact that by choosing identities on the kink *continuum*, kink becomes not only an attribute of a sexual practice but a perceptible identitarian component: 'I am kinky'. In recapitulating their different kink identitarian positions, A.B. exemplifies how valid each position on the rope / kink *continuum* was for them at a certain moment in their practice, and how relationalities between different positions can determine a fluid advancement between these positions, or towards new positions altogether. Although marking themselves as a submissive in the beginning, A.B. did not choose to remain enclosed within the confines of this label, but was instead quite keen to 'try stuff out', before moving through diverse labels such as sadomasochist, rope bottom and then

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<sup>92</sup> The expression 'hurting people' must here be understood solely in the consensual context of a kink scene.

returning to the submissive space. Comparing this testimony to other data I have gathered in each of the field sites, it becomes evident that just like A.B., a significant number of individuals I have encountered in the rope bondage scene have either 'tried out' tying from various positions (tying someone, being ties, switching, self-tying in various constellations) at a certain moment in their practice, which has attracted with it a series of identitarian changes and reversals, 'not being so deep set on 'this is [their] identity forever''. In some cases, as my fieldwork progressed and I kept on returning to the same field sites, I discovered that a few interview partners had expanded their positionality to different spaces of expression, stimulated by the wide range of interactions rope makes possible. Nevertheless, it is important to note that these identitarian expansions do not exist in isolation, but are rather the result of relational positions on the rope *continuum*, that is to say, of the manner in which a commonly negotiated interaction is taking place between two individuals who occupy a position on the rope *continuum*. A.B. further reflects on these aspects (I.F. London 2 / 16.01.2019):

A.B.: Identities don't exist in the vacuum, they exist in relation to other people's identities of their own use, so I identify in certain ways in relation to another person. I might meet someone for whom I might be the dominant one. I will tap into that side of myself for that particular dynamic because they instigate that in me and I instigate that in them, so they're not completely vacuums. And if I think about the things I seek out, the people I seek out as play partners, I go like: 'I want to play with that person' it's always because they're male, dominant and I enjoy this kind of activities. It's what I seek out, I never seek out the 21 [year-old], female submissive to play with. It's not what I want but if I happen to meet one and I am really attracted to them and they want to be my submissive, and I want to be their dominant, I'm not saying no to that either.

A new, relational layer of meaning to the rope *continuum* comes forth with this occasion. A.B. gives a pertinent personal perspective on the question of inter-relationality between different identitarian positions on the rope *continuum*, and attests to the fluidity of one identitarian position in relation to another, and what I will name the condition of mutuality. Although speaking from a place heavily informed by subjective experience, A.B. does not think of themselves as having a fixed identity which exists by itself and remains unchanged throughout their body's accumulation of situated knowledge as a result of human interaction; it is exactly by employing this rich subjectivity into processes of self-exploration present in the highly analytical description A.B. makes of 'different sides' of themselves, that identity becomes a flowing, versatile, ever-growing, situational process which accumulates, subtracts from itself, or changes completely, depending on the nature of a particular contact. A.B. 'taps into' a particular 'side' of

themselves within a particular scene dynamic ‘because they instigate that in me and I instigate that in them’, with the aforementioned condition of mutuality being satisfied – as we shall further see, through processes such as affective space sharing and affective contagion mediated through attraction, negotiation, or consent.

Within an identitarian positioning on the rope *continuum*, it can occur that for some practitioners it becomes very difficult to distinguish between their different identities, inside and outside the scene.

Interview partner M.R. from Paris commented subtly about this confluence (I.F. Paris 12 / 22.08.2018):

M.R.: if we assume BDSM is a transcendence of cruelty, then erotic art is a lot about transcending violence in something beautiful or aesthetic. So the parallel is quite natural for me. And I also do BDSM in my, in my everyday life and what bondage brought me and I was eager to find is also the fact that I don’t have to separate different ... aspects of my life that much that can be problematic to assume socially ... like a transition of the sexuality that is really raw, I don’t know, real as much as in rope bondage. And it’s such a huge part of who I am that it feels like I always will have to not necessarily justify but explain and take the risk of feeling judged if I am willing to connect with somebody or to speak truly about myself.

This passage illustrates the M.R. complex positioning, at the interplay between self-expression, social norms, and the desire for authenticity within the context of BDSM. Similar to the process of transforming cruelty into something beautiful or transcendent, in the same way in which erotic art often converts themes of violence into aesthetic expression, M.R. reflects on the connection between BDSM, erotic art, and personal identity: this parallel feels natural, because both practices involve taking raw, potentially harsh aspects of human experience and reshaping them into something meaningful or pleasing. Rope bondage, as part of BDSM, allows M.R. to integrate various parts of their life, particularly aspects that might be socially challenging to express or accept. They describe a sense of relief in not needing to compartmentalize their sexuality, which they view as ‘raw’ and authentic; in this way, rope becomes a medium through which they can embrace their true self more fully. This is done sometimes at the expense of ‘feeling judged’; nevertheless, M.R. feels that rope and kink is so much a part of themselves, that they are willing to risk judgment and take on the challenge of explaining who they are when openly sharing this part of their identity.

On the subject of how rope bondage influences identitarian positioning as an explorative means of ‘becoming’, interview partner B.L. claims (I.F. London 3 / 17.01.2019):

B.L.: I can use tying with someone as a way to knowing [them] better, I can use tying with someone as a way to get to know myself better, my body and its needs [...] I'[m] a switch. So, I find it less confusing for the people that I'm currently involved with, because I'm either one or the other with each of them. Currently, I'd like to find someone but I have not found, someone who I can switch roles with on a regular basis, but at the moment I don't have that and I don't have anyone to raise that with. So, I am into switching, [I am] a masochist, a sadist, but I am not submissive. I've tried that shit but I didn't like it. I can be dominant but it depends very much, the two people that I have dominant feelings for, those feelings were sparked pretty much the minute I met them. It's very much a chemistry thing for me. I wouldn't say that I am a dominant ... like, as a role, do you know what I mean? I can be dominant if the way you are inspires that in me. Yeah. I also do tend to attract a lot of rope bottoms, who will not top anyone, ever, for any reason.

B.L. explains the multiple ways in which this medium becomes a tool enabling them to explore their partner's situational identity wishes, needs and desires, as well as their own. At a first glance, B.L. seems to firmly inhabit some kinky identitarian labels, which had been attained through the accumulation of embodied knowledge during numerous rope scenes – 'I am into switching, [I am] a masochist, a sadist, but I am not submissive', and being able to somewhat restrict themselves to either tying of being tied, one at a time – 'I find it less confusing for the people that I'm currently involved with, because I'm either one or the other with each of them'. Beyond this assessment, however, lies a situational process which plays out with similar versatility as it does for A.B.: even if B.L. assigns one part of themselves to a specific person or a particular dynamic for the sake of avoiding confusion, the persistence of a certain inter-relationality between different identitarian roles and interpersonal dynamics is openly acknowledged. B.L. exemplifies very clearly in discussing the dominant side of themselves: 'I can be dominant but it depends very much, the two people that I have dominant feelings for [...] It's very much a chemistry thing for me [...] I can be dominant if the way you are inspires that in me', mediated through the same affective processes which will be discussed further on throughout this chapter. 'Becoming' someone (dominant, submissive, fluid, etc.) based on what the other person's 'being' incites in a practitioner – if the way you are inspires that in me – is truly the pinnacle of the working identitarian *continuum*. The 'being' and 'positioning', thus turns into a dynamically generative 'becoming behaviour' and 'becoming sensation' (Bankston, 2017: 1; see Deleuze, 1994 [1968]). Essential to mention here, then, is that even the process itself of switching is indicative of fluidity and flexibility, not only regarding the fact that different identitarian positionings coexist in the same person, but also of the different affective processes and sensations which comes with each rope interaction.

A.B. and B.L.'s reflection on their fluid identitarian actualization is based on the process of the 'virtual real' which becomes the 'actual real' the moment the condition of mutuality is being fulfilled (Deleuze, 1966: 42-43, and 81; Deleuze, 2002a, 44; also see Massumi, 2002). Deleuze defines the 'virtual' and the 'actual' real to refer to two aspects of reality, where 'virtual' is an aspect which is ideal, a potentiality yet unfulfilled or in the course of its fulfilment, whereas the 'actual' represents the very moment of that potentiality being realised and fulfilled (also see Pearson, 1999).<sup>93</sup> That is to say that the moment a particular 'side' is being activated or 'inspired', is also the moment that identitarian potentiality is transformed from the 'virtual' and become 'actualized' during the negotiated scene, when A.B. and B.L. 'become' that potentiality, embodying a certain identitarian locus, or 'become sensation' during the affective interchange in a tying session. And since 'virtuality' and 'actualization' are continuous multiplicities inseparable from the process of actualization itself, so does the 'virtual' multiplicity not only 'express abstract alternative possibilities', but also the 'openness to chance, that inheres in every situation' (Roffe, *id.*). As a consequence of the multiplicity's capacity to accommodate openness and change, A.B. and B.L. are perfectly capable of visualizing and manifesting their identitarian potentiality coming out as an effect of their subjective experience, sitting alongside their openness to exploring other potentialities 'if the way [the others] are, inspire that in [them]'. Interestingly, B.L.'s final remark on finding potential partners 'who will not top anyone, ever, for any reason' ends up rendering homage to the *continuum's* diverse and supple nature, by which rigid approaches which would not normally accommodate identitarian flexibility can undergo potential changes, if certain factors come together. In this way, what could initially be a clear-cut and firm positioning can easily 'become' its opposite, in the light of an affective encounter which stimulates previously underexplored 'sides' of the self.

### **5.2.2. The role of agency in identitarian positioning**

An important question which needs to be asked at this point, is how to discuss personal agency in the context of identitarian positioning and the employment of that identity, and to what extent the influence of other factors external to one's self are playing into identitarian positioning. Just like 'identities don't exist in the vacuum, they exist in relation to other people's identities' (A.B.), identitarian positions cannot exist outside the influence of larger contexts which impact subjective experience in one way or another,

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<sup>93</sup> Deleuze conceptualizes the 'virtual' as synonymous to Bergson's 'duration'. Both Deleuze and Bergson have been influenced by a quotation from Marcel Proust, who describes 'virtual' memory as 'real but not actual, ideal but not abstract' (see Roffe, 2010: 182).

be it rooted in the historical, the cultural, the social, or having to do with the internal politics and the culture of a rope locality or a tying venue. One pertinent example of this sort that I encountered in the field, consisted of a series of processes of reflection, re-evaluation, and (re-)positioning, in the wake of the internal disruptions which took place at The Greenhouse in the spring of 2018; many interview or informal conversation partners have told me that the manner in which the events unfolded prompted an urgent re-evaluation of their practice as well as of their position in relation to the rope bondage practice (field notes, Paris, June-July 2018; see also the Appendix).

Some of these re-evaluations are connected to sexual practices and sexual identity (and will be discussed further in this chapter), while others imply a processual self-evaluation in a more expanded sense, a questioning of the self as well as of how oneself is perceived by those with whom they interacted, or by the larger tying locality. For instance, numerous riggers in Paris sought to reconnect with their previous tying partners, aiming to gather information about any potential inappropriate behaviour they might have exhibited in the past (field notes, Paris, June 2018; also see Appendix). An otherwise commendable intention in itself, this process prompts by its very nature a re-visitation of what have been main identitarian components at one time, and has the potential to trigger a re-positioning of oneself.

In other instances, positioning can also be informed by systemic exposure to the same educators, especially in the early years of the practice – whether we discuss these aspects in relation to phenomena of ‘Japanisation’ (field notes, Berlin October 2017; Paris, April 2018; see Appendix), or simply to a tying venue with a strong local tying culture – or whether in promoting a certain ‘style’ of tying (field notes and informal personal communications, London, January 2019), or to the same group of people, some of whom might enjoy similar experiences. Interview partner A.N. discusses an instance from such a situation, as it has shaped their experience as a new-comer to the practice and to the Garden (I.F. London 1 / 13.01.2019):

A.N.: In effect, what you see happening, is that we tend hold it for people who started at the same time, and we are having the tendency to stick together, be there like a group of friends at a time. So, you get these sorts of cohorts, of people who are having a similar experience, going at similar paces [...]. There was a lot of time during my first year or two [when] I would be sitting around with the same sort of people upstairs, because like, that is where people hung out, a lot of those people are not coming anymore so that part of the atmosphere is somewhat lost. But I think it’s just the effect of who I was, who I knew when I started, rather than anything else. Yeah, the Garden really brought my social aspect to the fore.

A.N. 's testimony shows how group dynamics can shape the structure of a venue or locality, as well as impacting subjective 'lived' experience, and by extension also identitarian position. A.N. observes how in the Garden, people who are new to the field or appertaining to the same 'generation' tend to gravitate around each other, in solidarity with those who are at the same stage in their practice. Whether tying together more regularly, or gathering 'upstairs'<sup>94</sup> to 'hang out', groups of people who might be considered of the same generation in the Garden, tend to evolve with similar specificities to some extent, which has inherent bearing on some aspects of their identitarian position: 'people who are having a similar experience, going at similar paces', as my interview partner puts it.

Other London-based interview partners, including the owner of the studio, have talked about the Garden being a space with a specific strong social discourse and with internal 'house rules' which sometimes touch upon aspects which might encourage certain identitarian positionalities (field notes, January 2019, and I.F. London 2 / 16.01.2019; I.F. London 3 / 17.01.2019; I.F. London 4 / 16.01.2019; I.F. London 5 / 18.01.2019; also see Appendix). The 'values' openly promoted by the Garden during their induction sessions and available on their website under the section 'Our Values', is consistent with most of the values and beliefs that my interview partners expressed in relation to their practice, and to their identitarian affiliation as practitioners. These include being 'sex / kink positive', 'gender-inclusive' and encouraging a 'body-positive' attitude which promotes 'diversity, inclusion [and] tolerance' (The Garden's website, online resource; field notes, London: 04.2016, 01.2019; see Appendix). Each of these values respond to valid problematics which are at the core of most relevant discourses of this century, and which impact the rope scene in very particular ways – and which should be rightfully ratified and appreciated for their inclusivity. It is, moreover, also important to acknowledge the political dimension of identitarian affiliation manifested in norm-driven contexts, in relation to other tying localities and to the scene at large, whether we utilize an umbrella-frame like kinknormativity,<sup>95</sup> or we analyse how 'situated knowledge' (Haraway, 1988) operates alongside identitarian positions on a case-to-case basis.

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<sup>94</sup> 'Upstairs' refers to the architectural disposition of the venue, which comprised a second story corresponding to a mezzanine-like balcony. During my time in the field, I have observed a growing tendency of using or incorporating these types of mezzanine structures in the tying venues. For example, the Greenhouse in Paris had a similar architectural structure, and was used for the same purposes (field notes, Paris, April 2018); interview partners A.R. (I.F. P.1. / 11.06.2019) and K.I. (I.F. P.11. / 18.06.2018) also talk about their experience with the 'upstairs' Greenhouse, a place where they could relax and initiate conversation during a rope jam.

<sup>95</sup> Coined by Pennington (2017: 41-56) 'kinknormativity [...] outlines kinky identity built upon a population of compliant bodies within a group otherwise seen as pariah' (also see Puar 2017: 38 cited in Pennington, *ibid.*). Conversely, while kinknormativity functions as 'a political identity-construction tool to aid struggles for tolerance' (55), it still remains

My focus, however, does not centre on evaluating the ethical foundations of these assertions per se, despite their significance and relevance. Instead, my aim is to recognize their impact on the processes of identity formation within a rope locality. That is to say, this section does not assess whether or not ‘values’ such as the ones promoted by the Garden<sup>96</sup> are ‘pertinent’, or ‘good for the community’, but rather in how their existence aims to encourage the incorporation of certain behavioural reflexes by the rope practitioners who visit the venue, and therefore also encouraging a certain way of ‘being kinky’.<sup>97</sup> In this respect, even though the rope *continuum* professes a horizontal, non-hierarchical disposition of the positions, it could be said that some positions tend to be grouped together, as a result of a variety of reasons which include the directional preferences encouraged by the venues within which a certain group evolves.

In addition, and in a somewhat natural logic, external social, historical, and cultural factors influence collective discourses and positions, beyond individual identity formation. Interview partner C.F. (I.F. Berlin 4 / 11.11.2018) from Berlin discussed at length how complex historical and sociocultural factors have contributed to the formation of a very particular composite local rope scene in Berlin:

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exclusionary, enabling ‘kinksters themselves to construct dividing lines’ (51), through which some practices would be brought to the fore, and others would inherently be ‘left out’ (56). Pennington asserts: ‘normativity claims are frequently made to counteract pathologization and fight for inclusion, which is supposedly the basis of equality in opportunity, rights, and status. Thus kinknormativity, like homonormativity and transnormativity, could be framed as a political’ (55).

<sup>96</sup> It is vital to note that the ‘values’, and ‘rules of conduct’ discussed here are components of a larger problematic involving negotiation, consent, and group behaviour in BDSM / kink and rope bondage. Literature constantly emphasizes on the importance of these applying certain patterns of behaviour in one-to-one ‘safe, sane and consensual’ negotiated interactions, as well as for the sake of keeping a healthy community (see kink literature Baldwin, 1993, Graydancer, 2009; Langridge and Baker, 2007; Midori, 2001; Vane, 2014, academic literature Beckmann, 2009; Newmahr, 2010; 2011; Galati, 2017; Pennington, 2018; Weiss, 2006; 2008; 2009; amongst many other examples). For the purposes of this chapter, only a limited number of examples pertaining to this subject will be discussed.

<sup>97</sup> It should be mentioned that Pennington (2018), Galati (2017) and I have conducted fieldwork in the same tying venue in London, the Garden. Pennington asserts that no matter how incorporative discourses promoted by tying spaces such as the Garden are, they end up endorsing kinknormativity, and therefore excluding some members or the scene. I am in agreement with Pennington regarding kinknormativity’s potentiality to frame exclusionary identities, which although aiding ‘struggles for tolerance’ (55), goes against a horizontal, non-hierarchical perception of the practice. Nevertheless, my experience in the field has shown there is a demonstrated need for having shared ‘values’, as well as having rules and lists of ‘dos and don’ts’, in order to define a certain context within which rope interactions are to develop. Informal conversation partners from the Barn in Berlin agreed that having ‘rules of conduct’ help create a ‘nice’ and ‘healthy’ atmosphere in the festival; other informal conversation partners from Paris blamed the rapid degradation of the Greenhouse community partially on having vague and unclear ‘house rules’, which were often bypassed and intentionally omitted in the space (field notes, Berlin, March 2018; Paris, June-July 2018).

*Iris: Why do you think Berlin is such a fertile ground for the different movements and growth of quite different scenes?*

C.F.: Berlin has been a place for very progressive cultural development, very experimentalist and then also very sexual, like sexual developments and stuff like that [...] A lot of people have been coming to Berlin, who were drawn by easier opportunities of living a nonconformist lifestyle, because it didn't have to have such a lot of money. There were a lot of people coming here who were either artists or who were leftists who were trying to develop more collectivist lifestyles, who were interested in the political developments, in the autonomous scene in the 80s and what was left over of that in the 90s and 2000s. And in the past 20 years, also a lot of internationals came to Berlin because it was the one capital that was still affordable – and in the West, more or less.

Let me add one thing first: I think something that influenced the Berlin [rope] scene, is that feminism and queer movements and queer lifestyles have been very influential in Berlin because of all of this. And I would say the general kink scene and the rope scene in Berlin is much more informed by these two developments or these two movements [...]. I would say we have like a cultural foundation here with many people having been involved in these kinds of collective communities before they even started into kink. I think the common sense in Berlin is a bit more towards the left and a bit more towards feminism and queer ideas, than in many other parts. It informs the rope scene around [the Barn], that definitely informs the general kink scene here, which is centred around munches,<sup>98</sup> so people would be very criticised there if they said things like 'a true submissive has to do this or that'. I would say that the Berlin identity, if you can talk about Berlin culture, is a lot focused on fluidity and flexibility.

This rich testimony integrates the practice of rope bondage within a sociocultural context which has played a role in the way in which it the scene has been shaped and evolved, C.F. claims. Berlin has had a big capacity to acquire an 'international' community of 'leftists' and 'artists', who saw here 'easier opportunities' to carry out a 'nonconformist lifestyle', and which in turn, has shaped the landscape of the rope scene. C.F. cites affordability and the favourable geographical position the city has, of being 'in the West', as two key aspects which permitted the creation of 'collectivist lifestyles' and the development of 'feminism', 'queer movements' and of 'queer lifestyles' more generally. While albeit fascinating, a cultural

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<sup>98</sup> A 'munch' is a BDSM / kink social gathering, often in informal settings, aimed at popularising kink practices, and making them accessible, especially to new-comers.

examination of Berlin's culture(s) over the last few decades is out of the scope of this thesis, it's important to note here that a significant number of those who are involved in the kink and the rope scene have also been involved in one way or another in these movements and collectives, generally thought of adhering to 'nonconformist lifestyles.' C.F. identifies kink / tying venues such as the Barn as fusion poles, where social movements found a strong echo, and which influenced identitarian positions and the ways in which kink is performed in this locality; the influence of queer, gender nonconforming and feminist movements have also impacted the kink and rope bondage scenes, C.F. acknowledges.<sup>99</sup> A recurrent element which is interesting to note here, is that C.F.'s assessment of the Berlin locality reinforces the anti-essentialist idea of a 'one true way' of 'doing' and 'being' in rope, which has been analysed before in the context of the previous chapter on cultural exchanges. It appears again here, in the context of kink positionings, where those who adopt discourses who encourage a way of kink essentialism which goes against identification with 'fluidity' and 'flexibility' – for example, statements link 'a true submissive has to do this or that' are severely criticised within the group. Whether or not one can perceive the anti-essentialist discourse as becoming kinknormative itself, spiced with 'local flavour' is still open for debate.

A.N. and C.F.'s testimonies and the field data collected in the Greenhouse bring meaningful arguments to the process of understanding the way in which external societal factors and internal politics influence subjective experience and identitarian positioning. Their impact is robustly anchored in the three localities investigated, their presence signalled in many identitarian discourses and positionings of my interlocutors. However strong, the privileging of discourses anchored in 'social representations, ideological and discursive formations' responds insufficiently to the 'densit[ies] of affective materialities, 'lived' experience, the detail of bodily practice and the vibrant character of biological substance' (Cajigas-Rotundo, Hunter and Hernández, 2019: 13), nor to the virtuality, the 'futuraity of the here and the now' (see Muñoz, 2009),<sup>100</sup> crucial elements present in the rope bondage practice. Therefore, favouring a balanced analysis which acknowledges the importance of the former without diminishing the importance of the latter, is the only way of doing justice to the complexities the practice arises, and to avoid a crude flattening of different positionalities which may exist in a locality in spite of dominant narratives disseminated by educators and venue owners. Thus, correlating composite analyses mobilized by affective responses and situated knowledge with non-hierarchical, yet individualised positionings on *continuums*

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<sup>99</sup> This has also been my experience living and conducting fieldwork in Berlin (and to a large extent London, too) as a researcher-participant. I witnessed a general relaxed atmosphere and openness towards different types of lifestyles, in rope/ kink scenes and non-rope / non-kink scenes, in a way which was different from my 'lived' experience in Paris.

<sup>100</sup> I make appeal to Muñoz's research on queer practices, which, he argued, are enacted 'here' and 'now' but are profoundly future-oriented utopic ways of 'being' and 'doing' in the world (Muñoz, 1999, 2006, 2009).

characterized by ‘flexible demarcations’, is the only way to embody ‘practices of being’ (Muñoz; *ibid.*: 681) without falling into the traps of exclusionism and essentialism, but rather moving away from these fixed categorizations.

### **5.3. Rope bondage’s relationship with the kink *continuum***

As the previous section has demonstrated, the variety of manners in which rope bondage practitioners position themselves on the rope bondage *continuum*, refusing certain narratives and incorporating others is proof of the existence of a *multiplicity* which heartens non-hierarchical identitarian positioning on the *continuum* and stands as further proof for ‘the diversity of embodiments and identifications rope bondage makes possible’ (Ordean and Pennington: 69). While the chapter on Methodology has advanced the idea of the *multiplicity* as a viable research meta-model, in utilizing multiplicity as a theoretical framework integrative of the identitarian *continuum* alongside many others, the complexities of this practice begin to unravel; elements in the multiplicity are in continuous expansion, capturing an instance of existence and perception (Tampio, 2010).

Analysis of the field data collected in London, Berlin and Paris attest to the veracity of these claims. While some of the interview fragments reproduced below support the idea of a connection between the rope *continuum* and BDSM / kink to various degrees, others are supporting the claim that rope bondage experiences cannot be contained exclusively under the umbrella of BDSM or even of kink, for that matter. While studies have shown that kink activities provide unique experiences which enhance the body’s ability to accumulate knowledge through ‘lived’ experience (Beckmann, 2009; Newmahr, 2010; 2011, Pennington, 2017), my venture is to demonstrate this accumulation of knowledge is not only the result of body and more-than-bodily experiences, nor can it be categorised simply as ‘kink knowledge’.

Firstly, because the practitioners themselves might reject positionality on the BDSM / kink *continuum*. This positionality, whether it is inside or outside of the two *continuums*, depends enormously on how practitioners choose to identify in relation to ‘kinky’ identitarian labels, to having a ‘kinky’ lifestyle, to the spaces and venues where kinky activities take place – sometimes favouring a localised specific tying culture – or to their relationship with the kink scene in general.<sup>101</sup> Consequently, each of these responses

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<sup>101</sup> It is, of course, imperative to take into account that a standardized definition of ‘kink’ or ‘BDSM’ does not exist at present; numerous attempts at defining ‘kink’ have been made but a unanimous consensus has yet to be reached. Some voices in the field even claim a such an unanimity can never be achieved, since one person’s understanding of kink might or might not be identical to the next person (informal communications in Berlin and London, 2017-2018).

is analysed taking into consideration the specific identitarian parameters the interviewee had at the moment the interview took place, how they defined the concepts of 'kink' and 'BDSM'. While interview partners can recognise some relatively constant identitarian characteristics within themselves (for instance A.B. and B.L. who state 'my identity is submissive', 'I am a switch', '[I am] a masochist, a sadist, but I am not submissive', I.F. L.2 / 16.01.2019 and IF L.3 / 17.01.2019) over a certain period of time, the relational mutuality which is instituted during a negotiated scene – the affective particularities of which shall be later further unpacked – is related to the temporal consistency of the affective contagion which holds for the duration of that particular scene. In other words, in spite of the apparently 'fixed' identities which someone could identify with outside of the context of a negotiated scene (B.L. who identifies as a 'switch', A.B. who identifies as a 'submissive' are just two of many examples), the affective economy which unfolds during that scene has the potential to de-territorialize identity rigidities (a 'submissive' person could expose 'dominant' behaviour within that scene, or with other persons 'if the way [they] are inspires that in [them'])). Hence, each manifestation of relational mutuality has its own fingerprint in a sense, as no scene and no identitarian relationality can be entirely replicated again, not even when the same people are involved in that negotiation. The other variable links back to the unfixed identitarian positioning on the rope *continuum*, which does not preclude a different answer at another moment in time, should the practitioner choose to position themselves differently at another moment in the course of their practice. Regardless of these variables, it is worth taking note of the tensions, fluctuations and convolutions which continue to exist in the practice.

#### **5.4. Language matters (?)**

At the heart of this chapter – and this research in general – stands the idea that one should look at rope bondage as a practice that includes human and non-human interactions, bodies, sensations, cultural elements, identitarian positionings. As a precursor to language (Clough, 2010; Massumi, 2002; Sedgwick, 2003; Tomkins, 1962), affect corresponds to the 'passage from one experiential state of the body to another' (ATP, 1987: xvi). Nevertheless, in spite of the complex ways in which bodies exercise intensities over one another, field research has shown that the role of language remains an important component, albeit post-body or post-experience; neglecting it would mean neglecting some evident realities in the field. This tension, better described as an oscillation between 'ideological and discursive formation' and 'affective materialities' and subjective, 'lived' experience (Cajigas-Rotundo, Hunter and Hernández, 2019: 13), is intrinsic to any human interaction; in the context of rope bondage, it also has to do with utilizing

BDSM / kink-specific terms in the context of rope interactions, or to convey concepts or symbols through practice-specific terminology, which does not only add to the process of positionality, but which also internalizes 'somatic' 'bio-power' (Foucault 1996: 209; also see Damasio, 2000; 2008[1994]).<sup>102,103</sup> While at a theoretical level I'm not convinced jargon could really be put under the umbrella of affective experiences, I do argue that there must be space in the Kink *Continuum* for language. It is a reality of the field.

To explain: language sometimes resurfaces as a key element in identitarian positioning of some of my interview partners. The ambiguity (and incompleteness) of language or terminology in the rope field is often a cause of discussion and sometimes debate.<sup>104</sup> Language is the main element in pre-session negotiation, which primarily uses verbal communication to scope the scene within the boundaries of consent as defined by all participants. As Hart has noted in relation to SM practices, it is not so much a question of 'speaking' but rather about 'doing' (Hart, 1998: 57). Similarly, in a world in which the body is not a self-referential signifier, I'm arguing words, and especially kinky ones, are executing the performativity of language, describing practices of thinking-feeling. Some practitioners, as we shall see below, use terminology in support of positioning their rope practice as kink. Therefore, failing to discuss language would be releasing the Kink *Continuum* into the world in an incomplete form. Ultimately, language is understood here as an element in the process of identitarian positioning: it is about naming, rather than semantics. *How I name* myself as a kink practitioner, *what* do I name a certain way in relation to what I'm practicing at a given moment, and to what degree can become flexible over time and in different contexts, is what concerns me here.

Parisian interview partner T.P. was quick to support a seemingly inviolable connection between rope bondage and BDSM (IF. Paris 17 / 27.06.2018):

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<sup>102</sup> I am utilizing the concepts of 'bio-power' and 'somatic power' in a Foucauldian sense, for whom power affects the body 'not because it was first internalized in people's consciousness', but rather because it exists in a pre-conscious and primary state: '[t]here is a network of bio-power, of somatic power [...] within which we both recognise and lose ourselves' (id.).

<sup>103</sup> Introduced by António Damásio, the 'somatic markers hypothesis' advances the idea that emotional processes influence behaviour, through a psychological process through which certain bodily feelings or reactions are associated with emotions (Damasio, 2000; 2008).

<sup>104</sup> I can reminisce several such moments during fieldwork. For example, one of the editions of The Barn dedicated an entire session to issues of language, terminology and definitions. These sessions don't have a problem-solving format, but are rather putting some issues forth: limitations regarding definitions, labels, kink terminology, identity (field notes, Berlin, March 2018). Not to mention that every important rope bondage publication I ever consulted dedicates a section to language and terminology.

*Iris: Do you think there is a link between rope bondage practices, your practice 'philosophy' and BDSM?*

T.P.: Yes, definitely. I mean, I don't understand how some people can say that it's not BDSM. Because we all know what BDSM stands for [...] it has bondage in it, even if you take the B of BDSM, inside the acronym somewhere there is domination and submission, and rope is, at its core, a power-play. I don't understand how for some people it could not be. Even in the smallest bits, it is a power-play. Whether it's in a sexual context or leisure activity, it's linked to BDSM. So, yeah, for me it's a part of BDSM.

T.P.'s testimony supports an unquestionable connection between BDSM and rope bondage. It brings the connection between language and experience back to the forefront: the dynamics of 'power-play' stand at the heart of the practice, making rope 'at its very core' a physical manifestation of 'a power-play' between those who engage in the negotiated scene. Beyond trans-culturalist implications and appropriation (as we have seen in the previous chapter), language appears again as an agglutinating factor: starting from the first letter of in the acronym, which is the description of the practice which effectively binds various parts of the human body, and moving on to other kink-specific labels such as 'domination' and 'submission', the role of language reappears here, intrinsically linked with human experience. T.P.'s logocentric view is not singular in the milieu; written literature often gives considerable importance to the way in which jargon is being deployed in rope bondage-specific contexts (see footnote 22 above, Vane, 2014, 2017). As we have seen, interview partner T.P. conceptualizes kink-specific terms such as 'domination', 'submission', and 'power-play' as essential to the practice. These are, in T.P.'s view, attributes which exist specifically 'inside the [BDSM] acronym' and are indispensable to a consensual scene, especially so since the initial negotiation, and hence the establishment of the common dynamic between participants, is expressed verbally. Conversely, T.P. explains how power dynamics are embedded into the epicentre of the practice, present 'at the very core' and 'even in the smallest bits', through a consented exchange of somatic power, which exists implicitly and affects the body even before it reaches the step of the consensual rope scene negotiation. It is useful to mention here that affect and 'somatic power' play a significant role in the processes of identification, and in practitioners' relationality with the BDSM and kink *continuums*.

