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Performing the Climbing Body: Martyrdom, Apeiron, and Vulnerability in Rock Climbing and Mountaineering Stories

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies

by

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September 2023

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by

Anna Caitlin Holman

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ABSTRACT

Performing the Climbing Body: Martyrdom, Apeiron, and
Vulnerability in Rock Climbing and Mountaineering Stories
by

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This dissertation explores the climbing body and how it embodies cultural narratives across performance mediums. It delves into the significance of storytelling in the climbing community and how both the medium in which the story is told and the audience for that medium impact the narrative. This research also highlights the role of theater, film, and performance studies in understanding climbers' stories. Drawing on concepts from narrative performance and collective body memory, the research investigates how the climbing body constructs and promotes cultural norms within the climbing community. It also emphasizes the potential for climbers of diverse backgrounds to expand the narrative possibilities beyond conquest, transcendence, and survival. I argue that the climbing body acts upon stories, it *does* something: reinforcing, complicating, and disrupting cultural narratives. In performing the dominant narrative, the climbing body also performs what I call the martyred, *apeironic*, or vulnerable body.

Utilizing textual and performance analysis with a historical and phenomenological approach, ethnographic research, and surveys, this dissertation, with a climbing body as its constant, engages with performances of the climbing body in dramatic texts, theater

productions, live performance, and documentary film. Drawing upon existing literature, plays, and films on mountaineering and climbing culture, this study provides context for the climbing narratives present in the climbing community today, then considers the climbing body in theater, performance, and film through the following case studies: *K2* by Patrick Meyers and *Touching the Void* by David Greig, the 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell, an endurance climbing competition in Arkansas, and two documentary films, *Black Ice* (2020) directed by Zachary Barr and Peter Mortimer, and *They/Them* (2021) directed by Blake McCord and Justin Clifton. Engaging with documentary climbing films also leads to a discussion of the "stoke" film, a documentary film with an adrenalized anticipatory affective. By examining the narratives associated with climbing, the research illustrates the role of the body in performing its own stories and how those perpetuate or potentially dismantle dominant narratives. In addition, this dissertation demonstrates how the climbing body expands an understanding of narrative in the fields of theater, performance, and film.

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Introduction

For a moment I stood alone on the mountain. The rope at my feet uncoiled upward as my climbing partner disappeared from view while ascending the "Golden Stair," a gold-toned section of rock, one of the many pitches (sections) on the Upper Exum route on the Grand Teton. Looking west, pre-dawn gloom shrouded Teton Valley, Idaho. To the east, the sun began lighting the sky, casting rosy-pink alpenglow over Grand Teton National Park. My partner, our guide, and I had just climbed a section called the "Wall Street Step Across," a gap in the rock with an airy several-thousand-foot drop that, as legend has it, Glenn Exum leapt across in 1931 while solo climbing the new route in leather-cleated football shoes two-sizes too big.[1] The exposure of that move (combined, no doubt, with an elevation of 12,800 ft) left my heart pounding and an electric buzzing sensation throughout my entire body. Perhaps this was what the sublime felt like, the delightful horror mountains inspired in the Romantics, but at that moment I felt neither delighted nor horrified. My awareness had narrowed to the sensations of and around my body: the sight of the pink-tinged peaks below me, the metallic scent of granite, the whisper of the rope above me, the feel of icy-cold rock under my hands and feet, and the sense of standing at a great height with a void of empty air to all sides. I wanted to commit that moment to memory, make the experience an indelible part of my life story. In that moment, I felt a connection not only to the mountain but to the climbers who came before me. Their stories had inspired me to retrace the route before me, and now my body was adding its own nuances to the narrative of mountaineering.

[1] Glenn Exum, "The Exum Ridge," in *Never a Bad Word or a Twisted Rope*, ed. by Charlie Craighead (Moose: Grand Teton Natural History Association, 1998), 3-7.

Climbers love telling stories about climbing. Visit any climbing gym and you will inevitably see climbers recounting the route they have just completed to their partners: stretching chalk-stained hands about their head to mimic the distance between holds, pinching imaginary outcropping between their fingers, contorting their knees and torsos in an attempt to translate their vertical footwork to the horizontal plane. Climbers also like telling stories about the big mountains they have braved. Outdoor adventure film festivals, climbing festivals, and chapter meetings of alpine clubs abound with documentaries and photographs of journeys up perilous peaks. Unlike more mainstream sports, death and injury have only added to climbing's allure for those who choose to take part in the sport. Surviving a climb that others have not becomes a reason in and of itself for its undertaking. Also, unlike other sports that require adjudicating bodies to oversee formal rules and regulations, the climbing world has long been governed by generally unenforceable unwritten rules, a set of ethics learned from other climbers' stories. Different bodies tell different stories, and as the stories change, so too do the rules. Climbing therefore serves as an ideal framework for exploring how dominant cultural narratives (the accepted behaviors of belonging to a particular culture) complexify over time.

People who have never set foot in the mountains or on the crags also love stories about climbing. Even at its most basic level, climbing is dramatic: a conflict between the body's upward movement and gravity. Throw extreme landscapes and the need for survival into the mix and the beginning of an epic is born. Yet there is a danger to sharing such stories. Will an audience be left thinking, as one *New York Times* article succinctly stated,

"Are Mountain Climbers Selfish?"[2] in putting their lives at risk to become, as alpinist Lionel Terray calls "Conquistadors of the Useless"?[3] Given that climbing is ruled by ethics set from within the community, climbers wonder if telling their story to an outside audience will change the experience of the climb. *Free Solo* (2018) star Alex Honnold wondered if inviting a film crew along on his rope-less climb up El Capitan would mean climbing for the "wrong reasons" (i.e. for the fame and attention rather than for the experience itself).[4] Filmmakers Peter Mortimer and Nick Rosen expressed both frustration and admiration at trying to pin down their star climber for *The Alpinist* (2021), Marc-André Leclerc, who would never inform them of when he was going climbing, avoiding the limelight so as not to taint the purity of the climb with outside eyes.[5] Climbers are right to be slightly paranoid about having others tell their stories for them and inviting audiences to spectate their actions. Representing the climbing body through various performance mediums for an audience *does* change the narrative. The drama of the life or death stakes of climbing produces a market and an audience of affective voyeurs that encourage the proliferation of stories about bodies in extremis. Inspired by such stories, others then become climbers themselves, many of whom feel the need to live even more dangerously than the previous generation in order for their story to find its own audience.

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[2] Francis Sanzaro, "Are Mountain Climbers Selfish?," *The New York Times*, April 27, 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/04/27/opinion/mountain-climbing.html.

[3] Lionel Terray and David Roberts, *Conquistadors of the Useless: From the Alps to Annapurna*, trans. Geoffrey Sutton (New York: Vertebrate Publishing, 2014).

[4] *Free Solo*, directed by Jimmy Chin and Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi (National Geographic, 2019).

[5] *The Alpinist*, directed by Peter Mortimer and Nick Rosen (Netflix, 2021).

Through dramatic text and theater, live performance, and documentary film, this dissertation explores how the climbing body performs cultural narratives. I contend that the body has its own story to tell, one that the medium in which it is communicated and spectated has a hand in creating. Through this collaboration, a performance, a *doing*, of the body is enacted. The *doing* that occurs is the reinforcement, disruption, or complication of the existing dominant narrative. I see climbing as a way to think differently about bodies and narratives in theater, performance, and film, but also how performance studies can help climbers reconsider the stories they tell. As someone who came to climbing first through stories and then through actually participating in the sport, I straddle the lines of being a climber and a spectator. Also, being a not-particularly-good climber with little interest in pushing the physical limits of the sport, puts me squarely in the category of "weekend warrior" or perhaps "hobbyist." I relate to the sentiment one climber expressed to me: I know just enough to get myself into trouble and not enough to get myself out. While my level of climbing does not lend itself to mythologizing, it does allow me space to investigate and, at times, interrogate the narratives that climbers hold as "just the way things are." More broadly, this research asks us to consider that all cultures are comprised of stories, and that we can choose which narratives we want to reinforce and which might bear disrupting.

A. Roping Up: Embodying Cultural Narrative

In 2021, at the International Climber's Festival in Lander, Wyoming, I took a workshop on how stories about climbing could be expressed through creative means like writing, art, podcasts, and even rap. During the workshop, one climber reported that he was stuck for ideas on what to write about next. He had already written about his one climbing adventure-gone-wrong, when he and his partners had come perilously close to the loss of life

and limb, so what else was there to write about? Would he need to put himself in danger again just for the potential of a new story? This climber's conundrum reflects an issue with climbing stories in general. The basic *telos*, or goal, of the climber in almost all climbing stories is to get to the top and back down safely; the top of the mountain, the top of the route, the top of the podium. Conflict, either internal or external, arises when the climber struggles to reach the pinnacle and/or return to the ground. The climbing body is usually seen as being in service to this main narrative: drama is created through the climbers' physical, mental, or emotional struggles to reach the top and descend safely. However, if climbing is to be about more than just "selfish" thrill-seeking in pursuit of useless conquests, I believe that the story the body tells should be examined in greater detail.

Exploring the climbing body as performance creates an awareness that the body is doing more than just ascending and descending rock. The body plays a part in constructing or promoting the way members of the climbing culture are expected to behave. With this understanding, this research asks climbers to consider which stories they wish to embody. This research also opens the narrative potential of climbing stories to those beyond conquest and survival. When climbers of different races, genders, sexual orientations, abilities, or body types choose to tell their own stories rather than assimilate into the dominant narrative, they expand the potential of the sport beyond climbing ever more difficult or risky routes. Utilizing a climbing body as the constant across mediums, this project also offers new ways to think about how theater, performance, film, and the audiences for each, co-create narratives with the body. Lastly, the particularities of climbing itself offer new ways of envisioning how stories can be told in each medium.

To investigate the climbing body as performance, I call upon Nina Tecklenburg and Marie Maclean with their explorations of narrative as performance, and Thomas Fuchs with his concept of collective body memory, to act as my "belayers" for this expedition. Maclean's *Narrative as Performance* considers the role of the narrator in oral performance, dramatic text, and literature. Of particular relevance to my research is Maclean's consideration of the audience. She writes that in theater, the energy passing between performer and spectator changes the performance. While other theater and performance scholars have investigated the reciprocal relationship between audience and performer (for example, Gay McCauley and her concept of "performance space"), Maclean's research extends the impact of the audience to how different audiences (what Maclean calls the "actual audience") affect the narrative being performed.[6] She also considers the intended audience as well as those the narrator excludes.[7] I am interested in how audiences for climbing stories told through different mediums affect the narratives in play, the presence or absence of spectators for the climbing body, and the intended audiences for such stories.

Building on Maclean's work with narrative in performance, Tecklenburg considers "how each narrative performs itself, how it comes alive in performances and how it distributes its effects."[8] For Tecklenburg, narratives are generative embodied experiences; for John L. Austin, words *do* things, for Tecklenburg, stories *do* things too. The telling of stories

[6] Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre*, Theater--Theory/Text/Performance (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

[7] Marie Maclean, *Narrative as Performance* (London; New York: Routledge, 1988).

[8] Nina Tecklenburg, *Performing Stories*, trans. William Locke Wheeler (London: Seagull, 2021), 39.

"yields a cultural knowledge, an order of things, and intersubjective relationships."[9] While Tecklenburg examines what stories do in theater and performance art, my research centers on what the climbing body does and how that affects the narrative.

Fuchs' model of collective body memory ties the actions of the climbing body to the *doing* of spectated climbing narratives. Fuchs defines collective body memory as "an ensemble of behavioral and interactive dispositions characterizing the members of a social group, which have developed in the course of earlier shared experiences and now prefigure similar interactions of the group."[10] As Fuchs contends, collective body memory incites members of a group to conform to established body configurations and behaviors in order to maintain the group's identity. I activate this theory in order to explain how narratives endure over time. Conforming to the narrative of risk-taking in climbing, for example, maintains group identity. When bodies fail to conform to the collective body memory, they disrupt the dominant narrative.

Few scholars have considered how the climbing body performs cultural narratives as a site for research. This dissertation draws upon the following literature as a basis for how climbers and mountains have been storied. Jonathan Pitches' book *Performing Mountains* focusses on the mountain as a site for performance. He argues for greater attention to mountain cultural production through performance because performance aids in articulating

[9] Tecklenburg, *Performing Stories*, 36.

[10] Thomas Fuchs, "Collective Body Memories," in *Embodiment, Enaction, and Culture*, ed. Christopher Curt, Thomas Fuchs, and Christian Tewes (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2017), 341.

the visceral experience of the mountain landscape.[11] In his text, Pitches addresses the performance of mountains in terms of ritual, dramatic text, site-related performance, translation of mountains and climbing for the stage, deep and dark play in mountain tourism, and mountains in performer training such as Jerzy Grotowski's *Mountain Project*. Pitches also edits a volume of *Performance* where a number of authors have answered his call to examine the performance of mountain cultural production.[12] Other scholars address the meaning humans have ascribed to mountains such as Macfarlane's *Mountains of the Mind*, Marjorie Nicolson's *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*. Macfarlane traces how mountains have been imagined over time in a European context from the 17th century onward. The book makes the point that our contemporary view of mountains has been under construction for hundreds of years. Consequently, the actual experience of climbing mountains does not match up with the cultural image of them, being at once more miserable and more beautiful than words can describe.[13] The often-cited *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory* explores how the English concept of the sublime became associated with mountains in literature, art, and poetry. [14] Nicolson contends that the sublime (feelings of awe, fear, and wonder), what she terms "aesthetics of the infinite," once only applied to the

[11] Jonathan Pitches, *Performing Mountains* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK : Imprint: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 11.

[12] Jonathan Pitches, ed., *Performance Research: On Mountains*, vol. 24, 2 (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge Journals, Taylor and Francis LTD for ARC, 2019).

[13] Robert Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind: Adventures in Reaching the Summit*, First Vintage Books Edition, July 2004 (New York: Random House, 2003).

[14] Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959).

divine but beginning in the 17th century began to be associated with space, cosmos, vastness, grandeur, infinity, and certain aspects of nature including mountains.[15]

To the storying of mountains, I add the history of European and American mountaineering and the narratives that accompany that lineage. As such, I draw on such works as Maurice Isserman's *Continental Divide: A History of American Mountaineering*, a comprehensive account of American mountaineers from 1642 to 1963 climbing in North America and abroad. Additionally, Don Mellor's *American Rock*, John Burgman's *High Drama*, and John Sherman's *Stone Crusade* detail the history of climbing's growth in the United States during the second half of the twentieth century. *American Rock* discusses the development of climbing ethics in different regions of the United States. Mellor gives a history of selected climbing areas and how both the rock and the personalities of the pioneering climbers contributed to the cultural identity of the "crag."[16] Conversely, John Burgman focusses on the history of indoor climbing and how the creation of the climbing gym and competition climbing has changed the physical requirements of the sport.[17] Sherman's *Stone Crusade* further chronicles how the physical aspects of climbing have

[15] Martin Korenjak rebuts Nicolson's work in "Why Mountains Matter: Early Modern Roots of a Modern Notion." Where Nicolson argues that prior to the development of the sublime in the late 1700s, mountains were thought of as gloomy places, warts upon the landscape. Korenjak contends that positive mountain feelings began in the Early Modern period. From non-English language archives, Korenjak found evidence that scholars and those who lived near mountains had an active interest in mountains and took pleasure in climbing them.

[16] Don Mellor, *American Rock: Region, Rock, and Culture in American Climbing*, 1st ed (Woodstock, Vt.: New York: Countryman Press; Distributed by W.W. Norton & Co, 2001).

[17] John Burgman, *High Drama: The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of American Competition Climbing* (Chicago: Triumph Books, 2020).

changed due to the advent of bouldering, a subdiscipline of climbing that requires short series of powerful, dynamic movements.[18]

Turning to the narratives of climbing, Peter Donnelley, in "Playing with Gravity: Mountains and Mountaineering," considers the coalescence of cultural narratives and social conditions that led to defining climbing as a sport. Donnelley outlines how the sport governs itself through ethics that change over time.[19] Geoff Powter's *Inner Ranges* then establishes contemporary climbing ethics through a series of climbing stories. Powter draws on his own experience as a mountaineer and the stories of climbers with whom he has engaged as a journalist to depict what happens when mountains are climbed in the "wrong" way or for the wrong reasons.[20] Maria Coffee's *Where the Mountain Casts Its Shadow* asks: when things go wrong on the mountain, what happens to the climber's family and friends? Why do climbers take such terrible risks? What are the consequences of those risks?[21] James Edward Mills' *The Adventure Gap* both explores the history of black climbers and fills a gap in the above literature about the role of race in climbing. Mills discusses how climbing has been coded as a white sport and why bringing people of color into the sport is more than just about optics. New bodies, Mills argues, will determine the future of outdoor adventure sports and the

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[18] John Sherman, *Stone Crusade: A Historical Guide to Bouldering in America* (Golden: The American Alpine Club, 1999).

[19] Peter Donnelly, "Playing with Gravity: Mountains and Mountaineering," in *Sites of Sport: Space, Place, Experience*, ed. Patricia Anne Vertinsky and John Bale (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), 131–44.

[20] Geoff Powter, *Inner Ranges: An Anthology of Mountain Thoughts and Mountain People* (Calgary: Rocky Mountain Books, 2018).

[21] Maria Coffey, *Where the Mountain Casts Its Shadow: The Personal Costs of Climbing* (London: Arrow, 2004).

continued protection of the land on which we recreate.[22] Each chapter of this dissertation activates different theories of the body as represented in theater, performance, and film within climbing's historical and social context. I address these concepts in the chapter breakdown below.

B. Learning the Lingo, Establishing the Ethics

Throughout this dissertation, I utilize the terms "climbing" and "climber" to refer to the act of ascending and descending rocks, crags, mountains, and the rock-like surrogates found in modern climbing gyms. Climbing can be divided into a number of sub-disciplines as an extension of mountaineering. These sub-disciplines include rock climbing and its branches of specialty (sport, traditional, solo, bouldering, speed), ice climbing, deep water soloing, and waterfall climbing, to name but a few. The act of climbing mountains can also be divided into the categories of mountaineering and alpinism. Although both involve summiting a mountain where the aesthetics of the experience itself are paramount, Powter argues that alpinism is climbing the mountain on *its* terms.[23] Mountaineering may involve large teams of climbers, guides, or equipment that all but assure the climber of summiting, while in alpinism no such outcome is guaranteed. For elite alpinists like Reinhold Messner or Walter Bonatti, there must be the risk of failure in order to be "pure" alpinism.[24] Alpinists, therefore, take on

[22] James Edward Mills, *The Adventure Gap: Changing the Face of the Outdoors* (Seattle: Mountaineers Books, 2014).

[23] Powter, *Inner Ranges*, 245.

[24] Reinhold Messner, "A Passion for Limits," in *Voices from the Summit* (Washington, D.C: Adventure Press, National Geographic, in association with the Banff Centre for Mountain Culture, 2000), 221–25; Walter Bonatti, *The Mountains of My Life*, trans. Robert Marshall, Modern Library edition, Modern Library Exploration (New York: Modern Library, 2001).

tremendous risk because failure not only results in not summitting the mountain, but often also in the death of the climber.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I situate the origin of the Euro-American climbing culture in the mid-nineteenth century. Climbing mountains, whatever the reason, be it religious, spiritual, travel, or simply in order to see what was at the top, predates recorded human history, and archeological findings have placed indigenous peoples at the summits of many peaks long before any European-descended climbers made their way there. Religious texts and beliefs around the world hold mountains as the home of gods or a way to reach the divine, or as numinous entities in their own right. However, Donnelly contends that the systematic climbing of mountains for fun or adventure did not occur until the mid-nineteenth century, specifically the Englishman Alfred Wills' 1854 ascent of the Wetterhorn. Along with the creation of the first Alpine Club in 1857, England also took control of the mountaineering narrative, thus establishing Wills' 1854 summit as the "beginning" of mountaineering, kicking off its so-called "Golden Age." In reality, the French, Germans, and Swiss had been climbing their local peaks long before the English. I contend that the 1850s provides a starting point in climbing culture due to the widespread popularization of mountaineering storytelling beginning with Albert Smith's theatrical *Ascent of Mont Blanc*. This wildly popular staging of Smith's two-day ascent of the mountain featured Smith recounting his ascent in front of a two-story Swiss Chalet set piece, moving panoramas, and St. Bernards carrying boxes of chocolate during intermission. The production ran for nearly 2,000 performances between 1852 and 1858, and an estimated 800,000 people attended

Smith's extravaganza.[25] Mountain tourism boomed during this period as, inspired by stories such as Smith's, more and more people wanted to have their own tale to tell. The sustained and systematic proliferation of mountaineering narratives consolidated into a climbing community with a shared culture.

With the establishment of London's Alpine Club, the English mountaineers attempted to define the "rules" for climbing: all ascents must be made with guides, a climbing team must consist of at least three members, risk taking was not acceptable, and all climbers must follow the first established and easiest route to the summit. However, these rules meant that the only way to make a name for oneself was to find and establish the first route up a never-before climbed mountain. Mountaineers had to venture further afield to find unclimbed peaks, a costly endeavour that limited the sport to only those who had the means to travel beyond Europe. Mountaineering might have died out due to the restriction on who was allowed to climb and in what manner if not for the climbers of the "Silver Age" of mountaineering (1865-1887).[26] During this period, a new generation of climbers defied the Alpine Club and set in motion not only new means of climbing, but also the idea that unwritten, ever-changing rules (what climbers today call the "ethics" of a climb) would govern the sport rather than the mandates of a governing body.[27] The aesthetics of a climb

[25] Pitches, *Performing Mountains*, 12–13; Darren Bevin, *Cultural Climbs: John Ruskin, Albert Smith and the Alpine Aesthetic* (Saarbrucken: VDM Verlag Dr. Muller, 2010).

[26] Donnelly, "Playing with Gravity."

[27] While climbing ethics continue to apply to outdoor climbing, the advent of modern climbing competitions in the 1980s has led to the creation of committees that write and regulate the rules of indoor climbing. These committees, such as the British Mountaineering Council (BMC) and the Council for Competition Climbing, later renamed the International Federation of Sport Climbing (IFSC), represent a segment of the sport in which a governing body imposes the rules rather than the narratives from within the community.

gained significance; no longer should climbers only summit via the easiest route as the Alpine Club had dictated, but up rock and ice faces, buttresses, couloirs, chimneys, arêtes, and gendarmes. These new routes posed new risks and required increasingly higher levels of athleticism and gymnastic ability. Climbing became an activity for extreme bodies in extreme environments. To survive such dangerous climbs afforded successful climbers a voice in the community: their stories became models (the "ethics") of how the sport should be done. Alternatively, climbers who did not return from the mountain became lessons in what *not* to do. Disputes have raged over how much training a climber needed in order to lead their partners up a rock face, how much and what kind of equipment was allowed on a route, and the moral implications of free soloing – climbing without a rope where one wrong move spelt death.

This dissertation uses the terms story and narrative interchangeably to mean the way in which climbers communicate their past actions and behaviors. While literature has accounted for the dissemination of many climbing stories, I limit my research to three mediums: theater, a live climbing competition with theatrical rituals, and documentary film. Unlike literature, drama (which I consider to assume the presence of an imagined or eventual body in front of an audience) and theater, live performance, and documentary films demonstrate the climbing body, how the body relates to the narratives present, and the story the body itself performs. I consider the medium to be that which frames the story for the audience, be that the creative team of a theater or film production, the competition organizers for a live climbing event, or the conventions of the performance mode. Although individually these frameworks can be considered multimedia art forms in and of themselves, I use the term medium to differentiate between the broader categories of theater, film, and live

performance. In *Performing Arts In Transition: Moving Between Media*, scholars from across disciplines have taken up how the performing body might transfer from one medium to another, and how the body might perform as media in itself in that it acts as a transmitter or archive of knowledge.[28] While my research considers the interplay between the body and the medium, it focusses on how the climbing body is affecting cultural narratives.

C. Chapter Breakdown and Methodology

I have limited this dissertation to the exploration of three major climbing narratives that follow a roughly linear historical progression. In Chapter 1, I explore the connection between risk, masculinity, and the feeling of transcendence that has existed within mountaineering since the late nineteenth century. The often remote mountains and crags in which these stories take place makes catching climbers in the act a complicated endeavor. Observing climbers in the theater therefore allows for the story, presented first in the dramatic text and then realized on stage by the director and production team, to be played out on and by the bodies of live actors. Audiences then watch actors actually climbing the set pieces, blurring the line between what is real and what is staged. I have chosen two mountaineering plays: *K2* by Patrick Meyers and *Touching the Void* by David Greig in which to examine the embodiment of this narrative. Through a historical contextualization of the behaviors of the characters, selected reviews of live performances, performance images, and a live-stream production of *Touching the Void* directed by Tom Morris in 2021 at the Bristol Old Vic, I demonstrate how, within the medium of theater, the climbing body performs a kind of martyrdom for the sport.

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[28] Susanne Foellmer, Maria Katharina Schmidt, and Cornelia Schmitz, eds., *Performing Arts in Transition: Moving Between Media* (London; New York: Routledge, 2019).

Through ethnographic observations and a survey of seventy-seven rock climbers, Chapter 2 considers how climbers at a live climbing competition, the 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell, enact a narrative of boundarylessness. Following the Second World War, rock climbing, a sub-discipline of mountaineering, came to the fore, promoting a higher level of athleticism and gymnastic ability. "Try hard" became the motto of new generations of climbers. To "try hard" means to train and push the body to its physical and mental limits. In so doing, climbers attempt to "progress" the sport: demonstrate that the body is capable of ever more difficult and riskier routes. The effect of the "try hard" narrative on the body is what I term the *apeironic* body. *Apeiron*, from Ancient Greek, means limitless or without boundaries. While the "try hard" body is thought to be capable of limitless potential, the attempt to push oneself beyond one's limits results in a loosening of the limits between the body and its surrounding environment. In other words, while the elite athletes in the sport are capable of setting new records to be broken (pushing the limits of the sport), most climbers instead experience a loss of strict boundaries between their bodies and the rock, their partner, and time. At its pinnacle, this boundary-less existence produces a flow state in the climber. Rather than writing a narrative of the limitless potential of the sport, the *apeironic* body finds limitless potential in the connections climbers make between themselves and their surroundings. The 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell involves several theatrical rituals that encourage the competitors to shake off the limits of the individual body for an audience of noncompeting spectators. Given that the climbing takes place all throughout Horseshoe Canyon over the span of twenty-four hours, the competitors and competition staff are generally the only witnesses for the actual climbing, with no one present for all of the climbing of all the competitors. The experience of the competition, with its Dionysian rituals

and inclusion/exclusion of an audience, contributes to the storying of a body without boundaries.

Lastly, within the past decade, outdoor adventure sports companies and organizations like the American Alpine Club, REI, The North Face, and Patagonia (to name a few), along with climbers within the community itself, have begun promoting the need for increased diversity within the sport. Chapter 3 looks at this narrative of diversification through documentary film and how it leads to a performance of what I call the vulnerable body – an expression of the wounding it has undergone within the climbing culture and then the choice to not conform to dominant climbing narratives. The vulnerable body both disrupts narratives of how climbing should be embodied and enacted and is itself vulnerable to exploitation. For this chapter I have chosen an analysis of two documentary climbing films that exemplify the vulnerable body: *Black Ice* (2020) directed by Peter Mortimer and Zachary Barr, and *They/Them* (2021) directed by Blake McCord and Justin Clifton. *Black Ice* tells the story of a group of black ice climbers from Memphis, Tennessee and *They/Them* follows Lor Sabourin, a record-setting gender non-binary climber.

I. The Drama of the Martyred Masculine Body in *K2* and *Touching the Void*

Climbing came into my life, not on any mountain or climbing gym, but at the Centre Twin, my home town's tiny two-screen movie theater. Seventeen-year-old me sat transfixed as *Touching the Void* played out on the big screen, a documentary about mountaineers Joe Simpson and Simon Yates' 1985 climbing expedition to Siula Grande in the Peruvian Andes. Based on Simpson's memoir of the same title, director Kevin Macdonald's film retold the story of Simpson and Yates' summit of the 20,814-foot mountain and the disaster that followed when Simpson broke his leg on the descent. As Yates attempted to lower the injured Simpson off the mountain, Yates inadvertently dropped Simpson over an ice cliff. With Simpson incapable of climbing up the rope and Yates unable to lower him further, with deteriorating conditions and badly frostbit fingers, Yates cut the rope connecting him to his partner. Simpson fell over two-hundred feet into a crevasse. Left for dead, Simpson rappelled further into the depths of the glacier seeking a way out. His desperate descent deeper into the crevasse revealed a route back to the surface. He then crawled for three days back to base camp. As the film's end credits rolled, I sat utterly stunned. My heart was racing and my palms were damp with sweat. As I stood to leave the theater my legs trembled as though I too had just climbed a mountain. Never before had I encountered such a profoundly visceral experience in the cinema. The soaring shots of snow-fluted peaks combined with Simpson and Yates' stoically vulnerable narration awakened a deep need within me that all my childhood years spent hiking, skiing, and snowboarding in the mountains failed to fulfill. Here was something extraordinary; mountain climbers were extraordinary.

Joe Simpson became a climber after reading Henreich Harrer's *The White Spider* with its terrifying history of Eiger climbs, and *Annapurna*, Maurice Herzog's account of nearly fatally summitting that 8,091-meter (26,247-foot) peak.[29] Despite the terrible risk, these stories of adventure sometimes inspire others to take up crampons and ice axes and sally forth into the mountains themselves. As Simpson recalls:

> I was appalled by the grisly stories and the black-and-white photos of doomed climbers while at the same time fascinated by what they were trying to do [...] It seemed that they must live in an extraordinary world. They must see things and sense emotions that few others would ever wish to experience. There was something mesmerizing about climbing extreme mountain faces.

Like Simpson, I too found the extreme alpine world and the sagas of bodies on the edge of annihilation mesmerizing. I lost myself in "armchair mountaineering," devouring book after book of climbing memoirs. Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* led me to *Eiger Dreams*, Beck Weathers' *Left for Dead*, and Lionel Terray's *Conquistadors of the Useless*. I imagined myself navigating crevasse-strewn glaciers, fixing ropes on the snowy shoulders of distant peaks, and sleeping in storm-tossed tents. Yet, as a small, teenage girl, the possibility of summiting a Peruvian mountain seemed as likely as going to the moon. I did not know anyone personally who climbed mountains and the path towards that pursuit was unclear to me; all the stories of daring-do I had come across featured men in the leading roles.

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[29] Joe Simpson, "Introduction to the Pimlico Edition," in *Annapurna: First Conquest of an 8000-Meter Peak*, by Maurice Herzog, Pimlico Edition (Vintage, 2011), i; Joe Simpson, "Introduction," in *The White Spider*, by Heinrich Harrer (Harper Perennial, 2005), i.

As I delved deeper into the world of climbing, I came across the stories of women who climbed: Lynn Hill's *Climbing Free*, Sharon Wood's *Rising*, and Arlene Blum's *Annapurna: A Woman's Place*, about the first all-female ascent of an 8,000 meter peak. Yet, their stories only seemed to reinforce what I had felt from my early mountaineering reading: to be a woman in climbing was an uphill battle in more ways than one. One of the predominant narratives of climbing held that being a mountaineer meant taking risks, and women taking risks was less socially acceptable than men. In a New York Times article, Maya Salam writes about the media backlash following mountaineer Alison Hargreaves' 1995 death on Chogori/K2. As Salam states: "Some called her selfish and criticized the choice to leave behind young children to put herself in harm's way. Similar denunciations were not leveled so harshly against the fathers who died on the mountain alongside her."[30] While the attraction to mountaineering that captured Simpson's imagination also motivates women to take up the sport, men dying in the mountains has become an accepted part of the game. Tragic, yes, but also perversely inspiring. While the stories of women dying in mountaineering are cautionary tales of bleak loss, men's deaths become part of an epic hero's journey, stories worthy of an audience. It is this phenomena, the expectation and valorization of male suffering and death in mountaineering, that I explore in this chapter through Patrick Meyers' play *K2* (1982), based on the 1978 American expedition to Chogori (also known as K2), and David Greig's *Touching the Void* (2018), a retelling of Simpson's memoir of the same title.

[30] Maya Salam, "Overlooked No More: Alison Hargreaves, Who Conquered Everest Solo and Without Bottled Oxygen," *The New York Times*, March 14, 2018, sec. Overlooked, www.nytimes.com/2018/03/14/obituaries/overlooked-alison-hargreaves.html.

Throughout this chapter, I investigate the narrative of risk-taking in mountaineering as it relates to two of its most prominent embodied expressions: masculinity and transcendence. Masculinity and transcendence are defined in relation to the amount of risk the climber undertakes: the greater the risk of death, the manlier the climber and the better the opportunity to have an extraordinary experience. To put oneself into extremis, to walk the fine line between life and death, requires mental and physical toughness, endurance, and bravery, qualities historically associated in the climbing world with masculinity. In English-language dramatic texts about climbing, playwrights have long assigned physical suffering and death to their male characters, reinforcing this connection between risk and masculinity. Pitches, in *Performing Mountains,* describes many of the existing mountain dramas, several of which are specifically mountain or rock climbing-centric. To Pitches' nearly comprehensive exploration of climbing in theater, I add the plays *Grace, Or the Art of Climbing* by L.M. Feldman, *Misták: The Great Mountain* by Tracey Power, *Touching the Void* by David Greig, and several short plays: "The Rainbow Mountain" by Megan Fitzgerald, "First on the Rope" by Tim Kelly, and "Fall from Grace," by Jason Martin.[31] The female characters in these plays either do not experience the same level of physical suffering as their male counterparts, or like Jaybelle, the main character in Fitzgerald's short play "The Rainbow Mountain," their fate remains ambiguous. Moreover, similar to the story of Alison Hargreaves, the pregnant Jaybelle serves as an indictment of mothers (or soon-to-be mothers) as climbers rather than the qualities of epic heroism or transcendent suffering that male characters enjoy. As case studies, *K2* and *Touching the Void* are therefore representative of

[31] These examples account for dramatic texts of climbing plays, but not unscripted, devised, or site-specific performances.

how male characters enact a kind of martyrdom in performing masculinity and risk in the theater.

Although both *K2* and *Touching the Void* have film adaptations (*K2* (1991) directed by Franc Roddam and *Touching the Void*, the 2004 docudrama directed by Kevin Macdonald), I have chosen to focus on the dramatic and theatrical interpretations of these two stories. In doing so, I consider how the medium of theater, with the presence of the live actors in front of a live audience, affects the story the body is telling. Following my study of the dramatic texts, I turn to how these two plays have been staged. In particular, I look at how watching live actors putting themselves in actual risk (climbing scenery pieces) allows the audience to act as witness ("martyr" in Ancient Greek) to the live climbing body. In their live recreation of climbing the actors perform, to a lesser degree, the risk of martyrdom that actual mountaineers face. Conversely, the audience is aware that the bodies they see climbing before them are potential not "actual" climbers, as a spectator might see at a live climbing competition. The combination of real climbing but representational climbers for a live audience creates the narrative of witnessing/martyrdom on the body.

A. K2

In 1978, Lou Reichardt, a neurobiologist from San Francisco, and Jim Wickwire, an attorney from Seattle, became the first Americans to summit Chogori/K2, the world's second-highest mountain at 28,251 feet. Just as Chomolungma/Sagarmatha/Mt. Everest had been deemed the "British" mountain to conquer, and Annapurna the "French" mountain, Chogori/K2 was the "American" mountain for the taking. Since 1938 Americans had thrown themselves at this remote and dangerous peak only for the Italians to beat them to the summit in 1954. Nevertheless, Americans continued to vie for their place at the top, finally achieving

success with Reichardt and Wickwire. Rick Ridgeway, a member of the same expedition, who summitted the following day with John Roskelley, chronicled the adventure in his 1980 memoir *The Last Step: The American Ascent of K2*. In his book, Ridgeway tells the story of Jim Wickwire's benightment (an unplanned night out in the open) at the top of the mountain, at the time the third-highest known bivouac in the world. After reaching the summit just after 5pm, Reichardt headed down the mountain, but Wickwire remained to take pictures and try to reload film into his camera. By the time Wickwire started his descent it was after 6pm and growing dark. Without a headlamp, he was forced to stop for the night and bivouac just below the summit. Ridgeway's memoir captures this moment from Wickwire's point of view: "You are the highest man in the world right now. Somewhere around twenty-eight thousand feet – there is certainly no one else on earth right now standing anywhere higher than you are. Alone. Surviving this awful night."[32] From thermometer readings lower on the mountain, Ridgeway estimated that the temperature that night at 28,000 feet was 115 degrees below zero.[33] Ridgeway's account paints Wickwire's survival in heroic terms. Set in 1977, one year before Wickwire and Reichardt's real-life expedition, Meyers' play *K2* presents his characters as the first American men to reach the top of the mountain before having to bivouac together below the summit. Unlike Wickwire's lonely and unwitnessed stint on the top of the mountain, Meyers explores the risk of mountaineering in front of an audience, and how his characters' performances of masculinity determine each man's fate.

[32] Rick Ridgeway, *The Last Step: The American Ascent of K2* (Seattle, WA: The Mountaineers, 1980), 262.

[33] Ridgeway, 254.

As the play opens, Taylor and Harold, the play's two hapless mountaineers, dig themselves out of a snow pile after having spent the night on a ledge at 27,000 feet. Taylor exultantly proclaims that they have set a second-place high-altitude bivouac record:

> Hornbein...Unsoeld...Jerstad...and Bishop...twenty-eight thousand feet on Everest...no tent...no bags...one night. We didn't break that record, buddy, but we got second place. We have now definitely got second place – poor old Buhl standing on that ledge all alone, all night on top of Nanga Parbat, he is from this day forward relegated to a lowly third ... You and me, Harold, no tent, no bags, one night...you and me, Harold.[34]

Although Taylor is conveniently forgetting (or unaware) of Doug Scott and Dougal Haston's bivouac at 28,750 feet on Everest in 1975 (relegating Taylor and Harold to a "lowly third"),[35] his repetition of "you and me, Harold" carries more weight than his brash competitive announcement. Taylor's lines are testimony to their survival and camaraderie despite their perilous predicament. After briefly celebrating their survival, Taylor realizes that Harold's leg injury from the day before, the cause of their benightment, is much worse than he originally thought. At 27,000 feet, both characters know that a broken leg is likely a death sentence. Mountaineering, if considered a sport, is unique in its rate of attrition. As of 2021,

[34] Patrick Meyers, *K2* (Doubleday, 1982), 2. Subsequent references to the play will be given in parentheses.

[35] Brendan Leonard, "9 Legendary Bivouacs," *Adventure Journal*, March 16, 2021, https://www.adventure-journal.com/2021/03/the-aj-list-9-legendary-bivouacs/.

Chogori/K2 had a fatality rate of roughly twenty-five percent.[36] If every round of golf ended in the death of one out of every four golfers, people might think twice about taking up a nine iron.

That Harold and Taylor are not golfers but mountaineers speaks to the risk narrative specific to the history of Anglo-European alpinism: the greater the danger and the suffering, the more masculine one would be in the conquest of mountains. Since the mid-1800s, mountains have served as refuges for an increasingly industrialized society and incubators of masculinity.[37] Writing about his ascent of Switzerland's Schreckhorn in 1861, Leslie Stephen, the first president of London's Alpine Club, says of the perilous climb, "The scene was in itself significant enough for men of weak nerves."[38] After taking a swig of brandy each, Stephen and his guides proved they were not "men of weak nerves" as they traversed their way to the top of the mountain. They erected a black flag atop a summit cairn in proof not only of their victory over the mountain, but of their assured manhood. In his wildly popular theatrical production *Mr. Smith's Ascent of Mont Blanc* that ran from 1852-1858, Albert Smith promoted the athletic masculine body, appearing on stage as a bearded, rugged figure of "natural manliness."[39] In 1865, John Ruskin, an honorary member of the Alpine

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[36] "Why the 'Savage' K2 Peak Beckons the Daring, but Rarely in Winter," *Al Jazeera*, February 10, 2021, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/10/why-the-savage-k2-peak-beckons-the-daring-but-rarely-in-winter; Eberhard Jurgalski, "Fatalities - K2," *8000ers.com*, August 13, 2010, http://www.8000ers.com/cms/en/download.html?func=fileinfo&id=179.

[37] Tara Magdalinski, "Homebush: Site of the Clean/Sed and Natural Australian Athlete," in *Sites of Sport: Space, Place, Experience*, ed. Patricia Anne Vertinsky and John Bale (London: Routledge, 2004), 101–14.

[38] Leslie Stephen, *The Playground of Europe* (Longmans, Green and Co, 1894), 90.

[39] Christopher Oldstone-Moore, "The Beard Movement in Victorian Britain," *Victorian Studies* 48, no. 1 (2005): 18.

Club, implored his readers to refrain from judging climbers too harshly for risking their lives in the mountains because mountaineering helped form a "manly character."[40] When those risks ended in death, the climbing community continued to revere rather than denounce the dangers of the sport. After four of his companions fell to their deaths on the descent from the summit of the Matterhorn in 1865, Edward Whymper writes: "With the ascent of the Matterhorn, my mountaineering in the Alps came to a close. The disastrous termination, though casting a permanent cloud over otherwise happy memories, and leaving a train of life-long regrets, has not altered my regard for the purest, healthiest and most manly of sports."[41] In 1936, four young mountain guides lost their lives in attempting to be the first to summit the Eiger via the North Face. Of the four, Toni Kurz survived four storm-wracked nights on the mountain only to die within yards of his rescuers. In writing of how Kurz's "brave and vigorous life" came to an end, mountaineer Heinrich Harrer cites Arnold Lunn who says of Kurz: "'He did not surrender. He died. In the annals of mountaineering there is no record of a more heroic endurance.'"[42]

Taylor begins the play as a man determined to "win" against Chogori/K2, monikered "the world's most dangerous mountain," and heroically rescue his partner.[43] After examining Harold's broken leg, Taylor takes control with military-like efficiency, saying: "Okay. Equipment inventory, situation assessment" (5). Taking stock of their supplies, Taylor

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[40] John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, ed. Deborah Epstein Nord (Yale University Press, 2008), 3.

[41] Edward Whymper, *The Ascent of the Matterhorn* (England: J. Murray, 1880), 296.

[42] Heinrich Harrer, *The White Spider* (Harper Perennial, 2005), 56.

[43] David Roberts and Ed Viesturs, eds., *K2: Life and Death on the World's Most Dangerous Mountain* (Crown Archetype, 2009).

realizes that they only have one rope with not enough length to get both climbers down the sheer ice wall. For Harold to have any chance at all at getting off the mountain, Taylor must climb back up the cliff to retrieve the rope they rappelled off the night before. Harold argues that the climb is too dangerous, but Taylor's gung-ho attitude to save his partner overrides any reservations. Here Taylor embodies the trope of the "brotherhood of the rope" that Maurice Isserman defines as "the intense bonds of comradeship and trust that developed among [male] climbers who relied upon one another for both safety and success."[44] Before modern nylon climbing ropes went into service following the second world war, mountaineers used hemp ropes usually purchased from hardware stores (or stolen from clothing lines behind the house). These fragile ropes inspired the axiom that the lead climber must never fall, as a hemp rope would snap under their weight. Following the lead climber required absolute trust in your partner's ability. Even if the rope held under the force of a fall, with one mistake both climbers could be pulled off the mountain to their deaths. The rope both symbolically and literally bound the lives of climbing partners together. During the Second World War, Americans in the Eighty-Seventh Mountain Infantry Battalion, renamed the Tenth Mountain Division in 1943, risked their lives not only in pursuit of climbing mountains but in war.[45] Climbing partners became brothers both in the sense of the brotherhood of the rope and brothers-in-arms. Taylor performs this brotherhood as he chooses to risk his life to retrieve their missing rope, knowing that without it he will have to climb down the mountain alone and leave Harold to die.

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[44] Maurice Isserman, *Continental Divide: A History of American Mountaineering* (W.W. Norton and Company, 2017), 162.

[45] Isserman, 262.

As Taylor climbs up the ice to retrieve the rope, he asks Harold to "tell me stories you've never told before – big sprawling lies about your life, or interesting trivia" because, as Taylor admits, "right now I think I need some company" (11-12). In order to reassure himself that his partner is watching out for him as he begins the dangerous climb, Taylor asks Harold to tell him the story of how he became a physicist. Harold responds that the "big sprawling lie" of the American education system, modeled on the "ultimate universal concept of reality," at first led him to see Albert Einstein's Unified Field Theory as "God" (13-14). Studying quantum mechanics at university soon disabused Harold of this idea. "For years, all through college, I wandered, a bitter, confused atheist in an existential world of quantum reality, seeking an answer...some escape from the emptiness" (14). Harold's PhD studies became an act of "blind faith" where he believed he would find the answer to "quantum insanity" (15) – where he would rediscover God and cure life of its emptiness.

Harold's search for God mirrors his mountaineering avocation. During the early days of alpinism in the nineteenth century, mountaineering combined the athletic and aesthetic pursuit of mountain summits with the concept of mountains as sublime. In *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*, Marjorie Nicolson argues that a series of cultural changes in Europe, and particularly in England, shaped our modern understanding of mountains. Attributes once reserved for God like awe, wonder, vastness, and space, what Nicolson identifies as the "aesthetics of the infinite," began to apply to things in Nature, not just to God.[46] Through interviews with extreme sports athletes, Maria Coffey's *Explorer's of the Infinite* reveals the modern feeling of transcendence some mountaineers experience while climbing mountains:

[46] Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom*.

> ‘Being on the high peaks brings me a sense of intimacy with the infinite,’ says Everest mountaineer Pete Athans. ‘I’m more in touch with nature there. More alive. I don’t think climbers are just an eclectic bunch of misfits. In some ways, I believe we are torchbearers of having a relationship with the natural world. A lot of us are disaffected with contemporary Western religion and we’ve substituted it with our own brand of faith.’[47]

Harold’s disaffection with science led to a blind pursuit of answers to the emptiness in his life. Although Harold does not state outright that he came to K2 in search for his own “intimacy with the infinite,” he is nevertheless in a place where, Coffey argues, such revelations occur.

Before Harold can finish telling Taylor about where his search for faith has led, Taylor reaches the “son of a bitch” “bastard” “cocksucking” rope and tries to work it free (15-16). Failing to pull the rope from the ice and almost falling in the process, Taylor climbs back down to Harold on the ledge. Harold suggests that Taylor leave him and try to get help from the high camp below, both men knowing that Taylor would never make it back to Harold before nightfall and a second, fatal, bivouac. Refusing Harold’s suggestion, Taylor says, “I haven’t lost faith – you know, that crap you were goin’ on about while I was on the wall – I still have faith in my ability to face this challenge and win...and winning means getting me and what I care about off this wall” (18). “Winning” for Taylor means not only saving Harold, but society itself in his role as a district attorney:

> Christ, if you guys had any idea of what’s really goin’ on out there under your fuckin’ noses, you’d be so damn scared you’d shit and die...there’s a war goin’ on down

[47] Maria Coffey, *Explorers of the Infinite* (New York: Penguin Group, 2008).

there-and the barbarians are winning! [...] and I put 'em away every day [...] That's what you pay me to do, Harold, and I do it extremely well. I do it to clean up after all you pollyanna jerks...I do it for you and Cindy, Harold. I do it to 'protect and serve' what little of our society is left. (20-21)

Taylor not only abides by the brotherhood of the rope, but also operates as the quintessential late '70s and early '80s hard-bodied muscular man: the militaristic hero, usually a Vietnam veteran, who stands for the "average" citizen, against a corrupt society.[48] Taylor spends the first half of Meyers' play fixated on saving the "soft-bodied" Harold from the mountain just as he imagines he is saving Harold from the disintegration of society.

Taylor ascends the wall again with a new strategy for retrieving the rope, unable to leave Harold to his fate. As he climbs, Harold tells Taylor that his blind faith journey for answers led him to his wife Cindy and son Eric: "I was in love, and I didn't care about figuring out a thing for the first time in my life. I wasn't trying to make it all fit, have it make sense" (27). Taylor tells Harold that he could never have a relationship like that, saying:

You know, Harold, as love stories go...yours is a pretty nice one...I don't know, I...I could never love as much as you and Cindy [...] My relationships with women are battles...wars. Cold and simple. I enjoy them as that. So do they, the women – a good willful struggle of ideas over a couple of drinks, culminating in a ruthless, using fuck. That's my idea of a good relationship. (30-31)

[48] A. Burrows and Army Command General Staff College Fort Leavenworth KS, *Myths and Crises: American Masculinity in 1980s Vietnam War Films*, 2015, 4; Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (Rutgers University Press, 1994), 19.

Taylor's lines mix sexuality with violence, namely war-time violence. As Alicia Burrows contends, film representations of masculinity during the early 1980s like *Rambo* (1982) and *Missing in Action* (1984), focused on hypermasculinity, the return of the muscular male body to the Vietnam battlefield in order to rewrite a history of loss.[49] For Taylor, climbing Chogori/K2 is both war against and conquest of the mountain, parallel to his relationships with women. Harold, the good husband and father, whose relationship with his wife Taylor describes as "one of those pink Valentine hands cards with the diamond ring and the couple at sunset," is the one the mountain has injured, the one whom Taylor will eventually leave for dead on "this mother," "a nut-bustin' bitch," the "[s]tinking fuck hole of a mountain" (31; 2; 16; 34). Love has softened Harold's body, resulting in his injury on the mountain, while Taylor's hardened body protected him from harm.

Taylor's second attempt to free the necessary rope results in an avalanche, sweeping away much of their remaining equipment. Harold and Taylor barely survive, and their increasingly desperate situation sends Taylor into a frenzy:

> This is insane...what am I doing up here? I don't believe it...this just doesn't make sense, I mean this is my fucking hobby, for Christ's sake. It's not my GODDAMN LIFE! [...] (Suddenly Taylor is swinging the axe wildly into the wall behind him) SON OF A BITCH, YOU DIRTY SON OF A BITCH! I'LL KILL YOU, I'LL KILL YOU, I'LL KILL, KILL, KILL, KILL, KILL, kill, kill, kill...kill...kill." (38-39)

Though never confirmed in the play, Taylor's rage at the mountain, his attempts to save his "comrade in arms," and his tendency to combat fear with repeated equipment checks suggest that Taylor is a military veteran, perhaps even a Vietnam veteran given his age (38 in

[49] Burrows, *Myths and Crises*, 23.