Other interview partners expressed different points of view regarding their affiliation to BDSM and / or kink. Parisian interview partner A.L., for example, frequents the same tying spaces as T.P., but dis-identifies deeply with BDSM or kink practices (IF. Paris 1 / 08.07.2018):

A.L.: Yeah, I don't really recognize myself in, all the BDSM patterns [...] that's why I don't recognize myself in BDSM community, as I feel ... like, that's one of the main concepts of all of it, when you are in a BDSM relationship, it's all about shame and playing with your mind, with your confidence, and putting you in some delicate position that makes your ... it's like mind-fucking you know? And, and I, that's not something I'm really fond of. I have to be really intimate with the person. That has to be some kind of relationship, so, we can do this and it feels right. But that's not something I'm gonna do with who[m]ever or for anyone, a complete stranger, and for me, then, ropes are not that. For me, ropes are much more than that [...] However, there are people for whom this is a part of BDSM and I don't ... I'm just wondering [what would happen] if you happen to do ropes, [and if] one of those people [that are part of the scene] position themselves at the other end of the spectrum.

Concurrently, interview partner A.N. who also frequented The Greenhouse, but is also connected with the Parisian BDSM scene and entertains an active relationship with a submissive, sees rope interactions as situational. When asked if there is a clear connection between rope and BDSM, A.N replied (I.F. Paris 2 / 29.05.2018):

A.N.: Not necessarily. You see, the rope that I do with G.E. is not BDSM at all. There's no link. For example, when I tie certain people, it can be BDSM. When I tied with you, for instance, it wasn't BDSM. There were no domination-submission relationships. There was no place for domination there [...] I do 'domination rope' with my submissive whom I met at a BDSM party and whom I tied in that specific place [...] Come to think of it, with them I don't 'do rope', I 'do BDSM'. I am a *domina* when I am with them. For me it is very different. I don't have to unnecessarily use rope when I dominate them – I like it, because I like rope, but I don't *have* to use it [verbal emphasis].

A.L. is distancing themselves from 'BDSM patterns', which they associate with mind games, shame and vulnerability play, under the absolute auspices of profound intimacy: 'when you are in a BDSM relationship, it's all about shame and playing with your mind', a performative state of being which they do not adhere to in absolute, and which does not find its place in their rope practice. Rather than denying the existence of power-play in such an interaction: 'there are people with for whom this is a part of BDSM', A.L. is creating a system of relationality based on the rapport between the level of intimacy between the participants and the way in which BDSM 'patterns' are expressed. On the contrary, A.L. claims, rope bondage, a much more versatile and complex medium, fosters a significantly larger

‘spectrum’ of possible contacts, which are not necessarily dependent on intimacy vectors, albeit expressing a larger scale of possibilities: ‘ropes are much more than that’.

A.N. supports a nuanced perspective of the use of rope in different contexts. They explain that not all rope activities they engage in are linked to BDSM. For example, when they tie certain individuals, it may involve elements of BDSM, but with others, like life partner G.E., it is purely about the rope itself, with no dynamics of dominance or submission involved. Our own interaction was similar, when A.N. invited me to tie together at The Greenhouse (floor work 22 April 2018) prior to the interview, as a way to get to know each other better; their rope felt caring, tender and inviting. Also, A.N. brings forward a very important point, which we have seen also with other practitioners such as B.L. and as we shall see shortly with practitioner H.E. For many of the people I have interviewed in the scene, it is not necessarily about *doing* rope, as it is rather about *what kind* of rope you are doing, the *intention* behind the action. In this sense, A.N. draws a clear distinction between different interactions: when they tie their submissive partner, the activity becomes an act of domination and forms an integral part of their BDSM relationship. In that context, therefore, they identify as a *domina* and use rope as one of many tools to express their dominance. Nevertheless, they stress that the use of rope is not a necessity in their BDSM dynamic; it’s a preference. This distinction highlights their belief that rope can serve various purposes, and its role depends on the specific relationship and dynamic between the people involved. Other partners used a similar assessment when commenting about the fluidity of identitarian positionings, shifting not because of what rope is, but of what it becomes in a specific situation (see quote from B.L. in Section 5.2.1 of this chapter).

What these comparisons reveal is of great importance. T.P.’s testimony is anchored in the relationship between language and affective experience. Even though the interview fragment in itself does not elucidate which process comes first, or whether assimilating kink-specific terminology prior to tying pre-disposes the practitioner to a particular type of interaction informed by language – in the sense in which preceding exposure to kink-specific language would render a future interaction more towards the BDSM / kink spectrum – T.P.’s response incorporates both registers. On the opposite end, A.L.’s testimony speaks of BDSM / kink ‘patterns’ rather in the context of their subjective, ‘lived’ experience, focused on processes of ‘being’ and ‘doing’: ‘shame’, playing with [the] mind’, ‘putting [the other] in some delicate position’. Partner A.N. supports the idea of rope as an enabler while the outcome of a scene is shaped by affects and intentions. Yet all three testimonies bring elements of power dynamics to the fore, consistent with a

‘somatic’ integration of BDSM / kink elements in ‘speech’ and in ‘action’ alike, whether they are used in an integrative way (T.P.), or as a ‘marker’ (Damásio; 2000) of distinction (A.L. and A.N.).

Another compelling aspect to be noted about these two perspectives, is that a clear separation in positionality, as we have seen here, does not preclude in any way the possibility for a negotiated rope bondage scene between two people with two different ‘positions’ to take place: T.P and A.L. frequently tie together, in ‘public’ (in the former local tying venue, the Greenhouse), in ‘semi-private’ interactions (privately hosted rope play parties), and in private one-to-one negotiated scenes. The ability rope bondage has to be organised as a ‘multiplicity’ enable people such as T.P. and A.L. to interact, without their private affiliations and beliefs getting in the way of a consensually negotiated scene – and judging by A.L.’s sense of wondering from the last sentence of the fragment above, seemingly without even being aware of the other’s difference in opinion. Both the possibility of reaching a communal point in their negotiated practice, and the fact that they (and many other interlocutors in the field who identify differently from each other) are able to perform their practice in the same tying spaces, is one way in which multiplicity can be mobilized by rope bondage’s versatility. This is another example of the way in which an affective economy revealed during a negotiated scene is able to de-territorialise identitarian rigidities, or of how ‘people can participate in the affect of that materiality and change their political agency’ (Cajigas-Rotundo, Hunter and Hernández, 2019: 14), as a result of an affectively negotiated common space – as I have initially posited in section 5.2. of this chapter.

If identitarian positioning in the previous fragments has been expressed in clear affiliative and dis-affiliative terms regarding the rope bondage and the kink / BDSM *continuum*, other positions which treat the subject ambivalently must be equally acknowledged. Some of my interlocutors have avoided definitional constrictions on purpose, instead choosing to adopt a ‘definitional plasticity’ of kink (Pennington, 2018: 1, n. 1 and p. 2), and flexible positioning informed by a specific situation or context. In other words, these positionalities are to be found at the intersection of the rope bondage and the BDSM / kink *continuums*, inclining towards one or the other depending on the context in which they are used. Interview partner H.E. describes such a positionality (I.F. London 4. / 16.01.2019):

*Iris: Is rope BDSM to you?*

H.E.: Well, in the strict sense of the word, you know, Bondage and Discipline, yes, it can be. However, it doesn't have to be. It doesn't have to include any sadism; it doesn't have to include

any masochism – it can [...] I don't think that it really has a great place all the time, especially when it comes to learning in workshops and teaching.

H.E. fully acknowledges the potentiality rope has to mobilize certain BDSM-specific patterns, such as those which include sadistic or masochistic elements. Neither sadism nor masochism are necessary, nor even welcome ingredients in all rope bondage exchanges: 'I don't think that it really has a great place all the time'. H.E. mentions 'learning' contexts such as workshops and teaching as places and activities where the nature of the interaction rarely permits the mobilization of BDSM-specific dynamics. Linguistically, if one *names* things a certain way doesn't necessarily mean one must *follow* those identitarian labels to the core. Language matters, but identitarian positioning matters more.

It follows then, that BDSM / kink are actually practice attributes which could or couldn't be chosen to take part in a rope interaction depending on a certain context, rather than being fixated to identitarian positions. Such examples move the idea of fixed binary categories (rope / BDSM) to a space of multiplicity, where a temporary reframing of the cultures of tying takes place (also see Appendix). In this sense, belonging to one *continuum* or another is more a matter of affect, of 'flow' (see Newmahr, 2011; Pennington, 2017), and situation. Above all, H.E. claims, rope bondage and BDSM are not branches of the same practice, but separate practices which sometimes converge. They give, instead, an example from the opposite perspective, talking about kinksters who do not practice rope bondage, but still position themselves in the BDSM *continuum*. H.E. clarifies:

H.E.: So, do you need to learn rope so that you can do other aspects of BDSM? No. I know some people who have been doing [BDSM] for 50 years. They could barely tie their shoelaces, never mind a TK. But are they some of the highly respected kinky people in the UK? Yes. Do they know exactly what they're doing and they want to slap on a pair of handcuffs, or they want to slap on a pair of leather cuffs? Happy days, yeah. You don't need it. *I still think it is probably lumped in there together in the viewpoint of the wider vanilla world [my emphasis].*

H.E.'s statement attests first-hand to the varied positions of embodiment and identification (Ordean and Pennington, 2019: 69) which these practices make possible. In H.E.'s view, being skilled at performing BDSM corporeal practices such as 'slap[ping] on a pair of handcuffs' or 'of leather cuffs' does not necessarily imply being skilled at tying people or things: my interlocutor reminisces about 'highly respected' long-lasting members in the kink scene who have not chosen to develop any tying-related skills in particular. It is useful to note the tendency of practitioners to stay away from firmly defining corporeal

practices or assuming a certain positionality. While acknowledging that rope bondage can, 'in the strict sense of the word', be a form of BDSM practice, H.E. is quick to exemplify with situations which attest to the mobilization of bodily knowledge production, which is socio-situated, (Haraway, 1988; 1991), contextual, and does not have to follow a model which conflates BDSM and rope bondage practices; on the contrary, H.E. attributes this conflation to negligent categorizations of the 'wider vanilla world', which does not participate in this complex spectacle of knowledge production.

For other interview partners, language seems to play an even bigger role in kink interactions, to the point of positioning oneself as 'being' or 'becoming' something (for example, a kinkster) in relation to the rest of the world. Interview partner A.B. eloquently illustrates how kink-informed language and concepts can be helpful in translating experiences in the kink world (I.F. London 2 / 16.01.2019):

A.B.: [...] If I decided to stop being kinky tomorrow – I wouldn't – but if I stopped, the main thing that I would take with me in my journey is the *vocabulary*. All the words, all the vocabulary all the *context*, I cannot believe that I lived most of my adult life without having these words and concepts part of my relationship lexicon [...] I look at people who are not in the kink scene having relationship problems and I am like 'yes, because you're missing *this* concept and *this* concept and *this* concept and you're not communicating and you're only talking over each other and pointing fingers, because you don't have the words.' So that was the main thing, just the realisation of that.

Having access to kink vocabulary and has been for A.B. an opportunity to enhance their understanding of the world, and the way in which they relate to other people around. Having invested energy into creating an extensive 'relationship lexicon', A.B. points at the kink scene as the main source for acquiring the appropriate words, which helped translate their experiences, feelings, sensations, affective interactions. While not a component of affect itself, language must be acknowledged as a key-tool in the process of 'becoming'. We have seen similar ambivalence or identitarian plasticity in earlier examples in which interview partners have elaborated on their identitarian positioning. Knower-thinkers like A.B. or B.L. have spoken about different identitarian positions and about a sense of genuineness which came in each creative instant. Others, such as T.P. or A.L. adapted more adamant positions, but in spite of this, participate in situational knowledge production in their communal interactions – and where a shared space of flexible positions and affects takes form. Finally, H.E. adds to the constellation by expressing a well-engineered ambivalence, aiming to show that rope bondage and BDSM practices are not indispensable to each other, but are rather subjected to incorporation or division based on situational factors.

## 5.5. Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to advance further into the idea of The *Continuum* as a research model, and to apply it to the sphere of Kink identities. I argued *against* the total dissolution of identities (as this had not corresponded to the realities of the field), but *rather for* a certain identitarian plasticity which can exist both inside and outside the kink or the sexual spectrums. I have called this individualized ‘foldings’ or ‘positionings’.

In section 5.1. I have briefly discussed current tendencies to (re-)frame kink in relation to BDSM, erotic, sexual and non-sexual practices, using academic and non-academic material. Different points of view were mentioned, from authors who subscribe rope bondage to BDSM, to authors who hint at the existence of a larger spectrum, advocating each type of practice as equally valid. I subscribed to the latter category and dedicated the rest of the chapter to illustrating the complexities of different positionalities. In section 5.2. I advanced the theory according to which we should look at rope bondage practitioners as thinkers-feelers with fluid positionalities. Using some interview extracts, I exemplified different positionings, arguing for the validity of each, and the exclusion of none. A methodological solution was the creation of the Kink *continuum* as a reading tool, on which to position non-hierarchical identitarian striations, which stem from ‘lived’ affective experiences and situated knowledge production. I have also mentioned that these positionings are not fixed, but can juxtapose to various degrees over others, and that the same person can have more identitarian positionings over a period of time. Finally, I proposed that identities do not exist in a vacuum, but rather in relation with other identities, pertaining to the people or things with which a practitioner interacts. In Section 5.3. I discussed how the Kink *continuum* research model includes the idea of multiplicity as a meta-model. As this thesis advances multiple types of *continuum*s, this section sees to the integration of the Kink *Continuum* with the others. Finally, in Section 5.4. I brought forth the question of language, an adjuvant, a vessel in the creation of identitarian positioning, without the analysis of which this research would be incomplete. Words pertaining to self-identification (I name myself at this moment in time and space, and in relation to the practice?) place practitioners in a state of constant becoming, oscillating between ideological / discursive formation, affective (im)materialities and subjective ‘lived’ experience

## **Chapter 6: Curating Continuums**

*'Esa voluntad de apresar, es como una parte de ti. Sale de ti y se materializa y la cuerda aprisiona el objeto.'*

P.A. (I.F. F\* 2 / 10.10.2018)

*[This desire to tie, it's like a part of you. It comes out of you and it materializes, and the rope imprisons the object]*

## 6.0. Introduction

The previous empirical chapters of this thesis have dealt with aspects related to transcultural exchanges at work within cultures of tying, whether they relate to know-how and aesthetic (Chapter 4) aspects, or to inclusive or exclusive *kink-normative* practices, contextualised within identitarian formation (Chapter 5). These two perspectives are examples of non-hierarchical entry points in data representation and interpretation in the rhizome formation (also see Chapter 2), as ‘any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be’ (ATP: 7), to which any other entry points can be added after further research on the subject. This chapter is using the framework of ‘the curatorial’ to reflect on the creative partnership *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope* I was a part of together with rope bondage practitioner P.A., and which took place in their home island of F\* in the Mediterranean Sea.

Traditionally, ethnographers have prioritized the ways in which individuals convey knowledge through spoken or written language, and have typically disseminated their research through written texts published by academic presses or presented in lecture halls to scholarly audiences. However, contemporary ethnographers are increasingly exploring alternative formats for presenting their research: these include the creation of photographic collections, films, sound recordings, installations, museum exhibits, and live performances. Scholars Sarah Pink (2015:28, 164) and Dara Culhane (2017: 46-47) talk about the development of ‘sensory ethnography’ which feeds of that which is non- or para-verbal, felt, performed, tacit, affective, mundane, intuitive, emotional or imagined, that which is difficult or even impossible to express using words. Ingold (2011a; 2011b) further contends that sensing bodies should not be understood as mere texts shaped by cultural and political contexts, but rather as active agents that are deeply entangled with other human and nonhuman entities, as well as with our shared environments. In the last years, theoreticians and curators have worked towards developing a theoretical framework which distinguishes the act of ‘curating’ – assembling and caring for a collection or exhibition-making – from ‘the curatorial’, which is ‘akin to the methodology used by artists focusing on the postproduction approach [...] and other material and immaterial phenomena within a particular time and space-related framework [...] it also includes elements of choreography, orchestration, and administrative logistics’ (Lind, 2012: 11-12).<sup>105, 106</sup> ‘The curatorial’ goes beyond the confines of that which is curated, to reveal the research,

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<sup>105</sup> Lind also sees ‘curating’ as a ‘technical modality of making art go public. It is a craft that is [...] [called] ‘curating in the expanded field’; on the other hand, the ‘curatorial’ is ‘something that can also operate beyond the field of art, whether it has other significant features’ and has ‘a multidimensional role’ (2012: 12).

<sup>106</sup> O’Neill and Wilson also assert that: ‘[The] concepts of ‘the curatorial’, [are] conceived as forms of practice operating away from, alongside or supplementary to the main work of curating-as-exhibition-making’ (2015: 12).

fieldwork, methods and processes or meaning-making – it is this latter definition that I engage with in this chapter. There are three reasons for this. Firstly, this thesis presents the *continuum* as an inclusive model of research which has the capacity to incorporate a multitude of identitarian positionalities present in the rope bondage scene – positionalities which are not fixed and rigid, but which can change over time depending on the accumulation of ‘lived’ experience, relational mutuality and to the body of knowledge to which the individual consents should enter their practice. Employing ‘the curatorial’ theoretical framework enables me to examine the stratification of positionality within the *continuum*. In other words, it focuses on *how* positionality is formed and negotiated within a partnership, and how it evolves as the artistic research unfolds. Secondly, ‘the curatorial’ is a useful tool in relation to artistic research, as research methodology is in itself ‘curating’ creative processes. Thirdly, because through extrapolation, I argue this entire thesis is ‘curating’ i.e. bringing together a constellation of materials, processes, affects, ideas, perspectives and methodologies, which evolves into a ‘distinct, transdisciplinary, interwoven field of production and knowledge’ (Bismarck, 2022: 13). I am contributing to the *continuum* research model by interrogating my own positionality(-ies) and ways in which they generate valuable situated knowledge through the constant transformation of my own body (which accumulates knowledge while conducting fieldwork), adding to a constant shift of different roles, depending on the action / interaction at hand: practitioner, learner, thinker-feeler, producer / consumer of knowledge, researcher, creator, or curator: ‘co-producer, auteur, critic or agent provocateur, working with a range of different art practices which unfold in ways that are imbricated with each other within the curatorial process’ (O’Neill and Wilson: 2015: 15).

Section 6.1. outlines concept of ‘the curatorial’ and situate it alongside the rope bondage *continuum*; the production of ‘situated’ knowledge can also be interpreted as an act of accumulation, selection, incorporation and finally transmission. As a way forward, I propose a four-part model of inquiry inspired by the work of Beatrice von Bismarck, *The curatorial condition: ‘curatoriality’, ‘constellation’, ‘transposition’ and ‘hospitality’,* which the author uses as:

terminology capable of viewing the curatorial condition in terms of relations, and thus detached from the controversial notions of curating, curator and exhibition (2022a: 28).<sup>107</sup>

This framework enables the investigation of the creative partnership as a product of affective mutuality created in the spirit of parity and horizontality, and extending beyond the intimacy afferent to a tying

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<sup>107</sup> In section 6.1. I expand further on Bismarck’s argument, which advocates shifting from a subjective perspective to a horizontal approach based on reciprocity and collaboration.

session. Equally, it allows me to evaluate my own positionality as a researcher-practitioner further. That is to say, while immersed in the field in London, Berlin and Paris, I switched between observer (while collecting data using participant observation) and participant (while engaged in negotiated rope bondage sessions), often reflecting on exploring my own body as a site of research (autoethnography). During *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope*, I bring forth my expertise as a contemporary art curator and my willingness to incorporate a creative duo, and examine positionality from the perspective of artistic research: more than a researcher, my body is now *taking part* in processes of co-creation and shared authorship, indispensable from my other ‘half’, co-creator and partner P.A. Under these circumstances, ‘the curatorial’ theoretical framework is a useful tool as its primary purpose is investigating ‘modes of becoming – research-based, dialogical practices in which the processual and serendipitous overlaps with speculative actions and open-ended forms of production’ (O’Neill & Wilson, 2015: 12). I, too, will be concerned with the creative partnership as a *method*, a *way* of being and thinking and moving-together, rather than a means to an end. This position aligns to recent explorations which seek to demonstrate that artistic practices can play a pivotal role in fieldwork by easing access to new and complex empirical fields; bringing forth non-verbal dimensions of human experience, beyond the spoken language of the written word; rendering integrative ‘sensory ethnography’ as both an empirical process and a relational process; and finally holding space for ‘a multiplicity of voices to be heard’ as well as ‘transforming informants and spectators into active knowledge producers’ (see Pussetti et. al., 2018: 7). Section 6.2. will ‘zoom in on the field’ (Silverman, 2013: 8), specifically on *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope*. In doing so, I am presenting a specific case ‘in which an engagement with curatorial relations is reflected in the methods applied’, not as an illustration, but as a continuation to ‘the curatorial’ argument, ‘relat[ing] in their own specific, situated ways to issues of curatoriality, the curatorial constellation, transposition, and the dispositif of hospitality’ (Bismarck, *ibid.*: 29).<sup>108</sup> *Notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope* is derived from my long-term close relationship with rope practitioner P.A. whom I have met several times in Berlin at The Barn. Our repeated encounters, followed by constant online communication materialised in the implementation of a common project – an artist dossier – where different positionalities (viewer, doer, curator, artist, producer, generator, thinker, feeler) switched and morphed constantly, dismantling the idea of fixed roles and

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<sup>108</sup> Throughout this chapter, I often make reference to the ‘dispositif’, as Bismarck herself refers to the four-partite system (‘curatoriality’, ‘constellation’, ‘transposition’ and ‘hospitality’) as ‘dispositifs’. I trace back my understanding of the dispositif to Deleuze’s reading of Michel Foucault’s ‘dispositif’, or ‘apparatus’:

‘[a]pparatuses are therefore composed of lines of visibility, utterance, lines of force, lines of subjectivation, lines of cracking, breaking and ruptures that all intertwine and mix together and where some augment the others or elicit others through variations and even mutations of the assemblage’ (Deleuze, 1992b: 160).

identities. The following four subsections will apply and take this model of inquiry further. As such, subsection 6.2.1.: 'Curatoriality', looks at the formation of the partnership and processes of coming-together and 'becoming', and situating them in relation to the *continuum*. Subsection 6.2.2.: 'Constellation' looks at how knowledge is acquired and embodied rhizomatically within the partnership, and how bodies and nonhuman elements enmesh in a web of episteme and the relations they form with each other. Subsection 6.2.3.: 'Transposition' investigates the intrinsic processes of assembling in relation to outward processes of making-public. In the context of the practice of rope bondage, as well as in the context of the creative partnership, these inside (private) – outside (public) processes translate into acts of 'trans-individuation', exchanges between bodies who 'live' and/or 'situate' knowledge, between oneself and another, between 'the elsewhere' and localities. Subsection 6.2.4.: 'Hospitality' tackles the politics of care and generosity present across the practice, from the generosity of the invitation (an invitation to tie together), demonstrations of solidarity and affection inside the rope scene, to the way in which individuals react to an environment where hospitality is exercised. Although the chief focus of this chapter is describing methodologies of artistic research that took place in *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope*, examples from other interview partners are brought to the fore. No partnership, no practice and no perspective exists in a void. As a final remark, Bismarck contextualizes the four 'dispositifs' of 'the curatorial' as processual mechanisms, but also while taking into consideration the event of the exhibition. In the context of this research, the event of the/an exhibition is a highly desirable, but yet unrealised outcome (also see Chapter 7). Therefore, here I employ and make use of the dispositif *in absentia*, and hint only towards further contextualization within the framework of the exhibition.

### **6.1. Situating the curatorial and the creation of the curatorial *continuum***

In an essay called *The play of protagonists*, the group Raqs Media Collective state:

To curate is to offer, metaphorically speaking, not just old wine in new bottles, or even new wine in no bottles, but also all that is entailed when it comes to the cultivation of a vineyard, running of a distillery, maintenance of a cellar, and the animation of a tavern, and all at the same time [...] the curator is the distiller, bootlegger, tavern-keeper and barmaid of *rasa*,<sup>109</sup> or aesthetic experiences' (2017: 43).

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<sup>109</sup> The term *rasa* comes from Sanskrit and in figurative form it means 'essence', 'flavour' or 'taste'. Indian aesthetic theory understands *rasa* as 'an essential element of any work of visual, literary, or performing art that can only be

Raqs Media Collective offers a splendid metaphor pertaining to performing 'the curatorial'. Beyond putting together exhibition displays, to curate means to embody and present the entire constellation of processes and factors that help build a curatorial situation. Contemplating the artwork is not a sufficient gesture anymore; the viewer-experiencer must get acquainted with the conditions, premises, historical and sociocultural backgrounds, and, most importantly, must understand these factors in a coherent unity. Much like the ethnographer, the curator 'becomes' then a gatekeeper of knowledge, accumulating and equally dispersing, embodying and also transmitting; gathering, selecting, devising, but also showing, making visible. In this chapter – and by extension, in this thesis as a whole, I develop a framework of 'curation' which goes well beyond 'caretaking [...] and its spatial exposition' and evolves into 'working, researching, and developing (self-)critically together with artistic practitioners' in the service of 'making things public' (Richter & Kolb, 2022: 43; also see Chapter 3). As an observer, data collector, selector, doer (i.e. 'doing' rope, see Glossary) and as a consequence of my reflexive approach and my positionality as a researcher-participant, by body partakes in relations of affective contagion and meaning-making. As a facilitator, I become a node<sup>110</sup> in the rhizomatic system, a meeting point between the rope bondage scene and the 'outside' (academic and the art) world; in other words, 'the distiller, bootlegger, tavern-keeper and barmaid', a storyteller of 'lived' experience.

Aside from identifying as a researcher-participant, I also reflect on how my expertise as a curator informs the manner in which I select my interview partners, I devise questions / concepts proposed for discussion, and I 'curate' my own experiences in the field. My positionality, all of a sudden, acquires a new layer. I often focus on these transformations in my field notes:

It is, by now, clear to me that 'identity' is not, and cannot be a fixed concept. I would not go as far as saying that it does not exist (as H.E. thinks, in our discussions), that has clearly not been my experience in the field, and neither would I say that about myself. Instead, I'm thinking about myself. I started as a total newbie, then I started getting tied (and I liked it!); then, I started thinking about how I can bring this into the research; then, I met P.A. and everything changed again. Now I must figure out how to put all these 'me'(s) together. What better example of the *continuum* than myself? I am my own lab rat. (field notes, 20.05.2019)

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suggested, not described. It is a kind of contemplative abstraction in which the inwardness of human feelings suffuses the surrounding world of embodied forms' (Encyc. Britannica, online). In the same text, Raqs define *rasa* as '*aesthetic jouissance*' (original emphasis).

<sup>110</sup> In this context, I understand the 'node' as a point in the rhizomatic system, pertaining to no hierarchy and always connected to other nodes in the system.

This account – albeit a little graphic towards the end – explains my thinking process to the letter. The experience of the field has brought me to understanding positionality as a complex, multi-layered and fluid assemblage: the way I see myself is the sum of all my past selves (some aspects of which I kept, some which I discarded), but also the selves I will ‘become’ (which I don’t yet know, but will experience). I am, thus, simultaneously my own object of inquiry and the curator of my own experience. This is how I situate myself in relation to the ‘curatorial situation’, and this is the reasoning behind the development of the curatorial *continuum*. In this context, the *continuum* does not only spread out horizontally (i.e. allowing full inhabiting of positionalities), but also vertically. I am not employing verticality in an ‘arborescent’ manner, but rather to express individual depth; neither am I saying that positionalities on the curatorial *continuum* exist individually and not relationally (whereas positions on the cultural or the kink *continuums* do exist in relation to other positions). Rather, I am positing that, the curatorial *continuum* enables the examination of identitarian strata *within* oneself, by first looking inwardly; and secondly, by detecting and understanding that different views can cohabit and mature simultaneously within the same individual in a non-competing way. A practical analogy that comes easily in mind, is related to the process by which an individual starts off within the confines of one identity (for example as a ‘rigger’), and then discovering throughout a preference for identifying differently (i.e. for example, as a ‘switch’: see Glossary). In other words, this becomes an instance within one’s practice where an equal preference for two types of experiences (tying and being tied) coexist. Most of my interview partners identify as ‘switches’<sup>111</sup>; interview partner A.N., for example, told me (I.F. London 1 / 13.01.2019):

*Iris: So then, you identify as a switch?*

A.N.: Yes.

*Iris: What does that mean to you? Take your time to answer, no rush.*

A.N.: (after a short pause) That ... in terms of rope, I both like to tie and get tied in broadly equal amounts; like, I don’t have a strong preference for one or the other [...] there would be times I want to tie, times I want to get tied and I don’t feel like there is a particular direction that I incline towards more, it’s pretty much even.

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<sup>111</sup> In the spring edition of The Barn during a workshop, F.R. asked participants to form 2 rows: those who identify as ‘riggers’ to one side, those who identify as ‘models’ to the other. After the groups were formed, he asked those who ‘switch’ to take a step forward and to form a third row in the middle. More than 85% of the participants stepped forward, and the entire room burst into laughter. The subject of the workshop was ‘fluid identity’, and this ‘live statistic’ (as F.R. called it), served as proof of how fluid identity can be when practicing rope bondage (edited from field notes, 13.03.2018).

*Iris: What about the experience itself? Like how does it change from tying to be being tied?*

A.N.: Ah! that's interesting, that is a *totally* different activity. (original emphasis)

Tying and being tied, both perspectives exist and thrive in equal measure within their practice, A.N. asserts, in spite of them being different activities. A.N. identifies, therefore, not according to a pre-determined, fixed role (I am a rigger, therefore I should always perform according to this role), but rather according to an experiential spectrum (I feel good when I tie and I allow others to tie me). The reason behind this affinity towards incorporating new experiences and, hence, identitarian flexibility is given by A.N.'s openness and curiosity, even though the two activities are 'totally different';<sup>112</sup> in this sense, A.N.'s reflexivity is prompting further evaluation within the curatorial *continuum*. As Ordean & Pennington state, 'practitioners' multiple, often reflexive corporealities show why a rhizomatic understanding of the growth patterns of rope bondage practices helps chart non-canonical changes' (2019: 75).

I revert now to a second layer of comprehension of the 'curatorial situation', namely to examining the ways in which bodies can participate in the act of curation. Again, in its simplest form, we can see the negotiated rope bondage session as an encounter or people, places, things, affects and emotions which come together to serve one purpose: *curate* the rope bondage experience. Depending on what takes place within that encounter and depending on the preferences participants express – that is to say, depending on how 'the interview' is conducted (Barkas, 2016) – the experience can turn out differently, both in form and for the participants to said experience. For instance, a rope bondage interaction can infer from BDSM/kink world (or not), can borrow Japanese aesthetical elements (or not), can be rough, soft, erotic, instructional, etc. – or not. All experiences are submitted to the same processes or 'curation', and all perspectives are valid.

Nevertheless, what interests me here beyond the outline of a rope session, is applying 'the curatorial' as a *method*, and look at the way in which it is employed in processes of knowledge-production. Discussing knowledge production, Braidotti & Bignall (2018: ix) assert that:

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<sup>112</sup> This is not a true statement for *all* my research participants; some interview partners have expressed a clear preference for one of the two roles. It is a question of preference and positionality, and not rigidity. For instance, interview partner F.L. told me (I.F. Berlin 8 / 14.03.2018):

*Iris: (flipping through some photographs) Are you always the rigger [for these models] in these photographs?*

F.L.: Yes.

*Iris: Right. Always? Also in daily life? [i.e. practicing, but not for the purpose of photography]*

F.L.: Always. I only tie.

Viewed from a Deleuzian perspective, knowledge-production is a multiple and collective affair that emerges 'alongside' the creative act of composition when conceptual elements are drawn together into novel combinations.