1977).[50] Veteran or not, Taylor's position as the dominant character for the first half of the play, his machismo, and his military-like discipline superficially fits him to the 1980s hard-bodied male. After Taylor's violent outburst with the axe, Harold tries to calm him, saying:

> I thought you were a climber, for Christ's sake! Mountains are metaphors, buddy, in case you forgot – the purest, simplest metaphors on this whole crazy planet. The higher you go, the deeper you get. It's that goddamn simple...and when you can't run away from where the hell you are...then guess what? You have to be there! Where are we, Taylor? Where are we? (40)

They are, of course, still trapped on the mountain at 27,000 feet. Harold implores Taylor to accept the reality of their situation, that Harold is going to die despite Taylor's best efforts to save him.

Mountains may be metaphors, but as Everest mountaineer Pete Athans' words suggest, they also provide a sense of "intimacy with the infinite." To help Taylor regain his composure, Harold tells Taylor that in addition to finding love, he also found the answer to the "quantum insanity." "We found God's house, buddy, and we called it – quarks" (41). However, Harold only attains his intimacy with the infinite when he realizes that finding love, or quarks, or answers was not enough. Just as he said to Taylor, Harold must accept where he is – the mountain metaphor where the higher you go, the deeper you get:

> I don't think I ever got over being the 'bright boy.' I can see it up here. I can see it so clear...the quarks and neutron bang, and all the little gizmos down there. I thought they needed me to explain 'em. Shit. I thought my job was to explain it all. And I had

[50] Meyers, *K2*, 40.

> the answers. I had the answers to all the questions. I found the quark. I am one of the discoverers of the quark. I was the answer man...I was the answer man. I never grew up...it's so clear up here. It doesn't need me to explain it. I mean, it all goes on. It goes on whether I understand it or not. It goes on. Understanding has no meaning...holding on, holding on...just holding on. (Pause) That has meaning. (43)

Harold has found the resolution to the emptiness that consumed him, that life has no answers and needs no understanding but simply goes on. His imminent death on the mountain reveals that life is about paying attention to the people he loves. Taking charge of the situation for the first time in the play, Harold guides Taylor through retrieving enough of their scattered gear for Taylor to descend from the ice cliff. He implores Taylor to survive so that he can deliver Harold's mountain-borne revelation to his son – that life is about holding on to those you love.

Holding on to those you love is precisely why Taylor refuses to abandon Harold. After Harold again tells Taylor that there is no hope of saving him, Taylor replies,

> You don't have any idea of what you're asking me to do! You don't have the slightest idea of what you're asking me to live with...every lousy minute of the rest of my life. I don't have a Cindy, Harold, and I never wanted one. I only ever wanted one goddamn real friend...Harold you're my friend...my friend. (46)

Leaving Harold to die undermines everything Taylor has come to believe about himself as a man, a mountaineer, and a protector of society. To abandon his climbing partner and only friend would only add to, rather than rewrite, a history of "war-time" loss, with the war in this case being Taylor and Harold's victory over the mountain. However, the characters

cannot ignore the reality of being injured high on the mountain. In order to convince Taylor to leave, Harold asks Taylor to bring a message back to Cindy for him:

> I want to see Cindy...I want to touch her...comfort her, help her. I want to hold her and tell her I love her and I'm thinking of her...that I'm caring till the last second...And I want her to know that I know...I messed up...I took it for granted...livin' on the outside of our happiness [...] that's what I want...and I can have it all...I can have it...if you go back...if you just go back. (47)

Harold asks Taylor to make things right with Harold's wife and child, to tell them that he realized he was taking them for granted. Only this promise compels Taylor to leave his friend to die. After a brief exchange of "I love you's" between the two, Taylor uses their remaining equipment to rappel down and away from the ledge. The play ends with Harold soliloquizing about being blind to the importance of family. He takes comfort in knowing that Taylor is "goin' home...Taylor's gonna see [Cindy's] pretty smile. Taylor's gonna be warm again" (50). With Taylor's survival, Harold is able to hold on to those he loves.

Throughout the play, Harold tries to get Taylor to leave him to die. At one point, Taylor tells Harold not to "play martyr" (18), to try and survive in order to go home to his wife. However, Harold's death signifies more than just "playing" at martyrdom. The Oxford English Dictionary defines martyr as "a person who undergoes death or great suffering for a faith, belief, or cause, or (usually with to; also with of, for) through devotion to some object."[51] Harold's death is a result of his faith search, a quest to believe that life is anything but empty. Once he attains this belief, that all that matters in life is holding on to those he

[51] Oxford English Dictionary, "'martyr, n.'.," n.d., https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/114474?rskey=Hf97Kl&result=1&isAdvanced=false.

loves, Taylor is free to leave him to die on the mountain. Harold's martyrdom lies in dying for his faith, or a search for faith. Harold also becomes a martyr through his devotion to Taylor. Harold chooses to die rather than have Taylor continue to try to rescue him. Harold's martyr journey begins with a disruption to his faith in both science and God and ends when he climbs into the mountains where his impending death invokes an intimacy with the infinite.

Taylor also undergoes great suffering as he pushes his body to extremes to retrieve the rope, and later terrible emotional distress as he must leave his only friend on the mountain to die. Although ultimately unable to save Harold's life, the suffering Taylor experiences validates his masculinity, the kind of masculinity tied both to risking one's life in the mountains and witnessing the death of a brother-in-arms. As David Wilson captures in his poem "Generations," modern climbers "have no father's war to fight/or rest their courage against/they have no wall within themselves/which they must risk their lives to cross."[52] With no war to fight, climbers, in part, risk death in mountaineering as a substitute for the relationships formed in combat. Taylor struggles throughout the play to prevent the "wartime" loss of Harold with repeated assaults against the mountain to free the life-saving rope. His devotion to the masculinity performed through dangerous pursuits like mountaineering results in Taylor's suffering: suffering the loss of intimacy with others and the loss of his friend. Harold is the literal martyr of the play, dying in order to experience the "infinite" and fill the void of emptiness of his life, but Taylor is also a kind of martyr. Taylor is a martyr to manliness.

[52] David Wilson, *The Equilibrium Line* (Sheffield: Smith Doorstop Books, 2019), 59.

On the surface, *K2*'s characters display the kind of selfishness that, as Lionel Terray says, makes mountaineers "conquistadors of the useless." Why would Harold risk his life with a wife and young child at home? Could Taylor not find a less deadly means of manifesting his machismo? Meyers chooses not to answer the great *why* of mountaineering (why climbers risk their lives in a seemingly useless pursuit), rather, *K2* demonstrates how dramatic characters reinscribe cultural narratives. Taylor climbs to achieve the hard-bodied masculine ideal and Harold seeks religious enlightenment in the mountains. They perform the aesthetic and the sublime, respectively, of Euro-American alpinism. That these characters also risk death affords Meyers a kind of dramatic cheat. The characters can contemplate the meaning of life and argue about the ills of modern American society because the main crisis of the play is external. Harold, and to a lesser extent Taylor, fight for survival in an extreme environment with the mountain as the antagonist. Only in the face of such terrible physical danger do the two men achieve their respective *teloi*, namely to suffer and, in the case of Harold, die, as they tread the paths previous mountaineering stories have set forth. Meyers is caught in a vicious circle – to create the drama necessary for the stage his characters must risk their lives, but the expectation of suffering only exists because stories like *K2* perpetuate the mountaineering-as-masculine/transcendent narrative.

B. Touching the Void

David Greig's *Touching the Void* could easily have followed in *K2*'s boot prints: a climber breaks his leg high on a dangerous mountain in the pursuit of life fulfillment and his partner tries to save him to validate his masculinity. Instead, Greig introduces another character into the story, Sarah, an outsider to the world of mountaineering who continuously questions the climber's motives. Why must you risk your life climbing mountains? What are

the consequences of doing so? Who gets left behind if you die? In doing so, this play becomes a very different experience from the *Touching the Void* documentary film I watched as a teenager. The film is a survival story – a tale about the incredible capacity of the human body and mind on the brink of obliteration. Greig's play is a contemplation of what it means to witness such risk-taking both from the viewpoint of the non-climber character and the theater audience.[53]

Greig's *Touching the Void* begins with Joe Simpson lying "broken on a ledge of snow" calling out for his partner, Simon.[54] There are no exultant proclamations of survival from Joe, no crowing delight at having survived a high-altitude bivouac. Instead, Greig immediately transitions away from Joe and into "A lovely stone church" where Sarah, Joe's older sister, is giving Joe's eulogy.

> Sarah: People say, don't they, on these occasions...'Well, at least he died doing something he loved.' Because Joe loved climbing, didn't he. 'At least he died doing something he loved.' But that's bullshit, isn't it. Because Joe wasn't climbing when he died, was he? He was trapped inside a glacier/Alone. (3)[55]

Sarah imagines her brother's lonely death inside the crevasse as an end "he would have hated" (3). Simon, Joe's climbing partner, arrives at the climber's bar in Scotland where

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[53] For more on narratives of risk and death in Kevin Macdonald's *Touching the Void* (2003) documentary, see Anna Holman, "The Representation of Play in Joe Simpson's *Touching the Void* and Paratexts," in *The Mountains and the Politics of Representation*, ed. Martin Hall and Jenny Hall (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2023).

[54] David Greig, *Touching the Void* (Faber & Faber, 2018), 3. Subsequent references to the play will be given in parentheses.

[55] A note on the formatting of the text: Greig writes some of the character's dialogue in prose and some in verse. I denote the line breaks in the verse sections with /. Stage directions are italicized.

Sarah has gone to drink after the funeral. Before Sarah can question Simon about her brother's death, Richard, Joe and Simon's base-camp manager, tactlessly inserts himself into the conversation saying, "I haven't been to many funerals" to which Sarah replies, "Not a climber then?" (5). Richard's experience watching Joe and Simon climb Siula Grande has given him a passion for mountaineering stories, stories not unlike Taylor and Harold's, where death in the mountains is not only expected but idolized. Unlike Richard's enthusiasm for alpine mortality, Joe's death has soured Sarah's opinion of climbing as she tells Simon, "I hate climbers [...] Fucking endless fucking stories about how they nearly died/Blah blah epic blah" (8-9). Richard represents the retelling of the mountaineering status-quo, that risk and suffering creates a revered and manly character. Sarah, on the other hand, quickly squashes each of Richard's attempts to mythologize her brother's death.

In her need to know how her brother died, and have proof that he is in fact dead, Sarah asks Simon why he climbs. Ignoring Richard's glib answer of "because they're there,"[56] Simon attempts to explain what he values about climbing, but finding his words inadequate, Simon teaches Sarah how to climb so she can experience what he enjoys about the sport for herself. In Tom Morris' 2021 staging of *Touching the Void*, Simon flips a bar table up on two legs, forming a sloping surface onto which Sarah carefully climbs. "Feel the rock/Find the hold/Search/Touch/Pull" (14), Simon instructs. Sarah then graduates to climbing up the edge of the theater's proscenium arch before she, Simon, and Joe (who has joined them on stage as a pre-accident version of himself) engage in a coordinated movement sequence that imitates the action of ice climbing. As Sarah, Simon, and Joe climb together

[56] The answer mountaineer George Mallory gave a journalist when asked why he wanted to climb Chomolungma/Sagarmatha/Mt. Everest.

Joe defends his love of alpinism to Sarah, saying, "Climbing's what humans *do* [...] it's civilisation – that's what's nuts – that's what's weird. Not why climb, but why not? Why live like that/When you can live like this?" (18). Simon also justifies the risk of climbing, anthropomorphized as "the void," saying, "The void's our companion – the void climbs beside us. Life with the void is life times a thousand." Following her stint at climbing, Sarah tells Simon, "Okay,/That was good./That was helpful./Now take me back to the start" (19). Sarah's transition from spectator to participant allows her to embody Joe and Simon's reasons for climbing, whether that be acting upon their primal instincts or the desire to live life "times a thousand," with the void.

Although Sarah comes to understand the "why" of her brother's climbing, she still disagrees with the way Joe exalts its risk. As Simon and Joe reenact their Siula Grande adventure for Sarah from the beginning, Richard takes over the narration to explain the technical aspects of their climb. He tells Sarah that Joe and Simon climbed the mountain in "alpine style," a way of climbing that "goes back to the basics. Two people and a rope" (26). As way of further explanation, Joe begins to tell Sarah about his hero Toni Kurz, an Austrian alpinist who, with his partner Andreas Hinterstoisser "basically invented Alpine style":

> Sarah: What happened to him?
>
> Joe: He died.
>
> Sarah: I knew it – I knew it – I knew he'd die./They always fucking do in these stories./Climbers.
>
> Joe: No, sis, the point isn't *that* he died the point is *how* he died! (27-28)

Joe describes how during an attempt to summit the Eiger via the unclimbed north face, Kurz watched his climbing partners die one by one before he himself died, hanging on the bottom

of the rope just out of reach of rescuers. "Joe: He fought/Until he couldn't fight any more./And he turned/And said to them/Soft and clear as a night bell/'Ich kann nicht mehr'/I can't go on./Beautiful." To this sentiment Sarah replies, "No, Joe, not beautiful./Ugly./Horrible/Ugly and cold" (29). Despite having now experienced climbing, Sarah resists valorizing death in the mountains no matter how poignant the story.

Sarah, like many of the bereaved family members of climbers interviewed in Maria Coffey's *Where the Mountain Casts Its Shadow*, struggles with her anger over Joe's seemingly meaningless death.[57] She needs the embodiment of that story to understand her brother's demise. She tells Simon to "show [her] the mountain" (30) and Simon and Joe reenact their climb of Siula Grande. Richard explains the details to Sarah, simulating the two climbers and the distance of their route on the mountain with peanuts and bar furniture in order to impress upon her the magnitude of their undertaking. As the two climbers competently ascend to the summit of the mountain, Sarah remarks, "They look happy," and "It really is beautiful" (32; 38). Just as Sarah begins to appreciate what her brother sees in mountaineering, Joe falls from an ice cliff during his descent from the summit which Richard describes in graphic detail: "When Joe fell he hit the steep slope and slid twenty feet into a rock. His lower leg drove up – into his knee like this – and smashed it open. His thigh fractured near his groin./And his ankle was smashed./His pineal nerve was crushed. Joe can't walk a step, let alone climb" (44). As Richard tells Sarah the story of Joe and Simon's climb, she is also witnessing the event in real time through Joe and Simon's reenactment. When Joe

[57] Coffey, *Where the Mountain*.

falls, she is both audience proxy and horrified family member. One mistake has changed Joe and Simon's story into an epic.

At the beginning of the play, Sarah derisively states that she hates the stories climbers tell, "blah blah epic blah" (9), because they always end in death. Greig's play suggests that a climbing epic is a retelling of heroic action told through heightened language. When Simon attempts to lower the badly-injured Joe off the mountain, the script indicates a change to the poetic with boldfaced italicized lettering and lines grouped into stanzas intercut with stage directions:

> ***Hand over hand.***
>
> ***Simon holds me.***
>
> ***Hand over hand.***
>
> ***He takes my weight.***
>
> ***Hand over hand.***
>
> ***The rope burns into me.***
>
> ***Hand over hand.***
>
> ***My leg digs into the snow.***
>
> *Joe screams.* (48-49)

In addition to the lines' repetition and structure, Joe says outright that he and Simon are creating an epic poem through their actions:

> **Hand over hand.**
>
> **Simon holds me.**
>
> **Hand over hand.**
>
> **He takes my weight.**

Untouched, a blank page

On which we are writing

Together

Hand over hand

An epic poem.

A poem about an epic. (49)

Not only is this text deliberately calling attention to its poetic characteristics, but Greig indicates that it should be performed as "choric speech" (iii); all four characters recite the lines in unison as Joe and Simon enact the lowering from the mountain. The ensemble recital of these lines highlights the performative nature of the scene: Joe and Simon are creating an epic right in front of Sarah's (and by proxy the audience's) eyes:

Most times you meet an epic poem

It's a story that's been written

Many hundred years ago

And all you can do

Is try and imagine

What it was like to be the hero.

But what's this now

On Siula Grande?

What's this now with Si and Jo.

An epic poem

Being written

Right now by us (49-50)

Simon's heroic actions trying to rescue Joe come to an end when he accidently lowers Joe over an ice cliff. Unable to hold his partner's weight, Simon makes the unimaginable decision to cut the rope in order to save himself. At this point in the play, Sarah becomes a part of the epic herself as Greig puts her in Simon's place, holding the weight of her brother on the end of the rope. This action allows her to understand why Simon cut the rope – even she would not have been able to save her brother's life had she been in that position. Embodying the actions of Simon and Joe's climb allows Sarah to understand why climbers' stories are epics. The first act of the *Touching the Void* epic ends with Sarah cutting the rope and Joe falling into void.

With *Touching the Void*, Greig argues that theater continues to allow audiences to witness a modern epic: a mythic hero's journey told in poetic language. In a conversation with stage director Tom Morris, Joe Simpson says that for a climber, an epic is "usually something that's gone wrong [...] something that has required some extraordinary behavior to resolve what's gone wrong and survive. There is quite a lot of death like there is in Greek drama."[58] The mortality rate is not the only similarity between stories about mountaineering and Greek drama. Audiences of ancient Greek theater would have witnessed their culture's greatest stories during a festival that celebrated their religious beliefs, the physicality of the masculine body, and the civic duty of military service.[59] Since the 6th century BCE, theater has served as a medium for telling stories about heroes and the epic acts they perform. Just as

[58] *Joe Simpson in Conversation with Tom Morris: Touching the Void* (youtube, 2021), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1fiSH75ngg.

[59] John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin, eds., "Introduction," in *Nothing to Do with Dionysos?: Athenian Drama in Its Social Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 3–11.

Sarah needs to see her brother's story performed before her, works of drama ask us to imagine how the characters and story might be embodied. Theater, from Greek drama onward, allows audiences to see the embodiment of an epic.

Throughout the first half of the play, Greig's stage directions indicate that a "*Sudden rip of cold – wind -supernatural – heartbeat. The void asserts itself*" (7) or "*A roar from the void – a moan – cold*" (29) interrupts Sarah and Simon's dialogue. The second act opens with "*moans and whimpering from the void. A head-torch switches on in the dark. It picks out Joe. He lies crumpled on a ledge*" (57). Joe is still alive in the crevasse, imagining the funeral of Act 1; imagining his sister's grief; imagining Simon and Richard's retelling of why and how he died. The epic of Joe's Siula Grande adventure is, as Richard says, "only halfway" through (56). The second half of Greig's play focusses on Joe's struggle to climb out of the crevasse, his efforts to drag himself through the crevasse field of the glacier, and hop on one leg over several miles of rocky terrain to reach base camp. The scenes of this second half shuttle back and forth between Joe's laborious descent to base camp and his fatigue, injury, and dehydration-induced hallucinations, which include television programs featuring his "death" and Sarah, Simon, and Richard at the pub discussing how the story of Joe's death will be told. Will Joe's death become a legend like that of Toni Kurz? Will Simon become the hero of their epic as the only survivor? Or will Joe be just another tragic footnote in the history of alpinism?

Now part of Joe's story, Sarah has determined that Joe is alive and will survive his ordeal. Although in Simpson's real-life debacle he was alone from the rope-cutting onward, Greig chooses to have Sarah present to witness Joe's journey off the mountain. Trapped on

the ledge inside the crevasse, unable to climb up the sheer walls with a broken leg, Joe decides to descend further into the darkness to try and find another way out.

Sarah: You're going to descend into that?

Joe: Yup.

Sarah: But there's nothing down there./It's hell/It's bottomless.

Joe: Simon gave me a chance/But it's not a chance unless I take it. (65)

Joe's gamble pays off and he finds a snow-bridge and a slope of snow leading to the daylight beyond. From above, Sarah urges Joe onward, to climb out of the darkness and into the sunrise. However, Sarah is only a figment of Joe's imagination; an amalgam of his memories of his sister and the pain and delirium of his injury and dehydration. As Joe moves to stand after successfully pulling himself from the crevasse, Sarah knees him in the balls. "Sarah: It's not me, bro, it's your leg. Every time you stand up you put weight on your crushed nerve. It's not personal, you just forgot" (71). Throughout the second half of the play, Sarah becomes both goad and tormentor: whacking his broken leg repeatedly with a pool cue from the bar, reminding him of the pain in his broken leg while simultaneously ordering Joe forward.

Sarah's presence adds a mythic quality to the *Touching the Void* epic. Coffey argues that mountaineering stories are "new versions of old myths," a sentiment Greig echoes in his foreword stating, "This play is a mythic reading of a real event" (i).[60] As Greig's play and Simpson's conversation about epics indicates, climbing epics are about suffering or death in the mountains. According to Rufus Duits, myths, then, are stories that attempt to make sense

[60] Coffey, *Where the Mountain*, 81.

of the meaning or purpose behind that death and suffering.[61] Coffey goes on to say that Simpson's *Void* story "embodies an ancient fear of being buried alive" like the story of Jonah and the whale or Persephone dragged down into the underworld.[62] God releases Jonah from the belly of the whale and Persephone's mother called her back to the sunlit surface from the underworld just as Sarah calls Joe up from the crevasse. Joe conjures the character of his sister in order to process the pain and to explain the compulsion to survive despite the daunting distance back to base camp. In his memoir, Simpson dubs this driving force the *voice*, an uncaring pragmatic part of his mind that will not allow him to lie down and die. Sarah as the *voice* resonates with the mythic element Greig imparts to the *Void* story. Sarah finds no meaning in Joe's death in the mountains, and thus compels him out of the bottomless hell of the crevasse and through the wildness back to safety. The play ends, not with Joe's funeral, but with his return to basecamp and to life. The vision of Sarah exits as Joe makes the decision for himself to survive. He crawls the remaining distance to camp where his ghostly cries awaken Richard and Simon. The heroic actions of Simon in the first act allowed Joe the chance to save himself in the second, to transcend the limits of the human body, and return to the land of the living.

C. Performing K2 and Touching the Void

If *K2* and *Touching the Void* are modern epics or mythic retellings, then modern Euro-American theater reinscribes their stories onto the stage in order to experience the heroic feats of mountaineers. These stories resonate with audiences today because the actor

[61] Rufus Duits, "Mountaineering, Myth and the Meaning of Life: Psychoanalysing Alpinism," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 47, no. 1 (2020): 33–48, https://doi.org/10.1080/00948705.2020.1715227.

[62] Coffey, *Where the Mountain*, 81.

embodies the risk climbers take by putting their actual bodies in peril. Like the mountaineers themselves, the actors in these plays allow the audience to act as witnesses to their performance of masculinity, potential martyrdom, and transcendence.

The reviews for the 1982 and 1983 productions of *K2* focus on Ming Cho Lee's set design, a realistically rendered artificial mountain which would later earn Lee a Tony Award. First seen in 1982 at Washington DC's Arena Stage, the set garnered even more attention when the production moved to the Brooks Atkinson theater on Broadway in New York. Reviewer Frank Rich writes:

> Chances are that you've already heard the one unassailable reason to see Patrick Meyers's play 'K2': because the mountain is there. This scenic wonder is astounding. When the curtain rises at the Brooks Atkinson -very slowly, like a striptease - the audience seems to stop breathing. [...] What faces us is an enormous wall of simulated ice ascending from beneath stage level clear up beyond the proscenium arch. In its dark, icy shadows, its crevasse-scarred face looms like a prehistoric monster's. [...] It makes full use of the beauty and terror that the mountain evokes.[63]

Here Rich evinces the affective potential of *K2*'s set design. The "mountain" is astounding, monstrous, beautiful, terrifying, and causes the audience to catch its breath. Other reviews from the 1982-1983 production use similar terms to describe the on-stage mountain: "breathtaking" "menacing," and "authentic."[64] The reviewers simultaneously depict the chill

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[63] Frank Rich, "'K2, Two Men Trapped on a Mountain," *The New York Times*, March 31, 1983.

[64] John Beaufort, "Broadway's New Spectacle Is a Cliffhanger - - Literally; K2 Drama by Patrick Meyers. Directed by Terry Schreiber," *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 5, 1983, https://www.csmonitor.com/1983/0405/040500.html; Mel Gussow, "'K2,' A Drama of Mountain-Climbing," *The New York Times*, May 5, 1982.

of the mountain, the "storms," and the "avalanche" of snow that buries the two on-stage characters, as "illusory" but also "authentic" and "overpowering."[65] Rich's review also highlights the impossibility of putting a mountain on stage has somehow been made possible.

Touching the Void's onstage mountain was as viscerally affective as *K2*'s despite its more abstract design. As Stephen Dalton writes in his review,

> A central feature of this production is Ti Green's ingenious set design, most notably two giant floating geometric framework structures that serve as stylized representations of the Siula Grande peak and the glacier at its base. Suspended above the stage, tilting and rotating with stately precision, these striking pieces of mobile sculpture push the play almost into Abstract Expressionist territory.[66]

Touching the Void first opened at the Bristol Old Vic in 2018, and was then remounted with the same design at the Duke of York theater in 2019-2020. Combined with Jon Nicholls's "frenzied soundscape,"[67] reviewers commented that the design transported the audience to the "brutal expanse of a mountainside,"[68] one that felt "dizzily vertical" and "creat[ed] such tension and jeopardy that theatregoers must remember to breathe."[69] Unlike *K2*, *Touching the*

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[65] Beaufort, "Broadway's New Spectacle"; "'K2,' A Drama of Mountain-Climbing"; Rich, "'K2, Two Men Trapped on a Mountain."

[66] Stephen Dalton, "'Touching the Void': Theater Review," *The Hollywood Reporter*, November 15, 2019, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lifestyle/lifestyle-news/touching-the-void-theater-1255235/.

[67] Phoebe Graham, "Review: Touching the Void, Bristol Old Vic," *A Younger Theatre*, September 21, 2018, https://www.ayoungertheatre.com/review-touching-the-void-bristol-old-vic/.

[68] Blue Huseyin, "Review: Touching the Void, Duke of York's Theatre," *A Younger Theatre*, November 21, 2019, https://www.ayoungertheatre.com/review-touching-the-void-duke-of-yorks-theatre/.

Void added an extra layer of scenery between the audience and the "mountain." The stacked tables and chairs of the pub in the first half of the play become Sarah's training ground where Simon teaches her how to climb. Also, as Joe and Simon climb the abstract mountain structure, the character of Richard demonstrates the distances and scale of Joe and Simon's route on a scaled-down version using peanuts to represent the climbers and the pub's furniture as the mountain. The audience experiences a double sense of perspective: the climbers on the abstract mountain structure behind Richard's scale model in the pub.

For the staging of these two plays, *K2* and *Touching the Void* required designers Lee and Green to bring the mountains indoors, a novelty that casts extra attention onto the spectacle of the plays, causing feelings of tension, dizziness, and real jeopardy for the actors who must scale their colossal creations. The actors' physical feats in *K2* were so realistic that the audience stopped breathing[70] and "a chill rushe[d] through the theater."[71] "When Taylor uses a rope and ice axes to venture precariously up the mountain, finally rising above our view, the tension is so strong we forget we're in a theater."[72] Mel Gussow warned would-be theater goers in his review that *K2* is "vicarious as well as visceral." The audience experiences the risk of mountaineering both vicariously through the actor's performance of their character's movements, but also viscerally in watching the human performers in actual danger. Patrick Meyers, in his introduction to *K2*, confirms the reality of the risk for the

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[69] Mark Lawson, "Touching the Void Review – Thrilling, Chilling Drama Reaches Dizzy Heights," *The Guardian*, September 19, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/sep/19/touching-the-void-review-bristol-old-vic.

[70] Rich, "'K2, Two Men Trapped on a Mountain."

[71] Gussow, "'K2,' A Drama of Mountain-Climbing."

[72] Rich.

actors, "The first time we didn't have to stop the play because Taylor was in danger, was opening night. I remember it as a very involving evening in the theater."[73] Later productions of *K2*, although lacking Lee's overpowering set design, still included risk to the performers. For the 2019 production at Catalyst Arts Atlanta, reviewer Manning Harris writes:

> Actor Joel Coady is literally risking his life as he climbs, more than once, to the top of Barrett Doyle's ingenious set. Mr. Coady is using crampons and ice screws and his own strength and dexterity, but if he fell, he would be seriously injured or killed. When is the last time an actor risked his life for you? I've never seen it before—not like this.[74]

Behind the character of a skilled mountaineer is the body of the actor that could be injured or possibly killed on stage due to the instability of the set design or human error. The risk to the performer is both simulated and real. The knowledge of that risk's realness allows the audience to feel as though they are watching actual mountaineering in real-time within a shared space, an experience they may not be privy to unless they were mountaineers themselves.

Reviews of *Touching the Void* similarly singled-out the actors' physical performances as the highlight of the production. "And when it gets to climbing the mountain the play really takes off. [...] The whole climb is hideously affecting – even if you haven't been on board

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[73] Meyers, *K2*, xii.

[74] Manning Harris, "Theatre Review: 'K2' at Catalyst Arts Atlanta," *Atlanta Intown*, January 30, 2019, https://atlantaintownpaper.com/2019/01/theatre-review-k2-at-catalyst-arts-atlanta/.

until this point this will grip you, your heart climbing up into your throat."[75] Other reviews report similar experiences, particularly in the last scene of Act I when Simon cuts the rope connecting him to Joe: "This is the apex of the play, the moment where 500 plus breaths inhaled and refused to release for a good 15 minutes, as the terrifying reality of the situation began to be made clear,"[76] "[Joe] falls away and upstage into the abyss, then downwards from the sky; gravity takes a new hold. Lungs gasp for breath, and I need a glass of wine at the interval."[77] Like *K2*, the climbing in *Touching the Void* poses some amount of actual risk for the actors in order to produce a visceral response in the audience. The actors in mountaineering plays, like their characters, perform actions that put them in physical danger. The actors both perform an epic and create an epic of their own. The danger to the actor enhances the production and an understanding of the risk the characters undergo. In so doing, the audience can act as witness to risk that is both representative and real.

D. Conclusion

The role of the actor in mountaineering plays reflects an inherent contradiction of climbing: is the risk worth the transcendent experience of mountaineering? Coffey argued that mountaineering stories retell old myths, but I argue that they also create new myths. The old myths told the stories of heroes in circumstances controlled by gods or other outside forces. In mountaineering, climbers choose to be on the mountain. As reviewer Dany

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[75] Lilith Wozniak, "Review: Touching the Void at the Bristol Old Vic," *Exeunt Magazine*, September 23, 2018, http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-touching-void-bristol-old-vic/.

[76] Kris Hallett, "Review: Touching the Void (Bristol Old Vic," *WhatsOnStage*, September 19, 2018, https://www.whatsonstage.com/bristol-theatre/reviews/touching-the-void-bristol-old-vic_47632.html.

[77] Graham, "Review: Touching the Void, Bristol Old Vic."

Margolies writes of a 2010 production of *K2*, "The troubling part of the script is not Meyers' fault, however; it is the question of why a man with a wife and young child would leave them to pursue this dangerous hobby."[78] Although alpinists' motivations such as the search for god, a soldier's heroism, or the feeling of living "life times a thousand," might be familiar to theater audiences across culture and time, the troubling personal choice of risking one's life to write such epics is new. When a theater audience vicariously experiences the thrill of mountaineering through such plays as *K2* and *Touching the Void*, a new mythology, one of the personal choice to risk death for sublimity, is born. The question then becomes, is risk the only pathway to the sublime? Is mountaineering through masculinity and ego and the need to write oneself into history through epic events the only path forward? Should actors put their lives at risk in the retelling of these stories?

In thinking about these questions, I keep returning to one moment in Tom Morris' production of *Touching the Void*. The last time the audience sees Sarah, she is reading a letter from Joe. In the letter, Joe expresses his love of mountaineering one last time and tells Sarah his death is not in vain because he died doing what he loved. When Sarah finishes the letter, she crumples it in her hands, throws it to the floor, and exits the stage. Her final actions of the play are a wordless rebuke of Joe's quest for an epic death. Even after having learned to climb herself, Sarah refuses to accept that death is worth the risk, and so her character must exit the stage never to be heard from again. She is no longer allowed to witness Joe's story because she refuses to accept his narrative of martyrdom. As audience to this play, I could choose to look at Joe's story as a heroic epic as I did when I first watched the documentary

[78] Dany Margolies, "K2," *Backstage.com*, October 18, 2010, sec. Advice, https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/k-58756/.

film version. However, the play provokes the troubling realization that the foundation of the epic climbing narrative is built on the bodies of young dead men. Do I want to act as a witness and thereby reinforce this particular narrative? Or, like Sarah, will I reject it?

II. 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell

Taking a deep breath and drying my sweaty palms on my yoga pants, I pulled open the heavy glass door to the Little Rock Climbing Center. There was a lot riding on this visit. It was my first visit to a rock climbing gym since I was a teenager, and I wanted more than anything to feel connected to something; connected to my body and its potential, connected to a community of potentially like-minded outdoorsy people, and connected to who I was becoming as an independent young adult. I had decided that if I could not find that sense of connection, not only would I leave the gym never to return, I would also pack up my car with all my belongings and high-tail it out of Arkansas. Rock climbing was my last-ditch effort to tie myself to something and not run away. As I approached the front desk, a tall man with close-cropped blonde hair and mischievous blue eyes quirked a smile at me in welcome. After the requisite waiver-signing on my part, the blue-eyed man gave me a tour of the gym.

We came out of the tiny cave-like entryway into the gym proper, a massive open space with tan-colored climbing precipices festooned with colorful holds. The gym's unassuming façade in an industrial park at the edge of town had not prepared me for the vast space beyond its doors. "It's bigger on the inside!" I thought to myself. Blue mats lay at the base of each climbing wall like a spongy moat delineating the climbing space from the mundane floor. Ropes cascaded from the ceiling like mini-multi-colored waterfalls. I was struck by the airy light and immensity of the room. The bright colors gave the illusion of a space much higher and grander than it actually was, almost like being outdoors, so different from the dark, claustrophobic warehouse of the climbing gym I had been to as a teenager. I was looking at a modern climbing center. A very empty modern climbing center. Besides myself and the desk manager, the only other occupants were the gym staff, several men in

their twenties who served as route setters and instructors. With no one else in the gym to instruct, the young men were building a milk crate tower with one man perched precariously atop the swaying stack. As I watched, a man on the ground tossed another crate up to the climber at the tower's apex who gingerly settled it in place. Using his superb balance, he moved one foot and then the other up onto the newly stacked crate. At a certain point, the tower grew too tall and unstable and fell over with a resounding crash. The climber dangled like a piñata, suspended from a rope attached to his harness with his belay partner at the other end. The young men laughed at the whimsy of their game while I stood in amazement at their physical prowess.

The employee from the front desk showed me how to use the auto-belay (a mechanical device that acts as a belayer for a partner-less climber) and then left me to climb. I managed to reach the top of some easy walls, which were fitted with big climbing holds spaced as evenly as ladder rungs. Surreptitiously, I watched the employees at their crate game and tried not to feel too self-conscious as not only the sole non-employee but also the lone woman in the gym. After a time that felt like hours, I noticed my thighs and calves beginning to shake, and my forearms felt swollen and hot, a condition I would later learn to call "pumped." I packed up my harness and sticky-rubbered climbing shoes and headed for the entrance. At the front desk, the blue-eyed man looked at me in surprise. "Is that it for today?" I looked at the clock on the wall. I had only been climbing for twenty minutes! My body felt wrecked. I made some lame excuse about having to return to work, but before I could escape out the door in embarrassment, he invited me to keep coming back. Wednesday nights were apparently "Women on Wednesdays" and I could get a discount on a pass and find other women to climb with if I liked. It seemed the universe (and the man at the desk)

were giving me a pretty clear sign. I had been looking for connection and now it was being offered, all I had to do was reach out and take it. “I’ll come back,” I said. And I did.

As it turned out, the blue-eyed desk attendant was actually the owner and founder of the gym, Logan Wilcoxson. I learned many important lessons from Logan, like how to stay relaxed and calm even on scary climbs, also that I was much stronger than I believed myself to be. From the other climbers at the gym, I learned that being a rock climber meant focusing on ascending (“sending,” in climber lingo) harder and harder routes. To ‘send (or so it was impressed on me), one must buy into the “try hard” mentality. To “try hard” means not giving up on making upward progress on a route. In its enactment, I watched gym members spending hours training their bodies through calisthenics and yoga-for-climbers classes. These enthusiastic acolytes of the “try hard, climb hard” mentality could be seen planking and push-upping around the gym as they munched on dressing-less salads and bananas scavenged from the dumpsters behind Whole Foods. While on the wall, a climber might hear chants of “come on, come on, try hard!” from their belayer or spectators below, encouraging them to not give up until they had ‘sent (reached the top) of the route.

The try hard narrative has come into focus within the last sixty years or so with the advent of free climbing and bouldering. During the 1960s and ‘70s, advancements in climbing technique and technology led to a “Free Climbing Revolution.” Free climbing (as opposed to aid climbing) means to climb a route without pulling or stepping on gear to ascend. This term is often confused with “free soloing” which means climbing without a rope or protective gear. With free climbing, climbers use ropes and gear to protect themselves from a fall, but must use only the natural features in the rock to get to the top. During this time, another subdiscipline of the sport was also coming to the broader climbing culture’s

attention: bouldering. Bouldering is unroped climbing on large boulders or short cliffs and requires a series of powerful, dexterous movements to complete the "problem" (route). Given the increased strength and gymnastic ability required of these two new styles of climbing, rock climbers began new training regimens focused on improving their overall athleticism. Climbers adopted the "try hard" attitude in order to push through their physical and mental limitations when progressing through the ever more difficultly graded routes and boulder problems.

The result of the "try hard" attitude is the idea that with enough training and preparation, anything is possible for the climbing body. The usual risks associated with climbing and the limits of the human body can be overcome if climbers are willing to just "try hard." Many of the Little Rock climbers relished the chance to "try hard" and to put their bodily limits to the test in an annual endurance climbing competition in northern Arkansas: the 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell. Horseshoe Hell, or "Hell" as participants affectionately call it, invites competitors to complete as many routes as possible in twelve, twenty-four, or thirty-six hours. I twice competed in the twelve-hour competition (climbing for twelve straight hours felt worlds away from my earlier twenty-minute record), and in 2021 I returned to Hell as a spectator and researcher. Although I was originally drawn to Horseshoe Hell as a case study for "try hard" narrative in action, I found that the climbers at this festival-like competition were more closely performing what I call the *apeironic* body.

The term *apeiron* is an ancient Greek word meaning limitless or without boundaries. However, there is debate as to what Anaximander, the 6th century philosopher to whom the term is attributed, meant in its usage. Only one fragment of Anaximander's writing remains, and that in the form of a quotation in a later philosopher's work. Greek scholars following

Anaximander came to uneasy conclusions about the nature of the "boundless." As Thomas Marré contends, Aristotle understood Anaximander's *apeiron* to be in contrast with one's *telos*.[79] *Apeiron* is the negative form of *peirar* meaning "completion." When applied to climbing, the "try hard" narrative could be conceptualized as that which is without limit but also without completion. Through "trying hard," there is no limit to what the climbing body might achieve. However, there will always be a harder grade or riskier route to which a climber aspires, and hence, no fulfillment of a *telos*. Instead, the experience of Horseshoe Hell prompts me to turn to Radim Kočandrle's interpretation of Anaximander's term. Kočandrle contends that *apeiron* acts a modifier of the ancient Greek word for nature. Thus, *apeiron* is tied to nature as limitlessly generative, "spatially omnipresent" (the creative power of nature is not limited to any one place), and beyond human experience. In other words, Kočandrle posits that Anaximander's theory of *apeiron* can be understood as the "power of boundless nature."[80] Nature, in this sense, taken from its etymological meaning, is the "active power of growth."[81] The *apeironic* climbing body is therefore one that has the limitless potential to grow beyond itself. If performing the "try hard" narrative requires vertical progression (climbing ever higher and harder), the *apeironic* body encourages growth in all directions. The *apeironic* body dissolves boundaries laterally, connecting climbers to their surroundings, to other climbers, and to nature itself beyond spatial or temporal constraints.

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[79] Thomas Marré, "Telos and Apeiron in Aristotle's Science of Nature," *Ancient Philosophy* 41 (2021): 105–22.

[80] Radim Kočandrle, *Apeiron Anaximander on Generation and Destruction*, trans. Dirk L. Couprie, SpringerBriefs (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2017), 99.

[81] Kočandrle, 48.

This chapter explores the *apeironic* climbing body through several aspects of the Horseshoe Hell competition, from its community rituals to the individual experiences of the climbers as they reflect on the event. The narrative of the event itself as the "wildest" climbing competition, complete with absurd costumes, risqué team names, and theatrical rituals led by a Dionysus-like character named Gordo the Great, co-creates the *apeironic* body. Unlike filmic representations of climbing where the outcome is already known, or theater productions where the performer is playing the character of a climber, a live competition like Horseshoe Hell demonstrates the interplay between actual live climbing with unknown outcomes, climbers, the framework of the event's cultural conventions, and the spectator. Utilizing a phenomenological approach, I serve as spectator and witness to the theatrical pre- and post-competition ceremonies and to the climbing itself. Survey responses from seventy-seven of the participating Hell climbers tell the story of Hell from the competitor's point of view.[82] The chapter begins with the competition's history and then presents the 2021 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell from pre-competition rituals to closing ceremonies. I intersperse my personal account of the competition with responses from the climber survey.

A. 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell and Climbing Competition History

The 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell began in the early 2000s when Andy Chasteen invited his friends Adam Peters, Andrew Tower, and Steven Charles to climb at Horseshoe

[82] The data from the survey is limited in its scope. It represents only a third of the total competition climbers from one year of the competition (2021). The list of survey questions can be found in Appendix A. The spectator experience is also limited to my own observations. I would like to conduct follow-up surveys with competitors, volunteers, and spectators at a later date.

Canyon Ranch (HCR), a dude ranch in the northern Arkansas Ozarks.[83] Conversation amongst the friends turned to how many climbs they thought they might be able to do that day, and later to how many routes they could climb over a period of twenty-four hours.[84] Chatting with me before the competition, Chasteen laughingly admitted that by 10 p.m. that evening a cozy campfire and a few too many beers had ended his grand plans to climb throughout the night. At the 2021 competition, Chasteen joked to the group of assembled competitors that although Hell was his and his friends' brainchild, he himself had never managed to climb for the full twenty-four hours. Despite this setback, Chasteen and his friends believed it was possible to climb for twenty-four hours straight because of the high density of quality routes at the ranch. Horseshoe Canyon lives up to its name as a small horseshoe-shaped valley ringed with limestone cliffs. These cliffs, or crags as climbers call them, create an abundance of single-pitch (one rope-length) climbing routes set within the walkable area of the ranch. As of 2021, the ranch boasts more than 450 individual routes. One could climb in Horseshoe Canyon all day and all night and never repeat a single route.[85]

Hearing of Chasteen's idea for a twenty-four-hour climbing competition at Horseshoe Canyon Ranch, professional climber Jeremy Collins asked to be included in its planning, providing invaluable advice on the competition's rules and scoring. He brought climbing brands on board to sponsor the competition, and each year he dons the persona of Gordo the Great, the master of ceremonies. The competition rules are straightforward: climbers have a

[83] Cole Fennel, *Rock Climbing Horseshoe Canyon*, 2018 Edition (Springdale: Natural State Publishing, 2018), 46.

[84] *The 24*, directed by Clay Pruitt, (YouTube, 2020), 7:22, https://youtu.be/l_r3kBl3QP8.

[85] Fennel, 3.

set amount of time (twelve, twenty-four, or the combined thirty-six hours) to climb as many routes as they can. Each route is worth a certain amount of points, and the taller or harder the route, the more points one can earn. Routes must be climbed clean (no falls or hanging on the rope) and each route can be climbed twice for points. Climbers are on the honor system when reporting the number of routes climbed. The competition awards individual or team points in each category (recreation [twelve-hour only], intermediate, advanced, and elite), and recognition for accomplishments such as climbing a vertical mile, most 5.7s climbed (using a designation of difficulty called the Yosemite Decimal System developed in the 1950s by Sierra Club members Don Wilson, Chuck Wiltz, and Royal Robbins), most "trad" routes climbed, and best team costume. [86]

Since 2006, thousands of climbers have come from all over the world to rural Arkansas to participate in this endurance climbing event. Several years after the competition began, Chasteen added a twelve-hour event. In the early years of the competition, the twenty-four-hour event sold out within minutes of the registration opening online. In 2021, the two-hundred-some would-be competitors had to qualify for the twenty-four by completing a set number of routes in the twelve or twenty-four the previous year, or enter into a lottery. Who knew that so many people were eager to suffer for twenty-four hours straight? The twenty-

[86] Bill Oliver, "A Tribute to the Honorary Members of the Sierra Peaks Section: Norman Clyde, Glen Dawson & Jules Eichorn - Part V" 52, no. 1 (March 2008): 3.

The rating on a climb can range from 5.0 (easiest) to 5.17 (currently the most difficult in the world). Routes after 5.10 are further subdivided into a, b, c, d with "a" being the easiest and "d" the hardest. For example, one famous climb at Horseshoe Canyon Ranch is "Crimp Scampi" with a grade of 5.10d. 5.7, therefore, is a relatively easy grade. "Trad" climbing refers to climbing in the traditional style as opposed to "sport" climbing. In sport climbing, route developers place bolts along the route to which climbers attach the rope as they ascend. In trad climbing, climbers must place their own protective pieces in cracks or other features on the rock and then attach, or "clip," their rope to those pieces.

four-hour climbers are not even the craziest ones. Logan Wilcoxson and his partners, year after year, took on the added challenge of climbing in both the twelve- and the twenty-four-hour events, joyfully putting themselves through thirty-six hours of torture.

B. The 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell Pre-Competition Rituals

Friday September twenty-fourth, 2021 dawns bright and clear. The day seems poised to be, mercifully, not too hot with a warm night to follow. Perfect conditions for a twenty-four-hour endurance competition. The twelve-hour competition had concluded the day before, and Horseshoe Canyon Ranch was gearing up for the main event. Most of the twenty-four-hour climbers had arrived the night before, scouring the sloped hillsides looking for a place to pitch their tents and park their cars. The morning of, a few late-coming competitors check in at the volunteer booth located in front of the dude ranch's main office with professional climber Hans Florine in their midst. He introduces himself to everyone he comes across with a quick friendly chat. When he reaches the spot where I am handing out information sheets for my survey, he gives me an amiable smile and a handshake and asks me about my research. If I had not known who he was beforehand, I would never have known he was world-class famous. The second year I competed, 2014, was also the year that Alex Honnold, pre-*Free Solo* fame, took part. Watching Honnold climb during the competition was like witnessing Peter Parker turn into Spiderman. The gangly kid with the bad haircut from the welcoming ceremonies that I only vaguely recognized as professional climber Alex Honnold transformed into a climbing savant once on the rock wall, each movement powerful and precise, his shirtless back bulging with muscles. At a previous Horseshoe Hell, one of my partners teased a fellow climber about the kind of beer he was drinking, making the other laugh. Only when my partner got a good look at the man did he

realize it was Tommy Caldwell, another superstar in the climbing world, hanging with the Hell crowd and drinking a beer after the competition.

Much of Florine, Honnold, and Caldwell's fame comes from embodying the "try hard" narrative with their record-setting ascents in Yosemite Valley, the North American Mecca of rock climbing. In 1994, Lynn Hill became the first person to "free" The Nose, a prominently featured route on El Capitan. Several teams had attempted to free climb the route, but it was Hill's gymnastically trained body, her combined flexibility, strength, and well-honed technique that eventually allowed The Nose to be climbed without aid. After this historic ascent (which Hill accomplished in under twenty-four hours), Hill is famously quoted as saying, "It goes, boys!" meaning a free ascent on El Capitan was now possible.[87] Following the "Golden Years" of Yosemite climbing (1950s-1970), advancements in climbing technique and technology led to the "Free Climbing Revolution," a move away from the techniques pioneered in mountaineering where the goal was to reach the summit by any means necessary, and towards a new goal of climbing as an aesthetic and athletic pursuit.[88] Free climbing (as opposed to aid climbing) means to climb a route without pulling or stepping on gear to ascend. This term is often confused with "free soloing" which means to climb without a rope of protective gear. With free climbing, climbers use ropes and gear to protect themselves from a fall, but must use only the natural features in the rock to get to the top. As Jim Bridwell writes:

[87] Lynn Hill, *Climbing Free: My Life in the Vertical World* (W.W. Norton and Company, 2002), 225–48; Alexander Huber, *Yosemite: Half a Century of Dynamic Rock Climbing*, trans. Nadya Stracey (Birmingham: Menasha Ridge Press, 2003), 139.

[88] Huber, 71.

> Originally, free climbing in Yosemite was not as important as aid-climbing technology, for the major walls were unclimbed. The evolution of climbing marched onward to the first prize and, once the walls were mastered, the goal moved on toward virtuosity. A master of free climbing was not held captive by the ball and chain of mechanical reliance. The urge was to excel and consequently free climbing began to evolve.[89]

Tommy Caldwell's fame, showcased in his memoir *The Push: A Climber's Journey of Endurance, Risk, and Going Beyond Limits* and later captured in the film *The Dawn Wall* (2018), centers on his six-year project to free the seemingly unclimbable Dawn Wall on El Capitan, now considered the hardest and longest free climb in the world. Free climbing offered the Yosemite climbers the chance to express themselves both athletically and artistically. No two climbers would climb the same route the same way when they could only use their bodies on the rock to propel themselves upward. In order to climb sections of the Yosemite cliffs without the aid of mechanical devices, climbers now required training more akin to gymnastics than hiking.