Like me, Braidotti & Bignall focus on *how* knowledge-production is made, and sits next to 'the creative act of composition', testimony of the assemblage of myriad elements. I, too, make use of this complex position as a researcher-practitioner-curator to explore ways in which the co-creation / co-curation of the *artist dossier notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope*, together with rope bondage practitioner P.A. generates new insights regarding how rope bondage is embodied and incorporated into a larger artistic activity. In order to achieve this, I define the parameters of 'the curatorial' as a possible research method, from a 'constellational activity', to reveal a 'dynamic field, where the constellational condition comes into being' (Bismarck & Rogoff, 2012: 24). Separately, P.A. arrived at similar conclusions, when they applied the method of knowledge-production in the framework of the creative act (I.F. F\* 3 / 11.10.2018):

When I'm working [...] these solutions come to me, don't they, but they are like details, they are not a world, they are like drops of water, you know, like little drops of water. For me it's of no interest to work with preconceived structures. For me it's not interesting to work, and work on structures, and come, and work on more structures, and come, and come, and come, hoping that one day 'you're going to free yourself from structures' [...] For me, I think the other way round, I think that these structures limit the way you work, and then it's very difficult to get out of it; [I think] that you end up getting trapped inside of it.

P.A. rejects established instructional and aesthetic frameworks, believing that they limit the fully-fledged expression of rope's possibilities: 'these structures limit the way you work, and then it's very difficult to get out of it'. Instead, P.A. proposes a cumulative, open-ended system of growth; inside it, new expressive forms would find their way little by little, like 'drops of water', entering, morphing and inhabiting the self, their horizontality setting the groundwork towards the fluid positionality. Last but not least, making space and welcoming shared processes of research-creation.

And so, the premises for *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope* were laid.

## 6.2. Case study: *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope* and ‘becoming’-creator

Chapters 4 and 5 of thesis make full use of testimonies from the three field sites, which discuss situated knowledge as a ‘constellation of local knowledge applied in trans-local networks’ (Haraway, 1988: 579) generated through the practice and through processes of thinking and speaking which happens during the interview, brought together under the umbrella of the *continuum* model. For the continuation of this multiplicative model, bringing forward the inner structures of ‘the curatorial condition’ (Bismarck, 2022a) in this present chapter required me to adopt a different strategy, informed by the critical-creative research framework, and responding to the needs dictated by an ever-becoming, on the identitarian *continuum*.

Thus, this section draws from a long-term professional relationship and friendship I have fostered with rope bondage practitioner P.A. over the course of two and a half years and crystallised in a common project we decided to author together during an intensive one-week period while undertaking a research trip in their home in F\* an island in the Mediterranean Sea. The resulting work, an artist dossier,<sup>113</sup> has been generating knowledge as a result of thinking together, feeling together, and especially *doing together*; it reflects elements from both our practices outside the rope bondage field (P.A. as a filmmaker and myself as a curator), now joined together for the creation of a multimedia installation which would be available to people from *within* the rope scene, but also to people from *outside* of it. We named it *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope* in Spanish and English, reflective of our two main working languages.

In her volume, Beatrice von Bismarck rejects the ‘subjectivization of the curator’ and the ‘presentation format of the exhibition’ as inadequate definitions for this activity; instead, she advances the idea according to which the ‘fabric of [the] relations that defines the condition of the curatorial’ can be described using four vectors: ‘curatoriality’, ‘constellation’, ‘transposition’ and ‘hospitality’.<sup>114</sup> I will examine our work and our working method using this four-pillared format; I shall, as I progress, come back to each of these concepts. More than a carefully designed encounter, *notas sobre cuerdas / notes*

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<sup>113</sup> I use the term ‘artist dossier’ throughout this chapter to refer to an assemblage of notes, indications, field journal entries, conversations, and video material, part of which we imagined as elements from a multimedia installation and part of a future exhibition. Due to health issues on both sides, followed by a global pandemic, we had to postpone the exhibition; we are currently looking back on it, and researching funding possibilities.

<sup>114</sup> It is important at this stage to acknowledge the immense work on ‘the curatorial’ and ‘curatoriality’ by authors such as Maria Lind (2010; 2012; Lind, Ashford & Gruijthuijsen, 2013), Paul O’Neill (2015; O’Neill and Wilson, 2016; O’Neill, Wilson et al., 2019), Irit Rogoff (2006; 2013a; 2013b; 2018). I am indebted to their ground-breaking work, which were for me necessary stepping stones prior to decodifying the work of Bismarck, upon which much of this chapter relies.

*on rope* is equally an example of camaraderie, shared knowledge and becoming; in this sense, it integrates the *continuum* as a constant process of ‘becoming’, learning and expanding. Equally, it is important to mention that the analysis in this section will engage with the material at two levels: firstly, it will discuss the project as a result of a common vision and a shared negotiated working method; secondly, it will also engage with the interview material itself, as it is an important way of understanding how P.A. moves in the world, how they navigate the rope scene and their positioning(s).<sup>115</sup> As such, each of the following sections will bring forward material on both these levels.

### 6.2.1. ‘Curatoriality’

As argued by Bismarck, within a curatorial situation various human and non-human elements are juxtaposed, enter into relations, communicate and alter the space and ‘social, economic and discursive contexts’ (2022a: 9). As this section will demonstrate, a negotiated rope scene can be interpreted as a curatorial situation in which space, place, bodies, rope threads, partnerships, affective processes of thinking and feeling, flow and/or any other materials, creative techniques or (public) contexts. A very straightforward understanding of a ‘curatorial situation’ would be the formation of a rope scene: at least one body expresses the intention of applying rope to another body and/or object in a place and time. On a deeper level, bodies enter the negotiated scene with different cultural affiliations (see Chapter 4) and identitarian positionings (see Chapter 5), which can be subject to development and repositioning, as a consequence to the accumulation of knowledge and ‘lived experience’. In the case of P.A. and myself, the partnership was characterized by excitement and determination, and our intention was to ‘live’ the experience as openly and as consciously as possible. Speaking of our collaboration with one of the neighbours, P.A. described a joyful and sometimes playful atmosphere (I.F. F\* 1 / 10.10.2018):

we met in Berlin [i.e. at The Barn], and she is doing a PhD on art stuff, artist stuff and so on. And because she likes the work that I do, well, she brought me into it and she is studying me. I told her ‘study me, study me’ [chuckles]. Well, I am a part of what she is researching. So we needed to organise working days [...] she told me ‘for you I come to F\*. Imagine! [...] In any case it’s better

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<sup>115</sup> Some of the following section will have extensive material quoted: this is an intentional choice. Often, my work with P.A. involved many hours of conversation, and for most of it we used a technique involving *stream of consciousness*; added to this, I observed P.A. has a discursive mind and therefore I have encouraged long conversations as part of our routine. Leaving some fragments is illustrative not only of flair and character, but also gives a better understanding to the way in which their mind and our partnership work.

to work here where I'm close to my work and where I can show her the things which inspire my work ... and which is really more my home than any other place.

P.A. described the research within the dichotomy of the studying / studied body; even if it was intended as a joke to someone who was *de facto* unfamiliar with our work and a world of artistic research, we both recognised this moment as a necessary starting point to discussing and negotiating our working methods, and expressed the wish to create the project under a collective identity. The manner in which we subsequently worked for this project resembles more a working dynamic of an artist duo, dissolving hierarchies and blurring boundaries between what was *created* and what was *curated*. Production decisions, frame takes, content, places, affects, notes, drawings, snapshots, people, working hours, performances, are the result of moving, thinking and feeling together in that space and during that period of time. From a methodological standpoint, through the accumulation of subjective experience both individually and together, we were able to explore our own different positionings and how those might change and juxtapose as a result of the collaboration. A second layer is our negotiated partnership itself, which is subjected to continuous processes of positioning. On top of this, the relational mutuality which I have argued develops as a result of affective contagion during a negotiated rope bondage scene (see Chapter 2), is embedded into the very fabric of my working relationship with P.A and in this sense function as a 'folding' in the *continuum* and therefore, the multiplicity (Tampio, 2010; Deleuze, 1991 [1966]).

The work which resulted from this collaboration is neither mine nor P.A.'s entirely, but something completely new, a part of both of us, a *Third Hand*, to use Charles Green's iconic expression,<sup>116</sup> comprising 'a network of conditions, processes, modes and effects' activated, made to come into being (Bismarck, 2022a: 9; Bismarck & Rogoff: 2012). I refer here to the materiality of the resulting work, which shared authorship; but more importantly, I refer to the creative partnership as a *methodology* for artistic research, to a shared way of 'being' and moving in the world. In this sense, the 'conditions', 'processes', 'modes' and 'effects' take life are made visible by virtue of the partnership. This network included a constellation of elements, ranging from preparatory rituals<sup>117</sup> to how the work we produce will look, or to

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<sup>116</sup> Coined by art historian and scholar Charles Green, the concept of the Third Hand is widely used in the field of art history to designate a phantom identity, an extension of the artists' body(-ies), 'transition[ing] from traditional artistic identity to the identification of the collaboration itself as an artwork', 'a Doppelgänger' or 'a phantom limb' (Green, 2001: 43).

<sup>117</sup> A fragment of my field journal from that time describes how our preparation rituals helped us come together in the common space of creation: 'In preparation before each intervention, P.A. and I agreed that we go to bed early, so that we each have the time to enter into a stage of preparation. Asked what her own preparation will consist in, P.A. remained discrete regarding details, mentioning only that they need to 'clean' their body and mind, and get into the right state of mind; I was happy to hear this, as I also much rather preferred to keep my own rituals to myself; for this,

considering the role other human and non-human factors will play in this experience; we ‘stepp[ed] back as individuals’ and prioritized ‘the meaning of the context [we] form[ed]’ (Bismarck, 2022b: 14). Before this extensive material ‘becomes’ an (art)work, we ‘curated’ the strategies we employed when working together, negotiated differences, searched for solutions and combined each of our visions; scouted for filming places, and listened to each other’s impressions and / or which connected us affectively to certain places; jotted down thoughts, drew, described and added it all to a common archival pile; took turns in testing the image composition, talked to P.A.’s local friends, neighbours and acquaintances; took turns in teaching the other skills or new expressions in the languages we mastered better. To this sharing mentality, there was one deliberate exception: in the way a curator is never shown in the same way as an artist, I chose to stay behind the camera, at all times. It is, after all, one of the reasons this chapter is examining the ‘curatorial’ dimension of the partnership, and not solely its ‘artistic’ dimension. A much desired output of this research is creating an installation for public display, the presentation of which would enhance further the understanding of ‘curatoriality’. In its current state, *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope* is commenting on strategies of coming-together and methodologies of artistic research; in its yet unrealised form, the idea of the exhibition as event, theorises on future acquisition of knowledge and the implication of human and non-human elements, structures and the ‘becoming-public’ (Bismarck, 2022a: 15).

Preliminary to the processes of coming-together, it is important to explain the need and the purpose of the partnership, for which the primary catalyst is affinity. In the case of my partnership with P.A., I will speak of this affinity as a ‘becoming-affinity’, by which, I would argue, affinity is subjected to a continuous process of affective transmission where ‘rope literally passes reverberations along its length, just as the emotional reverberations of those in rope affectively pass intensity from person to person’ (Ordean and Pennington, 2019: 70), by means of negotiation, positioning and construction. The same way in which it has been argued that ‘doing rope’ is possible through affective transmission, and that affective intensity is a determining factor in the process of identitarian positioning, the process of coming-together for *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope* is a reverberation of the affinity that formed between the two of us over a period of time; personality, compatibility, corporeality all played a significant role in this constellation, as

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we needed time apart. It made me think of many performance artists who I had read about, who used to undergo the same rituals, and needed time to get into a specific ‘performative’ state of mind. Whatever it was that P.A. did, and what I did, proved to be very efficient. When the day of the performance came, the energy between us shifted, and we were perfectly in tune, very well connected. I called at the time a ‘shared liminal performative stage’ (field notes, October 2018).

by-products of affective contagion (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010, 8, 18). During our interviews, P.A. told me (I.F. F\* / 12.10.2018):

There's a French sailing method that I really like [and] when they teach you how to sail, the first thing they do instead of putting you in theory classes is that they take you out sailing ... and when you come back, you're willing to learn as much theory as they want you to, because you've experienced this *necessity* [original emphasis].

Discussing this process of coming-together through the metaphor of open sea navigation is as poetic as it is symptomatic of the development of our professional and personal bond. That is to say, the idea of creating a partnership occurred after we had already tied together (hence after some transmission of affective intensity took place), after a friendship was already consolidated, and finally, after a common exploration/research interest was nurtured and recognised in each other. Our identitarian positioning also shifted while this situation developed and as this new factor, the new project, came about. Just like with open sea navigation teaching method evoked by P.A., 'navigating' through all these factors contributed to creating the *necessity* for *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope* to become a 'curatorial situation'.

Being in this new situation also implies creating a new communal resource available to both people involved, and at a later date, to the ones experiencing the work. This resource is in itself an open-ended assemblage of knowledge in a perpetual state of accumulation of 'lived' experiences, situations, knowledge, ideologies. P.A. understands this development as a continuous learning process (I.F. F\* / 12.10.2018):

As for ropes, which I love deeply, doing rope, playing with rope, finally, is that, it's [about] learning, being open, living, living, living openly and learning, learning about what's around, learning about the things of nature, learning about the humanistic side of relating with others, [...] cultivating friendships with painters, with writers, with filmmakers, working on other things, working a bit on cinema, [...] and always thinking that *all* [original emphasis] these things are related. That everything you do touches the other, one thing touches another.

As I also do in my field notes:

I keep thinking about how everything that I have done, read and talked about has been preparing me for this very moment (field notes, 13 October 2019).

Independently of each other, both P.A. and I felt our collaboration took place at a moment where our interest in rope bondage was at its peak. We also started from having a common premise, understanding ‘curatoriality’ the same way. Nevertheless, the learning cycle is also a *continuum* – since the process of accumulation is an open-ended process – therefore *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope* would much better qualify as an interruption, a moment of ‘actualization’. This is a pivotal moment because now the ‘affective accumulation’ of ‘what has happened’ is ‘in contact and actively affectively participating with what is happening and about to happen contemporaneously as becoming’ and in effect ‘pressing towards its different actualization in the future’ (Seigworth, 2005: 163). This is of equal standing in our separate paths, as it is for our joint venture: in the context of it being the last fieldwork place, the progression from the interview to a collaboration type *Third Hand* (to use Green’s term) made perfect sense; in the context of P.A.’s evolving practice, a moment where accumulation was consciously brought to the ‘future’. As the rope thread transfers affective memory as it passes from one body to another, so does active learning and being curious about all aspects of life reverberate and get embedded in the way in which rope bondage is practiced, like a linking thread in a network of emotion.

The idea of affective accumulation, emotion and bodily expression actualising during a rope scene is an idea I have encountered in other interviews I conducted. Some interview partners mentioned strong emotions, shared affects and reaching alternative states of consciousness emerge during ‘rope play’.<sup>118</sup> I argue that the existence of these factors creates the premises of a ‘curatorial’ situation, defined not only as an accumulation of knowledge through interaction with external factors – ‘cultivating friendships with painters, with writers, with filmmakers, working on other things’ as P.A. states – but also through the accumulation, production and alignment of ‘internalised’ knowledge by way of ‘living’ experiences, affective contagion and playing out emotions. Thus, the rope itself and the practice are often tools and mediators of a kind of expression which comes out of the self and makes its way into the world by the means of a (staged) performance or a creative act of some sort. Interview partner F.R., a professional dancer and choreographer explains this situation very eloquently (I.F. Berlin.8 / 3.11.2018):

The rope is a kind of tool. A frame also. I am just curious to see and that’s all that matters, I don’t have a specific goal. But I want to develop that and see what goal I might have.

[...]

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<sup>118</sup> Although it is not the purpose of this chapter to go into much detail regarding altered states of consciousness, it is important to mention here that the subject comes very often in interviews. Literature also often mentions these aspects (also see Ambler et al., 2017; Beckmann, 2009: 175-227; Newmahr, 2011; Pennington, 2018).

Because [rope bondage] is more than just decoration, you know, it's *alive*. It's a *thing*, it's an *expression* [original emphasis]. And then, if the feeling is there, it's a strong emotion, then it looks good and looks interesting, also. And that's very much like choreography, it's a link between forms and space and emotions. Because it's human bodies, it's you and me, and we're the actors. We produce, we mirror one another and stuff like this. It's about how it feels, it's a body art also, it's not just rope art.

F.R. mentions curiosity<sup>119</sup> as the emotion behind the impulse of practicing rope bondage, nurturing discovery, 'lived experience' and bodily situations. The rope itself, bodies, movement, 'inexpressible affects' (Pile, 2010: 7), the setting, the performative context are human and non-human agents forming a complex constellation. The 'link between forms and space and emotions' (akin in F.R.'s words to the field of choreography) creates a reflexive curatorial situation, where the emphasis is not on each individual position 'but on an overview of the relations existing between them' (Bismarck, 2022a: 39). 'Produc[ing] and mirror[ing] one another also denotes a shared journey which helps build a strong relationship with the person sharing that moment.

Other interview partners have also mentioned this bond in relation to the space and in the time of the negotiated rope scene with two or more participants. Interview partner K.M. described (*I.F. Berlin 10 / 04.12.2018*):

K.M.: The *real* [original emphasis] space, like it's the space I'm in, because this has almost a similar effect on the person and on me as other factors; like our relationship, or the texture of the rope, or the music that I play, or like whatever, it's ahm ... and ... but it's also body-space ... If I teach, it's a lot about teaching people how to discover their own and other people's body spaces. And that they are like that, you literally can open, like how you *open* [my emphasis] a body, and how you find these little spaces in-between, or ahm, how you can play with them, also with rope. So, these both [aspects] I think of [when] I talk about space, and also a kind of mind ... spiritual, whatever space, [be]cause I know ... this is what I know from my own body experience. If I really

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<sup>119</sup> Curiosity is an emotion mentioned often in kink and rope bondage literature. One of Beckmann's interview partners describes themselves as 'curious by nature' (2009: 91), while Newmahr observed the community where she conducted fieldwork as 'intellectually curious' (2011: 5, 17). Galati (2017: 21, n.25 and 26) and Pennington (2018: 69, n. 85) mention participants from The Garden as open and curious about discovering different aspects of the practice, and that the slogan of The Garden itself welcomed people who are 'curious' and 'open'. Furthermore, Pennington describes the London scene generally as being open and facilitating 'curiosity that supports both education and gender 'exploration' / 'self-exploration' (*ibid.*: 6-70).

experiment with my body, especially in dance, sometimes my mind goes into these kind of exploring spaces that I didn't know of, and I experienced that this happens to people that I tie, a *losing* [original emphasis] effect that I enjoy very much and, of course, as a dominatrix this is what you want [me to do]. But I would say, like, it's more open, than the just, like I'm dominating you, and now you're like helpless, [the] blah, blah, blah narrative. It's ... for me it's broader, because people get sometimes in very emotional states [from] rope.

An accumulation of factors – place, textures, people, relationships, music, etc. – align within a negotiated rope scene and create a favourable ambience for the performing body, contracting or amplifying its 'space' – what K.M. calls 'the body-space' – throughout the process of mapping the own body and the body of another. Significantly, exploring the 'body-space' in this affective way can, in time, lead to a shift in identitarian positioning, as the body is in a permanent state of 'becoming'; 'the curatorial' acquires, then, a performative dimension, expressing outward and performing in front of another body. *Notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope* expanded the 'body-space' throughout a much larger timespan, where thinking, talking, drawing, filming rope practices situated the identitarian self in a permanent process of 'becoming', accumulating 'lived experience' and expressive energy. Curatoriality, therefore, can be understood at a primary level as a working method, but also as embedded in the very fabric of a negotiated rope scene which is set in place through the accumulation and expression of affects.

### 6.2.2. 'Constellation'

P.A.: You must move the way you want to move, you must let the vertigo come in, you must let in the wind that moves you from side to side against the sea cliffs, you must let the light that comes from the sea blind you, you must listen to the seagulls' terrifying screeching, that drive you crazy, you must see the friends that are far away, you must ... and all this, you must let it come in, dance to it like you are a crazy shaman, but you must remain conscious at all times. And the work I do with rope is the same. It's me, my therapy and my contribution to society.

said P.A. in one of our interviews (I.F. F\* 6 / 14.10.2018), reflecting inwardly. This excerpt brings together a series of elements from the realm of affects and bodily expression, encouraging surrender and inclusion as part of the expansion of bodily possibilities. A 'constellation' of human and non-human elements come together to create suitable premises for processes of accumulation (i.e. accumulating knowledge as an experiential process) and transformation (i.e. 'becoming' as an effect of experience and subjectivity) . The

actualisation of the self comes into being at the intersection between surrendering in front of natural elements, to movement, to the intensity of human relationships and the state of perpetual awareness, 'remain[ing] conscious at all times'. This acquisition of knowledge, which I understand throughout this chapter as transdisciplinary artistic research does not take place in a void, but within the intricate web of affective contagion stratifying the 'apparatus of bodily production' (also see Haraway, 1988: 591). More than in an 'assembly', a 'community', a 'system' or a 'complex' – structures which cannot break free from systems of hierarchization and which focus on 'more permanent formations of meaning over relational dynamics' – inside the constellation 'meaning is acquired in relational terms' and therefore 'individual elements [are] less significant than the whole' (Bismarck, 2022: 32-33).<sup>120</sup> Knowledge emerges as a product of a network of relationships, gaining significance through its integration and reception. Deleuze and Guattari have argued that the self is 'only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities' (ATP, 249, also see Sotirin, 2005); if the 'constellation' is a multiplicity, that is to say a horizontal accumulation of knowledge, meaning, symbols, affects, then the making of the self, and therefore the negotiated rope scene between at least two people, stands in a 'zone of proximity, where the elements of multiplicities enter into, and pass through and between each other' (Sotirin, *ibid.*). Turning back to P.A.'s testimony, it is at the intersection of ancestral practices, things and beings around them, and natural phenomena – now detached from their initial context and entering a transforming relationship – that P.A. becomes and inhabits themselves: by allowing 'the vertigo' and 'the wind that moves against the sea cliffs' to enter, by observing light, friends, and embodying this 'constellation'.

The interpretation of the 'constellation' in relation to positionality can take different forms. Discussion partner T.P. reflects on the composition of a negotiated rope scene, and on the power objects have within a story (I.F. Paris 17 / 27.06.2018):<sup>121</sup>

T.P.: For example, there is this thing that Flaubert says: *l'effet de réel* [the effect of reality].<sup>122</sup> It's something that has no use in the tale, in the story, but is very important, because it gives the reader a sense of authenticity. So, if Flaubert prepped a room in his head with a piano, and on the

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<sup>120</sup> In order to develop the 'constellation', Bismarck draws a constellation of her own in a sense, drawing from a broad range of theories, from astronomy all the way to the Max Weber and Bruno Latour, and more relevant to the present chapter, from Pierre Bourdieu, Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin (p. 39-45).

<sup>121</sup> In contrast, I had a very different conversation on this subject with interview partner F.R., who explained: 'When you want to do something interesting with rope and performance, you can take it very far away from rope and this is even more... I mean can you call it still rope? Is it good or...? Is it a special form of theatre? You know? It's interesting and fun.' (I.F. Berlin 7 / 3.11.2018).

<sup>122</sup> The term was actually coined by Roland Barthes in the eponymous article from 1968, where indeed he mentioned Flaubert's barometer.

piano there was a *baromètre* and Flaubert says that ‘we don't give a shit that there is this barometer on this piano, but it gives is a very ...

*Iris: ... it anchors us in reality.*

Exactly. It gives you a sense of reality and authenticity. And that's it. I think in *shibari* we are doing a lot of things that can be compared to *l'effet de réel*. As a rigger, you don't really do things that are necessarily, really furthering the session [...] you are also going to do other things that are completely optional, even if they are not very important theoretically, but that are actually very important. And it will be all the things related to the connection I think. That's where my instincts tell me that there are similarities [between] the narrative structure and storytelling techniques and *shibari*. But it's my own ... it's because I was born and raised in this, and I am sure for example that someone who was trained as a car mechanic - when he comes to *shibari*, maybe he will think it is exactly what he was taught in school about physics and things like that.

*Iris: People bring their own background into it.*

T.P.: Yes.

Two aspects pertaining to how the dispositif of the ‘constellation’ converge in T.P.’s account. Firstly, T.P. holds a Master’s Degree in Literature, training which informs their thinking and provides references (also see section 6.2.3 of this chapter). Their practice of rope bondage – and by extension their positionality on the *continuum* – are informed by a ‘constellation’ of ideas which come together and actualize during a negotiated session, in which T.P. engages both as a storyteller and protagonist, embedding intellectual capital into the fabric of their practice. Secondly, T.P. acknowledges this unique positionality as a result of their own situated knowledge, determined by specific conditions, a situated ‘constellation’ of identity as it was: ‘someone who was trained as a car mechanic’ will think in terms of ‘physics and things like that’. This account is a relevant example of the way in which, in Bismarck’s vision: ‘the concept of a constellation also speaks to the different disciplines and sections of society that may impact on the curatorial context and to which it may be relevant’ (2022a: 34).

The dispositif of ‘constellation’ plays an important role also in that which concerns the identitarian positioning on the rope bondage *continuum*. Having reflected at the ensemble of elements which stratify their subjective relationship with the practice of rope bondage, T.P. taps into a larger analysis of peers from Paris. T.P. explains further:

T.P.: it's also how we each view the ropes; for example, if you ask someone to tell you very, in a few words, what rope is to them, what rope is like. I heard for example that G.O. said that to her, *kinbaku* is a hurricane, because it lifts you and puts you somewhere else, or something like that. But to me, for example, it's something completely different. To me it's about telling a story, so we are far from the hurricane. And if you ask everybody, everybody [sic] will have a different metaphor for what rope is and I think it's terrifying because we all do something and are part of a community that does this one thing: rope, but everyone thinks they're doing something different than the other person, you know, so there is very little common ground. I am not sure if it's a bad thing, but it's interesting.

*Iris: Isn't it to be expected? There are so many different personalities that come together, and so many different ways of thinking and people from different backgrounds that come together to do this.*

T.P.: Yes, but if you ask someone who does mountain climbing they won't tell you it's a 'hurricane' or it's about 'telling stories'. They're going to tell you that it's about 'climbing' and 'getting over oneself' [i.e. surpassing one's limits].

A primary analysis of this fragment strengthens the understanding that practicing rope bondage means different things to different people: if for T.P. a negotiated rope scene is like telling a story, for fellow practitioner G.O. it is a transformative and displacing experience comparable to experiencing a hurricane. The presence of different accounts proves the necessity of using the *continuum* as an examination model. Seen from this perspective, the *continuum* and the dispositif of the 'constellation' overlap greatly, as the way in which different evolving identitarian positionalities on the *continuum* appropriate the practice is also metaphorically a 'constellation', a device which 'enables different components within a specific research interest to be related to one another and studied within the resulting relations' (Bismarck, 2022a: 35). T.P.'s identitarian actualization (which I understand here as a moment of lucidity, right before an act of positionality takes place within the continuum) is accomplished (in this case) through an act of comparison to G.O.'s actualization process: '[b]ut to me, for example, it's something completely different [...] And if you ask everybody, everybody [sic] will have a different metaphor for what rope is'. T.P. has conflicted feelings about it, evaluating it, in turn, as 'terrifying', 'not sure if bad' and 'interesting', not because of the 'plural coexistence and antagonism of social and cultural elements and factors' (Albrecht: 147, cited in Bismarck, *ibid.*), but rather in parameters of human relationality and afferent situated

knowledges (Haraway, 1988: 590).<sup>123</sup> That is to say, the interaction between at least two people within a negotiated scene can *feel* ‘terrifying’, if the negotiation is not performed correctly (a misunderstanding or a consent violation); feels like a ‘hurricane’ due to the affective impulses the tying body exercises on the tied body (in this case of displacement and transformation); is overall ‘interesting’ due to its diversity; finally, it differentiates rope bondage from other bodily practices such as mountain climbing, where the interaction takes place between human (the climber) and nonhuman (the mountain) elements.

The partnership between P.A. and me during *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope* can also be thought of as creating a ‘constellation’, here understood as a ‘flexible, relational structure linking individual elements that are themselves subject to change’ (Bismarck, *ibid.*: 32). P.A.’s positioning in the moment they enter the partnership evolves as our interaction unfolds, accumulates and generates new knowledge. My positioning as part of the *continuum* was also evolving and is ‘subject to change’, while engaging in this partnership. Within these processes, ‘zones of proximity’<sup>124</sup> are formed (ATP: 249; also see also Sotirin, 2005: 100) as we find ourselves in a perpetual state of becoming: becoming-curators, becoming-researchers, becoming-conversation partners, becoming-filmmakers, becoming subjects of enquiry, becoming-conversation partners, becoming-exhibition makers, and so forth. We ‘detach’ ourselves from ‘previous contexts’ and ‘enter into transformed relationships’, where power dynamics are perpetually shifting and turning on themselves, as we constantly feed new information into the ‘threshold’ (understood here as the space of contact between us, see note above), and which in exchange ‘has a meaning-producing effect on the individual components and [our] relationship’ (Bismarck, *ibid.* 13-14). In this sense, *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope* is as well a laboratory, a rhizomatic non-hierarchical place of experimentation to which we bring our affects, philosophies, situated knowledges and ‘lived’ experiences.

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<sup>123</sup> Haraway posits: ‘Situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals [...] the joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position that promises a vision of the means of ongoing finite embodiment, of living within limits and contradictions – of views from somewhere.’

Richter and Kolb (2022: 49) also claim that: ‘it cannot be overemphasised that a discourse of truth driven by situated knowledge is possible only in conjunction with other situated contexts and experiences’.

<sup>124</sup> Patty Sotirin offers an excellent explanation of Deleuze & Guattari’s ‘thresholds’, or ‘zones of proximity’, as brief moments of contact between two zones which pertain to different multiplicities, and which for a brief moment touch each other: ‘where the elements of multiplicities enter into, and pass through and in between each other’. These surfaces, or ‘thresholds’ are ‘in-betweens’, or ‘becomings’ (2005: 100).

Lastly, the dispositif of the 'constellation' can be interpreted as an expanding archive, resulted from processes of accumulation of knowledge for the purposes of meaning-making. P.A. collects interdisciplinarily, according to what sparks their interest at one moment (I.F. F\* 6 / 14.10.2018):

P.A.: I have a lot of archives of things I'm looking for, and I also have a lot of art references. I dedicate many hours to researching, I do a lot of research and a lot of things inspire me in my rope work; and little by little I've been discovering them, and little by little I'm organising them. I have videos, I have texts, I have images and I am ordering them and I am saving them and I am accumulating them, I am saving them and saving them and I look at them, it nourishes me, it nourishes me.

[...]

I have all [kinds of] collections, I share a lot of things, but not everything is about *shibari*, much of it has to do with art.

[...]

Look, I have my notes here, right? My notes ... where I draw ... ropes, situations in ropes, ropes and objects, ropes and people, shapes of certain ties. I draw a lot. I think about them and I draw them, because I have the need to do it, but then, normally, I don't work on this, on a concrete thing.

Researching, discovering, organising, making order, saving, accumulating is a 'constellation' of actions, an archival labour with the purpose of 'nourishing' the act of creation. Nonhuman elements: videos, texts, images, drawings are gathered together. P.A. takes on the role of collector-curator, in charge of selecting and caring for a growing collection; an act of looking and making sense of the archived components follows; finally, the archive fulfils its role as adjuvant in the production of situated knowledge. Contrary to the usual chronology of collecting (private) and then archiving (public), P.A. takes away from the public realm and brings material into their own private sphere. Besides, to this extensive enterprise P.A. adds personal sketches. This collection of texts and images assume a participatory role as objects of contemplation and objects of knowledge extraction.

### 6.2.3 'Transposition'

The third pillar in Bismarck's argumentation of the 'curatorial situation' is the dispositif of 'transposition'. It is as a relational mechanism that engages and fosters exchange between two points, while examining the transfer process as it participates in knowledge production. Within the curatorial situation, it defines 'inseparably intertwined opposing orientation that that motivate curatorial activity – on the one hand the inward-facing practice of assembling, on the other, the outward-facing, opening practice of making-public. In the absence of the exhibition, I will investigate in the following pages alternative readings for it. I will, thus, argue, that inner and outer processes are embedded in the way a thinking-feeling body moves through the world as an active agent, and not solely as an exhibit. Using this subterfuge, expands, in fact the definition of processes of 'assembling and disseminating' as they 'interrelate and entangle the various people and objects, disciplines and media, times and spaces' (*ibid.*: 83). As such, it investigates the intrinsic processes of assembling in relation to outward processes of making-public. In the context of the practice of rope bondage, as well as in the context of the creative partnership, these inside (private) – outside (public) processes translate into acts of trans-individuation, exchanges between bodies who 'live' and/or 'situate' knowledge, between oneself and another, between histories and localities. Scholars like Beckmann (2009), Galati (2017), Newmahr (2011), Luminais (2012) or Tuulberg (2015) talk at length about the transformative, even spiritual or therapeutic power 'doing rope' can exert on those who engage in this practice. To this scholarship, I am adding a new perspective, informed by 'the notion of material embodiment', which is 'central to transpositions' (Braidotti, 2006: 5). Like Luminais, I acknowledge that within practices of kink (and in this case, rope bondage specifically) 'intense sensation' and 'pleasure' can 'reformulate relationships to the self and others' (*ibid.*: 16).

In the simplest sense of the term, within the curatorial *continuum* 'transposition' implies an act of shifting from one position to another: a practitioner could 'become', evolve from one positioning to a new one after 'situated knowledge' is accumulated as a result of 'lived' experience. For instance, at some point in time a practitioner that has been only practicing tying and starts getting tied; if this action results in the incorporation of a new experience from that moment onward, then it can be said that the 'transposition' has taken full effect: a given situation, a *status quo* has been altered, 'became' another situation. To illustrate this example: a tying body ('rigger') becomes a tied body ('model'), who then moves on to tie or be tied by someone else. The transfer from one role to the other can happen, of course, both ways. In this way, the 'old' self assumes a new role in the next tying session. Sometimes this act of role transfer stimulates significantly, and an affinity or curiosity turns into assuming a new identity: the practitioner

now identifies as a 'switch' (also see Section 6.1.). Other times, 'transposition' occurs in small increments, or simply in particular aspects, but it is overall insufficient for a fully-fledged role change. This has been the case with interview partner T.A (I.F. Berlin 13 / 17.10.2018):

T.A.: I don't call myself a switch, but I do sometimes switch in rope. Relationally, I feel like ahm ... like, orientation-wise, I feel like a 'top' or 'dominant' ... be[ing] like, the 'active' part is the major theme, but with *kinbaku* I find that I can strongly enjoy very ... purely masochistic things... in a very sexual way, but I think there's more to it. Like, conceptually, pushing the body's limits and stuff. So in this sense I am switch, but I am not ... I don't identify with the switchiness, relationally. So, I do get tied sometimes, but I mostly tie.

When it comes to their orientation, T.A. identifies as a 'top' or 'dominant'. Nevertheless, when engaged in rope bondage experiences, T.A. admits feeling attracted to 'very ... purely masochistic things', emotions usually reserved for the tied body of the assemblage. Due to rope's 'transpositional' agency on one hand, and to its capacity to convey affective intensities through the contact with the material – and, of course, the sensations this encounter elicits from the body, T.A. temporarily populates a different, 'purely masochistic' affective space. It is in this ability to instigate to the temporary inhabitation of an alternative state, one brought about as a result of 'lived' experience, not positionality, that rope's 'transpositional' qualities reside.

In the case of *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope*, 'transpositional' processes were at the core of the partnership's working motor. Taking into consideration that the main goal of this creative partnership was to build up from methodologies of artistic research in order to investigate the processes of coming-together and shared authorship, the dispositif of 'transposition' was brought about by 'the connection of creative and cognitive processes and procedures', 'the entanglement of human and nonhuman participants' and 'the situational, processual orientations' (Bismarck, *ibid.*: 80). In the joint space of creative sharing, knowledge production actualizes in the affective spaces between our two bodies (i.e. in the space of The Third Hand (Green, 2001)), but also as a result of our interaction with nonhuman elements, be it in the form of surroundings (the landscape environment we worked in, familiar to P.A. but unfamiliar to me), elements used in the production of the *artist dossier* (from digital recording devices to the stones, branches, bamboo twigs and ropes used in the video production), to the collection of material objects which mediate the creative process (field notes, audio notes, sketches, texts, drawings). In this sense, the processes of 'transposition' transform here into mechanisms of trans-individuation. I refer to trans-individuation here as 'an exchange between situated and embodied knowledges between histories

and contexts, between generations and episteme' (Richter & Kolb, 2022: 46-47). Within the partnership, the 'transpositional' encounter comes alive only in relational circumstances, in the exchange of knowledge, skills and the transmission of affects, within a sociocultural context;<sup>125</sup> most importantly, 'transposition' alters and/or enriches the initial circumstance of the participating partners. As P.A. told me (I.F. F\* 5 / 12.10.2018):

P.A.: But the things that I take from the others are the things that go inside me and stay inside me and that I cannot take them out from within me. The merit is only to have the will, to have the consciousness to recognise them [...] when you become aware of it and you bring it home and you say: 'Wow! This is life-changing, this is touching me, this is speaking to me', and you let it really come in and let it within you, every single thing that comes within you makes all the things [in] there move [...] I am not inventing anything, I am simply remembering ... remembering what I learn.

But also in relation to nonhuman elements:

P.A.: I think there is nothing more honest in all my rope work than when I draw water from the well or when I tie the bamboos after cutting them I have to clean them, separate the twigs one by one and tie them with their little ropes. And years later, they are still there and still tied in bundles, right? No, it seems barbaric, but I don't feel, I don't feel it's less important. Sometimes when I am making ropes with someone, I think of the bamboos or I think of the cistern or I think of the planks of the...of the gates of the farm [...] and I think that there are things that I share with these ... with the planks, with the bamboos, with the stones and it is almost like I have little conversations with these elements, while I am making ropes, that sometimes I think I can only have with these elements, with them and that I cannot have with the people.

Two aspects are of importance here. in the first fragment, in the aftermath of the encounter with another thinking-feeling body, the self accumulates, encapsulates and transforms. The two key factors are, according to P.A., intention: 'you let it really come in and let it within you' (I am *allowing* this encounter and therefore this change to happen) and awareness: '[t]he merit is only to have the will, to have the consciousness to recognise them' (I am attentive to what the encounter brings, and I allow this to shape

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<sup>125</sup> Here, I understand creativity, the creative process which changes any given aspect of culture, in the context of a sociocultural encounter attuned to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi; where creativity, 'does not happen inside people's heads, but in the interaction between a person's thoughts and a sociocultural context', and is therefore, 'a systemic, rather than an individual phenomenon' (2013[1996]: 23).

the way I think about my practice). As a result, the self is transformed: ‘every single thing that comes within you makes all the things [in] there move’. In the second example, we read about P.A.’s ‘honest’, ritualistic interaction with nonhuman elements: drawing water from the well, cleaning, cutting, tying and wrapping bundles of bamboo twigs together. If we examine these actions factually, there is an inherent cultural component at play here, reminding of the way in which wrapping rituals, for example, occupy an important part in Japanese social life.<sup>126</sup> If we examine these actions in the context of locality (understood here as the place where P.A. lives and works), then we not observing ‘appropriation’ as much as we are witnessing transculturation:<sup>127</sup> the rope, or the bamboo are now agents assisting P.A.’s daily practice, and engrave themselves in P.A.’s mind, permeating the human-driven negotiated rope bondage interaction:

Sometimes when I am making ropes with someone, I think of the bamboos or I think of the cistern  
[...] there are things that I share with these ... with the planks, with the bamboos, with the stones.

‘Transposition’, therefore, can also be read here transculturally. P.A. humanises these elements, bringing them into the animated realm of the human interaction, but also into their own mind: ‘it is almost like I have little conversations with these elements [...] sometimes I think I can only have with these elements, with them and that I cannot have with the people’. In addition, ‘transposition’ facilitates acts of repositioning on the *curatorial* continuum i.e. who I was has been altered definitively, as what I’ve taken with me ‘makes all the things’ in my inner world ‘move’. ‘Situated’ knowledge generated this was, is – to quote Haraway – a ‘multiplicity of local knowledges in trans-local networks’ (1988: 579). This alteration creates an ‘interruption’, and has ‘the potential to free the individual elements, allowing them to enter into a new constellation and ‘illuminate’ one another’ (Bismarck, *ibid.*: 83).<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Nevertheless, an important distinction must be made here. In Chapter 4, I have discussed how some practitioners intentionally incorporate cultural (and ritualistic) elements from Japan in their practice (and vice versa), which I have designated as ‘appropriation’ (also see Henry, 1993). I do not believe this to be the case here, as P.A. doesn’t show an inclination toward Japanese-inspired rope aesthetics. P.A. has also commented on this subject:

‘If what you like is that you see an image or a photograph of a person who is tied upside down and has ropes around their legs and you discover that this is something that [AK.NA. i.e. well-known Japanese rigger] does, and that there are these specific people who teach it and you want to do it, well that’s fantastic. You go and they teach it to you or you learn it, you do it, you repeat it and you enjoy it and I think it’s great, you know? I think it’s fantastic, but it’s not my case and I don’t understand, that to do or to enjoy ropes or to do *certain* things, you have to necessarily go through other things.

<sup>127</sup> I am well aware of how transculturation is used in cultural anthropology (see Ortiz, 2022 [1963]). However, I contextualize ‘transculturation’ here to refer specifically to the complex merging and converging of the cultures of tying.

<sup>128</sup> Bismarck rightfully references Walter Benjamin’s concept of ‘constellation’, which she understands as ‘montage’; in this light, ‘transposition’ becomes a political apparatus that ‘interrupts both the structures of meaning and function into which something is inserted, and those from which it was taken’ (*ibid.*: 83).

I bring to the fore a final sense on ‘transposition’, as it pertains to the curatorial *continuum*. If we think at ‘transposition’ as a ‘leap from one code, field or axis into another [...] in the qualitative sense of complex multiplicities’ (Braidotti, 2006: 5), then we can also conceptualize an interdisciplinary transfer of episteme from one context of knowledge to another, as a way to make sense and move around in the world. This can occur at both the rational or at the affective, sensorial level. For example, for interview partner T.P., ‘transposition’ occurs the moment where they apply a theoretical framework learnt in the academic environment to their view about the rope bondage practice (I.F. Paris 17 / 27.06.2018):

T.P.: The interesting thing is that I apply to *shibari* my own view of the world, in French I’d say *grille de lecture*. It means I view the world in a certain way and when I come to *shibari* I view it with the same tools that I have, and those I’d use to apprehend the world. The tools I use and enjoy are the ones that were given to me when I studied. I have a Master’s Degree in literature, so I think it comes from that. It’s a very subjective thing but I was trained at university to recognize and study narrative structures. When I come into *shibari* I think there is a narrative structure in that, and I think it’s important. And I have to dig deeper in it. So that’s why I think I’ve come to view *shibari* as telling a story. And it’s still a bit fuzzy in my head and I don’t know if I can be very specific. For example, the very basic lay work of my analysis is that [...] it always begins with a *situation initiale*.

*Iris: An initial situation.*

R: Yes. And you have the *peripeteia – le moment du resolution*, which is something that brings you to the end, and then you have a *situation finale*. So, I think it applies very easily to *shibari* because you have something at the beginning, something that can go in different ways and then you bring this to an end and you have a final situation. So, I think actually a rope session actually follows this structure and this would be the very beginning why I had the lead of it telling a story. But then I think it goes way deeper, I started seeing it and I think it’s really time-consuming to ... I haven’t reached very high points in my analysis but I am sure you can use modern analysis of storytelling to describe what that someone is tying is doing. Like concepts that [have been drawn] by Flaubert, for example. I think you can apply what he invented and described to rope and tying someone.

T.P.’s captivating analysis of the rope bondage encounter through the lens of the narrative structure brings a perspective I have not tackled before in this thesis. Barkas (2017) has examined rope bondage using the metaphor of the interview, which implies (verbal and nonverbal) dialogue and requires active

implication from the interview partners. The dynamics of a negotiated rope bondage session is, thus, like an 'interview', where '[t]he tying person interviews the tied person, i.e., they ask the questions and the tied person answers. These questions as well as the answers are of course not (necessarily) verbal' (2017: 35). However pertinent, I find Barkas's analysis useful in a context in which I would be describing the dynamics and affective mutuality *within* the negotiated rope bondage session. Here, T.P. aligns an intellectual framework which actualizes within the self, i.e. does not require the acknowledgement or consent of the tying partner. The entanglement of 'transposition' and subjective experience is evident here, but it does not have to actualize in the realm of emotions or sensations. In this sense, the 'transposition' of 'situated' knowledge is taking place inwardly, yet it does not preclude the eventuality of identitarian repositioning (I am not necessarily identifying myself in relation to another, but in relation to *my own* situated knowledge).

For other practitioners like interview partner A.B., experiences 'transposition' does equal a transformative sensorial experience mediated by, or through rope. A.B. clarifies (I.F. London 2 / 16.01.2019):

A.B.: yesterday I really hit rock bottom, I was, emotionally, a fucking mess. All I had was 2 painkillers and 3 beers and I was just a fucking wreck. I was a wreck when I was working the door and instructed the people and I got tied first by J.O. and then by my boyfriend. And the moment I started getting tied, was the moment that all of my fucking confusion from the last 4-5 days just made sense. [clicks fingers] Just like that. I just ... I don't know why, sometimes having these physical prompts just makes your mind click and go where it needs to go. And my mood immediately changed. Everything made sense, I knew exactly what I had to do, exactly what I wanted. And I reconnected with myself, I was feeling very lost, I had very low self-esteem and when I was in the ropes I was like: 'I found myself'. I found the confident badass bitch that I am. I am back from this mess of the last 4-5 days. And it just does that to you constantly. Yesterday I felt it more because I was so far down the path of not being okay. So that I could say 'I found myself' and by doing rope regularly throughout my life, brings me back to who I am. I know other people who certainly feel the same way as well. It's not therapy, I'm not saying it is but it just, sort of reconnects you a little bit.

This testimony provides rich insight into a transformative moment. After a few days of emotional instability, A.B. came to the studio and negotiated two tying experiences by trusted partners, and this brought clarity and empowerment. From being a 'mess' and a 'wreck', A.B. switched to a state of confidence, where all the confusion they had experienced disappeared and everything 'just made sense'. Affective mutuality, on one hand, and the rope itself, on the other (as a retainer and enabler, not as a

material),<sup>129</sup> enables processes ‘transposition’ of sensations from one agent to the other: engaging in negotiated tying sessions with J.O. and with their boyfriend has generated ‘transpositional movements’ which were able to connect ‘what was previously separate’ and also ‘facilitate unexpected encounters’ (Bismarck, 2022a: 81). Here, the encounter is not outward the body, but within oneself. Even though the experience was facilitated by the tying bod(ies), the transformation took place within A.B.’s inner emotional scape, who claimed that ‘having these physical prompts just makes your mind click and go where it needs to go’. ‘Transposition’ is, in this context, a transfer of energy from the trying body to the tied body, hence outward of the self, but also an alternation from one mood (before ‘doing’ rope) to another (during and after the rope session), therefore within the self.

Having looked at some applied ways in which the dispositif of ‘transposition’ functions as a theoretical framework within the embodied human and nonhuman interactions in rope bondage, I will now move to the fourth and final element present in the curatorial situation. I end this section with a quote from Braidotti (2006: 6): ‘[Transposition] is thus created as an in-between space of zigzagging and of crossing: nonlinear, but not chaotic; nomadic, yet accountable and committed; creative but also cognitively valid; discursive and also materially embedded – it is coherent without falling into instrumental rationality’.

#### **6.2.4. ‘Hospitality’**

Remembering the Latin form *curare* (to care for something or someone), rope bondage dynamics are often about care: care for the practice, care for another, care for the self. Presence and absence of care determine an individual’s place and the way they react to their immediate practice environment. In relationship with another, caring becomes the equivalent of ‘hospitality’. ‘Hospitality’, Bismarck posits, means ‘receiv[ing] and welcome[ing] people and objects, bringing them together for a limited time’ in a convivial situation (2022a: 138). During a few editions of The Barn in Berlin, P.A. and me established a close friendship and tied together a few times – our conversations were extensive, and covered many subjects, our tying sessions were strong and emotional, and the experience would live in my mind for a few days after. I documented how my body felt and I tried to make sense of my experience, ‘writing’

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<sup>129</sup> In Chapter 3, section 3.2. I have referenced another quote by A.B., who states: ‘I don’t crave the touch of jute material on my shoulder. It’s meaningless to me.’ While I acknowledge the rationality behind this testimony, here I do not refer to the materiality of the rope itself (although this *can* be the case for many other participants, myself included). I rather allude to rope as a vessel for affective transmission. As Ordean and Pennington (*ibid.*: 70) state: ‘rope literally passes reverberations along its length, just as the emotional reverberations of those in rope affectively pass intensity from person to person through affective contagion’.

myself 'into the process and practice of research' (Coffrey, 1999: 117; also see Atkinson, 1990; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, van Maanen, 1988); soon after I realised that the P.A.'s ropes, the experience, our connection, were premises for designing a longer form of collaboration. I thought P.A.'s ropes were 'inviting', 'honest' and 'kind', and that they could reach to a very profound part of my being (field notes, Berlin, 12.03.2018). In this sense, a first approach to 'hospitality' lies *per se* in the invitation to tie with another, in the willingness to feel open, honest, vulnerable and free together with someone else. I started investigating other practitioners' experiences, and the answers I got corresponded to my own experience. Interview partner T.A. from Berlin spoke at length about the intimacy created in ropes (I.F. Berlin 13 / 17.10.2018):

T.A.: it was just like ... it was something pure and specific that was created. It was something that you can't understand from the outside, but you know they're [i.e. people who tie] doing something very specific to achieve this state, and it has something to do with all this creative or technical stuff with the ropes and the body. And yeah, that's really fascinating, because I think that you don't really understand it unless you experience it.

T.A. is speaking about what they've observed and experienced, as well as about the uniqueness of the embodied practice, which must be experienced in order to be fully understood. These, of course, were thoughts that aligned with my own reflections, and as mentioned throughout this thesis, I was aware that it was a common belief amongst ethnographers who researched embodied practices (also see Daniel, 1995: 23-24; for kink practices see Galati, 2017; Newmahr: 2011; Pennington, 2018; Tuulberg, 2015). Additionally, T.A. speaks about the 'lived experience' of tying and being tied as something 'pure and specific'; I argue that it is due to the possibility of going 'inside' as a result of the 'hospitable' invitation of entering a negotiated rope session, this embodied knowledge materializes. Moving one step further and beyond the intimacy of the rope *scene* (i.e. between at least two people), to the rope *field* (i.e. a place where multiple individuals come together and tie),<sup>130</sup> the sense of caring and being cared for influences the sense of belonging, and consequently is a strong motivating factor (Beckmann, 2009; Pennington:

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<sup>130</sup> Often referenced as 'community' by the interview partners. A.B.'s testimony is valuable in this sense: 'we (i.e. The Garden in London) have a lot of people from other communities that come here and do workshops and take the knowledge back to their own communities [...] Community in this sense means people who are into having rope in their lives as something significant. Significant means, that if you meet someone else who feels the same way, they automatically are part of the community [...] It doesn't really matter if you go to space X or Y, that you are interested in this activity is very much significant for you as a person, and that is part of what defines you a little bit, even if it's for a few years or months. For that period of time, if that interest is there, you are part of this broader community.' (I.F. London 2 / 16.01.2019)

2018; Weiss, 2011, etc.). The manner in which 'hospitality' is employed also determines one's positionality in relation to other positionalities on the *continuum*. Testimonies from A.N., A.S. and A.B. are significant in this sense; A.N. told me (I.F. London 1 / 13.01.2019):

*Iris: what is it particularly, that gives you such a strong sense of freedom?*

A.N.: In part it is the function of the community being a very accepting place, that however you react in rope is ok and that you don't feel ... even if it's not particularly conscious like normal life in general you have a degree of inhibition, you have a degree of ... a kind of expected behaviour and what isn't and that doesn't exist whilst doing rope.

[...]

it's really interesting to see, that is definitely like ... you have this community which is really nice to be part of, to go and see these people now, and then 2 or 3 months later you meet with the same people in a different setting, and like see the same faces and like. Because it is a big part of who I am doing rope, like this is the thing that made it become like my name, it is the main social thing I do, it's the community around it far more than the activity itself, like I have done various activities at different times but it is the community which is so comfortable in rope that it makes [me] keep doing it.

The rope scene is approached with openness, a sense of kinship and non-judgemental attitude which strengthens the sense of belonging, and intensifies full inhabitation on the identitarian positioning, A.N. asserts. A.N. is also hinting to a new specific code of behaviour, where social norms, which govern our 'expected behaviour' in a social situation, shift and assumes new meaning when engaged in the practice. This is a liberating feeling for practitioners such as A.N. – identitarian self-actualization, therefore, outplays the bodily experience: 'it's the community around it far more than the activity itself' which 'keeps [them] doing it'. The attitude of inclusion and generosity, is in Bismarck's words the 'immanently ethical' dispositif of 'hospitality', which influences 'aesthetic, social, political and economic lines of force that run through the curatorial constellation and that are responsible for the shape and impact of its relations' (2022a: 138). Other practitioners take things even further and compare relational dynamics to familial affiliation. I spoke with A.S. during one edition of The Barn about affects associated with instances of coming-together and moments of shared thinking-feeling. A.S. described these moments as similar to meeting family (I.F. Berlin 1 / 22.10.2018):

A.S.: By rope family I mean that it's ... that it feels like a family, like I've told people that going to [The Barn] feels like going home to a chosen family reunion. And one of the things that I get a lot out of, especially at events like this, but in rope community in general, is the sharing space. Like, not all of these people here, or at home I would want to be close friends with. But for a lot of them I really appreciate being, like sharing the space [with], just being here and watching them and feeling them move around me and that's the same with my family. Like most of my family members I wouldn't want to see them on a daily basis. We have such different world views but I really appreciate sitting down at the table and sharing a space with them. Every once in a while.

Sharing space, emotions and exploring personal boundaries are central to A.S.'s experience at The Barn. Family is usually thought of in terms of unconditional attachment and affection, so A.S.'s association speaks of a very strong bond and complicity while engaged in the practice (and perhaps less outside of it). The safe realm of the rope world has been created in the context of a negotiated shared experience and intermediated through trust, openness and like-mindedness of implicated parties during a set period of time – in other words, through exercising 'hospitality' in a specific place and period of time. The ample theoretical framework of the *dispositif* of 'hospitality' is applicable not only to how each individual relates to the identitarian *continuum* the field and the other fellow practitioners, as it can be a guiding force and a metaphor for the image of a tying space. During our interview, the owner of The Garden A.B. compared their approach to running the space as an invitation to their private living room: newcomers are welcomed to the space as guests into someone's most prized room, where they are to be treated with the utmost generosity and hospitality.<sup>131</sup> A.B. explains (I.F. London 2 / 16.01.2019):

On the notion of having to take care of a growing community of people asking things of you and trying to please people and go into a direction, that [i.e. the concept of a living room] made sense for us and other people and making mistakes along the way. And discovering our identity as a space and of our people along the way.

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<sup>131</sup> Although it goes beyond the purpose of this analysis, it is important to mention here that being a 'guest' also implies a power dynamic is at play with the 'host'. Generosity and hospitality is thus paradoxically subjected to that power dynamic. In this sense, a quick glimpse at Bourdieu's intake on hospitality as a form of symbolic violence and domination adds relevant meaning: 'the gentle, invisible form of violence, which is never recognised as such, and is not so much undergone as chosen, the violence of credit, confidence, obligation, personal loyalty, hospitality, gifts, gratitude, piety – in short, all the virtues honoured by the code of honour – cannot fail to be seen as the most economical mode of domination, i.e. the mode which best corresponds to the economy of the system' (Bourdieu, 1977: 192, cited in Bismarck, 2022a: 143 n. 17).

The dispositif of 'hospitality' crafts an impulse of including one another, shared responsibility, and a reassuring feeling of togetherness. A.B. continues:

A.B.: You have to watch out for yourself and you also have to watch out for other people because we're all in this together, we're all part of this community and you have to be, like, responsible adults, that whatever you do will impinge on someone else's activity, so we all have to kind of ... take care of each other.

The identity of the space's host – to continue with the 'living room' metaphor, fluidly moves within a constructed duality, as A.B. and their partner also hold classes on how to tie and be tied. How people behave – with kindness, generosity and a sense of shared responsibility, so how they utilize the dispositif of 'hospitality' – determines not only the outcome of an experience in ropes, but also imprints on the identity of the space. The 'host' also becomes teacher, opinion-maker, educator, mentor, a credible figure of authority (also see note below). A.B. reflects:

A.B.: I see myself as a person who is not just teaching this class or that class, but who is helping people discover something about themselves in a way, like tapping into something or taking them on some kind of journey and evolving as people, it wasn't something I thought about in the beginning. But, when we teach classes and get feedback and messages from people and in some cases they're very touching and significant and they say 'I just wanted to tell you that you didn't just teach me rope, but you, kind of gave me a new outlook on life, and you helped my relationship with my partner' or you know, something that is more significant than the rope and it's about individuals and about partnerships that significantly matter as a result of the workshop or something like that. And that makes you feel like it's a higher responsibility, it's something deeper in it, and it makes you think that your role is maybe a bit bigger than what you acknowledge.

[...]

The people who are attracted to rope - I'm so connected to them. I have never felt so connected to people I have in my life, as [I am] to the people who I do rope with. People who are drawn to this activity. I just click with them, both me and my boyfriend think the same.

For some people who are starting off, the rope journey (for the lack of a better word) is experienced as a rite of passage. The materiality and the texture of the rope thread which is applied on the skin, the intention behind the act of tying, the invitation to tie together interpreted as an act of generosity, the

rope bondage practice as a corporeal possibility, all these are elements hold symbolic capital;<sup>132</sup> those participating in the exchange (directly or indirectly) are redefined under the relational order imposed by the dispositif of 'hospitality'.<sup>133</sup>

I now bring forward another dimension of the dispositif of 'hospitality', understood as a catalyst of an affective encounter and an agent mediating learning and growth. During my conversations with P.A. in her home, two instances grabbed my attention, due to the manner in which they related to both the inside and the outside of the rope field. In one of our interviews, P.A. reminisced about their beginnings in the practice (I.F. F\* 4 / 12.10.2018):

P.A.: I could not [tie]. I didn't understand. I couldn't, I couldn't accept it. I couldn't learn it. Not everybody appreciated me [because of this], but I could not. It was absurd, I couldn't do the first turnaround to do a basic knot. Weeks, weeks, total blockage.

One Sunday afternoon, fed up with seeing me there [i.e. at the trying place P.A. was frequenting in Madrid], sweating and fearing that I couldn't do it, that there was no way I could get the rope to where it needed to be [...] three other women stood here, as if I was a baby, a little girl. I was surrounded by women on this side [pointing left], you see? on this side, they taught me ... they taught me ... they got me to turn the mirror around and go from seeing it from here to here, to being able to see it from here to here. And we went for a long time and it wasn't so easy, but all of a sudden, you know, they taught me, they taught me, they made me learn, they made me learn and they taught me, to go through here, to go through here, to this, to do that. And after that afternoon, when I got up from there, the blockage that I had was released, and I was already starting to tie around with ropes. Always strange, always very strange to tie rope around, but now I could tie the rope around. And I managed to learn, to master them.

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<sup>132</sup> I expand on Bourdieu's notion of 'symbolic capital' here to refer to the inside politics of the rope bondage scene. Within it, those who educate and provide 'safe' spaces (teachers, venue owners, etc.), as well as those who initiate sessions and meet the other's needs in a responsible, nurturing and empowering manner acquire symbolic capital. Ihlen (2018: 4-5) explained that '[c]apital is considered as accumulated labour; it is not a natural given and demands investment [...] [S]ymbolic capital can also be converted into other forms of capital as is also emphasized in the reputation literature by pointing to how a good reputation might attract [...] [and] clearly invokes communication and the subjective' (also see Bourdieu, 1984).

<sup>133</sup> Bismarck makes a splendid analogy when talking about relational shifts under the auspices of 'hospitality': 'just as travellers become guests when granted hospitality, those who partake of curatorial hospitality are redefined. This dynamic reflects key parameters of the curatorial dispositif of hospitality: separation of the space reserved for art from all other social spaces' (2022a: 142).

I remember P.A.'s emotional account at the time moved me to tears. As a middle-aged person,<sup>134</sup> coming into the rope scene could not have been an easy enterprise. And for understandable reasons, several psychological blockages occurred. After a period of time, the other members of the space where P.A. was practicing decided to come together and share resources to improve the tying technique of their companion who needed help: an excellent example of camaraderie and generosity within the scene. In the same interview session, P.A. opened up about the relationship with the neighbours who look with a friendly eye at the practice:

P.A.: And I've had a lot of conversations about ... about bondage, here with all sorts of people in the village, haven't I, and it's always been very cheerful. They also give me books of these sailing ropes, to learn how to make them and they say, 'Surely you can pull this bucket out very well, can't you?' And I have a whole relationship of ... I have a whole 'ropey' relationship with the objects and with the real objects, with the bamboos that I gift to them after I've been cutting it, with the buckets that I use to take the water out of the well, with the garden tools that hold and are held by rope. And afterwards, I have my own free time in which I work with the stones and with the trees and with the wood or with the things that I find.

P.A.'s world is populated by friendly and encouraging people, who accept and are curious about their practice. What is fascinating to observe, is the way in which the 'translation' of the practice happens inside the mind of people who have a very different 'lived experience', but who exercise kindness, inclusion and hospitality.<sup>135</sup> Through 'hospitality', the rope field extends beyond the site of tying. In the case of P.A., people from village gifted sailing books to help the betterment of the tying technique. In this case, being well-versed in rope techniques has chiefly a practical component, as P.A. can transpose the knowledge into practical, everyday situations: pulling water from the well, navigating in open waters, repairing and maintaining the garden tools, wrapping freshly cut bamboo bundles that are gifted back with the same generosity.<sup>136</sup> Nevertheless, the 'serious' practical time balances with the leisure time, reserved for experimentation and communion with local natural elements. In this latter instance, P.A.'s utilizes 'found'

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<sup>134</sup> I refer to P.A.'s age here in the context of them describing it as an issue in the interview fragment below.

<sup>135</sup> I, too, can attest to similar experiences that took place throughout these years of research. While explaining my research theme, on several occasions I observed my interlocutor was trying to 'translate' by using references from their own world: from yogic states, to sailing, to performance art or even to circus.

<sup>136</sup> Conversely, P.A.'s intimate relationship with rope as a part of everyday life is a reminder of the way in which rope is integrated into the daily lives of people in Japan. This has been an important subject in monographs (also see Botsman, 2010; Hendry, 1193; Russo, 2016; Woodman, 2013) as well as in rope bondage scholarship (Master K, 2015; Midori, 2001). While I do not think P.A.'s intention is to copy customs, it is interesting to see how a material can inhabit the mind and preoccupations of everyday life in the human imagination.

local objects, mostly natural elements which they carefully assemble into ready-mades (for a discussion on ready-mades also see Evinne, 2013; Milevska, 2001; Mansour, 2022). P.A.'s practice not only employs the dispositif of 'hospitality' in including and caring for non-human materials which become part of the installation, but it also separates, as Bismarck argued, the 'artistic' space (i.e. the space reserved for the production and creation of 'art') 'from all other social spaces' (2022a: 142).

Finally, this section will examine the dispositif of 'hospitality' as a mediating force for strong emotions and a sense of conviviality. Interview partner A.S. had spoken to me about the 'rope family' from the perspective of identitarian relationality. P.A., however, talked about how generosity and conviviality we embodied and 'lived' by participants in the context of the same rope event, The Barn (I.F. F\* 6 / 14.10.2018):

P.A.: In [The Barn] you have alongside your colleagues with whom you are sharing space, who are working in ways that are completely different and this is a great freedom.

[...]

I am part of it for love, not for any other reason, for love, for what I love the people that .... many of the people that are there love me, I am part of it for what I share when I receive a workshop and I am there, I am learning, for what I share when I give a workshop and I receive from the looks of the others and from their listening that makes me question myself and makes me move forward or backward in things that I propose, both when I give and when I receive, both times you give and you receive. And I'm part of it, because I love to perform in the community. [...] It's like I'm laughing with partners, isn't it? It's almost like the campfire when summer comes.

[...]

What would I really like to convey with my ropes? Not so much what I feel, not so much what I think, but the fact that you can *transmit all of that*. Or ... or that we can *share* it, while making ropes [original emphasis].

Processes of learning and becoming in a shared space are described by P.A. in a very warm and loving light. Their positionality comes into contact with another positionality through processes of doing, thinking, 'living', learning, trying, feeling, mediated 'across networks of rope and corporeal entanglement' (Ordean & Pennington: 2019: 71) by means of affective contagion (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010). Throughout the experience P.A. gives, transmits, receives 'from the looks of the others', 'shares' intimate

moments akin to sentiments of friendship and conviviality friends experience during summer campfires, by which 'meaning is generated collectively, and the way particular meanings are foregrounded to cohere as a narrative [is] temporary and situational' (Bismarck, *ibid.*). This working *method*, rather than a working *state*, can be compared with the methodology the partnership between P.A. and myself envisioned during *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope*. The relational mutuality, an emulation of 'hospitality', nurtured spaces of embodied shared knowledge and meaning-making at different levels and between actors whose positions were in a constant state of becoming, as we moved into the world.