In addition to free climbing, speed climbing and free soloing became recognized subdisciplines where climbers could make their mark. Hans Florine's obsession with The Nose involved speed: "I wasn't sure where I fit in Yosemite. I wasn't part of the free-climbing, free-soloing, hard-partying faction. Nor was I interested in first ascents of new lines up El Capitan or ascending hard aid-climbing routes, like the generation before me

[89] Huber, *Yosemite: Half a Century*, 82.

seemed to so thoroughly enjoy. What I liked was climbing light and fast."[90] Florine became known in popular media for his numerous speed records on The Nose, including his two-hour, twenty-three minute, and forty-six second-record in 2012 that he completed with up-and-coming climbing star, Alex Honnold.[91] Filmmakers Jimmy Chin and Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi would later immortalize Honnold's world-famous free solo of the Freerider route on El Capitan in the Academy Award-winning film *Free Solo* (2018). Speed records (a race to the top by any means necessary, aid or free) went from being measured in months to days to hours to *minutes* and free soloing served as the ultimate expression of the "real climber": the athletic "try hard" body necessary to complete the movements "free" (without aid), and the mental strength to take on the adventure (risk) of climbing without a rope.

With greater emphasis on gymnastic training in the sport came the belief that training hard, or "trying hard," was the secret to the success of free climbing or free soloing. What often goes unacknowledged are the advantages these climbers have in reaching the point where they can "try hard." Lynn Hill trained as a gymnast from a young age.[92] Tommy Caldwell's father was a climber himself who got his son into the sport.[93] Alex Honnold's family introduced him to Yosemite and the outdoors at a young age and he grew up in a town where a climbing gym was within biking distance from his home.[94] Additionally, to train for

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[90] Hans Florine, *On the Nose: A Lifelong Obsession with Yosemite's Most Iconic Climb* (Guilford: Falcon, 2016), 132.

[91] Florine, 166.

[92] Hill, *Climbing Free*.

[93] Tommy Caldwell, *The Push: A Climber's Journey of Endurance, Risk, and Going Beyond Limits* (New York: Viking, 2017).

[94] Chin and Vasarhelyi, *Free Solo*.

free climbing requires resources (time, money) and specialized equipment (a climbing gym) or proximity to outdoor climbing crags. Pushing the true limits of the sport (in terms of difficulty and risk) is available only to an elite few. For many of the Horseshoe Hell climbers, as the survey results attest, the competition is an opportunity to challenge themselves and also enjoy the supportive community atmosphere for which the competition is known.

The *apeironic* climbing body that I observed at the competition is one that uses such communality, rather than individualism, to inspire growth. Steven Rosen, drawing on Plato, argues that the Greek philosophers after Anaximander sought to tame or control *apeiron*, which they believed to be the chaotic power or primordial substance from which all springs and to which all will return:

> In its sheer boundlessness, *apeiron* defies containment within the ordering contexts of space and time. To the early Greeks, this posed a considerable challenge. For, in the unconstrained many of *apeiron*, there can be no *one*; in its chaotic multiplicity, there can be no unity, no stable center of identity, no indivisible core of being, no *individual*.[95]

Individuality, according to Rosen's reading of the early Greeks, has a stabilizing effect on *apeironic* chaos wherein the "boundless activity of wild nature is subdued."[96] In contrast, calling upon a limitlessly generative growth mindset of *apeiron*, the climbers lean into this non-individuality. They revel in the chaos of "wild nature." They climb alongside the "void"

[95] Steven M. Rosen, *Dimensions of Apeiron* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), xiv.

[96] Rosen, 3.

that is *apeiron*. The *apeironic* body as I conceptualize it therefore imagines the limitlessness of the climbing body as belonging to the climbing community as a whole.

Around 9am the twenty-four-hour climbers filter into the vendor area below the main ranch building. Along with their harnesses and backpacks laden with ropes and gear, the climbers keep with the community-born tradition of wearing a variety of ridiculous costumes. One team with devil horns attached to their helmets sports matching Prana brand t-shirts. Their team name? The Devil Wears Prana. Another team of men wear rainbow makeup and psychedelic shirts; a team with a man and a woman play dress-up as Marvel characters Hulk and Thor; and another team wear knitted woolen shorts giving them a distinctly satyr-like appearance. Their matching t-shirts read, "Herd Immunity." Two climbers dress as bananas, and I wonder how anyone could climb comfortably in a banana costume. Leopard-print leotards, men in tutus, denim duds, unicorn heads, flight-suits, and 80s-style headbands all make an appearance. One popular team posing for picture after picture wears red-and-white-striped button-up shirts and giant hot dog hats on their heads. When I ask for their team name, they proudly proclaim themselves the "Carabiner Wieners."

Climbing attire in 2021 is normally a mix of yoga apparel (stretchy pants or leggings and tank tops), denim jeans, athletic shorts, synthetic t-shirts, sports bras, and (the perennial favorite for men) no shirt and loose pants or shorts. Climbers in the 2020/21 Tokyo Olympics wore high-end name-brand versions of this look, with the Americans sporting The North Face tank tops, shorts, and leggings.[97] Horseshoe Hell climbers' choice to wear themed costumes sets them apart from the trendy name-brand-attired crowd. Though not, strictly

[97] Natalie Berry, "Olympic Outfits - Sport Climbing Style at Tokyo 2020," UKC, June 23, 2021, https://www.ukclimbing.com/articles/features/olympic_outfits_-_sport_climbing_style_at_tokyo_2020-13720.

speaking, sensible choices for climbs that involve a degree of gymnastic ability, as the competitors report, the communal spirit the competition traditions engender helps them achieve results beyond their expectations. With their costumes, the climbers sacrifice some of their "try hard" potential in order to connect with the other members of the Hell community and join in the formless but generative chaos that such disguises afford. The costumes also reflect the bacchanalian feeling of the event: transvestitism was an established part of ancient Greek Dionysian rituals, and "satyrs," perhaps men in "furry costumes" danced with the god Dionysus' followers.[98] A month after the conclusion of the sleekly styled brand-outfitted climbing at the Tokyo Olympics, the 2021 Hell climbers gleefully donned their tutus and wiener hats.

Andy Chasteen begins the twenty-four-hour competition with a review of the rules for the assembled competitors and spectators. Standing atop the bed of a truck, decked out in his traditional grey robe, gold chain necklace, sandals with socks, and trademark blonde mullet, Chasteen looks like a surf-bum-preacher about to deliver a sermon on how to keep the "stoke" alive. He then launches into the Roll Call, the naming of the twenty-four-hour teams. Though not all Hell climbers wear costumes, with some choosing the practicality of workout attire over the community empowerment the costumes provide, most Horseshoe Hell teams do contribute to the competition's performance of communal transformation with their team name. Team names can be a play on climbing terms, usually in a sexualized manner, like

[98] Arthur Evans, *The God of Ecstasy: Sex-Roles and the Madness of Dionysos.* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 19, 24.

team "Chains and Whippers Excite Me."[99] Names can also be a joke about the team's ability or the identity of its climbers such as "Team AARP," "We're in the wrong league," and "Hopefully We're Still Married At The End Of This." Some teams choose to comment on current events like the team called "There's hand sanitizer in my sack if you want to feel it," a nod to the Covid-19 pandemic. Other long-time Hell competitors opt to keep their names from year to year like "Leather and Lace" and Logan Wilcoxson's team "Team Honey Badger."[100]

As Chasteen calls out each name, the team stands to be acknowledged, waving or pumping their fists into the air with a "wooo!" or shouting out a prepared phrase in response. Chasteen jokingly advises the volunteers and medical staff to keep an eye on some teams whose names poke fun of their supposed ineptitude like "Last Year I Whipped On My Second Route" and "Gumby Chronicles."[101] As Chasteen announces team "Anchor Spankers," the two climbers stand, chug a beer, and light roman candle fireworks that explode overhead. The climbers of team "Chippendale Earnhardt," wearing white outfits and NASCAR hats, jump up onto the truck with Chasteen, calling out, "Start your engines!" then rip off their shirts and launch into a raunchy dance. "And I'm blushing," Chasteen says with a laugh as the crowd applauds the strip-tease. When Chasteen calls out team "TarXanax and Mary Jane," the two climbers respond in unison, "We're the other medical staff!"

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[99] Chains are found at the top of routes or the end of a pitch and can be used as anchor points (secure points off of which climbers can repel or belay). Whippers are bad falls, usually resulting in the climber falling some distance and "whipping" through the air on the end of the rope.

[100] "2021 Results," Horseshoe Hell App, accessed February 22, 2022, https://horseshoehellapp.com/events?33.

[101] A "gumby" is a new climber.

The Hell climbers' act of renaming themselves with outrageous aliases, complete with catch phrases, transforms them from ordinary climbers into the superhuman beings necessary to complete a day in Hell. When Alex Honnold competed in Horseshoe Hell in 2014, he made a point of saying that he was there to win, not to have fun. As his partner Stacey Pearson told Reel Rock filmmakers in *Showdown at Horseshoe Hell*, "I was like, we've gotta come up with a great team name [...] [Honnold] called our team Honnold and Pearson. That's our team name? How boring." To which Honnold replied, "I mean I hate to sound like a fuddy-duddy, but like, I don't need a team name, I don't need a costume. I'm just going to go out and climb a lot."[102] However, as the survey responses from the Hell climbers demonstrated, the enactment of community (seen in part through the costumes and team names) bolstered their mental and physical abilities, allowing many participants to climb longer and harder than they normally would have without the community's support. During Horseshoe Hell, the endurance aspect of the competition compels climbers to call upon the encouragement from their partners and the community to meet their goals.

After Roll Call, Chasteen invites a "guest speaker" to address the crowd. The newcomer, wearing a droopy bucket hat and sporting a fake gut under his button-up shirt, clambers awkwardly onto the truck. The nasally voice and undone fly on his khaki slacks fit with his geeky persona as he introduces himself to the assembled climbers as Gordon from Horseshoe Canyon Ranch's "tech department. (Given the guest speaker's ridiculous costume and the fact that Horseshoe Canyon Ranch has no "tech department," it is quickly apparent that this character is not to be taken seriously). "I've been asked to start us off this year,"

[102] *Showdown at Horseshoe Hell*, directed by Peter Mortimer, Nick Rosen, and Zachary Barr (Sender Films and Reel Rock, 2015).

Gordon begins, “You might notice that Gordo couldn’t make it. He’s at a meditation conference in Miami.” Gordo refers to Gordo the Great, Jeremy Collins’ Horseshoe Hell alter-ego who performs the Climber’s Creed each year. Gordon, Gordo’s stand-in, then welcomes the climbers to Horseshoe “H-E double hockey sticks” and reminds them that, due to the pandemic, all climbers are required to wear face masks at all times. He also implements a new rule: all climbers must wear helmets, to which a few climbers responded with boos. Gordon then attempts to begin the traditional Climber’s Creed with a prayer, but a man in the crowd interrupts him saying, “What the heck is this? We want Gordo back!” The other climbers quickly take up chanting the name of “Gordo” as several others rush the truck and vault into the bed with Gordon. One climber grabs the microphone from Gordon and asks the assembled crowd, “Who wants Gordo?” The group cheers and the AC/DC song “Thunderstruck” rumbles from the speakers. The climbers in the truck bed begin removing Gordon’s clothing. Underneath, Jeremy Collins wears his Gordo outfit: tight-fitting animal print leggings and a tank top sporting the image of a roaring lion. A fur collar, red jacket, black eyeliner, yellow headband, and red sunglasses complete the ensemble. Suitably dressed as Gordo, Collins falls backwards into the waiting arms of the climbers below who pass him around the crowd in rock-concert body-surfing style. Once returned to the truck, transformation complete, Collins reclaims the microphone and growls out, “Doesn’t it feel good to be who you really are?”

In this moment of theatricality at Horseshoe Hell, Collins’ Gordo character resembles the Greek god Dionysus, a god of depravity, pleasure-seeking, and transformation (including

the ability to transform into a lion).[103] Arthur Evans also suggests that the name Dionysus may translate as "God of the Mountain," a pertinent sobriquet for a rock climbing competition.[104] Even Gordo's name (meaning "fat" in Spanish) ties in to his decadent nature. Collins' performance of Gordo is brash and seductive, his adoption of this character an invitation to the assembled climbers to also throw off their everyday personas, join in with the chaos, and become rowdy, lion-like competitors. As Bowden contends, the followers of Dionysus have the opportunity to see the god for who he truly is, without masks or disguises: "[t]o do this they abandoned the trappings of civilization [...] and went out into the wild landscape beyond the city and beyond the cultivated land around it, up into the uncultivated mountains and hills, dressed in animal skins."[105] For his entrance into the 2022 competition, Collins road through the assembled crowd on a palanquin held aloft by ten half-naked male climbers. The City Dionysia, the ancient Greek theater festival in honor of the god, began with a similar ritual: the carrying of Dionysus' statue from Eleutherae to Athens.[106] In keeping with the narrative of "try hard," with regards to Roman Bacchanalia, Walter Burkert argues that the only path towards consummation, or one's *telos*, is to be initiated into the cult of the god.[107] While Justin Varley has considered the Dionysus role in community formation

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[103] Walter F. Otto, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*, trans. Robert B. Palmer (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1965), 110.

[104] Evans, *The God of Ecstasy*, 132.

[105] Hugh Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 136.

[106] Bowden, 107.

[107] Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 11.

(or *communitas*) in adventure sports as a separation from the "quotidian grind,"[108] Collins' Dionysian character calls upon the climbers to dissolve the spaces between themselves, their environment, and the climbers around them. In *The Civic Spectacle*, Mera Flaumenhaft suggests that Dionysus "abolishes boundaries" and that "[f]or those touched by Dionysus, life ceases to be measured, articulated experience in space and time."[109] For those climbers touched by Gordo, the boundaries between their bodies and the rock, nature, time, and their partners lost definition. In risking the dissolution of boundaries, the climbers gain the *apeironic* sense of limitless possibilities.

Following Gordo's spectacular entrance into the competition, Collins as Gordo then leads the climbers in the annual Climber's Creed. The Climber's Creed is a ritualized speech that symbolically binds each climber to their partner, builds the energy of the community to a fever pitch, and then releases the climbers in this near-ecstatic state into the surrounding hillside. Collins begins with the following stanza while the climbers stand face to face with their partner, right hands raised, repeating his words after each line:

> Partner.
>
> The hour is upon us.
>
> The sun has risen in the east
>
> And desire rises in my soul.
>
> Now we too shall rise
>
> On walls of stone.

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[108] Justin Varley, "Sea Kayakers at the Margins: The Liminoid Character of Contemporary Adventures," *Leisure Studies* 30, no. 1 (2011): 96.

[109] Mera J. Flaumenhaft, *The Civic Spectacle: Essays on Drama and Community* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 58.

(For the full transcript of the 2021 Climbers Creed see Appendix B). Collins continues the Creed with repetitions of the word "partner" and stanzas that reflect themes such as safety reminders ("Do not freaking drop me!"), the climbers as warriors or heading into battle ("We are warriors"), and the climbers as lions ("We are lions in a field of lions!"). The exact wording of the Creed changes slightly from year to year; for example, Collins referred to the Covid-19 pandemic at this year's event ("Give me ample slack. Do not give me ample Covid"), however the purpose of the Creed is to raise "the stoke" (climber lingo for encouragement or to excite, as in to stoke a fire). The Creed also creates an intimate moment between climbing partners when they look into each other's eyes and repeat the affirmations of Collins' speech. "Partner," they say to each other, "I chose you not for thine strength and will, but for thine determination and skill." The risk of being vulnerable in this moment, staring their partner in the eyes, causes some climbers to laugh nervously or shift in discomfort. Others clasp hands tightly, enjoying the special connection between climbing partners. The Creed is a reminder to one's climbing partner that they literally hold your life in their hands. The line, "Do not freaking drop me!" a perennial inclusion, gets a fervent repetition. At the end of the Creed, their initiation into the cult of Gordo just beginning, Collins repeats the phrase, "we are lions" three times at which point the assembled climbers throw their heads back and roar into the sky. The stoke is real. The sharp crack of a shotgun sets the competition in motion, and climbers dash into the wooded hills where they embark upon their first of twenty-four hours of climbing.

The following consideration of the twenty-four-hour competition draws on my limited ability to spectate the climbing and the Hell climbers' responses to the survey they filled out after the 2021 event. Set within the forested hillside of Horseshoe Canyon Ranch,

there is no central area to spectate the actual climbing. To watch climbers in action requires hiking around the perimeter of the canyon and witnessing small groups of climbers at a time. The survey therefore provides a broader perspective of what was happening during those twenty-four hours. In the survey, I asked the climbers to write about their experience during the competition, the relationship between their body and the rock, with their partner, time, nature, and whether they experienced "flow state." Maria Coffey defines flow specifically in regard to climbing as "Focus, peak experience, epiphany, the reintegrated moment, flow, in the zone—different names that convey the same meaning: the sense of being intensely alive. The moment when life is now, without past or future, beyond earthly mundanities. An intoxicating state. A fleeting sense of immortality."[110] Flaumenhaft's discussion of Dionysus also depicts Dionysus' disciples in their state of delirium as living outside of time, intoxicated, and beyond earthly matters. "[T]he followers of Dionysus drink him and eat him raw, ignoring even bodily boundaries to become one with him. Losing oneself in Dionysus is a reassertion of one's ties to the earth, but, at the same time, it is an attempt to assimilate oneself to the condition of a god."[111] Lastly, I add to the *apeironic* climbing body an understanding that it exists in "indefinitely extended space and time."[112] The sections that follow explore how the climbers perceived their bodies in space and time, and in relation to their partners, nature, and the Hell community. I introduce each of the following subsections with a quotation from Flaumenhaft's essay on Dionysus/Bacchus. Dionysus' devotees and

[110] Coffey, *Where the Mountain*, 23–24.

[111] Flaumenhaft, *The Civic Spectacle*, 60.

[112] "2021 Results."

those Gordo has enthralled tell a story of abolishing boundaries between bodies, rock, time, and nature.

C. The Climbing Body and the Rock

> "*They have left enclosed houses in a walled city to dwell on unroofed rocks on the open mountains. There the distinctions between human beings and the world around them are muted.*"[113]

When asked about the relationship between their body and the rock while climbing in the competition, the Hell climbers' responses surprised me. I expected a similar approach to Don Mellor in *American Rock*, who carefully describes each type of rock and which climbing styles are best suited to its configuration. However, only about one quarter of the Hell climbers even mentioned the rock itself. Instead, the majority focused on the effect the rock or the act of climbing had on their bodies. For example, one climber described the relationship between the rock and their body as a physical and emotional deterioration:

> At first, I was executing moves and moving fluidly. About 3 or 4 hours in my arms and legs started cramping, and that continued for another 15 hours or so. At about 2 in the morning some serious nausea and fatigue set in, and my speech began to slur, and I began to stumble down the trail, but I was able to send a couple of 5.12s. When I pulled through this rough patch, I was ok, but was feeling quite a lot of pain in my hands. At the end, I was just moaning and grunting through every move. It went from being a joyful experience, to a sickly feeling, to an absolutely dreadful last few hours.

Thirty-one of the respondents reported feeling pain, soreness, bruises, scrapes, or cramps in various body parts while an equal number also said they felt physically strong and confident.

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[113] Flaumenhaft, *The Civic Spectacle*, 59.

Another twenty-two said that their experience was one of fluid and/or efficient movement. Unsurprisingly, climbers also mentioned feeling exhausted or fatigued and/or talked about the mental challenge of the competition. Most of the stories the climbers told about the rock fixated on their own bodily perceptions: they were amazed at how well their body held up, pleased with how little pain they experienced, how the difficulty of movement increased as the competition progressed, or commented on their level of fitness or training. The rock is what happened to their bodies.

In "The Climbing Body, Nature and the Experience of Modernity," Neil Lewis argues that rock climbing is a reciprocal act; climbers touch the rock and the rock touches them back. "In mapping the rock with his body – fingers, fists, feet, blood, sweat, obscenities – [the climber] is, in turn, mapped by the rock. For the climber and environment inscribe each other."[114] The way the Hell climbers wrote about the rock/body relationship bears out Lewis' contentions. They did not need to explicitly reference the rock because the effect of the rock on their body told the story for them. Their relationship with the limestone on Horseshoe's crag was one of movement, pain from various scrapes and bruises, and confidence or lack thereof. Taking Lewis' arguments into consideration, the climbers' relationship with the rock, whether they felt they were reaching their goals, climbing strongly, or struggling with the mental or physical challenge, bled over into how they viewed their bodies and the competition as a whole. Seen in another way, the boundary between self and rock became less stable in the climbers' stories. As one Hell climber wrote (with perhaps a dash of cheeky climber humor), "The rock and my body become one and, like so much igneous rock, melded

[114] Neil Lewis, "The Climbing Body, Nature and the Experience of Modernity," *Body & Society* 6, no. 3–4 (2000): 74.

into one another." In telling the story of the rock through the body, the Hell climbers painted a picture of the rock at Horseshoe Canyon as inseparable from the act of climbing. Rather than two separate entities, body and rock, there was no clear demarcation between the two in the climbers' accounts.

A climber's relationship with the rock is a curious thing. Not all rock is the same, and each crag has its own charms and flaws. Smith Rock in Oregon, the birthplace of American sport climbing, boasts basalt cliffs, while on the opposite side of the country the nude Vulgarians strained and stretched over quartz conglomerate in the 'Gunks.[115] The rock at Horseshoe Canyon Ranch consists primarily of limestone and sandstone, fiery orange in places, fading to lichen-splotched grey in others. The stone is "grippy" (lightly textured, perfect for pressing and gripping with rubber-toed climbing shoes) with a wide variety of formations, from chicken heads (outcroppings around which a climber can wrap a hand) to overhanging ledges called roofs, to vertical cracks perfect for placing traditional protection pieces. Don Mellor argues that the particular kind of rock in a region influences the climbing culture of that area: "Seen through a Darwinian lens, each area was its own Galapagos, an isolated gene pool developing by itself, replete with its own language, its own grading system, its own shared goals and expectations."[116] Different rock requires different climbing styles and each crag creates a community of climbers who share an embodied knowledge of that particular kind of rock.

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[115] Mellor, *American Rock*.; The Vulgarians, a collection of climbers from the City College of New York, took to climbing the Shawangunks in the nude in defiance of the conservative "Appie" (Appalachian Club) sensibilities. (see Isserman, 322).

[116] Mellor, 13.

During the 2021 Horseshoe Hell, a majority of the competitors in both the twelve- and twenty-four-hour chose to climb a route called Action Hotdog.[117] The official Horseshoe Canyon climbing guide instructs climbers on this thirty-foot 5.6 to "follow the obvious line of buckets, stepping left into a water groove near the top."[118] A relatively short route, Action Hotdog earns climbers of all ability levels easy points in the competition. The day following the competition, my partners and I climbed this route for nostalgia's sake. As I led up the "buckets," I remarked to my belayer below that I had forgotten that the route is slightly overhung, causing the body to lean back away from the wall and putting strain on the forearms. The rock beneath my hands, large jagged holds that I could sometimes wrap my whole hand around, felt gritty and rough. As I reached the "water groove," I extended a foot across the smooth-surfaced channel, a move called "stemming," using the pressure and friction of my foot on the opposing rock wall to hold me in place as I first clipped my quickdraw and then the rope to the bolt affixed to the rock. After reaching the anchors at the top of the climb, I sat back in my harness as my partner lowered me to the ground, pushing off the rock in front of me with my feet to keep my body from dragging against the outcroppings of stone as I descended.

Of the two-hundred and nineteen climbers who tackled Action Hotdog over the course of the competition, likely no one would have climbed the route exactly as I did. My height and body shape, the choices I made about where to put my feet and hands, even the weather or time of day, which can affect the rock, would have changed the experience. Many of the competitors would have climbed the route at night, drastically altering their perception

[117] "2021 Results."

[118] Fennel, *Rock Climbing Horseshoe Canyon*, 52.

of the climb. With only their headlamps for illumination, everything outside the small circle of light fades into darkness. The dark limits the climbers' vision to the next set of hand and foot holds on the rock; the ground could be five or fifty feet away. Getting off route is a legitimate concern, so climbers look for the bright white splash of climbers' chalk left on the holds or the next bolt leading to the anchors to chart their course. When competitors climb the same route twice (they are allowed up to two "laps" on each route), each time becomes its own experience as the climber may use different hand/foot holds each time. Action Hotdog, like every route, contains limitless variations. Florine, Honnold, Caldwell, and Hill became the stuff of climbing legend through their unique and remarkable Yosemite climbs that pushed the limits of what was considered possible at the time through their free climbing, speed, or soloing records. Rather than an individual push against the boundaries of the sport, the repetition of Action Hotdog at Horseshoe Hell stands as community record setting. According to the results records, Action Hotdog was climbed at least four-hundred and thirty-one times over the course of the thirty-six hours of competition. Moreover, the route, its nuances of stone and height and environment, now exists as communal embodied knowledge. Bodies of many different kinds have now climbed Action Hotdog at all hours of the day and night, blurring the lines between the known and unknown of this particular piece of Arkansas rock. The climbers have mapped out a route on this stone, and the stone has mapped itself onto the Hell community.

D. The Climber and Their Partner

"*Those who merge with the natural world and with Dionysus do so while merging with others."*[119]

[119] Flaumenhaft, *The Civic Spectacle*, 60.