### 6.3. Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has expanded on the *continuum* research model, with the addition of the curatorial *continuum* equally capable of accommodating a diverse array of identitarian positionalities within the dynamic landscape of the rope bondage scene. These positionalities, rather than being fixed and rigid, undergo transformation over time, influenced by the accumulation of 'lived' experiences, exercising affective relational mutuality within the landscape of the negotiated rope bondage session(s). In employing 'the curatorial' as a theoretical framework, I facilitated an examination of the stratification of positionality within this continuum, as it develops within the self. Specifically, I engaged with methodological processes of artistic research, demonstrating how positionality takes shape and is negotiated within a creative partnership, alongside processes of creative composition and accumulation, evolving concomitantly with the unfolding of artistic research. Secondly, 'the curatorial' framework emerged as a valuable tool in the context of artistic research, given that research methodology inherently involves 'curating' creative processes. This emphasizes on the interconnectedness of research practices and curatorial methodologies. Thirdly, I have gathered in these pages a constellation of materials, processes, affects, ideas, perspectives, and methodologies, evolving into a dens transdisciplinary network of knowledge-production. My contribution to the *continuum* research model involved a meticulous interrogation of my own evolving positionality, as it is encompassed within the *continuum*, and the ways in which it generates valuable situated knowledge. I argued, this occurs through the continual transformation of my own body during fieldwork, as I shifted between various roles such as practitioner, learner, thinker-feeler, producer/consumer of knowledge, researcher, creator, or curator. In turn, I have engaged with diverse artistic research tools that intertwined and altered within the curatorial process.

Section 6.1. investigated further the concept of 'the curatorial,' and specifically on its standing alongside the rope bondage *continuum*. As such, I argued that generating 'situated' knowledge can be interpreted as a process involving accumulation, selection, incorporation, and transmission of elements, creative processes and affects. To illustrate this, I advocated for a four-part inquiry model inspired by Beatrice von Bismarck's volume *The Curatorial Condition*: 'curatoriality,' 'constellation,' 'transposition,' and 'hospitality.'

Section 6.2, I presented the case study *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope*, which reflects an engagement with curatorial relations through applied methods pertaining to research-creation. The project stems from my enduring relationship with rope practitioner P.A, materialized in a collaborative project — an *artist dossier* — where various positionalities: viewer, doer, curator, artist, producer, generator, thinker, feeler, perpetually shifted, challenging the notion of fixed roles and identities. The subsequent four subsections further applied and developed this inquiry model. Subsection 6.2.1: 'Curatoriality,' examined the formation of the partnership and processes of coming together and 'becoming,' contextualized within the *continuum* model. Subsection 6.2.2, titled 'Constellation,' delved into the rhizomatic acquisition and embodiment of knowledge within the partnership. It scrutinized how bodies and nonhuman elements intricately interweave in a web of episteme and looked at the relationships they establish with one another. Subsection 6.2.3: 'Transposition,' investigated the inherent processes of assembling in relation to outward processes of making-public. In the context of the practice of rope bondage and the creative partnership, these inside (private) – outside (public) processes translate into acts of 'trans-individuation,' exchanges between bodies that 'live' and/or 'situate' knowledge, between oneself and another, and between 'the elsewhere' and localities. Finally, Subsection 6.2.4, 'Hospitality,' addressed the politics of care and generosity across the practice, encompassing the generosity of the invitation (an invitation to tie together), demonstrations of solidarity and affection within the rope scene, and individuals' reactions to an environment where hospitality is exercised.

## ***Chapter 7: Conclusion***

This thesis has attempted to investigate positionality and the way in which 'lived' experience impacts processes of knowledge-production within the practice of rope bondage. In order to achieve this, a multi-case study design using a multi-methodological qualitative approach was explored. The research drew from participant observation and semi-structured and unstructured interviews with participants from the rope bondage scenes in London, Berlin and Paris; data was also collected from an island in the Mediterranean Sea, where practitioner P.A. is based.

In this concluding chapter, I highlight three main aspects this research has accomplished. Therefore, I start by summarizing the research findings in relation to the three research questions. Afterwards, I emphasize the main contributions this thesis had brought with respect to research concepts, frameworks and methods. Finally, I address the output of this research, its wider significance and make some suggestions for future research.

The first research question this thesis explores has to do with the way in which the practice of rope bondage be mobilised to address narratives pertaining to cross-culturality (East / West), and the politics of 'kink'. These aspects were addressed throughout Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 of this thesis. The first part of the question was addressed in Chapter 4, which began with an assessment of the diverse tying cultures in relation to cross-cultural exchanges and the exportation of 'Japanese cool' cultural products. It was discussed how through processes of 'cultural appropriation,' 'fetishization', and quests for 'authenticity' and 'validity', spaces and positions are crafted where knowledge becomes 'situated,' archived, or embodied. The discussion contextualized throughout Chapter 4 suggested a gentler approach to 'cultural appropriation', one which did not assume distortion or disrespect towards the culture that is borrowed from; this approach is more aligned with the realities observed in the field. It was also discussed how practitioners strategically mobilize their positionality in practices that either aestheticize or on the contrary, resist cultural differences. Within this dichotomy a tension appears; there is a perceived 'Japanese way' which practitioners mobilize to profess a 'one true way' of performing rope bondage. Thus, a 'historical canon' appears (containing a mishmash of facts from Japanese history, former military practices, or elements of material culture), claiming superiority and proclaiming 'authenticity'. On the other hand, there is a significant part of people in the rope bondage scene who do not conform to these standards, and opt a liberal approach to the practice, such as interview partners K.A., B.E.; this group is critical of the other, and sees these habits as outdated and pretentious. Practitioners pertaining to this second category (like, for instance, F.R.) largely use Western terminology and a more creative stylistic approach to tying.

Chapter 5 looked at the uniqueness of affective 'lived' experiences as articulated by individuals engaged in 'doing rope'. The findings were diverse: while some practitioners fully embraced labelling their practice under the umbrella of BDSM/kink, others accepted that classification only partially; some interviewees completely diverged from it. Testimonies from the field substantiated the notion that rope bondage activities and affiliative identities can extend beyond the realms of kink or sexuality. This extension may manifest through deliberate positioning away from the 'kink' or 'sexual' labels or through endeavours to re-conceptualize one's practice within alternative artistic and performative discourses, accentuating these dimensions prominently. Tensions between these groups on this subject were significantly less accentuated, since no practice claimed the higher ground over the other; the stakes were now shifted towards aspects concerning positionality, rather than employing hierarchical reasoning. Consequently, some interview partners reject the connection between rope and sex, or even between rope and kinkiness. Other practitioners (and authors) see their practice as inherently erotic or sensual, and therefore involving a type of aesthetics which fulfil certain desires. Most interview partners across all three field sites adopt a flexible positionality towards kink, claiming that it is not so much an identity feature, as it depends on the interaction dynamics, the intention and the purpose of the tie; that is to say, what you do depends on *who* you are doing it with and for *what* purpose (for instance, a tie used in a demonstrative class is not the same as a tie in a negotiated private session, etc.). Some interview partners felt disheartened, noting a few tendencies that seek uniformity within the practice, on both sides of the argument; this was generally regarded with an unfriendly eye, as it creates an artificial homogeneity that does not account for the diversity within the field.

The second research question lies at the base of the theoretical model I construct throughout the thesis. One challenge this research has posed has been to devise a research model that includes myriad voices, perspectives and creative outputs as they are embodied, experienced and produced in the practice of rope bondage; therefore, this question is addressed and embedded in all the three empirical chapters, and mobilised to address three different research aspects.

In Chapter 4, the analysis concluded that there are certain tensions in the field resulting from diverging opinions related to the incorporation of Japanese elements, aesthetics and philosophies into the Western cultures of tying. Historical evidence linking rope bondage to other Japanese activities or martial arts (such as Hōjōjutsu 捕縄術,) is fragmented and often questionable. This research has found that this evidence is, generally, speculative. Nonetheless, some practitioners continue to inscribe rope bondage into a supposed centuries-old ceremonial tradition, and therefore see this affiliation as authenticating; I refer to

this phenomenon as the 'historical cannon' throughout this thesis. In some spaces (physical and digital) the 'historical' narrative still plays a very important role and is perpetuated through books on rope bondage, images, podcasts, in various venues and tying styles which are taught in those venues. Other practitioners strongly reject this association, and are mindful of cultural appropriation, while some find it unreasonable and comical. Debates on terminology follow the same binaries, when it comes to the three different terms which are used to name the practice: 'shibari', 'kinbaku', 'rope bondage'. The chapter foregrounded the need to devise a research model capable of encompassing this diversity of voices, and advanced the *continuum* as a viable research model.

In Chapter 5, analysis concluded that similar debates are present also when it comes to accepting or rejecting the label 'kinky'. The *continuum* research model, is also applicable here, and further evidence is brought in its favour. Tensions on this subject are significantly lower, because being kinky or not being kinky implies adopting a positionality, and not a judgement of value. Research found that some practitioners see affiliation with kink as something mandatory, and have trouble imagining otherwise. For other practitioners, it is very much a question of *who* it is done with, and therefore the approach to the practice remains flexible. For example, a significant number of interview partners identify as switches, and incorporate kinkiness in different ways, depending on the role they assume. Other partners reject this association entirely, claiming a de-sexualised and de- 'kinked' relationship with tying; this group associates 'doing rope' with friendship or belonging, sometimes trust and even claiming it has therapeutic properties.

In Chapter 6 analysis concluded that the *continuum* research model devised in this research can also be applied in the case of creative partnership where rope bondage is discussed at length, but not used *per se*. Mobilising the *continuum* in this situation meant understanding the self in relation to past selves as well as in relation to the self into which one is 'becoming'. I assumed a role in a creative duo with practitioner P.A. in order to better understand positionality's stratification and its use in artistic research. We were both simultaneously the object of inquiry and the curators of the experience. This created an indissoluble bond, where our individual selves were dissolved and turned into a third common entity. P.A. also described her rope journey in poetical and philosophical terms; 'doing rope' was not just about a rope bondage encounter, but also about generosity, coming, thinking and feeling together. Rope was also transposed to other household activities (for example pulling water from the well), rituals (for example, putting and binding bamboo twigs for friends and neighbours); rope was also highly experiential, in a spiritual and/or philosophical sense (for instance in contemplating nature); finally, rope was a facilitator for artistic inquiries (for instance in collecting rope bondage images and drawing different tying

situations). The *continuum* was employed here, therefore, not only for its use as a facilitator of positionality, but also as a tool that encompasses and stores the accumulation of thoughts, 'lived' experiences and situated knowledges.

The third research question concerns my own positionality as a researcher-participant. This question has been pivotal and recurrent throughout conducting this research and became embedded in the theoretical framework I applied to analyse my participation in the project *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope*. Firstly, this research question concerned methodological matters: while in field immersion in London, Berlin, and Paris, I alternated between assuming the role of observer (utilizing participant observation for data collection) and the role of participant (engaging in negotiated rope bondage sessions). I reflectively considered my own body as a site of research and made use of auto-ethnographical reflection. It was important to permanently assess my positionality in relation to the field and in relation to how I was responding to the knowledge I was acquiring and produced. I assumed the roles of observer, data collector, selector, practitioner, facilitator and mediator between the rope bondage scene and the academic and art worlds. Secondly, my evaluation of my positionality as a co-creator deepened during the creative partnership I was engaged in with P.A. The partnership was indicative of a long-standing friendship and affinity P.A. and me felt towards each other. Using my expertise as a contemporary art curator was necessary, as my body actively participated in processes of co-creation and shared authorship, processes which were inextricably linked to those of my partner. My positionality within the project became more complex, as it encompassed past selves and present 'becomings'. Simultaneously, I was both the object of inquiry and the curator of my own experience within the curated situation; in this sense, my Self was in a constant state of 'becoming', and presence was negotiated differently within the two situations. This thesis has endeavoured to bring together literatures on kink, cultural studies, Deleuzian theories and curatorial theory, drawing from each of them in order to explore and investigate positionality and the way in which 'lived' experience impacts processes of knowledge-production within the practice of rope bondage. It cannot account for *all* rope bondage practitioners everywhere, but nonetheless, it provides insight into several aspects which are important for people who practice rope bondage in contemporary Western European contexts. Whilst this thesis can be situated within ethnographical literatures, both the theoretical framework and the empirical chapters have engaged with works from comparative cultural theory, postmodern philosophy and curatorial theory, highlighting its interdisciplinary nature. The research sheds light into processes related to positionality within or outside the 'kinkiness'. It brings forward 'thinking-feeling' processes through which practitioners employ this practice as a way to understand and develop the relationship with their bodies. It sheds light on the ways

in which positionality is assumed in relation to their peers. It offers information about aesthetic choices and appurtenance to various cultures of tying. The thesis glimpses into the everyday rope practice, it tackles issues related to negotiation, consent and the care that is shown towards the tying partner. Finally, the thesis reveals experiences of pleasure, enjoyment, fun and a wide range of intensities, as well as revealing some ideas and concerns related to the artistic aspect of the practice.

In terms of the thesis's contribution to kink literatures, the study makes a distinctive contribution by asserting the autonomy of rope bondage as an independent practice, rather than merely an adjunct to kink play, especially due to the intricate ways in which it has developed, is taught and thought about in rope bondage circles, and no less, because of practitioners themselves, some of who affiliate with kink, and others who do not. Additionally, this research has acknowledged and taxonomised the genealogy of BDSM / kink literatures from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. Additionally, it delves into positionality, highlighting a nuanced spectrum beyond a binary categorization of kink/not kink, as demonstrated by scholars such as Beckmann (2009), Newmahr (2011), Ordean & Pennington (2019), Pennington (2018), and Tuulberg (2015).

In terms of the thesis's contribution to the field of cultural studies, in particular to performance studies, this research serves as an applied case study addressing the themes of 'cultural appropriation', 'authenticity', and 'fetishization' and highlights the inherent tensions associated with such processes (Kowner, 2008; McWorther, 2016, Sugimoto, 2009). Although my engagement with this literature is limited, and I do not assert full expertise over it, it provides significant evidence depicting the movement and appropriation of cultural products across different contexts, as it is appropriated and observed from the European side.

In terms of the thesis's contribution within the framework of Deleuzian theories, this thesis makes a substantive contribution by methodologically involving with Deleuzian concepts, particularly the 'rhizome' and 'multiplicity', the first one as a 'way' of navigating the rope bondage *continuum*, while the second is posited as a research method. These concepts play crucial roles in the formulation of the *continuum* (as further elucidated in section 7.2.2). As such, it contributes to existing research which mobilizes Deleuzian theories as research methods and deepens the research on the relationship between the rhizome and positionality.

In terms of the thesis's contribution to the field of curatorial studies, this research develops 'the curatorial' as a research method, notably by mobilising von Bismarck's four-pillared curatorial framework and

applying it to a creative partnership involving researcher and researched bodies. It appropriates this framework methodologically in a new and novel way, with the goal of scrutinizing positionality through the lens of artistic research, on one side, and exploring the creative possibilities of togetherness and co-creation. It also contributes to the existing body of literature that delves into the realms of 'the curatorial' (Richter & Kolb, 2022; Gheorghe, 2022), and to literatures which explore the relationship between artistic research and curatorial research.

The thesis's employs the concept of *continuum*, and particularly so within research that examines identity politics, cross-cultural exchange and artistic research, and therefore contributes to interdisciplinary research. As such, the research responds to calls for devising inclusive research models which consider the plurality of voices within the rope bondage scene, against an assessment based on hierarchies (Ordean & Pennington, 2019; Pennington, 2018). By positing the *continuum* as a horizontal and inclusive research model capable of encompassing a diverse array of identitarian positionalities within the rope bondage scene, I am building on previous research (Rich, 1980; Pennington, 2018), but expand the inquiry, by applying the *continuum* as a research framework and use it to examine the cross-cultural movement of ideas, philosophies and cultures of tying between Japan and Western spaces. I provide extensive evidence from the scene to demonstrate that certain voices adhere to the 'Japanese way' while others reject this label entirely. Thus, I justify the need for using the *continuum* as a tool, which includes all these positions within the realities of the field. Furthermore, the employment of the *continuum* contributes to recent work on identity politics in kink, which itself treats identity in different ways, or reject the concept altogether (Beckmann, 2009; Newmahr, 2011; Ordean & Pennington, 2019; Pennington, 2018; Turley, 2019). In considering the *continuum* as a rhizomatic structure, I make a contribution to current literature by supporting the idea that 'all have a place within the rope *continuum* if imagined utilizing a rhizomatic, affective approach' (Ordean & Pennington, *ibid.*: 75), a standpoint consistent with the research findings. The use of the *continuum* model also responds to ethnographies on 'lived' experience and research on affective relational dynamics. The thesis makes a contribution to current research on 'space' in several ways. Firstly, by asserting that the *continuum* is, in itself, a space of occupied by 'positions', a space of action through '(re-)positioning', and a space of identitarian 'positionality'; all these are spaces or acts where identitarian actualization and integration / diversion take place at certain moments in time. The manner in which this research employs 'positionality' contributes to current debates that links positionality with 'situated' knowledge-production (Sánchez, 2011: online resource), including the researcher's positionality, by claiming that 'situated' knowledge is a product of inter-locality exchange, by which multiple local knowledges operate in the space of trans-local networks (Haraway, 1988). Thus, the

research responds to calls for a continuation of research into the space of (reflexive) positionality and positionality (Anderson & Smith, 2001; Cook, 2005; Crang, 2008; Gold, 2023; Secules et al., 2021).

There is also a contribution to research on artistic partnerships that must be discussed, where space is understood as the distance between two individuals engaged in a common artistic endeavour. In the case of the artistic experimentation together with P.A., that space created a Third hand, a joint unity comprising the two identities (Green, 1995). Throughout our partnership, P.A. and I sought to explore and understand joint research creation as a method of research and a facilitator in the exploration of and examination of identitarian strata: through self-examination, and through accommodating difference within the self. Thus, *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope* adds to research on partnerships and artistic production (Chadwick, 1993; Green, 1995; McEvilley, 2010; Stiles, 1992). Another aspect relating to spaces must be remembered due to the contribution to which this thesis is making, related to ethnographic research on spaces, understood as tying places and/or practice venues. The research makes an original contribution to the growing ethnographic literatures exploring BDSM/kink in general, and rope bondage in particular. Finally, this thesis examined space understood as the affective space within the negotiated rope encounter. In declaring that interaction is made possible through affective mutuality where the 'body's hopeful opening' (Puar, 2017a; 2017b) determines a distortion, a 'non-metric' perception of time, I situate my work within literatures on affect, and recent research on affect and BDSM/kink and rope bondage. Overall, this research regarded 'community' as a problematic term, and proposed using the alternative 'spaces'. This research was conducted in three rope bondage spaces from London, Berlin and Paris. It sought to contribute with new data to already existent research on the tying space in London (Galati, 2017; Pennington, 2018), while providing new insights and analysing the dissolution of the tying space in Paris (The Greenhouse) and investigating the dynamics of the Berlin tying space, which operated as a festival (The Barn). As expanded in section 3.3 (Field sites), where I provide a detailed account of the three venues where fieldwork was conducted, the 'space' from London was modelled after the Paris one (as A.B. confirmed in our interview), and they both served as venues with fixed address for the communities from the respective cities. On the contrary, The Barn in Berlin becomes a 'space' twice per year, attracting different international practitioners who temporarily find a common ground for sharing and creative and/or erotic endeavours. One other original contribution to literatures on 'situated' knowledge this research makes, is by examining the ways in which knowledge is produced, accumulated, selected, embodied and disseminated through affective mutuality and contagion. In discussing these processes as they appear in cross-cultural environments, this research brings its contribution to literatures on cross- and trans-culturality, especially those concerned with knowledge production in cultural exchange (Howes,

1996; Rogers, 2006; Ziff & Rao, 1997; Young, 2010; Young & Brunk, 2012), 'cultural appropriation' and 'fetishization' (Cook and Crang, 1996; Jackson, 2002; Taussig, 1996), and the market (Kowner, 2008; McWorther, 2016; Sugimoto, 2009). Moreover, in postulating a broader understanding of knowledge-production as a result of accumulation and incorporation in embodied rope bondage, this research adds to existing literature in the field of cultural theory (Haraway, 1988; 1991; Rogowska-Stangret, 2018). In exploring knowledge-production as a consequence of 'dialogical practices' involved in various 'modes of becoming' and generating 'open-ended forms' (O'Neill & Wilson, 2015: 12), this thesis adds to literatures which explore the cultures of 'the curatorial' (Richter & Kolb, 2022; Gheorghe, 2022), artistic research and curatorial research at large (Bismarck & Rogoff, 2012; Bismarck, 2022a; 2022b; Lind, 2010; 2012; Lind, Ashford & Gruijthuisen, 2013; O'Neill, 2015; O'Neill and Wilson, 2016; O'Neill, Wilson et al., 2019; Rogoff 2013, 2018). There are also methodological contributions to the field of ethnographic literature that ought to be considered. First, this research contributes to BDSM/kink and rope bondage ethnographical literatures by investigating the 'lived' experience and people's motivation to engage in rope bondage as they see and live it (Spradley, 1979). Within ethnographic studies, this analysis makes a case for, and contributes to further research using rhizomatic models. Finally, presented a nuanced account of people's 'lived' experience while engaging in the practice of rope bondage, and showed the ways in which practitioners relate to each of their tying venues (or the territory, in the case of P.A, who works in comparative isolation). Second, an important aspect is the original contribution the research is making in terms of the methods used. It emphasizes on the potential of using a combination of semi-structured and unstructured interviews, in giving enough space for interview partners to express and reflect on their practice and experiences. As such, the research makes an original contribution to similar ethnographies, in using a flexible design, tailored and responsive to the participants' needs. This responds to prompts for considering the individuality and unique approach that every practitioner brings to the field of rope bondage (Barkas, 2016; Ordean & Pennington, 2019). Moreover, concerning the data collection, the research makes a valuable contribution in using a researcher-participant approach. This aligns to other contributions in the field (Hedwig, 2011; Galati, 2017; Pennington, 2018), while also making a case favouring the use of autoethnography, alongside other research materials in the field (Geertz, 1983; Denzin and Lincoln 2005; Pensoneau-Conway and Toyosaki, 2011; Wint, 2011). Furthermore, in positioning the researcher-participant, it demonstrates that much can be gained when the researcher's body is immersed and learning by experiencing, similar to other research conducted this way (Coffrey, 1999; Hertz, 1997; Li, Stanley: 1993), and takes into account the social and political realities of the field (Farhana, 2007). In doing so, the research responds to calls for considering inclusive research designs

(Crang and Cook, 2007) which sometimes should not necessarily distinguish theory from method (Mayan, 2009) and which should further consider the importance of idiosyncrasies, emotion and embodied 'lived' experience in the process of crafting methodologies (Whitehead, 2004). The methodological insights generated this way can serve for future inquiries beyond the embodied practice of rope bondage, particularly in research that aims to explore embodied aspects in performative practices, immersive practices, dance or movement more generally. Third, this research makes a case for using a multi-sited comparative approach to researching 'lived' experience and people's motivation to engage in rope bondage. Thus, it emphasizes on similarities and differences pertaining to the field dynamics in these three sites, as interview partners responded differently to questions regarding positionality on different subjects across all field sites. During the years in which this multi-sited comparative research was conducted, the way in which social and sexual norms were discussed and conveyed to the participants underwent some changes as a response to ongoing conversation on rope dynamics and deepening issues about safety and consent. A deeper understanding and framing of individual boundaries which should be followed by the people present in the venue were observed in both group discussions and the presentation of house rules. The mission of the remaining two venues – The Garden in London and The Barn festival in Berlin, unfolds in the overall context of significant shifts in contemporary European rope bondage. On the one hand, there is an increasing tendency towards developing individualized approaches in terms of stylistic development, symptomatic of a maturing scene; on the other hand, there is a noticeable tightening of the rules, the does and don'ts participants must abide by in order to be accepted into rope bondage venues. This research has also found concrete evidence hinting towards a cooperation between the owners/organisers in London and Berlin (and arguably with other European venues) regarding space management and house rules, referred to explicitly during some of the interviews.

This research has provided significant insight into positionality and the way in which 'lived' experience impacts processes of knowledge-production within the practice of rope bondage. Nevertheless, some limitations are inevitable, due to the time scale of the doctoral project and the resources available. In dealing with the research questions and as I progressed with my fieldwork, I have taken note of some themes which are important subjects of inquiry, or which connect with some of the themes discussed in this thesis, but which do not form a part of the current research. In terms of suggestions for future research, new avenues of investigation could deepen and enrich the understanding of positionality, 'lived' experience and knowledge-production within the practice of rope bondage, but also expand towards more artistic and creative outputs.

First, this thesis draws empirical data from the scenes in London, Berlin and Paris, and exceptionally the island of F\* in the Mediterranean Sea where rope artist P.A. is based. London, Berlin and Paris are all flourishing Western European capitals, with a significant financial turnover, and this is also reflected in the financial commitments required for participation to classes, events, festivals, or the acquisition of treated rope which is suitable for bondage; nevertheless, both venues from Berlin and London have been striving to occasionally offer programs at reduced or student rates. On the other hand, owning a kink/rope bondage venue also comes with the responsibilities of owning a small business in cities with a capitalist climate where gentrification is increasing and living costs are mounting at alarming rates. As this is the primary income source for both owners (as it was the case also for the venue Paris), it is difficult to maintain the spaces open without qualifying for programmes of rent control, or without receiving state funding (also see footnote 136 at the end of this chapter). With a proper understanding and a gradual destigmatisation of the practice, some practitioners maintain hope that the practice of rope bondage will benefit from being included among the priorities of the local cultural agendas. It remains to be seen how much of these supposed subsidies would go into making the practice more affordable. Another important observation during field research concerns racial diversity. Although it has not been a focus of this research, a relative lack of racial diversity was an aspect which I noticed during my time in the field (interview partner A.B. addresses this briefly during our interview from the perspective of a rope bondage space owner see Appendix A, Part I). I am aware, however, of queer intersectional places like the K.H. in Berlin (which was beginning to take shape as a tying venue as I was concluding my fieldwork) which promote a diverse-friendly, postcolonial and race-friendly approach to the rope bondage practice, and of a general increased interest in practicing rope bondage from POC in big cities. A valuable line of inquiry would be looking at other places (in Europe, the US and beyond), outside big capitals, or even at peripheral places, where the rope scene is only just starting off. This would provide further insight into the ways in which cultures of tying expand, what discourses are perpetuated, and how these localities or regions contribute to shaping contemporary discourse in rope bondage. To further cultivate research, a comparative analysis can be drawn from contrasting rope bondage to other Japanese performative activities (wrapping as a cultural practice) or dances (such as Butoh). The results of this analysis could incite further investigation on 'cultural appropriation' and 'cultural essentialism'.

Second, as Chapter 4 of this thesis outlines, a significant exchange of cultural products and ideas takes place between Japanese and non-Japanese practitioners and audiences, which generates 'situated knowledge' (Haraway, 1988; 1991) and contributes to debates on 'cultural appropriation', 'validity', 'authenticity' and 'fetishization'. Nevertheless, empirical evidence has been collected from my own

observations and from interview partners based in London, Berlin and Paris and therefore contextual. Additionally, the literature I have consulted in order to situate this research was written in several European languages I had access to. Further investigation into literature available in Japanese, together with field research in Japan would potentially unearth significant information and prompt new findings. In this sense, a coordinated effort with researchers based in Japan would be very helpful.

Third, following closely the rhizome theory forwarded by Deleuze and Guattari (1980), this thesis advocates for a horizontal, non-hierarchic disposition of rope bondage practices, and favours the construction of the *continuum* as an alternative research model. Nevertheless, as argued by Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizome could become 'arborified' (i.e. subjected to some sort of hierarchies) when 'outside forces' are 'hardened by significant powers and subjective affects' (Zioli, Ichikawa & Mendes, 2021: 558). Following the field data, this thesis acknowledges a stratification within the scene(s) can appear, with hierarchic roles (teachers, mentors, artists, presenters, facilitators vs. 'students' and apprentices) and resulting power dynamics. It is important to acknowledge and mention this hierarchy in relation to matters of consent and negotiation, vital notions in the development of a practice, and gateways into discussions on the politics of power. Moreover, as described throughout this thesis, consent (or lack thereof) plays a pivotal role within a rope scene between two or more participants, and can determine the fate of a rope scene in a city, space or locality (as it has been, for example, the case for The Greenhouse in Paris). Throughout fieldwork, I noticed that attention paid to consent increased significantly; tying venues from all three field sites (and beyond) introduced mandatory talks about consent in their spaces and events. It would be advantageous that more research is conducted in this direction, including in fields such as sociology and psychology, which would be considerably more equipped to handle this type of research data.

Fourth, there is potential to conduct research about positionality and the way in which 'lived' experience impacts processes of knowledge-production within the practice of rope bondage using different research methods. This thesis utilised participant observation, autoethnography, semi-structured and unstructured interviews. It would be interesting to observe what new research data emerges from a long-term research conducted in these field sites and on further adding new data to the existing research regarding the impact of internet and the rope bondage practice, especially in the context of the covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath. Nevertheless, other quality methods would also be very useful. For instance, in order to understand better positionality in the lives of those who practice rope bondage, participants could be asked to keep a 'tying journal', where they could write at regular intervals about their experience,

thoughts, emotions and feelings. Other data collection methods such as focus groups could be useful if the researcher is analysing the parameters of the interaction among participants within the focus group (Mayan, 2009: 72). In addition, further research into identitarian representation can be explored through photo- and video-elicitation methods, or using photonovella. These methods ‘for participant-driven’ research (*ibid.*: 44) is a useful investigation method where participants become recorders of their own experiences and are in control of the ways in which they choose to represent themselves. These methods could capture some aspects of the rope bondage practice which otherwise escapes the written or recorded text. For a more ‘historical’ perspective, there is vast potential for researching using material (and digital) culture: archives, magazines, Japanese and non-Japanese bondage and SM magazines, art products and other paraphernalia. This is of particular importance, since little to attention has been paid to these evidence as sources of knowledge-production in the context of the practice of rope bondage.

Finally, there is potential to conduct further research on the relationship between ‘lived’ experience and knowledge-production in the practice of rope bondage from an artistic and curatorial perspective. The last empirical chapter of this research (Chapter 6) has employed ‘the curatorial’, and has exemplified with the project *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope*, which I undertook with rope bondage practitioner P.A. The chapter investigated *the form* of the partnership itself as a method of artistic research, and analysed positionality within one’s own identitarian strata. As mentioned throughout the chapter, a desirable output of *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope* would involve the production of a video montage, which will afterwards be exhibited as a video installation. Further research could tackle and analyse *the content* (video footage, photos, texts, drawings, sketches, audio recordings) of the project, and thus deepen existing research on visual representation. Furthermore, the model of research proposed by *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope* could be extended to include more participants, and therefore expand with new perspectives and content. On the more ‘practical’ side, the research model advanced, can be applied to curatorial work and exhibition-making. For instance, a comprehensive exhibition could display evidence from the material culture alongside a more experimental performative approach (such as a multi-channel video installation, accompanied by a live performance); furthermore, the theoretical framework concocted in this thesis can – and has already – be used interdisciplinarily, and be applied to other curatorial projects.<sup>137</sup> Further research could serve in advocacy and in the long-run contribute to public

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<sup>137</sup> I am referring here to the exhibition *Made-up histories have long lives* which took place in February 2023, and was included in Timisoara 2023 European Capital of Culture. The exhibition sought to expand on the notion of ethnographies and explored the relationship between ethnography and artistic production. The theoretical framework of the exhibition was much inspired by this thesis. More information about the exhibition via:

policy-making in the cultural sector. This would popularise the rope bondage practice and bring it closer to general audiences, and facilitate access to public sources of funding.<sup>138</sup>

To conclude, there are several possible directions for future research on positionality and the way in which ‘lived’ experience impacts processes of knowledge-production within the practice of rope bondage. This thesis serves as an initial foundation, paving the way for subsequent theoretical, conceptual, and methodological research in this domain to unfold. There is the potential for further research to offer additional significant contributions, and add to a broader understanding of the embodied practice of rope bondage. I am optimistic this will serve as a continued source of inspiration and remain an engaging research topic for years to come.