The theme of boundary-dissolving continued for the Hell climbers when writing about their partners. Twelve climbers wrote that the competition deepened their personal connection with their partner. As one stated, "We started as friends that had not competed together. Seeing one another vulnerable and pushing hard added another layer of respect and depth to our friendship." Another climber simply wrote, "Basically married by the end." Thirty responses talked about how the climber felt they and their partner were a good match or had a solid relationship. Twenty-six mentioned how supportive and/or encouraging the relationship was, and twenty said they had good communication with their partner or knew how to read their non-verbal cues. One climber felt, "Increased empathy, desire to support or sacrifice for others, greater levels of trust and appreciation. Like we now have a bond that one can only get from overcoming great feats together." In keeping with the Dionysian aspect of the competition, Papaioannou and Lykesas contend that Dionysian mysteries (cults) were places where "people who joined the same dance and participated in the same proceedings felt united with one another forever."[120] Climbing, as a kind of vertical dance, performed a similar function on the Hell climbers in uniting them with one another. The devotion to one's partner during Hell stands at odds with the current climate of individual achievement stories in climbing. From documentaries about solo climbers such as *Free Solo* (2018) and *The Alpinist* (2021), to the emphasis on individuality in the climbers at the 2020/21 Tokyo Olympics, to the almost daily reports from magazines like *Climbing* that highlight the triumphs of a single athlete, contemporary climbing stories rarely focus on

[120] Christina Papaioannou and Georgios Lykesas, "The Role and Significance of Dance in the Dionysian Mysteries," *Studies in Physical Culture and Tourism* 19, no. 2 (2012): 69.

climbing partnerships. For Horseshoe Hell, the climbers' partners were inseparable from the story they were telling.

Around 10:30 p.m., halfway through the twenty-four-hour competition, I hike up to the North Forty, the northernmost part of the ranch. Now boasting many more than the original forty climbs of its namesake, the North Forty is a popular area where climbers can complete a large volume of routes within a short distance. Competitors have just completed their mid-point check-in, logging their finished climbs at folding tables under giant glowing inflatable tube arches, and allowing the volunteers to assess their mental and physical well-being. When I ask, the staff say the climbers look good and are still going strong after twelve hours of climbing. One of the volunteers acts as a disc jockey and soon the neon-lit crag resounds with climbers belting out Bon Jovi's "Halfway There" as the song pours from the surrounding speakers. The role of music, particularly "loud, rhythmic and repetitive music" was common to ancient Dionysian rituals.[121] Music and dance were key components to experiencing the ecstasy of the god.[122] The climbers respond to the blaring music as well, belayers' hips swishing side to side as they hold the rope connected to their partner, climbers bob their heads in time to the beat. The lyrics "halfway there" also serve as a reminder that they have now completed a full twelve hours in hell, a celebratory milestone in the competition.

Normally, loud music at a climbing crag is frowned upon as it prevents climbers from hearing important safety commands from their belayers and vice versa. The traditional script between climbers is as follows: before the climb, while both parties are still on the ground,

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[121] Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*, 214.

[122] Papaioannou and Lykesas, "The Role and Significance," 70.

the climber asks their belayer, "On belay?" After the belayer checks that the climber has correctly knotted the rope to their properly secured harness and the climber has checked that their partner's belay device and harness are also properly set up, the belayer replies, "On belay." The climber then warns their partner that they are "Climbing," to which the belay responds, "Climb on." At the top of the route, a climber asks their partner to "Take" (meaning take up slack in the rope), the belayer says "I've got you" (or something similar), and then the climber asks the belayer to "Lower" (lower them to the ground) to which the proper response is "Lowering." The Horseshoe Hell competitors almost never say any of these safety phrases. After hours of climbing together, potentially with a partner they have known for years, each pair has a kind of short-hand communication that is more physical than verbal. A quick "Climbing" might be all a belayer gets, the words barely reaching their ears before the climber has already clipped into the first bolt of the route. "Take" and "Lower" can still be heard, but many climbers choose their own set of "safe words" for these crucial commands so as not to be confused with other climbers around the congested crags. It would not do to begin taking up slack or lowering your partner before they have reached the anchors, after all. One set of climbers uses the words "split" and "peel" for take and lower, a banana-themed call and response that fits well with the perennial Hell favorite of wearing banana costumes.

The personalization of commands and reading of a partner's body language in place of spoken commands not only demonstrates the "brotherhood [sic] of the rope," as described in Chapter 1, but how Hell competitors psychically merge with their partners. As the climbers repeat after Gordo in the 2021 Creed, "Partner! Are we climbers? Nay. We are more than that." The significance of the Hell partnership continued to appear even in responses to

my survey prompts that had nothing to do with the climber's relationship with their partner. In the aforementioned prompt about the climber's relationship between their body and the rock, nineteen responses directly referenced the climber's partner or used the pronoun "we" to talk about their experience. As one climber wrote of his rock/body relationship, "My body was pissed pretty much the entire time. My brain, my partner, and the Hell community carried my physical body to the end."

A reliance on one's partner, or their own efforts to support the other were common themes throughout the climbers' responses to the partnership prompt. "My partner is the best [...] make it known that I LOVE MY PARTNER," wrote one such enthusiastic participant. Affirmations of love between partners make the responses where this connection was lacking all the more tragic. As one climber wrote, "The partnership is the actual challenge of the competition. The climbing was easy." Injury, the physical or mental struggle of climbing for twenty-four hours, lack of compatibility, or the inability to continue were the most common sources of friction for the Hell climbing partnerships. However, all but two of the seventy-seven respondents put a positive spin on their partnership no matter what challenges they faced during the competition. Even when injury, exhaustion, or negativity threatened to derail their goals, most of the climbers reported that their partnerships survived the night and were stronger than they had been before.

E. The Climbing Body and Time

"*The women who worship Bacchus 'out of place' also live outside articulated human time. Neither natural nor conventional time punctuates their lives."*[123]

[123] Flaumenhaft, *The Civic Spectacle*, 59.

The most apparent disruption of boundaries in the Hell climbers' stories involved their perception of time. Of the seventy-seven climbers who responded to the survey, seventy-four reported feeling that time was distorted in some way during the competition. In *A Culture of Stone,* Carolyn Dean writes that for the Inca, stone was "life immobilized," "animacy 'paused' for an unspecified period."[124] Stones also acted as thin places between time and other dimensions. These thin spaces were powerful places of transubstantiation and keepers of numinous forces. Thus, certain rocks, worshipped as *waka* (sacred), are not mere inanimate objects. They are deities or other beings frozen into petrified form or passageways into the "underworld" of "spirits and ancestors." [125] Jeffrey Cohen contends that stone in European medieval mythologies also offers contact with time, stating, "To lay hand upon stone is to press against time in material form."[126] Encountering the deep time of stone shifts the human perception of time to one of incomprehension, the feeling that "stone's time is not ours, that the world is not for us."[127] An exploration of lithic time and the transformative power of stone from the Inca to the Early Modern Europeans suggests that rocks can be experienced as an embodiment of *apeiron*. They exist within a timescale that appears limitless and possess powers that transcend the boundaries of human reality.

The seemingly never-ending bodily exertions required to sustain contact with the rock during an endurance event like Horseshoe Hell likewise distorted time for the competitors. In

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[124] Carolyn Dean, *A Culture of Stone: Inka Perspectives on Rock* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 5.

[125] Dean, 28.

[126] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 86.

[127] Cohen, 83.

Lucien Devies' preface to Maurice Herzog's memoir *Annapurna*, Devies states that with climbing in the "extreme tension of the struggle [...] Space, time, fear, suffering no longer exists. Everything then becomes quite simple."[128] Or, as one Hell climber explained, "The first 10 hours fly by, the sun is out and it's all laughter and climbing. The next 8 feel never-ending, as if you will never stop suffering. The final 6 are relieved grins, resignation with the pain, and this strange elation that grows as the sun rises." For some, time seemed to fly by throughout, for others, time passed very slowly or seemed not to exist at all. A third of the climbers reported that time seemed particularly slow at night. The requirement of climbing at night sets Horseshoe Hell apart from other climbing competitions. It also reinforces the event's similarities to Dionysian rituals. Performing orgiastic dance rituals at night was a common feature of the worship of Dionysus, and earned the god the appellation of "Nightly."[129] Some climbers responded that their perception of time depended on their movement; whether they were actively climbing, belaying, or resting between climbs. For a quarter of the respondents, time felt as though it sped up with the sunrise as the competition drew to a close. The climbers experienced the (sometimes odd) passage of time not only as it related to day and night, but also to their bodies.

Although the competitors can keep track of the hours on devices like smart phones, they often choose not to, or rely on their score-keeping friends and one of the Hell rituals (to be discussed shortly) to keep time. When I participated in the twelve-hour competition, I would turn to my friend who was not competing to ask for the time, but otherwise I was

[128] Lucien Devies, "Preface," in *Annapurna : First Conquest of an 8000-Meter Peak [26,493 Feet]*, trans. Nea E. Morin and Janet Adam Smith (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, Inc., 1952).

[129] Papaioannou and Lykesas, "The Role and Significance," 71.

content with not knowing. Very few climbers wear watches on their wrists as they could pose a hazard when jamming hands or forearms into cracks, not to mention that swelling in the arms that might cause a watch to cut off circulation. Also, checking my phone was a last resort. I was reluctant to smear its buttons and screen with the mix of dirt, climbing chalk, and "rope gack" (aluminum oxide from the rope running through carabiners and belay devices that leaves black smudges) that clung to my hands. Much easier to ask a nearby volunteer or visiting friend to tell me how long we had left to climb, or to simply not worry about it at all. One source of timekeeping that has become an annual Hell ritual is the "yell." Each hour, one climber or volunteer will take it upon themselves to begin the yell, a wordless cry that echoes around the canyon and prompts the hundreds of climbers and volunteers to begin roaring into the sky. From the centrally located ranch buildings, the surrounding forested hillsides reverberate with primal screams. Every time I hear the hourly yell, it never fails to make my skin break out in goosebumps and the hair on the back of my neck stands on end. The yell simulates what I imagine our distant ape ancestors sounded like, unseen bodies howling out from within the dense foliage. Like contact with lithic temporality, the hourly yell disjoints human time as a declaration of our here and now as well as our most ancient animal impulses.

F. A Brief Interlude for Bouldering

Around 10:00 p.m., as the twenty-four-hour climbers descend into a nighttime of suffering (entering the "pain cave," as one competitor noted), the non-competing climbers are off testing the limits of climbing difficulty at the Boulder Party. The Dionysian Gordo's influence is felt here too as I follow a long stream of climbers wearing headlamps and toting climbing shoes to the "Idaho" boulders on the ranch's southwest side. Not to be outdone by

the twenty-four-hour climbers, the Boulder Partiers have taken upon themselves to test the boundaries of not only their climbing abilities but also their tolerance for drugs and alcohol. As Papaioannou and Lykesas state, Bacchic dancers "manifested a rare hyperactivity and were full of hallucinations and disorders of memory, judgement and vision. Drunkenness and ecstasy led their steps."[130]

On the trek out, an already inebriated climber strikes up a conversation with me, but he quickly falls back to retrieve the beer dropped into the ivy-covered underbrush. Other climbers ask each other if they are going in the right direction (the darkness and mass consumption of alcohol and pot no doubt making wayfinding all the more challenging), but we soon see the glow of lamplight up ahead. I pass through a cut in the house-sized boulders, taking care not to brush against the ubiquitous poison ivy, and into the ring of stones where the Bouldering Party will shortly begin. Climbers have lit two boulders on either side of a roughly circular clearing with lanterns and flashlights. They have spread boulder pads underneath the rock to catch a falling climber. A few climbers are already attempting the chalk-marked routes on the two boulders. From down the trail comes the sound of music and people laughing and shouting. Headlamped bodies festooned with glow bracelets and necklaces soon stream into the bouldering area. Two climbers carry a large orange sports-drink cooler filled with alcohol. The party has arrived.

Unlike free climbing, free soloing, and speed climbing that maintain mountaineering's pursuit of lofty heights, climbing single-story boulders as its own subdiscipline took a while to catch on. John Sherman defines bouldering as "unroped rock climbing where a fall would not be fatal. Hence it is practiced on large boulders, low cliff

[130] Papaioannou and Lykesas, "The Role and Significance," 70.

bands, and the bases of taller cliffs."[131] Sherman goes on to say that climbers long considered bouldering a means to an end: a warm up for longer climbs, a place to practice technique, or a last resort when lack of knowledge, skill, or access to taller cliffs precluded roped climbing.[132] However, this attitude began to change within North American climbing circles in the 1960s and '70s, largely due to John Gill and his obsession with the gymnastic movements required to climb boulders. Gill developed boulder "problems" (short, difficult routes) across the United States, created a philosophy of bouldering in his 1969 article "The Art of Bouldering," and presented a rating system uniquely for boulder problems, which is still in use today. What Gill and many boulderers discovered is that although boulder problems may be short, they require far more strength and dexterity than many roped climbs. Gill, and his followers, pushed the limits of extreme difficulty in climbing.

I watch the boulderers for a time as one by one they make the few short, powerful moves up and over the chosen problems for that evening. A ring of climbers surrounds each of the large stones, arms outstretched to prevent a falling climber from landing outside the mats laid out below. A fall from a boulder may not be fatal, but broken feet and ankles are a common occurrence for this subdiscipline. Glowing in the light of lanterns and headlamps, surrounded by intoxicated attendants with outstretched arms, the boulders in the ivy-strewn clearing seem like the focus of some ancient stone-worshipping ritual. In a way, bouldering is the purest celebration of human/rock convergence, as boulderers connect with the rock without the mediation of ropes, harnesses, or gear. Bouldering is just the climber and the rock with their friends' arms to guide them to the safety of the mat should they fall. As the

[131] Sherman, *Stone Crusade*, xxvii.

[132] Sherman, xxxvii.

Boulder Party climbers work their way to ever greater levels of inebriation, I retreat from the circle of stones before I have to witness an accident. As I go, I can hear the boulderers dancing, calling out encouragement, and losing themselves in the bodily ecstasy of climbing up, over, and around the ancient stones.

G. The Climbing Body and Flow

"*The maenads are characterized by constant motion, interrupted by falls to the earth."*[133]

Meanwhile, many of the twenty-four-hour competitors were experiencing another intoxication: flow. Flow is the embodied breakdown of time and space. As the borders between rocks, bodies, and the linearity of time dissolve, so too do mental barriers, leaving climbers feeling "intoxicated," "immortal," and "intensely alive."[134] Seventy-five percent of the surveyed climbers reported encountering flow at some point during the competition. As one climber described the experience,

> Having complete and total trust in my partner's belay allows me to concentrate on the task at hand. There are a series of hard moves which I breathe through, and my body just makes the moves. I am thinking of nothing but breathing and moving. I perceive no danger, because I am completely confident that my body will do what it needs to do.

This climber's account describes flow as happening in the now with intense focus on the movements of their body. Coffey argues that climbers become addicted to the sensation of flow, and that because physical risk is integral to climbing flow, climbers continue to put themselves into high-risk situations in order to experience its intoxicating effect.

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[133] Flaumenhaft, *The Civic Spectacle*, 62.

[134] Coffey, *Where the Mountain*, 24.

Paradoxically, while in flow state one's perception of risk is muted, as the climber quoted above indicates when writing that they "perceive no danger." The initiation rituals of the Dionysus mystery cults, which included dancing in the mountains, created a "broadening of the consciousness, and the approach of the hidden divine aspects of man."[135] Achieving a flow state could be considered a "broadening of consciousness," the climber unlocking their "divine aspects" resulting in a diminished perception of risk. One Hell climber wrote: "Flow state is the reason many of us rock climb. It takes complete focus on the connection between my body and the rock. Any thoughts trailing outside of this moment will end in failure. It is one of the great pleasures of life to be so fully immersed in a moment." Many of the competitors also reported that while in flow they were "in the moment," leaving no room to fear the risk they were taking. Their movement became strong, effortless, or fluid, and as a consequence the experience was intensely emotional, euphoric, dreamlike, or magical.

When asked what precipitated the experience of flow, the most common response was repetition. The repetitive tasks of climbing in combination with the awareness of their bodies and the risk they were taking induced flow state:

> I don't know if it was a specific moment, but for many stretches during the comp it was full on flow state. Climb, lower, pull, swap, climb, lower, pull, swap, belay, lower, off, swap, on, belay, lower, off, swap, etc. While that sounds mundane and repetitive, each of those tasks must be done with care because we hold our life and the life of our partner in our hands. So you must focus on each small task while also thinking "what routes next, do I need to eat, drink, pee, whatever" there was little

[135] Papaioannou and Lykesas, "The Role and Significance," 68.

time to think about what happened yesterday or what's gonna happen in the after party. It was just "go."

The focus required to maintain the climber's and their partner's safety prevents the repetitive motions of climbing, belaying, and pulling down the rope from becoming monotonous. In *A Choreographer's Handbook*, Jonathan Burrows defines repetition as "a device to emphasize or erode something by showing it more than once."[136] As the climbers emphasize their skill and endurance through repeated acts of climbing, they simultaneously erode their sense of time and the separation between their bodies and the rock, resulting in flow.

H. The Climbing Body and Nature

"*The Bacchic celebrants merge not only with the earth and other living things around them, but with the god himself."*[137]

The climbers' responses to the survey prompt, "How did you experience 'nature,' whatever that means to you, over the course of the competition?" were complex and indicated that climbers currently hold many different narratives simultaneously about nature. The most common definition of nature in response to this question was rocks, animals, plants, landscape, weather, sun, moon, stars, essentially anything not involving people. A few climbers even stated that they were not able to experience nature due to the presence of too many people present. These climbers continue to define nature as a sense of peacefulness due to the absence of humans, a narrative William Cronon describes as the "romantic sense of a

[136] Jonathan. Burrows, *A Choreographer's Handbook* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; Routledge, 2010), 8.

[137] Flaumenhaft, *The Civic Spectacle*, 60.

domesticated sublime."[138] As Cronon argues, the American story of wilderness is one of natural spaces that hold the sacred qualities of the nineteenth century sublime without all the terror. In other words, in order to be considered "nature," mountains and climbing crags should be pristine spiritual spaces devoid of human presence, where climbers can visit on occasion to feel connected with the natural/numinous world. One climber described their relationship with nature:

> The experience/connection with nature in this competition was somewhat strong. Seeing the beauty around us for 24 hours was incredible and, in a way, fueled me. I always say nature helps cleanse the soul and I feel like I was able to prove that idea to myself during 24hhh. The breezes, stars, and warmth from the sun were all appreciated as well as the smell of the dirt, rock, and glorious plant life around us.

The rejuvenating, cleansing aspect of nature reflects a continuation of the "domesticated sublime" narrative in the way climbers today tell stories about climbing.

Additionally, as Günter Figal contends, nature only appears in contrast,[139] interpreted in the climbers' stories as nature existing outdoors and in non-competition circumstances. Eleven of the surveyed climbers specifically mentioned being outdoors or outside when asked about their relationship with nature. The choice to climb indoors rather than exclusively outside is relatively new to the sport. In 1987 there were two commercial climbing facilities in the United States compared to the six hundred *The Climbing Business*

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[138] William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 74.

[139] Günter Figal, *Aesthetics as Phenomenology: The Appearance of Things*, trans. Jerome Veith, Studies in Continental Thought (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 172.

Journal estimates will exist by the end of 2022.[140] Climbing outside on real rock has become an adventurous alternative to gym climbing. Rather than driving (possibly for hours) to an outdoor crag, hiking out to the base of the climbs (or rappelling down from above), and then only climbing a few routes, all the while battling potentially inclement weather and bugs, climbers can get a workout within the comfort of their nearby climate-controlled gym. As with mountain resorts with chairlifts that allow skiers to skip the trudge back up the mountain each time they complete a run, climbing gyms allow climbers to maximize their time, climbing far more routes in one session at the gym than would be possible outdoors.

Climbing gyms are set up for "top roping," meaning that the rope is already at the top of the route. When outdoors, climbers must have the knowledge of how to set up their own top rope or lead climb (bring the rope to the top as they climb). Gym climbing is therefore often more convenient and requires much less technical knowledge than climbing outdoors. However, many of the Hell competitors were drawn to the event because it is held outside. When writing about climbing outdoors, the climbers mentioned the enjoyable weather for that year's competition and the sense of spaciousness they experienced in contrast to the enclosed space of the indoor gym. One climber stated, "It feels good to be outside. Nature provides so much energy. This type of a competition would be harder and less enjoyable indoors." Again, the idea of nature as a catalyst for positive experiences (energizing, cleansing) appears in conjunction with finding nature outdoors. The sheer number of routes

[140] Seth Heller, "Meet the Man Responsible for America's Climbing Gym Craze," *Outside*, May 8, 2017, https://www.outsideonline.com/outdoor-adventure/climbing/guy-quit-his-job-and-became-climbing-gym-pioneer/; "Gyms and Trends 2021," *Climbing Business Journal*, February 13, 2022, https://www.climbingbusinessjournal.com/gyms-and-trends-2021/.

at Horseshoe Canyon Ranch also affords the climbers a sense of variety missing from the smaller space of an indoor gym.

Climbers also contrasted the experience of nature with competition versus noncompetition climbing. Competition climbing today is most often contested on indoor, human-made climbing walls. Although early competitions like SportRoccia were held outdoors, climbers quickly found these sites to be unfair playing grounds.[141] A climber who had spent all their life climbing at a particular crag would have an advantage over a climber who had never been there before. Designing a new artificial wall with removable holds for each competition ensures that none of the competitors will have the advantage of familiarity. Hell climbers can and do take advantage of the set outdoor routes on the ranch, traveling to Arkansas before the competition to scout out the climbs and practice their movements. However, because 24HHH is an endurance competition, route knowledge only provides climbers with a slight edge over other competitors. Knowing the movements for a few routes and being able to climb many different routes over the course of twenty-four hours does not always correlate. What *did* correlate for at least nineteen of the surveyed climbers was the absence of nature during the competition:

> We love the outdoors. When I think of nature I'm not sure an event like this overlaps into my definition of "nature." Yes, we are outdoors but not focusing on much other than climbing, safety and friendship. Other climbing experiences lend themselves better to observing nature and appreciating the physical surroundings.

[141] SportRoccia represents the first modern climbing competition, held at Italy's Valle Stretta crag in 1985. Although earlier competitions existed, such as speed climbing in Russia (beginning in the 1940s) and bouldering in the United States (1970s), SportRoccia stood as the first major international climbing competition, drawing competitors and spectators from around the world. (See "A History of Climbing Competitions Since 1985.").

For these climbers, nature was for non-competitive, non-spectated climbing experiences. Many of the climbers who felt they did not experience nature during the competition also used the word "focus," as though nature comes into or out of focus depending on the circumstances. Nature, then, is not only conceived through contrast, but also through attention. Nature exists when humans pay attention to it, and does not exist when our focus is elsewhere.

For all the climbers who wrote that they could not experience nature due to the competition aspect of the event, the same number said that they themselves, the people around them, and the act of climbing itself were a part of nature. The rites of the cult of Dionysus express "the ancient magical belief that man and animal and nature are one," and that the act of worshipping the god "animated the mystical powers of vegetation."[142] Worshipped as a god of fertility, Dionysus is also known as he who "makes things grow," a fitting god for bodies experiencing the limitlessly generative capabilities of nature: *apeiron*.[143] As one climber enthused, "Oh my gosh [nature] was my favorite part. The moon and stars were perfect at night. It was awesome to feel the rock and look back at all the trees. Even though we were competing, I kept finding myself appreciating the earth around me." Another climber wrote that they loved climbing at the ranch because they felt nature had "engulfed" them. Others referred to nature as the feel of the stone under their hands and feet

[142] Noel Robertson, "Orphic Mysteries and Dionysiac Ritual," in *Greek Mysteries: The Archaeology and Ritual of Ancient Greek Secret Cults*, ed. Michael B. Cosmopoulos (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), 232; Papaioannou and Lykesas, "The Role and Significance," 71.

[143] Madeline Jost, "Mystery Cults in Arcadia," in *Greek Mysteries: The Archaeology and Ritual of Ancient Greek Secret Cults* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), 146.

and the experience of "flowing" over the rock. A few considered nature to include the other competitors:

> I took the time to look up at the beautiful stars during the competition. I also took time at the top of a couple tall routes to turn off my headlamp and look at all the lights from others climbing on the rock wall as well as the others climbing on the other side of the canyon. It is always cool seeing the place so lit up by different climbers.

In a 2008 study on human perception and definition of nature, researchers Vining, Merrick, and Price asked participants whether they saw themselves as a part of nature or separate from it.[144] They found that even though participants defined nature as lacking human elements, they still considered themselves connected to nature. Their conclusion was that humans view themselves simultaneously as part of and separate from nature.