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<https://timisoara2023.eu/en/events/made-up-histories-have-long-lives/> (last accessed 26.11.2023). This exhibition was a part of the project Remix ID: <https://timisoara2023.eu/en/projects/remix-id-2023/> (last accessed 26.11.2023).

<sup>138</sup> For instance, interview partner F.R. commented on this aspect (I.F. Berlin 7 / 3.11.2018):

‘The next step would be to get it to a level at which you could ask for public funding for it. If it gets to an art level it means it reaches everybody so you could make open evenings and just deal with it as [you would deal] with art. Confront it with normal [i.e. vanilla] people and see what they react like and then of course you can produce much more interesting things like commissioned work.’

## *Appendix*

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Hemp rope bundles, treated for rope bondage (using coconut and / or jojoba oil) and ready to be shipped. The most common length for each bundle is ca. 7 meters, and they can have different thickness, and be made out of different materials: hemp (most common), jute, coconut, cotton, and synthetic fibre. Image credit: <https://supernaut.info>, all rights reserved (used with permission).



2. Rope bondage full side suspension tied by M.A. and undisclosed model at the Greenhouse Paris, spring 2017. The model is dressed and suspended on one side with a *takate kote* (TK). A stone is placed as a supplementary counter-weight. On the floor there are tatamis, and in the background Japanese-style silkscreens are visible. Courtesy of M.A., all rights reserved (used with permission).



3. Rope bondage semi-suspension (i.e. only a part of the body is suspended, in this case the arms in a *strappado* tie) and double *futumomo*, tied by M.A. and undisclosed model in a private setting, spring 2017. The model is tied in a 'predicament', a difficult contortion in which the movement of one part of the body generates tension and pain in another; for example, a temporary movement of the arms and torso would generate more pain in the back of the neck and the leg area. Courtesy of M.A., all rights reserved (used with permission).



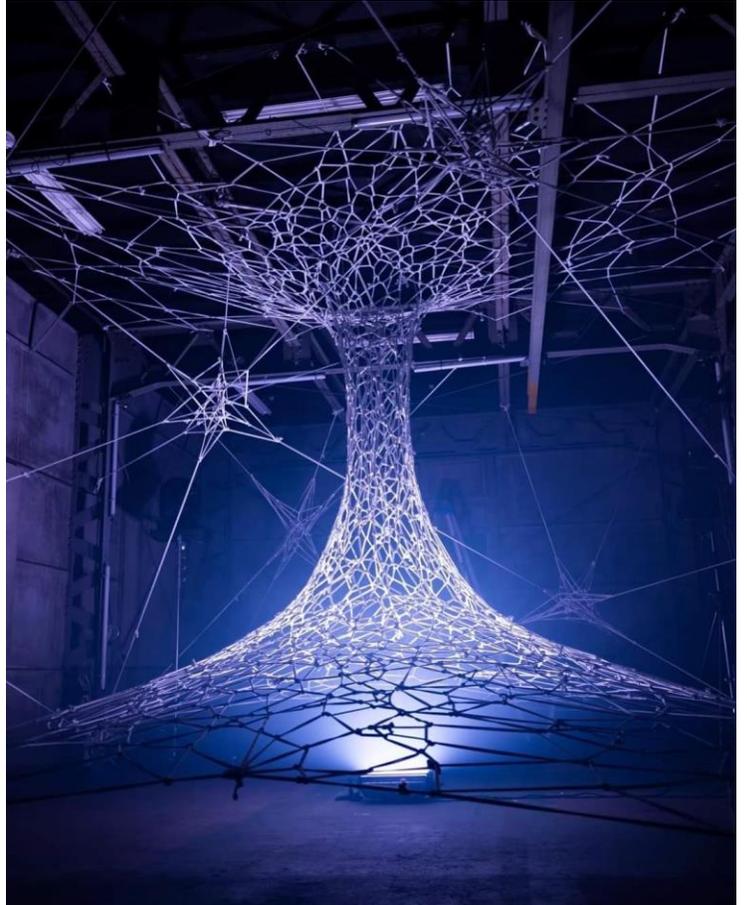
4. Tied branches by S.H. April 2017. Sent to me together with the following lies: *Hands running over the branch and along the tense yarn which holds it tight, I let my fingertips feel and read the stories offered, and observe, as they aggregate with the stories emerging from within me. Memories of ties past, of bodies past, of unique moments partly echoing into other unique moments. The ties that hug yet expose, protect, yet point to hidden depths and intimate spaces. The ties that accentuate the natural traits of the body and those that transform and structure the void, integrating the latter into the solid body. I move back and forth between this external body and my own, the boundaries in between get softer until they don't matter anymore.* Courtesy of S.H., all rights reserved (used with permission).



5. Screenshots from the project *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope*, fieldwork in Formentera, October 2017. The images show P.A. during a performance, using ropes and organic local materials (stone, sand, branches). Image courtesy: P.A. and Iris Ordean.



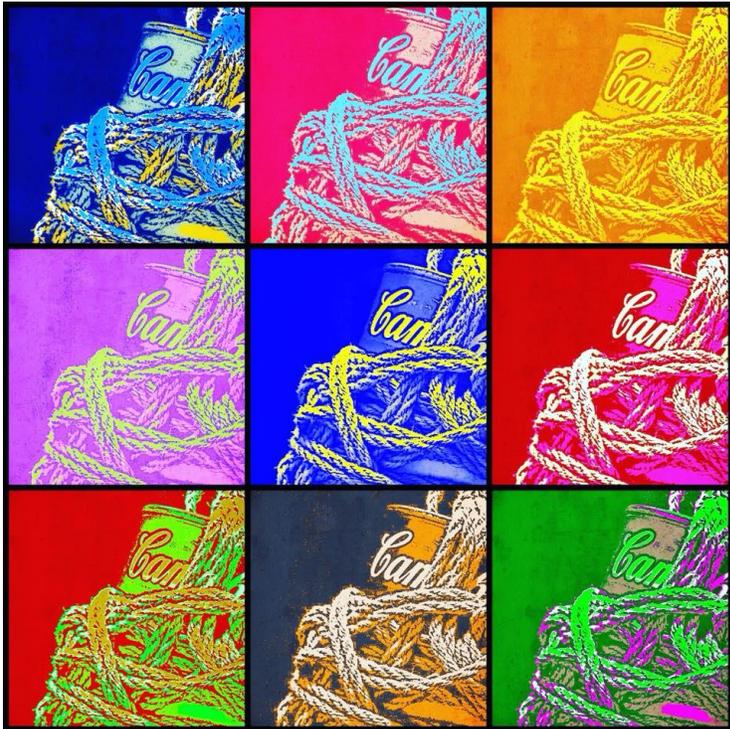
6. Monumental synthetic rope installations (indoor and outdoor) in Tokyo by rope bondage practitioner K.H., 2019 and 2023. Image credit: K.H., all rights reserved (used with permission).



7. (left) photo manipulation by P.A., pastiche after Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans* series. The soup is here 'tied'. The caption reads: *I really want to tie Andy all together! (Warhol time)*.

(right) fine art photograph Giclée print, 100 x 70 cm. The photograph depicts a tied body with bits of rock attached to it.

Images copyright: P.A., all rights reserved.



8. Documenting coming out of a rope scene at The Barn in autumn 2018. On my right foot there are some rope marks visible and under the feet there is a loose end of a rope M.A. used in order to tie me.



## APPENDIX A

### PART I

***Excerpt from the interview with C.F. (I.F. B. 4 / 11.11.2018) held in Berlin, advancing some possible explanations behind the scene's current cartography:***

C.F.: And I think there will be a lot more of different scenes. In Berlin we have this privilege of the Berlin scene being so big, that we have different *scenes* (original emphasis) in Berlin.

*Iris: Why do you think Berlin scenes are so... Why do you think Berlin is such a fertile ground for the different movement of very different scenes?*

C. F.: Berlin has always been, like also in the 1920s, Berlin has been a place for very progressive cultural development, very experimentalist and then also very sexual, like also sexual new developments and stuff like that. This has all been killed or I'm guessing most of it has been killed, it was hardly visible anymore through national socialism and afterwards. But when Berlin was this divided city, you could come here, people from Western Germany to the Western part of Berlin, people could come and young men wouldn't need to do their military service, so Berlin was exempt from that. Also not many people wanted to live in Berlin, not many like established people wanted to live in Berlin, so flats were very cheap and an alternative culture developed here. I would say a lot of impulses for leftist radical scene have been developing in Berlin, especially in the 70s, 80s. And in the 90s, when the city was reunited, there were even more very cheap flats, so a lot more people came here. So we have had until the middle of the 2000s maybe, when the flats got more expensive, or even later, maybe even until the 2010s. A lot of people have been coming to Berlin who were either drawn by easier opportunities of living a nonconformist lifestyle, because it didn't have to have such a lot of money. There were a lot of people coming here who were either artists or who were leftists who were trying to develop more collectivist lifestyles, who were interested in the political developments, in the autonomous scene in the 80s and what was left over of that in the 90s and 2000s and in the past 20 years maybe also a lot of internationals came to Berlin because it was the one capital that was still affordable and in the West, more or less. Let me add one thing first: I think something that influenced the Berlin scene also is that feminism and queer movements and queer lifestyles have been very influential in Berlin because of all of this. And I would say the general kink scene and the rope scene in Berlin is much more informed by these two developments or these two movements and in many German cities, at least. So if I compare to what other people from Germany are telling me

about their places, I would say consent and ways of dealing with consent, at least can rely on longer discussions. It doesn't mean that everything's great, I wouldn't say that at all, but I would say we have like a cultural foundation here with many people having been involved in these kinds of like collective communities or something, before they even started into kink. I think the common sense in Berlin is a bit more towards the left and a bit more towards feminism and queer ideas, than in many other parts. I think this also informs the rope scene and I would guess even the parts that feel very strange to me, but I'm not sure about that, at least it informs the rope scene around The Hangar, that definitely informs the general kink scene here, which is centred around equality and fairness, so people would be very criticised there if they said things like 'a true submissive has to do this or that'. I would say like a Berlin identity, if you can talk about Berlin culture maybe, is a lot focused on fluidity, flexibility.

***Excerpt from the interview with B.A. and A.T. (I.F. Berlin 2 / 17.03.2018) on fields vs. communities:***

A.T.: So If a community is something with defined ... Something that doesn't communicate with the outside or other things, then yes, I cannot accept that term and I'll have to reject the notion of the communities as well. And I think partly that's because of mobility. And yeah I think there's enough overlap between various epicentres regardless of whether it's geographical location or a dojo which spreads infinitely over, or whatever the latest presenter has going around and the trend is following, and then things overlap so much, that I do not think you can pick out any one bundle of people and distinguish it from the next bundle of people, because half of the bundle already belongs to the next bundle. So ...

*Iris: Is it important for you to be settled somewhere and if not, how do you conceptualise movement?*

A.T.: I think any good rope, or kink, anything important and core-moving like that ... you have to invest in it, you have to question it, and develop it for as long as we develop ourselves, otherwise it's a habit not an act of intention. It kind of has to be evolving, And I think people want to evolve it by sitting and thinking, [making] thinking [about rope] internal to your thought process.

B.A.: I would rather ... I would go with a term of *field* rather than community. Not so much because of my own definition of community, but that's rather because of what I believe it creates in the heads of people. The community where there's like a care for each other, and I have seen too many situations where the care for each other that I believe is supposed to be part of a community, is just not there. Also, a community has in my understanding much more defined borders than a field. So, would much rather go with the term field than community, although when we make an event and we welcome people there of

course we wanted to people to feel welcome and included; and then, yeah, *of course* you can speak about the idea of a community, because it creates inclusiveness. When I speak academically about it I would rather speak about the idea of a field.

*Iris: And what do you think?*

A.T.: I can't remember what it was because I then I had a second thought. The second thought was about how everyone seems to embrace this idea of a community right off. So that, that's your problem isn't it? That's a very bitter thought on our part. But, there is something to it. There's my first thought as well: The community that it's supposed to care and share responsibility for each other, I think it works on smaller amount of people who also depend on each other for their livelihood. Everybody has their fixed role in the community and blah, blah, blah, everybody's happy and you have to care for each other, because if you don't care for each other the community falls apart. The community is what keeps oneself going. For us, this notion of independence in the rope scene, and in many of these niche fields is, ahm ... People draw something for me and people contribute with something to it, but it is possible to live one's life in prosperously and fulfillingly without having to play an active part in it. So, then when the moments get tough, people take a stand and step back, as they should. And the community then becomes a drain more than it gives to them in life. That is why communities are so hard to find, because there's a fair amount of role-play in there.

B.A.: When I say fields, I think about Pierre Bourdieu's notion of field, of fluidity, where like one can be a part of many fields. You know, like one person is the member of an academic field, but may also be a member of the field of sailors, and so on and so forth. All fields have their own cultural appearances, their own language, and their own rules. Communities as well. Communities have much clearer borders, like you are not so easily a part of many communities, I would say. Whereas in a field, in a more sociological terminology, it is easier to be. I mean, like how many members from the BDSM field are members of the academic field for instance, or [the] music field, or [the] art field. Whereas the idea of a community creates this picture of 300 people inside the village.

A.T.: And a Bubble kind of bursts at 250-300 people because that's as many as you can make a real connection with. It's about as many people as you can know – their names, their faces and a little bit of information about them.

*Iris: So, if we apply this logic to the rope bondage community, do you think we might be talking about different field with different specificities or different points of interest. Like, for instance, Europe vs everything else come out or everything else vs Japan.*

B.A.: [laughs ironically]. Yeah, fields have all these intersections right? If we are looking at the Venn diagram, those people who are established or who are about to be established in the arts field of so, of course they tend to pull BDSM or rope in their direction. Whereas other fields have different centres of interest, or pull in different directions, right? It is a very fluid interplay. European vs. this, vs. that, is kind of wrong, although there are many people who think that way. There are differences, of course. Like, how many people in Europe or North America – as I cannot speak personally about South America or Africa – but we've been to Australia. And, in North America, how many people in *kinbaku* have this belief, that in Japan rope is almost like a religion. Liquid secret temples and so on; there is like one industry with two or three people from the 'old masters' who put some thought into their philosophies and thought into what they are doing. In fact, they are even influenced by their martial arts background, or their poetry background or [their] writing background. There are differences.

A.T.: Most of my intercommunity experiences are there is a same as yours, because it's you I have been travelling with, or [they have been] largely curated by your experiences. We tend to spend time with people who have largely compatible philosophies. So yeah ... I mean, you can probably find somebody here who knows more about Japanese stuff than some dude in Japan. It's probably, you know, clusters and tendencies. Probably largely influenced by, you know, some of those magnates [who have] very strong presences [and who] are influential, but relative to their environment. I guess we are looking at influence peaks. And whomever attains the peak, is the centre of your Venn diagram. Most of the cultural differences that we have seen have been influenced more by the culture of a place than the country that the place is in.

**Excerpt from the interview with K.M. on embodiment, affects, sensations, emotions (I.F. Berlin 10 / 04.12.2018):**

K.M.: I think like one [thing] is that the rope is clearly an extension of my own body, and it feels like I can catch someone with the rope like I can do it with my body or with my hands. Ahm, I think it depends, clearly, I have a clear sense of rhythm, pace, my ... ahm ... the space ... like, space is also very important ... it's not just us. It's, like, I can open, I have a feeling for, I can open someone [up] to space, or I can compress them and I know that this has a big effect on their self-perception and their emotional landscape. So, I rather think maybe of landscapes that I can travel in, so it's kind of an artistic project anytime I tie, but also so emotional. And, I think it's because... ahm ... I'm rooted in the performance tradition, or like a way how people do performance which is more, it's not like they are the artist and he's showing great things and the audience is sitting there it's like 'wow, this is cool', it's more interactive, it's more like performance as a yeah ... interaction, participation, communication with the audience and so. I think, also, if I am professional, as a sex worker, I am more connected to my performer brain, than anything else, because I know it's about giving someone a full on performance, it's a one-on-one performance and we are both actors in a way. And maybe this is also part of it, that I have a sense of like, this is my dance partner and we are performing here. Also, just for us like it's ... it's not that I ... it's not about showing off or showing how cool I am or ... I mean this can be the case, but it's not ... but like also sensual performance can be also a performance, which has a certain build up peak or peaks. It has a kind of a narrative in it, also it's very abstract and physical.

*Iris: You mentioned ... ahm ... I picked up on something you mentioned about space, that you can open people to space and you can compress them ... ahm ... I was wondering what is your definition of space in this context and how you relate to it. This one question. And secondly, how you relate to space as environment and ... or is it rather a psychological process when you say space?*

K.M.: No, it's the real space, like it's the space I'm in, because this has almost a similar effect on the person and on me as other factors; like our relationship, or the texture of the rope, or the music that I play, or like whatever, it's ahm ... and ... but it's also body-space ... If I teach, it's a lot about teaching people how to discover their own and other people's body spaces. And that they are like that, you literally can open, like how you open a body and, and how you find these little spaces in-between, or ahm, how you can play with them, also with rope. So, these both [aspects] I think of [when] I talk about space, and also a kind of

mind ... spiritual, whatever space, [be]cause I know ... this is what I know from my own body experience. If I really experiment with my body, especially in dance, sometimes my mind goes into total, ahm, these kind of exploring spaces that I didn't know of, and I experienced that this happens to people that I tie, a losing effect that I enjoy very much and, of course, as a dominatrix this is what you want [me to do]. But I would say, like, it's more open, than the just, like I'm dominating you, and now you're like helpless, [the] blah, blah, blah narrative. It's ... for me it's broader, because people get sometimes in very emotional states [from] rope.

[...]

*Iris: And this sort of affect is transmitted from one person to another?*

K: Yeah, totally. I mean, this is the idea of the dance. It's like I'm dancing, of course with my own. Which is beautiful, like I, if I dance, and also, like then I have a connection to the space and gravity and my own body, but if I share this experience with someone else, this will affect my dance and so, this dance thing it's kind of a third thing which is just happening between us. And yeah ...

*Iris: What brought you to rope in the first place?*

K.M.: Ahm ... I was tying myself ... this was the time when I was like doing more dance myself and was like very much into physical exploration of myself and my own body. And then someone tied me up and they suspended me immediately. And I was just in heaven. I was like 'Wow, if this exists, the world is great'. Yeah, and it was so, I think, the relief was that every, like I think I've been [in my life time] someone who has been like exploring also boundaries and experiencing myself via challenges, also physical challenges. This gives me the feeling of 'I'm here'.

***Interview partner A.D. talks about the importance of 'Japanese rope' in their practice and teaching (I.F. P.8 /12.08.18, interview conducted in French):***

A.D.: I'm really ... I'm all the time with my partner generally and close friends, so we have a really good feeling and...so...yes, we...we had a really different point of view about ropes in general, much more than only consent and um...many things...I have really...I have really...umm different way of thinking, I...can understand that ... that ropes are...umm... you can practice ropes in lots of different ways and I've no problem with it; but I'm really close to what happened in Japan and I'm not so much in like yoga rope or something [like that], I'm really close to ... what happened in Japan, which is more [akin to] sex and SM actually. So, it's my vision, and also because I come from BDSM before doing ropes so um ... I didn't find myself in like leather things like whips [...] and I was like, oh, ropes, it's kind of cool and much more refined. So I just started ropes [as a] kind of art at the same time, it was much more easy [sic] for me to start practicing BDSM with ropes. What was happening in Europe at this moment like seven years ago it's quite different from what is taking place right now, people evolved, communities evolved so lots of things changed.

*Iris: What was it like seven years ago?*

A.D.: That was like we only...in Europe all people [were] tying in the same way, the same style from the Japanese [people], we didn't have so much information at this moment about ropes, and so it was ... much more performative than right now, we still have performances now but the few people who are doing suspension are doing quite all the same, and it was *O.S.* or *K.N.* who inspired mainly with *carabines* and everything so... it evolved and it was in France mainly in fetish parties or in BDSM clubs or in your own bedroom (laughs). So it was completely different.

[...]

Most people when they are [going to] my workshops, when they are new people, or when I give beginner classes I just start like ok: "ropes...I'm not doing ropes. I'm doing *kinbaku*." So it's ... to me it's a big difference ... so *kinbaku* is the Japanese way of doing it, and in Japan it's about sex and about SM. Maybe not both at the same time but ... generally one [or the other]. So ... I'm always ... I'm always starting the workshop by telling people: 'ropes are ... *kinbaku* is about sex or about SM. Ahm ... I will not play in front of you as a teacher because it's not my job to have sex here or something', but I will give advice or like ... making jokes about sex or SM in my workshop because to me it's part of it ahm ... but ... for me it's really

important that ... we are doing quite difficult ropes, and quite difficult suspension and the rope bottom has to ... let go a lot so ... it's much easier when you want to let go, to have this communication and this ahm ... feeling together. And so if you can't play at all, you will not let go, and everybody will be ahm really ... ahm straight uh ... or not stressed but ...

[...]

A.D.: I think if I remember well, in Japan depending on who's the rigger you're talking about or you're talking with, they will use it in a different way, so to me ... most of them are much more talking about *kinbaku* but ... I think that *shibari* is coming in lots of conversations in Japan because it's assumed that you like the chicken-y style, so ... I think western people went in Japan and they couldn't stay for months or years, and came back to Europe or America and bring *shibari* and ... to me it was kind of mistake but we don't care about it, it's not very important and ... in the end, if you go, if ... I think if you talked with Y.K. Sensei while he was still alive he would have used more *shibari* I think ... not sure. And some others will have talked about *kinbaku*.

*I: What is the difference between Shibari and Kinbaku to you?*

D: To me is ... I just use it to ... talk faster with my student and partner ... like to me *kinbaku* is ... much more like Japanese, so really deep emotions and really intense, and the moment it starts to be ... just technical, it starts to ... become *shibari*, like to me is ahm ... just to make the distinction. I don't make it really, but when we want to ... talk without explaining 'oh, in this case we have lots of emotions and in this case not', I'll just talk: 'ok, this was *kinbaku* and this was *shibari*'. But it's just to make it easier for us to understand each other.

*I: What about rope bondage?*

D: Ahm ... to me rope bondage is much more about ... generic, like ahm ... like you can include also American bondage inside ahm, maybe European bondage for some ... people, so bondage is more ... general like *kinbaku* in Japanese rope bondage? I think ... ahm London festival was Japanese rope bondage festival or something like that ... and ... but to me rope bondage is not only about *kinbaku*, it's ... it's much more general.

*I: You also mentioned that you are following the 'Japanese masters' and their way of tying ... why is that important to you?*

D: I think we started Shibari at the very beginning and ... I think I was really passionate [about it] and I wanted to ... not to lose the spirit what the Japanese created; to me it's very important not to ... I want them to be proud that some people understand and [are] not changing what they are doing. So to me it's really important, and I started to be really close to Japanese rope bondage really, really quickly. And also because at some point I wanted to understand what they are really doing and so ... the [better] I was, the more I felt close to what they are doing ... when I see some Japanese video of *kinbaku* I just feel like understanding what they are doing and I feel like 'ok, that's what I want to do'. So, to me it's really important, and the moment I want to do something really close to what they are doing, it's really important to ... go in that way and not modify ahm ... their way of thinking. And also because there are less and less Japanese sensei and so ... and less and less people practicing in Western countries also, so, to me it is very important that we don't forget where it comes from.

***Interview partner A.B. expands on their understanding of 'identity' (IF.L.2 / 16.01.2019):***

*Iris: Do you see identity as being fluid or rather rigid, and how do you define who you are in relation to this?*

A.B.: It's rather hard, I think it's a bit of both. There are parts of it that are a bit rigid and within that scope there is a bit of room for wiggle; and for people that spectrum is narrower and for others it's wider. I don't think that ... ahm, there are parts of people who are just wired that way, it's what they get turned on by and that's what they like. It's pretty fixed, you can't change it. Other parts can be cultivated in a way. I am thinking about myself and all the people I know. I know their fantasies and desires, and I know they're the same from when they were a kid or a teenager. It hasn't moved. It evolved a bit, or adapted to different partners and dynamics, but it's like: 'this is who you are', you know?

*Iris: Yes. Is this true for you as well?*

A.B.: Yes, totally. I don't think I woke up at 31 and decided to be kinky, I think I was kinky as soon as I can remember having remotely sexually oriented fantasies. I just didn't know what they were, or didn't acknowledge them or thought they were wrong and dirty and shoved them away. Or tried to push them away and ignore them. But it's very much a part of who I am and my identity.

***Interview excerpt with partner S.A. from Paris, who discusses how their vision and application of consent norms have changed in the wake of internal disruptions in the Paris scene, only a few weeks before (I.F. P. 15 / 04.07.2018).***

S.A.: [...] now the way I see consent is totally different.

*Iris: How do you now conceptualize consent differently?*

S.A.: Now I'm very, very [original emphasis] aware about consent. And now I know why it is important, because you can't consent [to a scene] and say: 'I consent just for this moment' and you can also put your consent out [i.e. withdraw consent]. Your consent has to be freely given, and not [like]: 'ok, I consent because you've asked me', etc. So, the concept is very good in fact; but, because rope is a special activity, I think you also have to ask [what is] the intention.

*Iris: Have you tried to talk to anybody at the Greenhouse about this?*

S.A.: I talked with a lot of people and – to be clear – I had a lot of discussions about [the owner of Greenhouse], about his ... the way he managed [his] relationships with girls. A lot of my friends were abused by him [...]. We had problems with him even before this consent storm happened [i.e. internal disruption] ... He had the power, the only [one who had] power – at the top of the pyramid – and we were all in[tegrated] in this pyramid. And we didn't elect this guy, we haven't given [this amount of] power to this guy, we don't empower him with [having a] consent authority, but in fact he [was the one who] had the money the power and the girls. And when I say the girls, I say all girls, our friends or girlfriends sometimes.

[...]

S.A.: He said: 'I am the leader of the community', but there was absolutely *no* community [original emphasis]. There was a system, a pyramid, but not a community. And the leader was not the most technically better guy, or the most philosophically important guy in the community. In fact, [it was] so strange, what a strange leader. Really it [i.e. consent violation] was, uhm ... an important subject of lots of discussions with all my friends, who were more experienced practitioners and in time, I saw the problem. And I did nothing. That's why when the first testimony came, I cried, a lot. I hated myself.

*Iris: You felt responsible for ...*

S.A.: Sure, sure. Because I knew everything.

*Iris: Do you think that's the case with a lot of people there?*

S.A.: For sure. Everybody. Everybody shares a little responsibility for this situation [...]

*Iris: Do you think that if this kind of disruption happens again, this experience has taught you, and maybe other people here to speak up?*

S.A.: Ah, for sure. There is a big change now, because [of] the discussion we have been having, it's no longer between two friends or three friends, we have this discussion across all the community now. This is the first thing; [it is] very important. The second thing is, we worked, and I worked a lot on this, [in order] to have a system to help us repair the problems even before the storm [arrived]. For example, I am in a [social media] group with a lot of people you know, with B.E., M.A. or R.A., and we worked on a sort of system, a platform [where we can] listen and advise and archive [consent violation] testimonies. And when one name came up one time, two times, three times, we would ask this person to have a discussion together [and we would ask]: 'do you know you have a problem with somebody?', 'do you know what kind of problem it is?', 'are you aware [of what it takes to] to solve it?' etc. So, I think we actually *were* working on something. My fear is that we will stop working on it, because we will have a new place, or a new organisation etc.; it is important we continue to discuss. The third thing for me, which is very, very, very important, is how we teach Shibari now in Paris. Because I think it is fundamental; if we teach *consent* every time we teach, if we teach *intention*, if we teach *relationship* in ropes, I think it could be different.

***Interview excerpt with partner M.E. from the rope community in The Netherlands, who has been a regular participant of The Barn, and who reflects on identitarian changes and changing community dynamics (I.F. 11 / 15.03.2018)***

*Iris: Speaking about The Barn, how long have you been coming here?*

M.A.: This is my third [one], so I went to the Spring and Fall edition of last year (2017).

*Iris: Did you find any big differences between the editions? Maybe your personal experience very different, or was it that the program itself or the themes approached were different?*

M.A.: Yes, in a couple of different ways. Of course, for me personally because at first you know, you don't know anyone, and the second time I knew loads of people, and now I know less – of course we changed

location so that kind of plays into it, it changes the atmosphere and stuff. And also, within the rope community you have the hypes if you know what I mean. So, for example, everyone was doing ‘*connective bondage*’ [air quotes], then you had the big flow of ‘*modelling*’ [air quotes] and now I feel we are more into body handling and non-verbal communication. For example, the first edition of *The Barn* I went to had a lot of ‘mussy ropes’, so you know, you have these hypes. I also feel like around ‘*consent*’ [air quotes] things have changed a lot.

*Iris: In what way?*

M.A.: In a lot of different ways. I think people’s frame of reference has changed as to consent; therefore, the framework now differs. So, for example negotiation 10 years ago would be like ‘hey, would you like to tie me up? / Yeah, sure, let’s go’. And now we seem to be needing almost an interview of an hour and a half to tell the story of your full-life experiences, blah, blah, blah. And I also feel it might be - but this is something I am still really structuring myself yet, so I don’t yet have any ‘clear’ concepts – I feel we might be moving more towards the state in which the female bottom is becoming a ‘victim’ that needs to be ‘protected’, whereas the top male dominant is like the guy who does [sic] the consent violation, so people need to be aware, and people seem to be more ‘opposed’ to each other when tying. So like, I want to tie with you, but first in order to do that I need to know if I can trust you and be able to protect myself, which to me personally, it makes me kind of angry because I feel like, you know, we had all the feminism waves and people now kind of take care of each other, and now suddenly my insights in negotiation and whatever can’t be done because apparently I am not able to speak for myself anymore or I need to have ‘spotters’ there ...

*Iris: do you think that outside contemporary movements such as #metoo informs or changes in any way the way people think within the rope community?*

M.A.: I think the #metoo movement actually has been going a little bit longer within the rope scene. Of course, with all the [social media] writing and the rope bottoming group of E.V. [rope model and author] being online and that kind of stuff. But I certainly feel it changes the way we look at consent and from a lot of, for example, male tops here, who are really afraid and way more cautious to tie with new people they don’t know, than it has been a year ago, two years ago, ten years ago.

*Iris: How do you find The Barn normative regarding concepts such as gender, or sexual orientation. Do you find it normative, or on the contrary a very ‘open’, ‘fluid’, ‘safe’ space?*

M.A.: I used to think it is an open space, but with this edition I feel like it might be becoming a bit more normative, not necessarily in terms of gender and stuff, but also in terms of consent. Suddenly you get notes on the bathroom saying that you have to 'wash your hands' and so on.

*Iris: How do you feel about that?*

M.A.: I feel that's a shame, because actually what I loved around here was that this is the kind of place where everything is possible. You know, if you wanted to explore something, like consent and whatever, you know there were hardly any rules, which led to a lot of creativity to pop up, and a lot of new experiences to pop up.

*I: Do you believe this has something to do with the venue, or would you attribute it to other things?*

M.E.: Yes, it comes to the things I already said and also some recent events with people who were supposed to present here, which might be influencing that as well.

***Interview excerpts with partner A.B. from London, the owner of the Garden, on issues concerning space identity, education, opinion-making and identitarian positioning within a locality (IF.L.2 / 16.01.2019). Importantly, the fragments chosen here are illustrative of the identitarian evolution of the Garden as a rope bondage space, of the way in which the owner has been repositioning themselves over time, and of how this act has infused the identity of the space, and had an implicit impact on those who are frequenting the venue.***

*Iris: I was wondering whether you could tell me a little bit about what it is like to run this sort of space?*

A.B.: It's very much ... the biggest challenge has nothing to do with kink essentially. It was very much, what I discovered was, that I had never had any experience with running my own business and having to take that financial risk [...] Or the notion of having to take care of a growing community of people asking things of you, and trying to please people and go into a direction that made sense for us and other people, and making mistakes along the way. And discovering our identity as a space, and of other people along the way. So those were all the things that I can remember.

[...]

*Iris: Since this is the only space that deals with rope on a full-time basis in the UK, I was wondering what did that bring for the UK community and for the European community, more generally?*

A.B.: Obviously I am biased because I am *inside* [original emphasis] the space, so it's difficult to say. But after talking to a lot of people, and traveling to other communities, and going to other events in London, what I've noticed is that when we first came in, there was a lot of misinformation and a lot of miseducation and a lot more [rope-related] accidents – just a lot of misinformation. The level was very low. I feel like there were very few people who were interested enough to travel and get the information, education and research it; that was a very small group, the majority was just happy to play around a bit with rope. Part of the reason why we went down the route of trying to organise workshops and inviting people to teach workshops and later opening a studio, is because we wanted to be surrounded by more people who were informed, educated, doing beautiful, safe things; who were also intellectually curious to evolve with the practice. This was the motivation. And I have to say that when we go to other events and other communities, we see the things that people are doing and I very much feel and know that we've had a very successful impact and a trickledown effect on the general level in London but also in other communities, because we have a lot of people from other communities that come here and do workshops and take the knowledge back to their own communities. So that sure feeds down the food chain. Even when we go to fetish parties and we see the people doing rope, there are people that are regulars here a lot of the time, and they're doing really informed, *good* rope [original emphasis]. Negotiating appropriately with people who approach them to do rope in these environments. And the overall, not just the level of rope, but also the level of information in terms of rates of injury and all of that. That's totally dropped and that is quite rare, that there is an injury in the community.