The fusion with nature that the Hell climbers experienced lies at the heart of *apeiron*. For the ancient Greeks, *apeiron* was nature at its most wild, chaos beyond the confinement of time and space.[145] A return to nature thus requires a loss of the individual self. Many of the climbers, including those cited above, felt not only connected to, but "engulfed" by nature. Animals, plants, rocks, the dirt on their hands, the wind on their skin, the light from other climber's headlamps, the act of climbing itself was "nature" for the Hell climbers. Through this embodiment of nature through climbing, the competitors merged with the earth and the living beings around them. From connecting with the stones that embody limitless time to the

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[144] Joanne Vining, Melinda S. Merrick, and Emily A. Price, "The Distinction Between Humans and Nature: Human Perceptions of Connectedness to Nature and Elements of the Natural and Unnatural," *Human Ecology Review* 15, no. 1 (2008): 1–11.

[145] Rosen, *Dimensions of Apeiron*, xiv.

act of pushing their bodies beyond their limits, the Hell climbers both enact *apeiron* and become *apeiron*, nature in its rawest form. In so doing, they experience, as Flaumenhaft says, the "god himself," the numinous sublime qualities of their relationship to nature, flow, their partner, and to the rock.

I. Awards Ceremony

On the morning of September twenty-fifth, the twenty-four-hour competition comes to a close. The twenty-four-hour climbers muscle through a few last climbs, their movements fluid but machine-like. After climbing so many routes, climbing has become an automatic process. In an area of the ranch called the "North Forty," I spy a climber sitting against a tree, his eyes closed as if he were asleep, but his face is lined with pain. He looks like a soldier at the end of a grueling battle, his body rigid with exhaustion. Other climbers, still pushing themselves through the motions, look haggard and weary. A few slur their words as they try to communicate with their partners. "Whoa, it's really starting to hit me," says one, to which his partner replies, "Because you sat down." At this stage of the competition, the climbers are running on pure mental determination, ignoring their bodies' need for rest. In a small clearing by the crag, the volunteers have set up a check-in station with snacks and music. During the night, giant inflatable light-up arches around the station served as beacons in the dark canyon, keeping the party atmosphere and the stoke alive throughout the night. Now, in the morning, the volunteers continue to pump out music and check in with the climbers' mental and physical states. A popular song starts to play and the climbers in the area sing along half-heartedly. Amazingly, many are still climbing well, flowing up and down the routes as if they had not been climbing all night long.

At 10:00 a.m., a shotgun blast rings out from the ranch's main office, signaling the end of the competition. The climbers submit their scores either electronically through the competition's online score-keeping system or stumble down to the volunteer headquarters to offer their scores on paper. Two climbers, the tape around their hands and fingers black and fraying, congratulate each other on making it through the night and crack open a couple of beers. Most of the twenty-four-hour competitors retreat to their tents and vans and collapse into sleep. The party-hard boulder climbers are most likely still sleeping off their hangovers. Other climbers drive over to the nearby Buffalo River to relax in the swimming hole or climb the cliffs overhanging the water, a subdiscipline of climbing called *psicobloc* (deep water soloing). Horseshoe Canyon is strangely quiet after the night of frenzied climbing.

In the late afternoon, climbers rouse from their exhausted naps and prepare for dinner and the awards ceremony. Climbers, volunteers, and weekend pass holders line up in the parking area for the spaghetti dinner. Outside, climbers collect more cans of Hell beer to accompany their dinner, and we all find places to sit on the wide east-facing lawn that slopes down towards the awards ceremony area. Like the theaters of ancient Greece, the staging area for the awards ceremony is a blend of functional performance space and nature. A long folding table holds rows of trophies sculpted with the Hell lion, and in the distance rises the "Cliffs of Insanity," the Southeast Crags. The climbers mingle and recount the stories of their competition experience, moving stiffly on sore muscles. One man sitting nearby kicks off his sandals to reveal feet the color of boiled lobsters. After everyone receives a bowl of spaghetti, Andy Chasteen, dressed in his usual grey robe, gold medallion, and sunglasses, picks up the microphone to begin the awards ceremony for the 15th annual 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell.

Chasteen first recognizes the work of the volunteers and also that of the other founding members of the competition who are present to help distribute the awards. As per Hell tradition, Chasteen announces the winners who then have to take a shot of "lion's blood" (whiskey) and ride an innertube down the hill on watered-down tarps before collecting their prize from the stage area. Awards go to the male and female climbers in each division and to the teams whose combined scores put them in first, second, or third place. Climbers also receive awards for best team costume, team name, the winner of a foot race held during the awards ceremony, and climbing enough routes to equal a vertical mile (5,280 feet). Although many competitors accomplish the vertical mile, the Goat Busters, the Elite division team comprised of Rob D'Anastasio and Vasya Vorotnikov, stand out for having climbed a combined 25,000 vertical feet. Chasteen announces that each member of the Goat Busters, winning both the team and individual competitions in their division, completed three hundred and twenty-three laps (climbing one hundred and sixty-one routes twice plus one more lap) in the 2021 competition. To climb a combined six hundred and forty-six laps meant that, on average, the Goat Busters completed a route every two and a half minutes for twenty-four hours straight. Adding to this incredible accomplishment, D'Anastasio and Vorotnikov also participated in the twelve-hour competition the day before. In the twelve-hour, each man completed two hundred and twenty-four laps, for a team average of one route every one-and-a-half minutes.[146]

The closing event for the 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell is the After Party. Usually held in the campground pavilion, the competition organizers move the 2021 party to the award ceremony lawn. Well after sunset, climbers, friends and spectators gather in the chilly

[146] "2021 Results."

darkness to dance, drink, and celebrate the end of another Hell. Fireworks explode overhead, and the crowd, most of whom had just completed the marathon of the climbing world, toss their inhibitions to the wind.

J. Spectatorship

During the pre-competition rituals, the spectators see the theatrical, "storied" side of the competition before the climbers disappear into the hillsides to climb largely unobserved. The pre-competition rituals of the Roll Call, Collins' Gordo performance, and the Climber's Creed is the only time before the closing ceremony when all the competitors and spectators gather in the same place at the same time. Spectators witness the communality of the competitors and also the social chaos they embody through that communality. During the rituals, the community enters a space of limitless potential in front of the witnessing bystanders. Collins' words complete the transformation as he calls upon the climbers to merge with nature itself, becoming "lions in a field of lions." At the awards ceremony, the non-competitors (and perhaps some of the competitors as well) in the audience are left with the mystery of how the body can climb so hard for so long. The *apeironic* body is constructed in these moments when the climbing community's abilities seem inexhaustible.

For the climbers, the transformation to an *apeironic* body occurs away from spectating eyes. Without an audience, the competitors experienced a lack of boundaries between themselves and their surroundings. Their partners, connected to the other end of the rope, became a part of this blurring of lines between the individual and the indefinite. For some climbers, a connection with the environment was more difficult to access because of the presence of other people. These people (belay partners excluded) became spectators rather than co-performers. Additionally, while in a state of flow, many of the Hell

competitors' responses indicate that they lost sight of the risk inherent to climbing. I saw one climber, some twenty-hours into the competition, (unaware that he was being observed) essentially free solo a thirty-foot route. He added only one piece of protection and that piece slipped out of place moments after he set it. Neither he nor his partner noticed. Had he fallen, there would have been nothing to stop his descent. When unobserved, climbers lose sight of the dangers they may unwittingly (or in a fatigued state) overlook. They have given themselves over to the uncontrollable chaos of *apeiron*.

K. Conclusion

"Did you hear about Logan?" a text from one of my Arkansas climbing partners read. It was a few months before the 2021 Horseshoe Hell competition and the text seemed to come out of nowhere. My climbing partner had reached out to let me know that Logan Wilcoxson had passed away. Later that day, I talked to two of my other friends and fellow climbers, and we expressed our shock and disbelief. How could this happen? *Why* did this happen? Logan was the heart of the Little Rock climbing community. It seemed inconceivable that he was gone. Planning to return to Arkansas in September to research the 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell, I wondered what the 2021 competition would feel like without Logan.

At Hell that fall, the event organizers commemorated Logan in a number of ways. Climbers could sign or leave messages on a hand-drawn portrait of Logan near the check-in booth. Lively Beerworks dedicated their Hell Ale to him, stamping the cans with "In Loving Memory of our Friend Logan Wilcoxson." During the hourly yell, the climbers shouted out "Honey Badger!" (Logan's team name), and his former partners came out of Hell-retirement to compete one last time for their departed friend. Scott Cook, a Little Rock Climbing Center

employee who worked there while I was a member (and who also gave me the best beta on a route I have ever received: "You go up. It's hard.") gave a short prayer/speech at the welcome ceremonies in honor of Logan. I was startled at my own grief at Logan's passing. After the competition, I realized that not only was I grieving the loss of a first mentor of sorts, but also a person who fostered a different kind of climbing narrative, one that did not focus on setting new records or the relentless push to climb harder and harder routes. Logan once awarded me the "Climber of the Month" and it had nothing to do with how hard I could climb. He recognized me for welcoming and climbing with newcomers. I knew what it was like to be nervous on that first day at the gym.

For me, Logan represents the potential of the *apeironic* climbing body. He taught me that my relationship with the crag and with the other climbers was just as important as "trying hard." While the "try hard" narrative progresses the sport on an ever-upward course for an elite few with the resources and the athletic and gymnastic capability to reach those heights, the narrative of *apeiron* encourages growth through the dissolution of boundaries. *Apeiron* creates a sense of union with our environment. The *apeironic* body is also one that revels in the chaos of the nonindividual. After the competition has ended and the Hell climbers have returned to their individual lives, they cling to the feeling of community through the competition's social media page, posting follow-up stories and pictures. In 2018, the organizers decided to move communication about the competition from the 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell Facebook page to the 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell Community page:

> [We] have come to the conclusion that 24HHH is more of a community than anything else. So we have decided that from now on the vast majority of our communication will take place on the 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell Community page. This is a more

intimate place for our big family to talk about topics, plans, strategies, carpools, photos, and just stuff.[147]

Climbers use this community page to announce the birth of their children, post pictures of blistered and peeling skin following the competition, and once organized a yard clean-up for Andy Chasteen when he was injured.[148] Climbers continue to perform connection even outside of the time and space of the competition. The *apeironic* climbing body also operates outside of time and space. The Arkansas climbing community's relationship with Logan did not end with his passing. Every hour the twenty-four-hour climbers cried "Honey Badger!" the memory of Logan was invoked and pictures of Logan regularly appear on the Facebook Community page. The 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell demonstrates that sport can grow in any angle, not just upward. Climbing harder and risker routes can be just one of many ways in which climbers push the limits of the sport. The *apeironic* body is limitlessly generative.

[147] "24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell," Facebook, March 24, 2023, https://www.facebook.com/horseshoehell/.

[148] "24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell Community," Facebook, March 24, 2023, https://www.facebook.com/groups/635227289892194/.

III. Performing Vulnerability in *Black Ice* and *They/Them*

On a volcanic mesa overlooking Bishop, California, a ring of rock climbers sat and spoke of their struggle to find belonging in the climbing community. The group, comprised of BIPOC, LGBTQ+, Adaptive, Plus Size climbers and their allies, met as part of the Climb United initiative at the American Alpine Club's Craggin' Classic, a rock climbing festival held annually in eastern California. I was attending the festival to watch the documentary film *Black Ice* (2020) and listen to keynote speaker and one of the film's participants, Malik Martin, discuss the inclusion of black bodies into the sport of climbing as part of my dissertation research. I chose to attend the Climb United meetup for myself. As a queer climber, I resonated with the stories the others told about hiding aspects of their identity in order to fit in. I realized how often I was performing different versions of myself in order to meet the stereotype of the "cool climber girl," and how often I fell short. Mostly, I marveled at the group's vulnerability. They spoke with tears in their eyes, voices rough with emotion, of the shame they felt at not daring to show up as themselves at the crag. Only an hour before, these climbers had fearlessly scaled two-story tall "highballs" (boulder problems) without a rope and hung underneath outcroppings of stone with only a few thin pads below to break their fall. Yet, this unveiling of identities was the riskiest action they had undertaken all day.

This chapter looks at what happens when climbing bodies choose to perform as themselves, rather than conforming to dominant narratives. These bodies perform what I call the vulnerable climbing body. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay's edited collection *Vulnerability in Resistance* considers the role vulnerability plays in structures of power, and how bodies perform vulnerability in acts of resistance. I prefer an etymological

view of vulnerability with the term (from the Latin *vulnerabilis*) meaning susceptible to wounding.[149] The vulnerable climbing body communicates the wounding that has been (and continues to be) inflicted upon the climber, whether that be from society at large, from within the climbing community, or self-inflicted in order to fit into dominant climbing narratives. However, as Shawn A. Ginwright contends in his essay on healing black youth: "[T]here is power in our vulnerability; and our capacity to share parts of ourselves, even the parts we hide from, gives us enormous strength." The vulnerability Ginwright writes of is "emotional risk-taking."[150] Risk-taking in climbing stories often takes the form of physical or psychological risks. The stories presented in this chapter demonstrate the emotional risk-taking of discussing personal experiences of trauma and violence, and the risk of future harm that could come from such openness. The climbers in this chapter also take emotional risks in simply being themselves and refusing to conform to established paradigms in the climbing community. The vulnerable climbing body can be understood as performing its own story, with all its wounding on display, and not someone else's. Embodying and telling one's own story thereby becomes a source of empowerment and change.

The vulnerable climbing body performs its own story because it does not, or cannot, take part in muscular assimilation. In his essay "Sport and the Paradoxes of Racial Reform," Patrick Miller argues that beginning in the early 1900s, African American activists consciously deployed a tactic Miller terms "muscular assimilationism." Muscular

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[149] Oxford English Dictionary, "'vulnerable, Adj.'.," n.d., https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/224872?redirectedFrom=vulnerable.

[150] Shawn A. Ginwright, "The Blues of Vulnerability: Love and Healing Black Youth," in *You Are Your Best Thing: Shame, Resilience, and the Black Experience* (New York: Random House, 2021), 99.

assimilation presented the image of African Americans as powerful, skillful, and all-American in integrated sports contexts. Sports such as American football and track and field demonstrated the success of black athletes who represented "a significant opportunity to open the eyes of white America to the qualities of character African Americans brought to the sporting arena."[151] In excelling in popular sports like football, activists hoped to counter negative stereotypes about black Americans, while also integrating the black body into mainstream American society. Documentary filmmakers have followed and reinforced this narrative of black athletes in mainstream sports with such films as *Hoop Dreams* (1994), *Muhammed Ali: In His Own Words* (1998), and *Venus and Serena* (2012). However, sports like climbing and activities that required black athletes to venture into wilderness spaces precluded assimilation due to their lack of mainstream visibility and the increased risk of danger to black bodies in rural landscapes. Utilizing *Black Ice*, a film about a group of black climbers venturing into the Montana wilderness to ice climb for the first time, this chapter, in part, explores the historical reasons behind this lack of black bodies in outdoor adventure sports. Furthermore, as society's relationship with the black body has changed throughout the past century, so too has the objective of "assimilation." In pursuits like climbing, *Black Ice* demonstrates how nonconformity takes precedence over assimilation.

I then draw upon Judith Halberstam's concept of "queer failure" to address how queer bodies have also been expected to take part in muscular assimilation but often "fail" to do so. Halberstam defines the phrase "queer failure" as, among other things, a resistance to the status quo, what I term the dominant narrative. Queer failure is a "drama without script, a

[151] Patrick B. Miller, "Sport and the Paradoxes of Racial Reform," in *Race and Sport* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 147.

narrative without progress."[152] The documentary film *They/Them* (2021), featuring gender nonbinary climber Lor Sabourin, demonstrates how queer bodies fail to follow the script of the ideal climbing body: tall, lean, muscled, and male. While female climbers have utilized muscular assimilation to conform to this standard, Sabourin's gender nonbinary body disrupts any attempts at assimilation. Instead, Sabourin invites consideration of the wounding climbers undergo through eating disorders, sexual harassment, and transgender (in)visibility in order to conform. In being vulnerable about their identity and the violence their identity has engendered, Sabourin's performance writes a new story about how to show up as yourself at the crag.

I have chosen the medium of documentary film to explore how the medium is inflecting the body in relationship with cultural narratives. Within the climbing community, fiction films do not serve as valid sources for what a climber should be and do since the climbing or use of climbing equipment is rarely depicted accurately. Additionally, fiction films are usually not shown at climbing festivals or competitions but the latest documentary climbing films are.[153] Further, *Black Ice* and *They/Them* critique climbing narratives and the documentary genre of "stoke" films (to be discussed below). They illustrate how the climbing body can tell new narratives through a medium that carries credibility within the community. Lastly, looking at these films through the lens of performance allows for understanding of how the illusion of reality in documentary films is just that, an illusion.

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[152] Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 88.

[153] *The Eiger Sanction* (1975) starring Clint Eastwood, with its more realistic depiction of climbing, does occasionally find an audience at climbing events. The 2021 Horseshoe Hell competition began its festivities with a screening of this film.

While these films disturb the conventions of the climbing documentary, they are themselves creative constructions and should be viewed as such.

Films display the climbing body in ways that live theater and climbing competitions cannot. Filmmakers can capture a climber in their element as they scale a rock wall hundreds of feet tall, a frozen waterfall, or the highest peaks on earth. They direct the audience's focus to cramponed feet on a steep slope, or calloused hands closed around a hold. They show the environment and the body in that environment. In documentary films, the climber is understood to be performing as a social actor rather than a character. Through the way the film is conceptualized (framed, edited, lit, etc.), directors have much more control over the narrative they want the film to tell than a public event like a climbing festival or competition, or even a stage play. As Sheppard and Vogan attest, sports documentaries in particular can be powerful sites for interrogating societal values and identity through the intersections of popular culture, branding, advertisements, celebrity, and "the outsize audience that comes along with sport."[154] This chapter therefore considers the way documentary climbing films frame a narrative for their intended audience: the climbing community. *Black Ice* and *They/Them* call on the history of climbing documentaries as transmitters of the "stoke" affect to subvert their audience's expectations. Neither film shows death-defying climbing or superhuman feats of physicality. Rather, the filmmakers utilize the stories of Lor Sabourin and the climbers in *Black Ice* to demonstrate the vulnerability necessary for changing the climbing landscape.

A. Lineage of the "Stoke" Documentary Climbing Film and Filming the Climbing Body

[154] Samantha N. Sheppard and Travis Vogan, "Introduction," in *Sporting Realities*, ed. Samantha N. Sheppard and Travis Vogan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020), 1.

Black Ice and *They/Them* represent a shift in the typical climbing documentary viewed at climbing festivals or outdoor adventure sports film festivals. These films comment on and subvert the expectations of the "stoke" documentary film. Stoke films began, not with the sport of climbing, but with downhill skiing. In October of 1950, Warren Miller's ski documentary *Deep and Light* premiered in the auditorium of John Marshall Junior High in Pasadena, California to the members of Ski Club Alpine, a ski racing group in southern California who agreed to host the film. Miller's film, featuring shots of ski patrollers demonstrating their skill in the deep powder, newbie skiers on the tow rope, and a blind skier working their way down the slopes, narrated by Miller himself, was a success with the ski club, selling 836 tickets for its first viewing. Even better, the club wanted Miller to return the next year with a new film that would get its members stoked for the next ski season.[155] 2022 marked the 73rd annual Warren Miller Ski film, touring ski clubs across the United States and bringing skiing to the masses. Miller's contribution to ski films and ski culture has marked him, as Outside columnist Heather Hansman says, "the progenitor of the seasonal stoke film."[156]

Stoke films are outdoor adventure films, usually featuring extreme sports like skiing, snowboarding, climbing, and surfing, that produce an adrenalized anticipatory affect in the audience. Similar to becoming "psyched" for an activity, becoming stoked is a full-bodied response to watching others perform and then feeling the need to perform those same actions in turn. With Miller's early adventures into capturing and sharing the stoke of skiing on film

[155] Warren Miller, "1950-1951: Digging Ditches to Finance My Kodachrome Addiction," in *Freedom Found* (Deer Harbor: Warren Miller Company, 2016), 197–204.

[156] Heather Hansman, "A New Documentary Shows Warren Miller's Darker Side," *Outside*, March 3, 2021, https://www.outsideonline.com/culture/books-media/ski-bum-warren-miller-documentary-discovery-plus-review/.

came other adventure sports documentarians. In 1964, the surfing documentary *The Endless Summer*, directed by Bruce Brown, found instant success. While Brown's earlier surf films had appealed to a niche audience of surfers themselves, *Endless Summer* brought surfing to the mainstream.[157] Seeking to do for climbing what Brown had done for surfing, The North Face founder Douglas Tompkins agreed to provide financial support to a climbing documentary directed by Fred Padula. Glen Denny, one of Padula's film students and an ardent rock climber, had convinced Padula to help film an ascent of Yosemite's El Capitan. When filming on *El Capitan* began in 1968, Padula discovered that climbing presented unique challenges to the filmmaking process. Unlike skiing or surfing where filmmakers could set up cameras on the (relatively) stable ski slope or beach, in order to film a climber the camera and its operator would also need to be on the cliff or mountain face with the subject. Denny operated Padula's Arriflex camera while on the wall, a camera that weighed over fourteen pounds without film and could only shoot 160 seconds of footage per reel. Hauling the equipment up the 3,000-foot-tall rock face required strength and organization, and changing the reel while attached to the side of the cliff was no easy task. Moreover, once the film had been shot, Tompkins realized that the slow pace of climbing failed to capture the excitement of surfing as *The Endless Summer* had done. Tompkins withdrew his funding and the film languished for years before finally being finished and released in 1978, going on to win the Banff Film Festival's Grand Prize in 1979.[158]

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[157] John Vilanova, "White-Out! Surf Films, Alternative Whiteness, and the Commodification of Surfer Subculture," in *Identity and Myth in Sports Documentaries*, ed. Zachary Ingle and David M. Sutera (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2013), 3–14.

[158] Wil Treasure, *El Capitan - A Film by Fred Padula*, podcast, Factor Two (United Kingdom, 2020), Apple Podcasts, https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/el-capitan-a-film-by-fred-padula/id1299132061?i=1000501962721.

Padula and Denny's cinematography on *El Capitan* stands as its most defining feature. The film opens with time-lapse shots of a crescent moon rising and falling behind a treed mountainside, then the Dawn Wall on El Capitan filling with sunlight. The composition of the climbing bodies in relationship to the rock and sky bears a strong resemblance to the early framing of the climbing body in Germany's *bergfilms* (mountain films) of the 1920s and '30s. Although his films were fictional narratives involving climbing, Arnold Fanck, the pioneer of the *bergfilm*, utilized actual alpinists both in front of and behind the camera to create "real" climbs for the screen.[159] For example, *Der Berg des Schecksals* (*Mountain of Destiny*) (1924) starred Johann "Hannes" Schneider, a famed ski instructor and alpinist who would go on to train the 10th Mountain Division of the U.S. Army during WWII, and Luis Trenker, a ski instructor and mountain guide who became a *bergfilm* director in his own right.[160] In *Der Berg des Schecksals*, about a mountaineer who falls to his death on a difficult climb which he son is then determined to complete, Fanck establishes the compositional aesthetic of the climbing body for the camera, a look that future climbing films, both fictional and documentary, will continue to use. Filmed on location in the Alps, Fanck created images that required superb athleticism from his actors and crew. For *Der Berg des Shecksals*, Fanck employed climbers Hans Schneeberger and Herbert Oettel as camera operators in order to position the cameras high enough of the side of the cliffs to capture Schneider and

[159] Kamaal Haque, "10 May 1924: *Der Berg Des Schicksals* Inaugurates the Genre of the 'Mountain Film,'" in *A New History of German Cinema* (Rochester: Camden House, 2012), 142–47.

[160] "Hannes Schneider Meister Cup Race," New England Ski Museum, accessed June 26, 2023, https://newenglandskimuseum.org/events/hannes-schneider-meister-cup-race/.; Gerard Fairlie, *Flights Without Wings: The Biography of Hannes Schneider* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1957).; Sabine Hake, *German National Cinema*, 2nd ed. (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 46.

Trenker.[161] Placing the camera at equal height and to the side of the climber allowed the cliff on which the climber clung to take up to half of the frame, the other portion, open sky against which the climber's body was silhouetted. Filming from directly behind the climber, the camera followed the full body's movement as it traversed over the rock. One scene in *Der Berg*, in which the climber is seen silhouetted inside a "chimney" of rock, is almost exactly replicated in *El Capitan*, with the two sides of the cliff blocking out most of the frame and just the climber's body seen moving upwards in the sunlit space between the rocks. The interplay between body, rock, and sky became a compositional norm for filming climbing.

A popular film at the time, *Der Berg des Schecksals* also inspired a young dancer by the name of Leni Riefenstahl, who convinced Fanck to let her perform in his future films. *Der heilige Berg* (*The Holy Mountain*) (1926) became Riefenstahl's first film, and through Fanck's mentorship, she learned filmmaking techniques and became a director in her own right. While Riefenstahl's *bergfilm Das blaue Licht* (*The Blue Light*) (1932) received some success, her documentary about the 1936 Olympic Games, *Olympia* (1938), has become a primary reference point in sports documentary production and scholarship. *Olympia*, with its opening sequence of nude athletes framed against a clouded sky, presents the (white) athletic body as godlike in its form and movement.[162] While both Fanck and Riefenstahl made use of low-angle shots to emphasize the authority and supremacy of the mountaineering/athletic body, *El Capitan* employs more high-angle shots. Taken from above the climber and showing the distance between the climber and the ground below, this technique demonstrates

[161] *Der Berg Des Schicksals*, directed by Arnold Fanck, (YouTube, 1924), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzwWXJmbZfY.