*Iris: I assume, since you were talking about how that feeds down the food chain, I assume, that's how you've got your experience as well. Have you travelled to learn rope outside of London?*

A.B.: Yes, absolutely. In the beginning, especially before we had the studio, we travelled to loads of places. We travelled to Paris a few times, we went to Spain, to Germany. Yes, we travelled to get the knowledge. Absolutely. But then, we got tired of travelling and decided that we should bring people over here, because there wasn't anyone doing it regularly, so we thought: 'let's be the people who bring other teachers here and get the level and the people excited to learn and get the level up'. So, yeah, very much so. I come from an academic background, my boyfriend is also an academic, he recently now, in the academic world, he has an industry job now, so we were both just as excited about the intellectual and the technical aspects of rope, as we are about the kinky-play-connection side of rope. So, I did this with kink too, I read loads, I went to classes. This is how I like to learn; I like to feel like I have ownership of my experience. I didn't just want to rock up to an event and be the clueless new girl, who throws herself at

play. That would never be me, I read loads before I went to my first event. So, we also try to do that here. We try to provide an environment where information is easily accessible, giving no excuses to people not to have it. There are books of bottoming and literature on consent on our website and in the studio, we always talk about partnership and communication, about consent and all that. It's saying to people: 'you have no excuse not to be in charge of your own experience'. Which was very much lacking in general in the rope scene when I first came in.

[...]

*Iris: What has been your experience teaching?*

A.B.: I mean, I was teaching at university pretty much since 2008, so I was teaching undergrads and master students and things like that. I've been teaching for a long time, so teaching rope was ... it didn't feel that different, it was just basically transitioning into a different topic. And obviously because it's something a bit more practical, teaching people how to develop dexterity and managing another body and using some facts of psychological aspects. These things were a little bit different to what I was doing, but in terms of reading in class, structuring something, reading a curriculum, that came very natural[ly]. I started doing it by necessity really. The reason why we started teaching, was literally this: we needed to fill up workshops from the presenters we invited, because we had a financial commitment. So, if we invite someone we have to pay for their trouble and per diems and all that stuff. So, we need to sell a certain amount of tickets. But we also want to provide the teachers with an educated audience, and [in] the beginning there were a lot of brand-new people to the scene that didn't know X from Y from Z of rope. So, we had to build the knowledge up and put prerequisites, so we wanted to offer tougher opportunities for people to meet the prerequisites, so they can book into these external presenters and their classes and have everyone speak the same language, rather than having these crazy mixed levels like it was before. You were travelling and you'd pay 4-500 GBP for a workshop, and then you'd have a person doing suspensions for a few years and another person who literally had learned a hand tie a week before. And that wasn't only dangerous but also a waste of people's time. As the communities grew and there was a higher demand for workshops and people presenting and travelling, people would start being a bit more professional about their approaches to teaching. So, the prerequisites and getting people to a certain level became really important so we started teaching so that people would meet the prerequisites for classes. That's literally it. As our understanding and level grew, we started taking on more high-level classes and also developing our own curriculum based on our own interests. But it wasn't ever the primary interest. Both me and my boyfriend were teaching at university, and we never felt that it's such a high-status thing.

I know it's a glamorous thing in the rope scene to be a rope presenter, but honestly, I never saw it that way. Even when we put on classes here, I very rarely say 'It's a class with Anna Bones', I'll just say it's a TK class. I don't care about having my name on a poster or in my own space. It feels like being part of the job and it's a part of the job that I adore. It's very satisfying and it comes easily to me. But yeah, I don't think about it too much. Does that make sense?

*Iris: Is this different than being perceived as an educator?*

A.B.: I don't really know externally what people think the difference is between a teacher and an educator. Perhaps if you say you're an educator, it might mean that you have more of a role in mentorship and something like that. Or that education goes beyond the 3-hour classes and trickles on to after the class too as we have an ongoing relationship with that. And in that sense, because I am always in the studio and F.H. [co-manager] is as well, there's always an element of a class or a jam and [if] someone needs help, of course you're going to help them out. So, of course there's always this feeling of being a little bit like a mommy to your babies, who come to your classes. Because you've seen them grow and go from not knowing anything to doing amazing things and having all these revelations along the way. So, you get to see some people's journeys so I guess that's not like teaching in class, it's more complete than that.

*Iris: Do you see yourself as an educator?*

A.B.: I don't know. I don't know how I see myself. I do think... in some cases... actually no, in the broader scheme of things, I see myself as a person who is not just teaching this class or that class, but who is helping people discover something about themselves in a way, like tapping into something or taking them on some kind of journey and evolving as people. It wasn't something I thought about in the beginning; but, when we teach classes and get feedback and messages from people, and in some cases they're very touching and significant and they say: 'I just wanted to tell you that you didn't just teach me rope, but you kind of gave me a new outlook on life and you helped my relationship with my partner' or you know, something that is more significant than the rope and it's about individuals and about partnerships that significantly matter as a result of the workshop or something like that. And that makes you feel like it's a higher responsibility, it's something deeper in it, and it makes you think that your role is maybe a bit bigger than what you acknowledge [...] and sometimes, you *don't know* [original emphasis], sometimes people come to your classes and you think: 'they didn't really enjoy that much', or: 'they didn't seem interested enough', and then you get a couple of messages from people that just bring tears to your eyes, and you're just like: 'I had no idea that this person was feeling this', or: 'that's what they took away', and: 'I don't

even remember saying that'. That's incredible. You feel like: 'oh, shit!' and it makes you feel more self-aware of your responsibility when you're teaching.

[...]

A.B.: In this space, we wanted people to feel like in a living room, which is the devise we are going by, because it pretty much started in our living room so the devise is still the same.

*Iris: Why 'living room'?*

A.B.: There's actually a reason for it, because this actually... So basically, it was like this: we were running the space like a living room, but like, subconsciously and then I had a conversation with F.R. when he came to London; and I remember this vividly because it was one of these pivotal moments and it was one of those massive lightbulb moments. He was in the kitchen looking for milk, totally casual, he probably doesn't even remember, and it was that time when I was feeling really stressed because I felt like some members of the community were putting a lot of pressure on us to fulfil certain demands. In terms of, queer visibility, choice of models, photographs [that] we were producing. Everyone wanted more. More body positivity, more gay positivity, more LGBT stuff. Asking questions about the choices we were making and making suggestions: 'what if you did this?' 'What if you did that?' And I was very, very overwhelmed with all of it and feeling very disconnected from the space, and it was making me very sad and F.R. was in our living room and it was perfect because he actually had the same situation, he ran the Barn for 7 years from his actual, fucking living room. And I just thought 'how did he do this?', so I asked him: 'did you ever get burn out from your community? How did you deal with that, trying to please everyone and people pulling you into every direction?' And he basically said something like this, I don't know if I'm quoting him exactly, but it was something like this, this is what I remember: 'you know, I ran the Barn for the first 2-3 years just for the community, I would not go to bed until people had left the stage and I would clean up after people and do all these things and one day I had enough, I was burned out and I decided the only way I could continue running the space, was if I was gone'. He really said this, and it was brilliant: 'if I was gone'. This is my space, if people don't like it, they can leave, and if they enjoy the space, they can come but they have to obey the rules, there are places in the house that they can't go, they need to clean up after themselves and that's just what it is, because it's my living room. And I thought this is the key, because until then I was approaching the studio almost like this corporation, I had to make it clear where all the rules were, and they were all asking more of us, so I asked myself: 'do I have to put more ropes, do I have to do all these', and I just couldn't. I physically couldn't. If I went down that route I'd feel completely

disconnected from the studio, and I was going to basically just be a businesswoman and that's it. I would've lost the love for it. That was the route I was going down, and that's when he said that. And it was like: 'ah, yes, this is going to solve all the problems, because if we present it as a living room, then we actually don't even have to have a reason for asking people not to do something. Or inviting people to do something. Because it's my house and if you don't like what I am proposing here you can leave, you are not forced to be here. It works because we're also not the kind of people to use that power, people do relax, we don't have many rules, but it gives us the opportunity and freedom, especially for me, because I am a lot more here than my partner, to, if I see someone doing something that doesn't quite click, that I wouldn't be able to identify on paper what it is, I don't have protocols; I just have a sense that this person is doing something dangerous or that person is overstepping someone's boundaries, or like, that person is going to cause trouble, I'll have the freedom to say: 'this is my house and I don't like what you're doing, let's have a chat about it.' And if they don't like it, they can leave.

*Iris: Does it work?*

A.B.: 100%. As soon as I went down with that shift everything died down, people are much more relaxed because: 'ah, yes, it's their place, if I don't like the rules I don't have to go there.' And that's exactly it. But if you are here, this is what you are basically agreeing to. And since then, it was the best decision I could ever make, I feel super connected to the space and I feel we can run it however we want and people are proposing things to us all the time, I have zero problems selling workshops, zero problems filling up the jams. And, it is safe, people feel safe, there are no cases of injuries, I can't remember the last time there was a consent violation in this space. I think we've never banned anyone; we asked 3 people over the last three-and-a-half years to take a break from coming to the studio for various reasons. And yeah, that's basically it. I think part of the reason is that humans in general quite like some sense of hierarchy, and if they know that mommy and daddy are running the space ... they're also there, but you're also an adult and you are in someone's living room and you have to behave. It just sort-of works. I find places who have too many protocols about anything and too much crap on paper, it will just lead to more problems. It's like this: it's like negotiating a scene when you play. If you give people too much of a checklist, like 'hair pulling', 'neck rope', you can take that paper and you'll always be able to wiggle yourself into crap. You're always be able to say no to hair pulling, but someone is into this, and they can say: 'it's not really hair pulling, it's brushing it more forceful', but for me that still falls into a category of hair pulling. They have the possibility of saying: 'not really'. Or if I say: 'no neck rope', they'll say: 'there is no rope technically around the neck', but it's still sort of 'necky'. You know? It's the same with rules. If you give people fifteen

different rules and you put all these doors ... all these walls, what people are going to automatically do is look for the cracks, look for the windows and doors they can use. If you say: 'there are no walls here but you have to be an adult about your own behaviour and you have to share this space that has no walls with other adults and somehow figure your shit out', people don't behave like children anymore. Because they have personal responsibility [...] They've been told: 'you have to watch out for yourself and you also have to watch out for other people because we're all in this together, we're all part of this community and you have to be like responsible adults, that whatever you do will impinge on someone else's activity, so we all have to kind of ... take care of each other. And that works really well, whenever I say that on a Thursday, people nod their heads and look around and all of a sudden, they say: 'yeah, we're all together', if one person doesn't do the dishes, it means you're fucking over someone else. If everyone does their own cut, everyone can have a better time. And it also means that people feel a sense of ownership for the space. It's not like: 'this space belongs to person so and so', it's like: 'it is their living room but it's also kind of mine in a way, I am participating in it'.

***Interview excerpts with partner A.B. from London, the owner of the Garden, on issues concerning space identity and diversity politics (IF.L.2 / 21.01.2019).***

A.B.: When we opened the studio, we wanted to create a clear sense of who is coming here and what it is like, for people: people drinking tea and laughing inside the ropes, ropes flicking around, and showing how people are dressed, so people who'd come to the studio would get a sense of the age variation and the female proportion. In the beginning we were constructing our own phone images, we didn't want anything too professional, that wasn't really sending the right message for us and not representative of what we were trying to do, with a very strong female presence in the content. Nowadays, I feel like so many people are using Instagram, it's a big change to us. All people in bondage who are on Instagram are literally posting pictures and what we do is repost. I don't think I've been posting an image on Instagram for a long time. I've just been reposting other people's content so people can get to see the space through the eyes of people who come here. That's more interesting. I don't engineer stuff. I don't want to do a photoshoot with someone overweight, so that people can say: 'oh, look, I'm fine I can come too', or whatever. It's just like: whatever happens in the space it's an identity issue. Like [it is] shown online. I don't want to engineer stuff like that. There are other people more qualified than me who are creating visibility for minorities in rope and that is very important. I don't feel like it's something that I can take on,

I really feel that we have a really good representation of genders, dynamics, bodies and all that. And that [it] will make itself visible online without me trying too hard to do it.

*Iris: What about race diversity?*

A.B.: [...] That's something that we've started to see change in [over] the last year or so. I see specifically more black people and people of brown skin colour. We've even had a couple of people with head scarves, so that was totally new to me. That was really amazing. I remember this one girl coming in and she was really interested in domination and it was amazing with the head scarves. She didn't come again because she probably didn't see a lot of people like her here. I can see how that can also be intimidating. But definitely more people of colour are coming to the studio [now] than they were before. I don't know what the change is, but all it takes is just one person, another person, another person. And you're not going to be the only one there who looks like you, so you keep going. That appeared basically, which is really nice. But also, I have to say, I think about that ... it's got somewhat to do, with the degree of conservatism in black communities. They're a bit more homophobic, more religious so that might also impact the representation in the kink scene. Things like that.

*Iris: Perhaps it's even about class?*

A.B.: Yes, perhaps even that. All those things will be contributing. It's not just what you look like, it's your economic and social background and your degree of religiosity. That stuff will impact your... you know.

***Interview excerpt with partner B.L. from London, provides further insight into the relationship between identitarian positioning within the larger locality (IF L.3 / 16.01.2019):***

B.L.: [In] the beginning I just rocked up, I didn't plan very often when I went to a rope jam, who I was tying with, or what I was doing. So, I'd just rock up and tie with whoever is there, whoever needed a partner. Sometimes I got paired with people who never came back, sometimes I got paired with people that I am still friends with [...] The way they teach these classes is very smart and very switch-y, you just swap all the time.

*Iris: Between partners, or with other people?*

B.L.: Between the partners. So, especially if there are a lot of ... A.B. for example, when she's teaching, you'll see that there is a lot of ... [interrupts herself] how to say this, let me think, I think she often gives people the option to switch. Obviously, some people don't and some people do. And I was always the one

[who said]: 'yes, let's switch', especially if I was tied by someone who was really shit [laughs], and not confident, and all like: 'I'm [the one] tying you now', and I was like: 'chill, give me the rope, let me show you how it's done' [laughs]. Of course, at [sic] the beginning my tension wasn't very good and things slipped, but I still felt like I don't give a shit about that stuff. If the intention is there and the confidence is there, you just have to giggle and move on and just fuck it, move the rope and put it somewhere else. I think a lot of that was because in those days, H.E. was teaching quite a lot in the Garden, and a lot of that was her influence. She's very ... she's an excellent teacher because she really knows where to start and she really knows how to break it down. She's put proper thought into her teaching methods, but she still keeps it very light-hearted, there's not too much pressure, she makes it fun. And she does encourage people who she is teaching to have fun above all else. She doesn't care if you're not doing the thing properly, if you're having a good time. Unless of course, you're being unsafe. So, for a long time, when I started [going to] the Garden, I felt quite self-conscious, because I really enjoyed the flow [of] rope, [and] like rolling on the floor with really messy ropes. At the time there was a lot of K.H.-style, dynamic suspensions, very K.H.-based, lots of harnesses because A.B. and F.H. had just released either their first video of their hip-harness, or an update of it. And so, everyone was playing with that. I've noticed as I've been going to the Garden over the years, that sometimes there are just trends, people are working either because of workshops that A.B. and F.H. have invited us to, or just [on] things like ... because we're all tying together, multiple times a week. We see each other, and we are just copying and live-feeding and just doing different things. At the beginning I felt quite self-conscious about the type of rope that I really enjoyed. Which was basically just being thrown around on the floor in a really messy rope. I really enjoyed a really tight rope, like a lot of pain, and H.E. made me feel comfortable with that because she was like: 'I didn't put someone in the air until ... I had been tying for 3 years, and I was bullied into it'. She was adamant on that, all the fun happens on the floor. Just having someone so well respected, who'd keep reiterating that point to me, made me more comfortable than my prior friends. Because previous to me being in kink, I was very easily influenced. I kind of still am, to a degree, but I am working on it. But I just want to fit into the crowd, do you know what I mean? I can be quite sensitive to peer pressure and I want to do whatever everyone else is doing, which is a bit immature, but I am 26, in case that helps [laughs]. It takes time to grasp these things. I've definitely learned to be more gentle [sic] with myself [laughs].

[...]

*Iris: Do you think it's the London community that is particularly non-judgemental?*

B.L.: Yes. But I still wasn't seeing myself represented. I was still ... I had quite a lot of fear in asking people to suspend me. The first time I've been suspended I wasn't very comfortable; I didn't really enjoy it [...]. I didn't see myself represented in rope, and then in January of that year, I really became committed to making it happen.<sup>139</sup> Like, mentally. I've had a lot of encouragement for someone [...] a very professional person and very high-up in the industry, does a lot of coaching, mentoring people, and [they] really believed in Body-Posy Rope, and has encouraged me along the way. So, they've been a big part of me staying motivated to make it happen.

*Iris: Are they also a part of the rope scene?*

B.L.: Yes, they're in the scene, this is how I met them. They've given up a lot of their time to encourage me, and they were like: 'I believe in you, you [can] totally make this happen' [...]. So yeah, I did the first shoot for Body-Posy Rope and it was in March 2018, or maybe it may have been January ... yeah, anyway. So, before I took that first step, I was very much like: 'I am not an experienced roper, I am not an experienced rigger, I am not a photographer, how am I going to put this together?' And so [...] as time went on, I became more confident with myself [...] Even now, I'm just like: 'I'm just the person who gets all the people together' [laughs]. But yes, because I spent a lot of time at munches and stuff, before I started doing rope, I knew a lot of people. Because I've been going to the Garden so regularly, I knew a lot of rope people and I knew a lot of people who were tied, and I knew a lot of people who took photos. So, all I had to do, was...

*Iris: Bring these people together.*

B.L.: Bring these people together and find those rope bottoms, that, well, I knew they were all over the country, I knew they were all over the world, which has been proved. But they're just like the ones in the pictures. So, I started off doing Body-Posy Rope by getting a rigger and photographer and a model who was either fat or larger, I don't want to call people 'fat'. But, 'fat', trans, person of colour, older male[s]. I mean, like, all the people that you don't see in rope. Anyone who is not basically white, bendy and female. And young. I organised a shoot a month for the first six months of Body-Posy Rope, and I published the images. Then I had the idea, there was a lot of work going into producing these images; I'd get 5-6 shots out of a shoot and it would take like a full month and a whole day to put together. It took a full month to organise and get everyone's schedules lined up if not longer, because a lot of these people are very busy

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<sup>139</sup> Interview partner B.E. is referring to their online visual project called Body-Posy Rope, which encourages body non-conformism and bodily diversity.

people. There'd be a day of shooting, out of which I'd get 4-5 really excellent shots. It just wasn't, I wanted to be publishing an image, like every day, and it wasn't [...] feasible. So I started asking for submissions on Instagram, of people either self-tying or just like cell phone pics that people take, and I started using those on Body-Posy Rope and in between, in order to stretch it out: in case I didn't have a submission, I'd post either topics like news topics and around like social justice, or motivational quotes about diet culture. I'd link people to other influencers that were talking about body positivity and diet culture and fat phobia and all these things, just in order to bring it all together. This was just about rope, about people connecting with their bodies and this was an expression of taking down all that learned self-hatred. Just to put all the things together.

[...]

*Iris: What has rope brought to developing your sense of community, or to your understanding of how a community can function?*

B.L.: I think the only community that I've been involved in, before the Garden, for like an extended period of time, because I've been pretty scarcely with my job, I've never been like, I've never worked anywhere longer than a year. So maybe like my class of people at university but the only thing we had, maybe because the contact wasn't as close or as frequent. It wasn't the same, I had an idea like a shed set of beliefs. I've never experienced it as concretely as I have with the Garden. The Garden is my first experience of making me part of a community in that sense. And yes, it's taught me a lot about, just like the ups and downs of relationships within that community, like you see people get into relationships with people, they break down, there's tension in some places. It fades over time and then there's tension in another place. But we're still a cohesive group, moving together in a direction but I've never experienced that before the Garden. I've learned a lot about forgiveness, patience and tolerance. Giving people the benefit of the doubt, giving people too much benefit of a doubt. But that's my first experience of the sense of community, yes.

*Iris: Do you feel that you belong there?*

B.L.: I did feel very strongly connected and identified with the Garden as a community in the beginning, [but] because now my style of rope is changing and I don't go to the Garden as often as I used to. Just because some things are not really allowed. I've developed connections within that community and I have transcended that community. So, there are people that I've met in the Garden, that are not just like colleagues, or peers in the community, they're my friends we have our own relationship. Because I have

a lot more space, I don't live with my parents anymore, so I'm very comfortable being like: 'hey, people, come over and let's tie at my house.' So, I've been able to develop stronger ties with people who are more, who have a similar set of beliefs and a similar mind set to [sic] me about rope. It's people in Edinburgh, Oxford and they're part of the Garden's community. But I wouldn't have met them if it hadn't been for the Garden.

***Interview partner S.O. reminisces on the important role the Garden has had in encouraging specific approaches to rope bondage in the larger locality (I.F. L.6 / 27.01.2019):***

S.O.: if you take the Garden as an example, what they have done for an enormous time, is having brought a multi-rope studio [to the fore], [bringing] a lot of respect for rope and all that. But I also, I found it creaky, 'body beautiful', and all that shit, when I started going there, so I didn't engage. I found it all very hypocrite, and it was very much about sanitized rope, and I think that this was very much where A.B. was at, at that time. I think that was [a reflection of] her personal journey, and where she was personally at, at that time. I think it's quite hilarious that her personal journey has quite significantly changed over the last months and that's shifting [...] and is right out there, in a sort of teenage-kink way. I think that is actually true and that is what happened so the sanitized rope version that was going around, was for no other reason than some people who were leading rope because they were in that specific place themselves.

***Interview partner A.N. (I.F. L.1 / 13.01.2019) expands on the relationship between rope bondage, BDSM and affective dynamics:***

*Iris: Is rope BDSM to you or part of BDSM activities?*

A.N.: Sometimes.

*Iris: Can you tell me when and when not?*

A.N.: That's going to depend far more on my interaction with the particular person than anyone else. Like, I can do rope purely as a friend with someone, and I am totally expressing a different set of emotions, I can do rope in a sense where it is very caring or very experienced-based, I am giving someone the experience of being in a suspension; and yes, there is literally bondage involved, but it isn't the same as having a strong dynamic to a tie organised in the form of being particularly sadistic or [having] a strong D/s component.

## PART II

### *Excerpts from field notes in Paris*

*Field journal excerpt: Paris, 5<sup>th</sup> of March 2017.*

Upon entering [The Greenhouse], I was struck to see how similar the venue's architecture was to the one I already knew in London. Albeit more spacious,<sup>140</sup> central to the venue was a large room with an overhead stair cased mezzanine, where I was told most workshops, classes and performances took place. Unlike The Garden's more austere grey linoleum and white walls, here bamboo and light wood-inspired colours, tatamis and Japanese paper screens dominated the place; warm lighting complemented the warm tones. It was overall a very agreeable place to be in. The place was very busy, and shortly everybody turned to the far-right corner, where a rectangular stage with wooden beams was prepared for the upcoming performances.

[....]

When B.O. and I talked about this at some point during that evening, they told me the place which would become The Garden at a later date, had been largely inspired by the venue in Paris. This is but one aspect through which some European communities choose to circumscribe to collective aesthetical conventions, I thought to myself. Other European venues I visited or consulted online encompass similar elements, whether we talk about the shape of the space that often resembles a Japanese dojo, or analyse different particular functional or decorative elements which gives an idiosyncratic visual identity to rope bondage venues.

*Field journal excerpt, Paris, 6<sup>th</sup> of April 2018:*

'While listening to K.H. speak about his own culture, in Japanese, to a 100% non-Japanese audience, I realised participation in this workshop must mean there is a strong investment that must go into assimilating aspects of a culture different from your own. It is not sufficient to just be curious about a couple of aspects, one must identify strongly with certain parts of the 'Japanese rope style' in order to commit to a highly technical, expensive three-day masterclass, which is infused with complicated Eastern-Asian philosophical concepts. One must, indeed, truly feel inclined to practice the 'Japanese style'. I

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<sup>140</sup> NB: to the Garden venue at the time this field notes were written.

wonder how far the identification can go for each person in this room, since it is clearly a highly individualistic pursuit. And I wonder if there are other aspects in their lives in which they practice or embody the 'Japanese spirit', or if it is just reduced to rope.'

*Field journal excerpt: Paris, 28<sup>th</sup> of June 2018.*

'I have been interviewing many people over a short duration of time, and I am not surprised to see that all conversations seem to pivot around consent. Most interviews have been difficult conversations, in the light of these terrible developments. I'm trying to be as careful as I can, not to push my interview partners into states of mind triggered by traumatic experiences (because I can never know who has been a victim of abuse, and who hasn't), nor to pry unnecessarily. Interestingly though, a considerable number of partners are coming forward and discuss this subject by their own will. There is one thing which I have observed, and that is that this severe disruption has made people start going through a serious accountability process, especially in the case of riggers. T.P., A.L. K.D., B.E., A.R., S.A., A.D., G.E., all have talked about this aspect with me. I think many people are seriously starting to rethink their practice in a post-abuse awareness context, so to speak.'

*Field journal excerpt, Paris, 3<sup>rd</sup> of July 2018:*

'Here we are, a few months after the 'storm' that hit the Greenhouse, and so much has changed in the discourses that I hear from people, or that I read on social media groups. Several people who enjoy being tied (and who rest anonymous) have told me the context in which we currently are made them realise they have been abused at least once in while engaged in a rope-related activity – abuse ranging from mild consent violations to rape. The same goes for a few riggers (interviewed, online users or participants in informal conversation), who have reconnected with former partners and have inquired whether their behaviour has ever been in any way inappropriate. Most conversations are happening privately, but there are a couple of public posts on social media about this issue. I experienced the same process myself with K.Y., who was one of the first people to tie me in Paris; although we only met once, he wrote to me a few weeks later to ask whether there was anything which went wrong during our session. I assured him this was not the case, but they seemed reflective, maybe even a bit anxious about their behaviour. I wonder how much of this going-back-to-former-partner phenomenon which is going around is sparked by genuine concern, and how much by the need to conform to some sort of trend, or internal pressure. Whichever

the case, it's interesting to see how these phenomena impact the way in which people position themselves, and it will be even more interesting to see how it will impact their way of doing rope.'

### ***Excerpts from field notes in Berlin***

*Field journal excerpt: Berlin, 10<sup>th</sup> of October 2016*

I am sitting on a wooden bench in Berlin's M\* district, scribbling some thoughts in my field journal. The week is coming to an end, and my mind bounces back and forth between exhaustion and excitement. It had been a very intense week, meeting many people from the European and North American communities, sharing thoughts and opinions on rope bondage practices, observing various workshops and performances and making the acquaintance of dozens of practitioners. In short, I had been learning how being a part of The Barn, one of the largest and most influential rope bondage events out there, felt like. This was also the first pilot study in the doctoral project and the longest time I had been on the field.

Across from me, S.H. is smoking a cigarette. She smiles and asks me what I think of 'all this'. We took a liking to each other from the first day of the festival, and we have developed a strong bond ever since. We were both among the 'presenters,' so introductions were straightforward, given the similar role we were playing in the event.

At first, she was curious to learn more about my own experience with rope, and upon learning that I had, indeed, very limited experience myself, encouraged me to think about expanding this experience. I did not feel coerced or pressured in any way to do this. It just felt like a genuine recommendation which could help me create a common language with the people that I would be researching with, and which surely will be helping us establish a stronger bond. A week later, the same S.H. was standing across from me on a wooden bench, and asking about my positionality. She also wasn't the only one with whom I had this conversation that week: during the first focus group, the rope bondage technique of suspension had come up fairly regularly. My interlocutors were using a very particular set of characteristics to describe what they claimed to be a very particular sensorial experience for both rigger and bottom. Unfortunately, I did not have the resources to go into much detail at the time, but from what was discussed I can tell that workshops, classes, tutorials and talks tend to put as much emphasis on the role of safety as they put on initiative and craftsmanship.

Even if personal limitations would prevent me from exploring in depth the rigging side because I lack the technical foundation, experiencing the role of the tied person would still have brought me a step closer to understanding the embodied experience of rope bondage. I started giving the idea some thought. I was recommended to try modelling, and it was somehow implied that I would learn more from the experience of being tied. This and some passing conversations about rigging technique lead me to conclude that modelling would be the most appropriate way to commence my journey 'embodying rope'. I do feel that my experience will remain incomplete without the rigging experience, which is one of the main reasons why I remain completely open to the idea of learning how to tie in future fieldwork. For instance, The Garden in London is periodically offering a three-step foundation course for riggers which could potentially give me the necessary stepping stones.

*Field journal excerpt: Berlin, 23<sup>rd</sup> of November 2017*

While on this medical leave and preoccupied with keeping in touch with most of my collaborators, I was given the opportunity to travel to Berlin for a few days, two months into my medical leave. I met with T.A. and G.E., to congratulate them on the newly formed professional partnership. Both of them 'do' rope as a full-time occupation and earn their living either by touring with other artists or giving private lessons and workshops. Aside from keeping the connection alive, working out the determinants that make my collaborators relocate geographically and into different communities was at the height of my interest. I had already learned T.A. embraced Berlin as a home from back at The Barn, but I was also curious to find out why G.E. had left the London scene in favour of the one in Berlin just a couple of months before my visit. This got us into discussing concepts like 'underground' vs. 'mainstream', and how she played in favour of the former. There is yet much to be discussed on the subject in the upcoming interviews, but what I could establish from that meeting was that there are, amongst my collaborators, people who work outside the new conventions of 'mainstream-isation', and who enjoy the quasi-hidden, mysterious, decadent atmosphere that still surrounds rope practices. I am definitely planning to explore this tension further. This meeting was also a test for me, as I deduced at a later time, as I was asked numerous questions about my methodology, my data collection strategy, and most importantly, about my evolution in understanding rope bondage practices. I could feel a general sense of worrying lingering in the air, having to do with me being perceived as an 'outsider' into the rope scene. As the conversation moved on, I happened to make a comparison between partner dynamics in the rope community versus partner-work in the dance community with which I was thoroughly familiar, due to my background in dance practice

and my academic background in performance. This inadvertently ended up putting everyone at ease and established a new front of communication based on a common language we shared. We talked about movement, the restricted body, expression, gestures and partner connectivity with visible easiness and a sense of complicity. I realised two things: that this might be a good strategy to use with other collaborators in the future, and that I can draw many insights from as well as make future connections with my background in dance practice.

I was invited to observe one of T.A.'s workshops the next day. It was held in their own private apartment for an audience of ten to fifteen people. The theme was the *Takate Kote* (TK) knot, a frequent way of tying hands-to-back in *Hōjōjutsu* and in Japanese rope bondage practices. I was not formally introduced to the workshop-goers so nobody apart from T.A. knew who I was, but I found the atmosphere very friendly and relaxed throughout the entire duration of the encounter, which in turn, helped me relax. As I was already used to by now, I spent the first minutes watching the participants pair up and taking a few moments to become aware of each other's presence. Some chose to lightly touch each other's hands or shoulders, while others hugged. It is very rare that I see pairs in similar situations simply getting on with it, without going through this intimate moments of contact. It is the rope bondage's version of the pre-liminal stage, expressed not like a 'ritual 'death', as Victor Turner once said, but rather as a mental divorce with anything that exists outside of the rope scene. Many times, I found this difficult to witness as a detached observer. It feels as if intruding on a moment of great intimacy, and I have more than once reflected on the relationship between the observer and voyeurism. Further investigation needs to be conducted in this sense, especially when I will move on to being in the field full-time.

When assisting at these type of technical workshops, I am very often reminded of handcraft classes, where you need to practice a certain pattern as many times as needed in order to get the hang of it; in a similar way, after showing something the tutor is making the rounds examining the outcome and making sure everyone there understood the mechanism behind. The importance of 'getting it right' is certainly enhanced by the fact that it is performed on human beings. In this case, the TK is a vital point in suspension, or even the only one in some cases, therefore assuring safety must always be the first priority. The aesthetic part is not to be neglected either, as the teacher assures the participants - one can tie a correct, safe and aesthetically pleasing pattern all in the same time.

A sketcher was also present at the workshop. Although this trend was only introduced in the rope communities in the last years, it is becoming a more and more frequent practice to commission a sketcher or an artist photographer to document events (whether these are jams, workshops or performance

nights). While many European rope bondage studios and rope Dōjōs (including The Garden and The Greenhouse) have been commissioning artists to design logos, posters or merchandise (A recent example, at the beginning of 2018 The Garden commissioned the UK-based fetish illustrator to design some of the new merchandise. The new designs are available on the studio's social media accounts, and on their official website), and members from diverse communities capitalise differently on rope's potential to create and sell art products and merchandise. This will be a future theme of inquiry, as it prompted me to think about the economies of artistic production and distribution in the community. More, over the past few years there has been an increasing trend in opening doors for fine artists. It is now common practice to do life drawing sessions and model for artists; the artist and their model, such an explored subject in art history is once again reinterpreted in alternative spaces. Seeing a sketcher at T.A.'s workshop was, therefore, not unusual to me. After the workshop, T.A. told me they're thinking of introducing an 'observer fee' system where people can come and just watch/observe in exchange for a small fee. It made me wonder in what ways this has the potential of changing the dynamics of this micro-community, and its relationship to both practitioners and 'outsiders'. On the upside, this can be another stone in the temple of mainstreaming – so far, being a member of the community would not be a pre-requisite for attending. In the same way in which The Barn has opened its doors to audiences outside of the community who can attend performances, this 'observer fee' has the potential to popularise the craft and techniques of bondage to the same type of audiences. What remains, however, is the place's potential to transform into a voyeuristic and sexualised space, and to retrieve some of its unwanted stigma.

*Field journal excerpt: Berlin, 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2018.*

The Berlin rope field is currently a very difficult field to assess for me, beyond understanding how The Barn works. With the Hangar closed and everyone talking about how great a venue it was, I'm wondering how much from its culture still transpires in present activities, and in turn is diffused in other scenes throughout Europe and beyond. Something else that I'm aware of, The Hangar also functioned as a stable venue whereas The Barn is a festival, and has different dynamics. F.X. is the artistic director of The Barn, a sort of artist-mastermind, who works with a team of people for this event. I know two of them are paid executives, but I'm not sure what working regime the rest have.

Each edition of the festival has a list of invited guests called 'presenters', who come and propose different elements from their practice. Since I followed a few editions until now, it's interesting to reflect on the

cultural economies behind, on how presenters are chosen, where they are from and so on. The organisers also have this constant pressure of keeping it interesting and engaging; there's even a wall where there's a list of demands and a list of offers, and people can vote. Whomever gets most votes can offer the class. I find this quite democratic, and there's space for grassroots-up, embodied situational knowledge exchange. But The Barn is also very much about coming-together, because as far as I can tell many people come here to meet others from their 'rope family' and spend quality time together.

The calendar at The Barn is set for each day, with the respective time-slots. Each slot is of usually 90 minutes. Lunch times are predetermined. This is the first edition in the history of The Barn in which there are blocked morning slots, and a fixed program with workshops and presentations on consent. This is without a doubt due to recent developments in Paris (and in other parts of the world, by the looks of it). It's also an opportunity to educate people more on these very important safety issues. Nevertheless, a few of the people I was talking to feel that these new measures turn the environment of The Barn a bit more controlling. I'm hoping there will be some time to discuss these issues openly. Let's see how the situation develops in the coming days.

## PART III

**Ordean, I. Pennington, H. (2019, January – December). *Rope Bondage and Affective Embodiments: A rhizomatic analysis*. *Revista Corpo-grafías: Estudios críticos de y desde los cuerpos*, 6(6), 64-77 / ISSN 2390-0288.**

70 Vol. 6, Núm. 6 // Enero-Diciembre 2019

### *The Affective Lens*

While some rope bondage practitioners utilize identitarian vocabulary to define their orientations toward their rope practices or themselves as BDSM practitioners, others do not. Rather than engaging with the exclusionary mechanisms of identity and identity politics, some practitioners form communities of affinity shared through affect (Pennington, 2018), a prepersonal corporeal intensity passed between affected and affecting bodies (Massumi, 1987, xvi), delineating degrees of transfer “embodied in purely autonomic reactions most directly manifested in the skin – at the surface of the body, at its interface with things” (Massumi, 1995, 85). It is no coincidence that Massumi’s formative definition of affect is to be found in his introduction to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, the same work which spells out the efficacy of the rhizome in replacing vertical, “arborescent”<sup>12</sup> hierarchies with omnidirectional, interrelated agglomerations (1987, 7). Deleuze and Guattari’s mapping of rhizome as horizontal, complex, and connected shows how affected bodies are able to connect with one another non-hierarchically at any point across heterogeneity (ibid).

Affect is felt through embodied sensations. Rope bondage practitioners affectively orient themselves toward both rope and bodies—their own bodies, and the bodies of other practitioners tying, being tied, switching, or self-tying. Such affective orientations are directed materially, which has a noteworthy influence on rope bondage practitioners and practices. Specifically, rope’s material vitality can be partially expressed through Jane Bennet’s thing-power materialism, an idea which gives voice to a kind of materiality de-centering the human, attentive to the power non-human things can exert (2004). As Harrington comments: “rope can loosen or tighten on its own. Some rope stretches...the ropes move slightly...rope marks are caused by pressure on the skin” and rope can cause rope burns (2007, 18). Remaining attentive to these material changes and effects contributes to the affective orientations rope bondage practitioners have toward rope, orientations which reflect both rope’s material vitality—its ability to affect even though it is a “thing”—and a rhizomatic structure of connection. These orientations are not solely arranged in a tree-like, top-down manner running from practitioner to rope, but also form from rope to practitioner and from rope to rope in a network of reverberations and connections. Casting rope through space creates “lines of flight,” Deleuze and Guattari’s name for destratifying marks of multiplicity which indicate rhizomatic connection (1987). Further, rope literally passes reverberations along its length, just as the emotional reverberations of those in rope affectively pass intensity from person to person through affective contagion (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010, 8, 18).

<sup>12</sup> Based on the “model of the tree and descent” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 10), arborescent structures function vertically and impede the establishment of creative interrelations along other axes. In rope bondage, an arborescent model assumes the existence of a fixed and limited hierarchical evaluation system, in which the quality of a rigger, for example, would be judged solely on their fidelity to “original” Japanese techniques.



Figure 11. Jute rope, 6mm, and the marks it leaves on skin's surface. Photo courtesy the authors. 2018

Concentrating on the application, pressure, movement, and intensity of rope on skin, and the variety of affective sensations which arise from that material contact, can allow an individual to subjectively experience a feeling of surpassing habitual perceptions of time while engaging in rope bondage. As practitioners become enmeshed in webs of affective contagion across networks of rope and corporeal entanglement, their affective awareness of time can alter. Instead of perceiving it as linear, practitioners may see time moving according to other rhythms in an affective temporality which brings kinky perception to the verge of an altered state of consciousness (Beckmann, 2009; Newmahr, 2011).

Rather than mystifying such phenomena, the authors wish to align them with a state of consciousness known as *flow*, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's description of the feeling of intense concentration required to skillfully complete a particular, often durational task (1991, 2013). An altered sense of the passage of time is one characteristic of flow, which can be induced through activities such as swimming and playing guitar and has also been described in relation to BDSM (Ambler et al., 2017; Newmahr, 2011). Staci Newmahr (2011) argues that many practitioners are "more highly motivated to recognize altered states in bottoms than in tops"<sup>13</sup> (97), and that tops who undertake what she calls "advanced bondage" achieve flow through mental focus while bottoms "experience flow as a result of intense rhythmic sensation, sensation or pain itself, unrelenting focus on a particular task, or concentrated effort" (97–98). While supporting Newmahr's contention that kink communities recognize flow in bottoms more easily than in tops, the authors' fieldwork indicates that in rope bondage, flow occurs readily across power dynamics. Though the intense mental focus which produces flow is undoubtedly required of tops during "advanced bondage," bottoms regularly exercise mental focus as well, concentrating on breathing or body postures, while tops' work is also physical, inducing strenuous positions or delivering strong sensations. Thus, while Newmahr seems to contrast tops' supposedly mental triggers into flow state with bottoms' supposedly physical triggers, in rope bondage a top's work is just as physical, a bottom's just as mental. Both parties must exert their abilities to maintain safety for self and other. This means that the intense mental concentration and corporeal effort equally required from rope tops and bottoms produce flow.

When an individual enters flow state, their energy is directed in such a way that often the "self" and the "ego" seem to dissolve, and one rarely stops to think of oneself (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013, 112). For this reason, flow and affect dovetail effortlessly: affect is a prepersonal, experiential state of readiness (Massumi, 1987) and flow is a state in which one's consciousness of self ebbs away, leaving room for affective capacity. As detailed above, the rhizomatic web of affective connections between rope and rope bondage practitioners; rope's affective temporality; and linkages between rope bondage, flow, and affect all position rope bondage as an affectively charged practice.

#### *Rhizomatic Compositions*

Searching for validation in canonical historical narratives—the accuracy of which largely remains unproven—some European rope bondage practitioners (Ordean, forthcoming) claim close connections between their techniques and Japanese cultural heritage. Courses, workshops, and literature on rope bondage (Master K, 2014) explore this connection in detail. Yet some interview partners reject grand historical narratives and describe their practices

<sup>13</sup> The terms "bottom" and "top" denote those who relinquish or hold power or control during the course of a BDSM interaction (Pennington, 2018). In rope bondage, "bottom" often aligns with being tied and "top" with tying. Some practitioners prefer one role to another, but many are proficient in multiple behaviors which both resemble and transcend the categories "bottom" and "top."

## APPENDIX B

### PART I

#### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

##### **Research project about rope bondage and people from Berlin, London and Paris**

Investigator: Iris Ordean, Durham University

##### **What is the Participant Information Sheet?**

- You are invited to take part in this research project to explore rope bondage communities and aspects of identity politics for those who practice rope bondage. You have been invited because you identify as a rope bondage practitioner.
- The Participant Information Sheet and the Consent Form tell you about the research project. It explains the processes in which you will be involved, it tells you how data will be collected, it gives details about anonymity, image ownership and data storage. Knowing what is involved will help you decide whether you want to take part in the research.
- Participation in this research is *voluntary*. If you don't wish to take part, you don't have to. If you decide you do wish to participate please read this sheet and tick the appropriate boxes in the consent form, which you should then return to me. By doing so, you are telling me that you understand what you have read and that you consent to take part in this research project. You can withdraw in any stage of the research, without being required to give an explanation.

##### **1. What is the purpose of this research?**

- This is a participatory research project. It allows you to participate in many stages of the investigation and to contribute to and shape the direction and content of research. By doing participatory community research we will also create a model that can be used in the future to work with other

rope bondage communities that cannot be covered within this thesis but which can be in future studies.

- *Implications:* together we aim to create a project that will exist and develop alongside other similar academic studies by members from within or outside of the rope community. Then, we will try to articulate what rope bondage is and how it is positioned in relationship to other activities or disciplines such as BDSM, theories of the body, performance, creativity, Japanese styles. We will also record information about the challenges and social implications associated with rope.

## **2. What does participation in this research involve?**

- *Reflexive approach:* I will be involving both you and myself in a reflective process, in which we can think critically about 'doing rope', how you see yourself, and other people that you interact with while doing rope. Please pay close attention to visual aspects of your practice, and how your body feels like why you tie with rope. I want us to focus on the themes that recur or that hold a particular interest for you and to try and analyse how these impact, inform or alter your practice.
- I am also interested in finding out whether you feel a strong affiliation with a local community or not. You can do this by taking a step back and thinking about your practice, the place it has in your life, and on how your role or affiliation with a community is changing as the community becomes bigger and more visible.

## **3. What are the possible benefits of taking part in this research?**

- By participating in this research, you will be a part of a pioneering academic study about rope bondage practices, and help creating a space where your story will be heard, documented and told. By the nature of the research parameters, you will be invited to reflect critically on your practice, which might in turn open up new personal lines of inquiry and self-reflection and which can open new perspectives in your practice.

- Depending on a prior agreement, you will also be featured in a videotaped material which will be edited into a video installation at a later date. This will be giving you exposure to audiences outside the community, in a safe, controlled environment (such as a museum, a gallery, or an art event).

#### **4. What happens when the research project ends?**

- If you agree to take part in this research project, the data collected and analysed in the final stage of the thesis (along with accompanying imagery) will be securely stored on Durham University's host server.
- Once data is collected, you will be helping in the process of analysis, by choosing the visual material that will be discussed and organising it according to some themes and concepts that you consider relevant for your practice. Should you have consented to the video recording, you will be consulted in the editing of the material for the video installations.

#### **How is the research project being conducted?**

##### **5. Anonymity**

- *Data*: all data collected is confidential with respect to your personal identity, unless you specify otherwise. The researcher acknowledges that while some participants do not object to being referred to by name, others will request to be referred to by a pseudonym. A section on this can be found in the consent form, where you can choose the name or the pseudonym by which you want to be referred to. All data will be securely stored throughout this project and you will retain ownership of all the material you provide.
- *Images*: you will find in the consent form a section to this effect, where you can choose whether you wish for total or partial anonymity in the edited materials, both in the thesis itself and in future written publications, exhibitions, installations or films.

##### **6. Who is organising and funding the research?**

This research project is sponsored by the Leverhulme Trust through the Leverhulme Doctoral Partnership Scheme and the Centre for Visual Arts and Culture (CVAC), Durham University, United Kingdom.

### **7. Who has reviewed the research project?**

All research has been reviewed by the Ethics Committee at Durham University, School of Modern Languages and Cultures. This is a standard procedure for all doctoral research project developed to protect the interests of people who agree to participate in human research studies. Additionally, all research and written drafts is periodically reviewed by three supervisors in Durham University.

### **8. Further information and who to contact**

If you want any further information concerning this project, you can contact the researcher as follows:

*Iris-Carmina Ordean*

*(iris.c.ordean@durham.ac.uk)*

*Durham University*

### **9. Concerns or questions**

Should you have any concerns or questions about this research project which you do not wish to discuss with the researchers listed in this document, please contact Dr Luke Sunderland (mlac.dor@durham.ac.uk), who has responsibility for ethical aspects in the School of Modern Languages and Cultures at Durham University.

**THANK YOU!**

## CONSENT FORM

**Below are a series of statements asking a series of questions about your involvement in the research. They help determine the parameters by which collaborators want to be referred and/ or integrated in the project.**

**Please read each sentence and tick  the boxes if you agree.**

**At the bottom of this sheet please sign and print your name.**

I am over the age of 18.

I have read and understood the information provided in the participant information sheet and I would like to participate in this section of the doctoral project. I understand that my participation in this project which collects written, photographic and video recorded material is voluntary.

I understand the intent and purpose of this research. I have been informed of the details of the project, prior to my engagement in it. However, I acknowledge that I have the freedom to ask Ms. Ordean for any other details regarding the themes, concepts and the structure, as well as negotiate my level of implication.

Should my name/ nickname/ stage name/ pseudonym be used throughout this research, the name by which I would like to be referred is

---

I am happy for Ms. Ordean to use the above-specified name in her project.

I wish confidentiality to be maintained regarding my face or any distinguishable features throughout every step of the project.

I understand that if, for whichever reason and at any time, I would like to stop the photo/video documentation or to withdraw from the project, I can do so freely without being required to give an explanation.

Talking about rope can imply talking about intense emotional and psychological feelings and experiences. I understand that I can pause or interrupt my contribution to the project at any given moment if I find myself in difficulty.

I understand that the images will be kept in an archive at a safe location (external hard drive) at Durham University and that some of the images may be used as part of academic publications (journal articles), or academic presentations.

I understand that the data collected is confidential with respect to my personal identity, unless specified otherwise (see below). By requesting to anonymize, I understand that Ms. Ordean will use the name I provided within this form.

**Regarding the use of images:**

I hereby *consent* to the use of the material resulted from the photographic and video documentation for any purposes in relation to research dissemination and legacy/ outreach around this project. This can take the form of a written publication, an exhibition, an installation within a collective exhibition or a film. I acknowledge that I will continue to hold ownership of all the material I provide.

I hereby *consent* the use of the material resulted from the photographic and video documentation for any purposes in relation to research dissemination and legacy/ outreach around this project *as long as* anonymity is preserved, and the material is edited in such a way that avoids showing any distinctly recognisable face or body features. I acknowledge that I will continue to hold ownership of all the material I provide.



**PART II**

Agreement to conduct recorded audio and video interviews at The Barn.

Felix R



**Agreement**

between

**Miss Iris Ordean MLitt**, Leverhulme doctoral research candidate at Durham University, registered with the School of Modern Languages and Cultures (MLAC), the Department of Geography and the Centre for Visual Arts and Culture (CVAC),

and

**Felix Rückert**, organizer of European Rigger X-change (Eurix) biannual Festival, to be held at Holzmarkt 25, eG, Holzmarktstraße, no 25, 10243 Berlin (Germany), between 12-18 March 2018.

It has been agreed that Miss Iris Ordean will conduct a series of workshops and focus groups within the guidelines of the festival. Individual approval will be sought individually from each participant before the start of each assembly. Unless otherwise specified by the participant in the consent form, the videotaped material will be stored in a secure location and will be used for research purposes only - this includes transcription and analysis.

Participation to the focus groups and workshops held by Miss Ordean is voluntary.

Signature

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be "Iris Ordean", written over a horizontal line.

Date

12.03.2018

Signature and stamp

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be "Felix Rückert", written over a horizontal line. There is a faint rectangular stamp or mark to the left of the signature.

Letter in support of assistance for transcriptions.



School of Modern Languages and Cultures

20 January 2020

Dear Sir or Madam,

I write in support of Iris Ordean's application to the Postgraduate Research Grant scheme at Centre for Visual Arts and Culture (CVAC). I am the principal supervisor of Iris's PhD, and am based in the School of Modern Languages & Cultures. Iris is making excellent progress with her innovative doctoral work into *shibari* (Japanese rope bondage) in communities in London, Paris and Berlin.

Central to Iris's research are the interviews that she has conducted with rope practitioners in those three cities. These interviews form the very bedrock of her thesis; they constitute her primary corpus, for want of a better term. Iris has carefully – and ethically – selected a range of individuals so that a wide range of views, identities and practices can be presented in her innovative doctoral thesis. These interviews vary in length (up to three hours) and are conducted in a range of European languages.

Iris has made significant progress in transcribing these interviews, but such is the volume of material that it would be of considerable benefit to her research if she were able to employ someone to transcribe some of those interviews. I understand that Iris has found someone suitable for this work, and has managed to secure a rate which I'm confident represents good value for money.

If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Best,  
Tom

Professor Thomas Wynn  
Professor in French  
School of Modern Languages and Cultures  
Durham University  
DH1 3JT

thomas.wynn@dur.ac.uk

Example of confidentiality agreement with transcribers.

**CONFIDENTIAL DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT**

THIS AGREEMENT dated 23.01.2019 by and between, IRIS ORDEAN, Leverhulme Doctoral Scholar at DURHAM UNIVERSITY and ADRIANA ROMAN.

WHEREAS, IRIS ORDEAN and ADRIANA ROMAN, for their mutual benefit and pursuant to a working relationship which has been or may be established, anticipate that

IRIS ORDEAN may disclose or deliver to Recipient information via video or audio recording; and WHEREAS, IRIS ORDEAN desires to assure that the confidentiality of any Proprietary and Sensitive Information is maintained;

NOW, THEREFORE, in consideration of the foregoing premises, and the mutual covenants contained herein, IRIS ORDEAN and ADRIANA ROMAN agree hereby that no part of the information contained in the video or audio recordings shared shall be disclosed to anyone else but the two concerning parties.

ADRIANA ROMAN shall, upon request of IRIS ORDEAN, return to aforementioned all documents and materials delivered to them, and all copies and reproductions thereof.

Title to all property received by ADRIANA ROMAN from IRIS ORDEAN including all Proprietary Information, shall remain at all times the sole property of IRIS ORDEAN, and the respective interview partners recorded. This Agreement shall not be construed to grant ADRIANA ROMAN any access to the intellectual property contained in the body of the recordings.

This Agreement shall be binding upon and will inure to the benefit of the parties hereto.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the parties have executed this Agreement as of the date first above written.



**IRIS ORDEAN**



**ADRIANA ROMAN**

Service-level agreement for a placement scheme that took place between 01.04.2018 and 01.07.2018 at the Greenhouse in Paris. The placement scheme was a compulsory part of my degree.



Durham Leverhulme Doctoral Training Programme in Visual Culture

Placement Scheme

Letter of Expectation (Service-level agreement)

**SECTION 1 - To be completed by the student, Placement provider and representative from Durham University:**

<b>Name:</b>	Iris Ordean
<b>School/Department:</b>	MLAC + Department of Geography
<b>Main Supervisor (DU):</b>	Prof Thomas Wynn
<b>Contact Email:</b>	Iris.c.ordean@durham.ac.uk

**Details of the Placement:**

<b>Name of Host Organisation:</b>	Place des Cordes Paris
<b>Name of Placement supervisor</b>	Cyril Grillon
<b>Proposed Placement Start Date:</b>	1.04.2018
<b>Proposed Placement End Date:</b>	1.07.2018

The purpose of a Letter of Expectation is to clarify the arrangements and responsibilities with regards to health and safety-related issues for the Student, the Employer (or Organisation) and the University.

**Responsibilities of Durham University**

- Provide information to the student about the arrangements (including health & safety) prior to their placement
- Provide specialist advice and guidance for students with additional support needs
- Liaise with host institution

**Responsibilities of the Placement Provider**

- Provide an induction for the student including health & safety awareness, the organisation and its working practices, fire precautions and emergency evacuation arrangements and how to report accidents and incidents.
- Nominate a supervisor who will conduct or make arrangements for day-to-day supervision of the student
- Comply with health & safety legislation



- Confirm that Employer and Public Liability Insurance is held and that it will be provided for the activities of the student with regards to the student and to others who could be affected by the student's actions or inactions.
- In cases of serious accidents or incidents involving the student or breaches of discipline by the student, advise and consult with the University

Responsibilities of the Student: to the Placement Provider

- Abide by all rules regarding health & safety requirement and other practices and procedures of the Employer
- Carry out the work specified by the Employer under the supervision of the specified supervisor(s)
- Inform the Employer of any access or support needs that may require adjustments
- Report any concerns about health & safety within their placement to the Employer

Responsibilities of the Student: to Durham University

- Inform the University of any personal factors (e.g. health, disability, linguistics) that may affect the level of risk or may require adjustments
- Consult with the University prior to seeking significant changes in the terms or duration of the placement
- Report any incidents in which they are involved and any health & safety concerns that are not addressed by the Employer, to the University

**Please sign below as proof of acceptance to the arrangements and responsibilities set out above. Please print your name, provide an electronic signature and date it.**

	Name	Signature	Date
<b>Durham University representative</b>			
<b>Placement Provider representative</b>	Cyril Grillon		18.03.2018
<b>Student</b>	Iris Ordean		18.03.2018

**You should now e-mail the completed, signed form with supporting documentation to the Durham Leverhulme Doctoral Training Programme in Visual Culture Administrator.**

**Kathryn Moore [kathryn.moore@durham.ac.uk](mailto:kathryn.moore@durham.ac.uk)**

**SECTION 2 - To be completed by the DLDTPVC Administrator:**

<b>Date Received:</b>	
<b>Date Passed to the DLDTPVC Director:</b>	



Hosting Iris Ordean at Place des Cordes Paris, 1<sup>st</sup> of April to the 1<sup>st</sup> of July 2018

Place des Cordes Paris  
Rue du Docteur Potain  
75019 Paris  
France

To whom it may concern,

Place des Cordes Paris agrees to host Iris Ordean for her placement, which will take place from the 1<sup>st</sup> of April to the 1st of July 2018. We acknowledge Ms Ordean's placement is a compulsory part of her PhD degree at Durham University.

During her placement, Ms Ordean will be based in our small Paris studio in Rue du Docteur Potain. The studio is a meeting place for Shibari practitioners, offering and hosting a variety of rope bondage events. Ms Ordean will be involved with helping with the general running of the place and set up. She will be a key liaison at the various meetings, workshops or performances hosted on the premises. Additionally, Ms Ordean will be helping with various tasks in our office, such as co-designing our marketing and communications strategy and being a key pillar in its implementation during the year.

The 2018 calendar is shaping up as rather intense for our organisation, with a series of talks, networking mixers and exhibitions. Given Ms Ordean's organisational skills and expertise in the visual field, she will prove an excellent consultant to the team, helping us improve and optimise and giving us valuable input. We acknowledge Ms Ordean's previous experience included international institutions, but we are confident that working in a small environment will add to her abilities.

Additionally, our studio is at the core of the community with whom Ms Ordean is working as part of her doctorate project. We believe that her time here can also be used to strengthen the relationships with future collaborators, as well as maximising the potential to get unrestricted access into the community. It is our understanding that Ms Ordean plans to document in photographic and video form part of her experiences here, which we welcome and encourage.

To conclude, this placement will be mutually beneficial, adding to Ms Ordean's academic and professional development, while contributing to the development of one of the prominent Shibari studios in the European space.

We are looking forward to receiving Ms Ordean in April.

Yours sincerely,

Cyril Grillon  
Place des Cordes Paris



## PART III

A page from The CVAC Times, a satellite publication of the Leverhulme doctoral cohorts of the Centre for Visual Arts and Culture on the occasion of the 4<sup>th</sup> Visual Intersections Summer School, Durham, July 2018. The article is an interview I conducted with P.A. in preparation for our upcoming project *notas sobre cuerdas / notes on rope*.

16

The CVAC Times

# Through the pinhole: identity and self- representation

**Can you introduce yourself and your practice with rope bondage?**

My name is Pilar Aldea, and I am a professional movie-maker. I have been the director of Consulta Films Brussels/Madrid, and produced experimental films between 1995 and 2009. In 2011 I founded the Producciones Como Mola

evolve. It turned into a self for my own self through 'working' and 'playing' with rope. From an ethical, free, sensual and creative points of view, drama and humour cohabit as equals in my work.

Between 2012 and 2015 together with Ana Gutiérrez, we developed the

ground has determined ever since the beginning a cinematic view when I 'do rope'. Training to communicate through image and sound permitted me to rise relatively comfortably to the stage and perform, and at the same time has marked very clear differences between different types of work. In cinema, I am the one behind the cam-

what is happening at that very moment, and this contrast has pushed me into creating a very open and communicative type of work. I suppose in a way it is as if I can exit the screen, look at my creation and be able to gain a different perspective.

**In the workshops you gave at this past Eurix,[1] you talked a lot about how important it is to learn how to 'see' the other by paying attention to their breathing, movement, sounds, or how something feels on their skin. You also mentioned learning a lot about this through martial arts. Can you perhaps develop on this a little bit more?**

I have practiced Tai Chi Chuan daily for nine years with Helena Belzer, always placed a few steps behind, observing and following the development of the exercise or the Duan as is usual in this type of learning. Tai Chi has given me a foundation in breathing, balance, continuity in movement, awareness of the positionality of body and mind, which I use extensively in my work. I think they are essential for tying, as they are essential for teaching Tai Chi Chuan, that is a method based on sharing when teaching rope workshops. Let me give you an example: in Tai Chi, you listen to the breathing of the teacher, which is going to mark your movements. In the rope workshops we work by listening to breathing, which indicates intensity and rhythm, in both the one who ties and the one getting tied, working until we can start to be in dialogue by listening to our breathing.

**Who do you become when you tie?**

For me, tying is first and foremost an act of pacifying will. It is seeking, meeting, looking each other in the eyes, transforming shadows into light and showing the pain, nonconformity, impotence, joy, desire, tension, fear, humour, courage, the courage to build together a moment in space and time where we try to approach each other and feel safe while we reveal ourselves and we understand who we are. When I tie, I am everything that I can be.

[1] Eurix is a biannual rope bondage event that takes place in Berlin, under the artistic directorship of the ballet dancer, rope performer and educator Felix Rückert. It is an important site of fieldwork for the author.

Iris Ordean



Instance from the performance 'Desván', Pilar Aldea and Lee Sola, La Estupenda Artes Escénicas. (Granada), November 2017. Photographer: Zor Neurobashing Photography

in the isle of Formentera, which is currently running its 12th consecutive project. I am very interested in the cinematic experience conveyed by movements such as *Herramienta de Trabajo* or *Encuentro Social*.

Ropes entered my life in 2010 and they are here to stay. I received what is called in the scene the 'classical Shibari training' from prominent rope educators such as Osada Steve, Alberto Noshibarí, Dasniya Sommer, Haruki Yukimura, Yukinaga Max, Shadow, Akira Naka, Nawashi Murakawa, Bergborg and Sangs Blague, Felix Rückert, Vlada & Falco, Ricardo Wildties, etc. My practice has evolved and continues to

project '*Cuerdas Poéticas: Sensual Performance of Explicit Poetry*' with performances and workshops in Barcelona, Madrid, Soria, Bilbao, Strasbourg, Gothenburg, Moscow and Berlin, among others. As of 2016, I am working on a project called 'some ropes'. This is a project of work and research that includes workshops, scenic proposals and exchange with artists from different disciplines.

**How has your cinematographic work influenced your practice of 'doing rope' and your perception of the aesthetics?**

Ever since the beginning, my back-

era, therefore my voice, my emotion and my thoughts must happen through the other. When doing ropes, I can express myself directly in dialogues or monologues, but my voice and my body are always present. Of equal importance, in cinema the choice of the final image rests with the one who films.' In a rope performance, what the spectator receives is the immediacy of

## An Interview with Pilar Aldea

A page from The CVAC Times, a satellite publication of the Leverhulme doctoral cohorts of the Centre for Visual Arts and Culture on the occasion of the 5<sup>th</sup> Visual Intersections Summer School, Durham, July 2019. The subject of the article is related to the one-day conference 'Bodies Re-formed: Materiality, Transformation and the Performative' which took place on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November 2018. It was co-organised with a fellow doctoral student, and had a paper on rope bondage and an in-situ installation 'Rope Web of Affective Connection' by Heath Pennington.

## Conference Review

# The Bodies Re-formed: Materiality, Transformation and the Performative

Held on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November of last year at Durham University, the one-day conference 'Bodies Re-formed: Materiality, Transformation and the Performative' brought together scholars, creatives, performers and thinkers whose research explore the possibilities of the body, and various forms of embodiment and performativity. The conference was designed to be a welcoming hosting place for international appli-

cants and early career researchers and practitioners, inviting speakers from the UK and continental Europe.

The eleven interventions comprised research papers on various subjects connected with the body: from the exploration of trouser pockets as recipients of affective gestures in literature (Linda Tarto), the fetishized female body and the idea of punishment in the XVIII cen-



Cline Duarte's performance props after her performance intervention. Image by Iris Ordean.



Heath Pennington during their in-situ installation of the 'Rope Web of Affective Connection'. Image by Iris Ordean.

tury French collective consciousness (Prof. Thomas Wynn), or analysing the figure of Caliban in the history of reception (Fernando Martinez-Periset), to exploring the condition of 'being' post-human (Stella Kasdovasil), and the phenomenology of the body through the practice of scar embroidery in performative interventions (Joost van Wijmen). The keynote speaker, Dr Susan Vincent delivered a presentation on the bob haircut as a marker of 'rebellious' identity, but also of resilience in the struggle for emancipation. The confer-

ence also included a collective workshop of body-mapping (Nelli Stravopoulou), an in-situ installation (and research paper) on rope bondage and affective embodiment(s) (Heath Pennington), and a performance exploring the narratives of the female body through wearable sculpture (Céline Ducret).

In the context of important academic debates surrounding representation, non-representation and more-than-representation, the 'Bodies Re-formed' conference attempted to make room for research which falls under each of these categories. Equally important, was the fact that participants were confronted with performative materiality, represented, but also embodied and performed; the members of the public were, in turn, spectators, listeners, or performers themselves. Finally, the way in which the event developed and the nature of the exchanges between those who participated in it, proves, once again, that a space where seemingly contradictory theories coexist can, in fact, be created.

By Iris Ordean

**Conference Organisation:** Miss Iris Ordean and Miss Kimberley Foy, Leverhulme Doctoral Scholars. With the generous support of: St Cuthbert's Society, the Centre for Visual Arts and Culture (CVAC) and the Leverhulme Trust



Prof. Thomas Wynn delivering his paper during the first panel of the conference. Image by Iris Ordean.

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