[162] While *Olympia* often serves as an important case study in documentary sports films, Riefenstahl's support of Germany's National Socialist (Nazi) party and her problematic representations of a "superior" Aryan body should be noted.

the climbers' prowess and bravery but also their fragility in being so far above the safety of the earth. *Free Solo* uses this camera angle to great effect to showcase both Alex Honnold's climbing expertise, moving thousands of feet above the Yosemite valley floor beneath, but also the extreme precarity of climbing El Capitan without a rope. That American mountaineering documentaries should incorporate this filming strategy is both a testament to the technological advancements in both climbing and filming, but also exemplifies a shift away from the German *bergfilms* with their legacy of, as Kamall Haque points out, "deep ties to the development of German fascism."[163] *El Capitan's* American climbers are scruffy nonconformists, entirely human despite their courage on the granite massif. Nevertheless, the history of the climbing body on film would not be complete without addressing this connection between alpinism and the formation of ideologies about the "superiority" or superhuman quality of bodies along racial and ethnic lines.

Although artistically innovative, what Bill Nichols would call a documentary in the poetic mode, *El Capitan* lacked a narrative that engendered excitement in its viewer.[164] Amongst long still-frame shots of the mountains and cliffs swirling with fog, rhythmically edited to a modernist orchestral soundtrack, the jargon-heavy dialogue shots of the climbers failed to provide context or immediacy for their climb. Among the climbers on the *El Capitan* project was Lito Tejada-Flores, who in 1968 took up a camera himself to film his friends on an epic climbing trip. *Mountain of Storms* (1972), featuring Doug Tompkins, Chris Jones, Dick Dorworth, and Yvon Chouinard, founder of Patagonia, with its mix of surfing, skiing, climbing, and road-tripping found an audience in outdoor adventure sports enthusiasts

[163] Haque, "10 May 1924," 146.

[164] Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, Third edition. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017).

who were looking for a compelling narrative to give context and meaning to documentary film climbing.

Another early 1970s film, Bob Carmichael's short documentary *Break on Through* (1973), found a way to market climbing, and the climbing body, to the public audience. Credited as the first televised climbing documentary, Carmichael wanted to capitalize on the fitness craze of the 1960s and early '70s while making climbing watchable for a non-climbing audience.[165] As Nick Rosen states, "Watching climbing happen is like watching paint dry." *Break on Through* overcomes the doldrums of the slow, methodical pace of climbing through its editing, dynamic camera movements, score, and Stan Brakhage-esque clips of the climbing body. One sequence features quick clips of a rope passing through a carabiner, then rapid succession close-ups of the gear attached to bolts in the wall, a knot in the rope, a set of climbing nuts hanging from a harness, then a slow zoom out of the tiny climber's body on a sea of red rock, then a tracking shot of the climber's foot, then a medium shot from behind the climber, showing off the man's muscled shirtless torso. The relentless rhythm of electric guitars and drums, à la The Doors, provides the soundtrack to the fast-paced editing. Half way into the film, the electric guitar music cuts out and a dreamlike lo-fi soundtrack takes its place. Shots of the climbers' side-lit naked torsos twist and contort against a black background. Carmichael's depiction of climbing is exciting in more ways than one; he had found a way to make rock climbing look sexy.[166]

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[165] Burgman, *High Drama*, 7.

[166] *Break on Through*, directed by Bob Carmichael, (Carmichael Productions, Inc.), https://vimeo.com/284250100.

Another part of the puzzle for creating "stoke" in climbing documentaries, beyond compelling narrative and film techniques used to liven up the visual imagery of the climb, was to find climbers that an audience knew and cared about. Climbing documentaries needed star quality in their subjects. Yosemite's climbing scene from the 1970s through the early 1990s featured a likely cast of outrageous characters, climbers who called themselves the "Stone Masters." The Stone Masters were at the cutting edge of what was possible in rock climbing, pushing the limits of the sport throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. Beginning in 1991, Eric Perlman capitalized on their renown within the climbing community (and the growing public awareness of climbers as demonstrated in Lynn Hill's appearance on Late Night with David Letterman in 1989) with his *Masters of Stone* (1991) documentary series. Visually, *Masters of Stone* replicates much of what made *Break on Through* so efficacious: a soundtrack heavy on electric guitar, mixes of low-angle and high-angle shots, placing the camera above, behind, and below the climber, close-ups of feet, hands, and naked torsos, while also highlighting the feats of such climbers as Ron Kauk and John Bacchar, "the best climbers in America on some of the toughest routes."[167]

The formula for the stoke climbing documentary seemed to be set: engaging narrative, production techniques that emphasized the movement of the body with camera angles, editing, rhythm, and music scoring, and a well-known individual breaking new ground and/or climbing at the edge of their abilities. However, in 1999 the amateur documentary *Rampage*, directed and produced by Josh Lowell and Brett Lowell, became a cult classic in the climbing community due to its youthful energy and punk-rock aesthetic.

[167] *Masters of Stone 1*, directed by Eric Perlman (Perlman Productions, 1991), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=27KD4GobLvo.

Using hand-held camcorders, the film follows the 1990s trend of filming friends at the skate park. The film is also reminiscent of "beta" films from the late 1970s and early 1980s. Climbers would record themselves on Betamax cassettes so that they (and others) could learn the sequence of moves required for a route; hence the origin of a climber asking for "beta" (advice). While *Masters of Stone* depicts climbers as rock gods, Lowell and Lowell's film suggests that anyone with a janky RV, a few friends, and some crash pads could live out their rock climbing dreams. *Rampage* is a road-trip "rock porn" crush-fest starring Chris Sharma, one of the most well-known climbers in the world then and now, but Sharma's status is treated with laid-back humor. Lowell and Lowell spend as much time showing Sharma and Obe Carrion (another bouldering phenom) playing a game of "slap-hands" as they do Sharma's 1999 X Games victory.[168] One of the first films by director Josh Lowell, as part of his company Big UP Productions, the film added a crucial piece to the stoke formula: the idea that anyone can accomplish their own personal goals on the rock, they just have to get psyched to get out there and try hard.

The 2000s and 2010s saw a boom of commercially successful climbing documentaries including Kevin Macdonald's *Touching the Void* (2003), *Meru* (2015) directed by Jimmy Chin and Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi, and Chin and Vasarhelyi's Oscar-winning *Free Solo* (2018). Josh Lowell, Peter Mortimer, and Nick Rosen, in various roles as director, producer, cinematographer, and editor, have also been responsible for some of the most well-known climbing documentaries within the last decade including *King Lines* (2007) starring Chris Sharma, *Valley Uprising* (2014) an expository documentary on the history of Yosemite climbing, *The Dawn Wall* (2018) starring Tommy Caldwell and Kevin Jorgeson,

[168] *Rampage*, directed by Josh Lowell and Brett Lowell, (Big Up productions, 1999).

and *The Alpinist* (2021) about free-solo mountaineer Marc-André Leclerc. Rosen credits this rise in climbing documentary prominence with the introduction of the Canon 5d Mark II camera in 2008. "Essentially, guys like Chin can now ascend ropes easily with Hollywood-quality cameras," writes Matt Skenazy. Skenazy continues that moving away from "rock porn" (beta-style films) towards a humanist narrative with complex characters has been a game-changer in the climbing documentary world.[169]

The leader in narrative-driven, high-quality stoke climbing documentaries is the annual Reel Rock film tour. In 2005, Lowell teamed up with Peter Mortimer, Nick Rosen and their company Sender Films to found Reel Rock. Reel Rock seeks to share "the biggest stories from the world of climbing, celebrating the human side behind the sport's greatest adventures and achievements."[170] The tour is largely exhibited in climber-dominated spaces: climbing festivals like the American Alpine Club's Craggin' Classic series, film festivals like the Banff Centre Mountain Film Festival and Mountainfilm Festival (co-founded in 1979 by Lito Tejada-Flores and Bill Keys), and in gyms and for climbing clubs across North America for night of raising the stoke. As part of Reel Rock 15, *Black Ice* demonstrates a shift away from the typical format of Reel Rock's other films. With the rise of more socially and environmentally conscious documentaries making the circuit at outdoor adventure sports film festivals, *Black Ice* is riding the latest trend in the wider world of activist-focused outdoor adventure sports documentaries. *They/Them* continues outdoor apparel company Patagonia's

[169] Matt Skenazy, "The Era of the Awesome Climbing Film Has Just Begun," *Outside*, May 21, 2015, https://www.outsideonline.com/culture/books-media/era-awesome-climbing-film-has-just-begun/.

[170] "About Us," Reel Rock, accessed June 9, 2023, https://reelrocktour.com/pages/about.

mission that began in 2014 to produce films that promote environmental and social activism. *Black Ice* and *They/Them* still target the climbing and outdoor adventure sports communities, but the stoke is different. These films, through a performance of vulnerability, attempt to raise the stoke for social justice and activism within the sport of climbing.[171]

B. Black Ice (2020)

Black Ice opens on a shot of snow-covered pine trees passing outside a car window, the jittery camera movement indicative of a rough road beneath the tires. Snow embankments that come half way up the vehicle line the road. Ominous mountains appear and disappear between breaks in the tree line, their summits shrouded in fog. The camera then turns to the back seat to show climber and photo journalist Malik Martin and climbers Chris Dean and S'lacio Bankston appareled in North Face puffy jackets and hats. "It is *a lot* of snow out there, dawg," Martin remarks to the others, "I really hope there ain't no black ice on this road." Dean replies, "Why everything that's bad got the name 'black'? Like, they be like, 'black ice.' How do you know it's black? It look clear to me!" The two banter back and forth about being in the middle of nowhere and being so close to Canada that they could cross the border as passport-less "refugees." The title of the film, *Black Ice*, fades up onto a shot of the mountains in Montana where Martin, Dean, and Bankston find themselves, and over the title card Martin says, "Man, we a *long* way from Memphis."[172]

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[171] Ilan Mochari, "Why Patagonia Is a Natural for the Movie Business," *Inc.*, May 5, 2015, https://www.inc.com/ilan-mochari/patagonia-films.html.

[172] *Black Ice*, directed by Zacchary Barr and Peter Mortimer (Sender Films and Big Up Productions, 2020), https://www.redbull.com/us-en/episodes/reel-rock-s7-e9. Transcription mine. *Black Ice* is divided into two parts (Season 7 episode 9 and Season 7 episode 10) on the Red Bull website where this film was accessed. Subsequent quotations are from *Black Ice* unless otherwise noted. All transcription is mine.

The idea for introducing a group of black climbers from Memphis, Tennessee to ice climbing came about after a series of conversations between Malik Martin, Chris Dean, and professional climber Conrad Anker. With support from Anker and Anker's sponsor The North Face, Martin and Dean organized a group of climbers from the Memphis Rox climbing gym to travel to Montana for several days of ice climbing, skiing, and camping in sub-zero temperatures. Seeing the potential for a "story that needed to be told," the Reel Rock creative team at Sender Films became involved to document the journey. Directed by longtime Reel Rock contributors Zachary Barr and Peter Mortimer, written by Nick Rosen, filmed by Malik Martin, Rob Jackson, and Austin Schmitz, and produced by Zachary Barr and Chris Dean, the film not only tells the story of the Memphis climbers through the eyes of Martin and Dean, but the two help shape the narrative of the film through their roles on the production team. Due to the pandemic in 2020, the film originally screened online on the Reel Rock website before touring for live screenings in 2021. Martin accompanied the film as it was exhibited at climbing festivals, mountain film festivals, and climbing clubs, holding Q&A sessions after the film. I saw *Black Ice* at the 2021 Bishop, California Craggin' Classic where it received a positive reception and many questions for Martin from its audience. As Martin explained, the goal for the film was to show that anyone, no matter their climbing level or experience, can enjoy the benefits of climbing when financial barriers are removed.[173]

The mashup between Dean and Martin's message for a more inclusive climbing community and the typical Reel Rock approach to climbing stories is seen in the first few minutes of the film. Following the *Black Ice* title card, the film cuts to the Reel Rock

[173] *Memphis Rox Goes Ice Climbing: Reel Rock Interviews* (YouTube, 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMH7U3PSyEM.

introduction, an almost minute-and-a-half montage of footage from previous Sender Films and Big Up Productions' documentaries on outdoor adventure from the annual Reel Rock film festival. Scenes of hard-bodied rock climbers, valiant alpinists, daredevil wing suiters, and highline free soloists flash across the screen. Their playgrounds are snow-covered ridges, pocketed cliff faces and boulders, roaring oceans, and desert pinnacles. Over these images, a narrator intones: "The wildest places on the planet. The athletes who live for the challenge. From alpine legends to unlikely heroes. We've brought cameras to the ends of the earth to capture these incredible stories of victory, failure, and perseverance. Join the great adventurers of our time as they step into the unknown, risking it all to achieve the impossible. Welcome to Reel Rock." Between bits of narration are clips from the athletes themselves saying such things as, "It's like ultimate fighting with a rock," "You have to get over that primal fear," "You try to climb to the center of the universe," and "It's part insanity, and part genius."

Within the first two minutes, *Black Ice* establishes the meeting of two very different narratives: the nervous fish-out-of-water black climbers driving through the Montana wilderness and the seasoned outdoor adventurers highlighted in the Reel Rock introduction. The former represents a performance of vulnerability, the latter those athletes who have successfully assimilated to the dominant narratives of risk, pushing the limits of human physical and mental strength, and self-actualization through exposure to the wilderness. Given that white male bodies have historically been the driving force in constructing climbing's governing narratives, the black ice climbers' sense of dislocation, both physically and culturally, is understandable. Underpinning Martin and Dean's joking is a current of anxiety, not just about the total change of physical environment from their home on

Memphis' south side to the frozen mountain landscape, but also being the lone black bodies in rural Montana. Created in 2020, the film came out in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement that protested police brutality and the systemic racism that led to the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, George Floyd, and many others. The *Black Ice* climbers have left behind the relative safety of the almost all-black climbing community of their climbing gym, Memphis Rox, during a time when white Americans all too often gun down black bodies for being in the "wrong place." Moreover, the young men and women from Memphis have entered the world of ice climbing, a subdiscipline of climbing that, like most of the sport in North America, is dominated by white climbers. While the athletes in the Reel Rock montage are shown fighting for "victory" over remote natural locales, struggling against their own "primal fears," and achieving the "impossible" in their respective adventure pursuits, Martin and the other black climbers have fought to simply exist in a country and a culture where they could die at any moment for being black. For a group of black rock climbers from Memphis' south side, Montana may as well be a journey to the center of the universe; theirs is already a story about unlikely heroes stepping into the unknown to achieve the impossible.

Following the introductory scene in the Montana wilderness, the film transitions to Memphis, the starting point of the ice climbers' journey, where Martin and Dean relate the history of the city and the role the new climbing gym, Memphis Rox, plays in their community. In introducing Memphis and Memphis Rox, Dean and Martin's narration, over b-roll footage of Bankston walking through present-day Memphis and archival photographs and footage of Martin Luther King Jr. and Memphis' black community, explains how Memphis might be the site of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Mountaintop" speech, but the city is

also the site of his death. “This is a city where we have a rich, rich history. But there’s a lot of pain here too,” says Dean. After the death of MLK Jr., South Memphis fell into disarray and became one of the poorest and most violent areas in America. The film depicts this through a montage of dilapidated buildings, an overgrown concrete slab where the youth center once stood, and archival news footage featuring the rise in violent crime. “South Memphis needed a place where kids could be safe. Where people could be themselves and actually have fun. Nobody would have thought that it would have been a climbing gym,” say Martin and Dean as they trade off narration. A high-angle tracking shot of the climbing gym’s colorfully-muraled exterior, depicting famous black figures including Martin Luther King Jr. and professional climber Kai Lightner, then cuts to the front of the gym where Bankston is seen entering. The film’s portrayal of Bankston’s walk through the decaying Memphis streets emphasizes how the new climbing center has breathed new life into the South Memphis community.

Like the *Black Ice* climbers themselves, their home gym, Memphis Rox, tells an unlikely story in the world of climbing. A nonprofit climbing gym, Memphis Rox is, as climber Brent Goode attests, “a community center disguised as a climbing gym.” As stated on their website, when climbers join Memphis Rox, they become part of a community, not just a gym. Their mission is to bring “rehabilitation, healing and a renewed sense of hope to challenged communities by providing a climbing facility and programs that foster relationships across cultural, racial, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. We exclude no one – regardless of ability to pay.”[174] Climbers can choose to pay the suggested fee or can work five volunteer hours through the gym to earn a four-week membership. Volunteer

[174] “About Us,” Memphis Rox, https://www.memphisrox.org/about-us/.

opportunities include distributing free meals, neighborhood cleanups, working in the community garden, up-cycling retired climbing ropes into arts and crafts, restocking the community food and clothing pantry, and washing climbing holds.[175] The gym also offers an afterschool program where children ages 12-17 can learn to climb but also receive help with homework, an afterschool meal, and can take part in creative arts. While most climbing gyms serve as training grounds for pushing one's physical limits, Memphis Rox provides a safe space for the most vulnerable populations of the city.

In a sequence of handheld camera shots, the film flashes through shots of the interior of Memphis Rox and its members. Groups of black children and teenagers climb the artificial walls and go through the climbing commands of "on belay" and "climb on." Staff climbers walk new members through the pay-what-you can process at the front desk. Two little girls run to Dean for a hug. Using medium shots taken from beside and behind the gym members, the camera gives the impression that the viewer is part of the group, just another climber waiting to check out a pair of climbing shoes or cheer on their friend as they ascend the wall. A clip then shows Martin behind the camera, conveying the impression that Martin was filming the previous series of shots. "I am the head photographer for Memphis Rox," Martin narrates over images from his photojournalism career. "My duty is to tell the story that often doesn't get told within my community. A lot of times my peers is like, overlooked. That's why it's so important for black photojournalists to tell the story."

This section of the film sets up uncertainty regarding who is telling the story of *Black Ice*: Martin and Dean, directors Barr and Mortimer, writer Nick Rosen, or a combination of

[175] "Volunteer," Memphis Rox, https://www.memphisrox.org/volunteer/.

all of the above? Introducing Martin as one of the camera operators for the film, his statement about allowing black photojournalists to tell their own story, and Martin's later role as the film's spokesperson on its exhibition tour, creates the illusion that the film is Martin's project. Following his introduction as a photojournalist, Dean and Martin engage in a moment of reflexivity for the camera. Martin sits in front of the camera to be interviewed and from behind the camera, Dean coaches him: "I was thinking of [filming the interview] a couple of different ways, you can try like a funny way, like comedic way, but you can always...you got that voice, you know." Martin then puts on an exaggerated southern accent saying, "Alright y'all, gather round. I'm finna tell y'all a story about this one time that...I'm sorry," Martin cuts off his speech and clears his throat. "I gotta know the audience, my bad," he says with a smile. Martin then straightens up in his chair and relaunches his interview, putting on a "white" voice saying: "I am about to tell you the story about a group of African Americans from South Memphis who embark on an ice climbing trip to Bozeman, Montana." This scene is a playful jab at the stereotypical "voice-of-god" narration found in expository documentaries, a comment on the intended (predominantly white) audience for the film, and another example of Dean and Martin's creative control on the project.

Using Bill Nichols' taxonomy of documentary films, *Black Ice* is in participatory mode.[176] Participation from Martin and Dean are shown more overtly, while Barr and Mortimer's voices are felt in the composition of the film as a whole: its narrative structure, choice of shots, editing, soundtrack, etc. The Reel Rock films follow a particular aesthetic of letting the participants speak for themselves, carrying the narration for the film. In interviews, the subject's body and voice are all that are seen and the directors or camera

[176] Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*.

operators are rarely if ever caught on film. However, due to the nature of filming rock climbing, the filmmakers themselves, as is the case with Barr and Mortimer, are themselves climbers. The directors can get personal stories from their subjects because they are part of that world. *Black Ice* introduces a challenge to the Reel Rock model in that the film is about being a racial minority in the climbing scene, an identity that neither Mortimer nor Barr hold. In conceptualizing the film as a story told through the eyes of Dean and Martin, Barr and Mortimer put themselves at a further remove than is typical for their climbing documentaries. Additionally, the moments of reflexivity where Dean and Martin are commenting on established climbing documentary aesthetics, set *Black Ice* apart from other Reel Rock offerings.

After the film acquaints the audience with Memphis Rox, Martin and Dean credit the Montana ice climbing idea to Dr. Fred Campbell, The North Face's professional climber Manoah Ainuu, and The North Face's climbing team leader Conrad Anker. Anker first came to Memphis Rox in 2018 to celebrate Global Climbing Day with the community, earning the respect of Dean, Memphis Rox's Director of Community Outreach: "Why I trust Conrad is because he came to Memphis first. That's big for me. [...] you come to *my* city and meet the people in *my* gym, meet people who are struggling, look kids in their eyes, and then you want to help, make people feel important, I'll go to bat for you now."[177] Dean's reaction to Anker highlights how the Memphis climbers were not expected to assimilate into mainstream climbing culture. Instead, Anker, a well-known and respected leader in the climbing community, went to Memphis to learn a new model of operating a climbing gym. Inspired by Memphis Rox's mission to bring new populations into the sport that otherwise would not

[177] Malik Martin, "The Tools of Ascension," *Yeti Dispatch*, 2022, 14.

have had the opportunity, Anker felt that as a white man who had spent his life in the predominantly white climbing culture, the Bozeman trip would be an opportunity for him to learn and grow as well. Ainuu, who grew up in California and later Spokane, Washington, began climbing in earnest after moving to Bozeman, Montana to attend Montana State University. While climbing at Bozeman's Spire climbing center, Ainuu met Anker who convinced him to take up ice climbing. In *Black Ice*, Ainuu reports never having seen so many black climbers as he did on his visit to Memphis Rox. While speaking of Ainuu, Dean comments that "In Bozeman, there's one black person. It's Manoah. I can't believe Manoah actually lives here. He's like a superhero." Later in the film, Ainuu says that being with the Memphis climbers made him realize how much he needed other black people in his life. "My goal is to have people get all psyched about [ice climbing] and move out [to Bozeman]." Fred Campbell also joined the trip in order to encourage other black climbers to try ice climbing. Ainuu and Campbell had few black mentors or peers in the world of climbing but now act as mentors for the next generation of black climbers.

As Anker, Ainuu, and Campbell's lived experiences disclosed, black climbers in North American climbing are few and far between. In *The Adventure Gap*, James Edward Mills chronicles the adventures of the few black climbers whose stories, he argues, should be better known in climbing culture. During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, an African American entered climbing's historical records with Charles Crenchaw's 1964 ascent of Denali, becoming the first black American to summit the highest peak in North America. Crenchaw's accomplishment went largely unnoticed in the dominant narrative of American climbing, but his mountaineering exploits were celebrated in the African American media of the time. In the November 1963 edition of *Ebony* magazine, Crenchaw, an administrative

assistant at Seattle's Boeing Aero-Space plant, rated a four-page spread titled, "Weekend Climber: Boeing Aero-Space aide enjoys lofty hobby." In 2006, Sophia Danenberg became the first African American to summit Chomolungma/Mount Everest, and in 2013, nine black climbers (six men and three women) took part in NOLS' (National Outdoor Leadership School) Expedition Denali, their near summit of the mountain recounted in the documentary film *An American Ascent* (2014) and Mills' book. 2022 saw seven climbers from Full Circle Everest Team, the first all-black Everest expedition, standing atop the highest peak in the world. Fred Campbell took part in the expedition and in the summit party was Manoah Ainuu.[178] With these notable exceptions, climbing has seen few black bodies and even fewer depictions in stories about climbing.

The lack of black bodies in North American climbing is due to numerous complex issues. One issue is access to climbing equipment. While pre-WWII climbers made do with hemp ropes and woolen outfits, the difficult grades of modern climbing routes necessitate more specialized equipment. Ice climbing in particular is, as Campbell says, "inaccessible for a million reasons" due to the expense of the gear and reaching ice climbing destinations. Memphis Rox creates a space for the black South Memphis community to learn to climb in a gym, where no one is turned away for financial reasons. However, an ice climbing expedition to Montana for a large group of climbers is another matter. In his position as outdoor gear company The North Face's climbing team leader, Anker secured the funding and necessary gear to bring the Memphis group to Bozeman. The film depicts the group flying from Memphis to Bozeman and then receiving a bag of gear from Anker in their hotel lobby. The

[178] Ben Ayers, "First All-Black Expedition Summits Everest," *Outside*, May 12, 2022, https://www.outsideonline.com/outdoor-adventure/everest/full-circle-first-all-black-everest-expedition/.

climbers try on helmets, carefully handle sharply spiked crampons, and show off their new waterproof pants and puffy jackets, all emblazoned with The North Face logo. "How does it feel to be the freshest one on the trip?" Martin asks Jewell as she bops her head, sporting a bright red North Face hat and winter jacket.

In addition to Anker's personal interest in the Memphis climbers, The North Face also has its own diversity, equity, and inclusivity initiatives. In 2010, The North Face launched its Explore Fund, a program that grants money to nonprofits working towards equity in outdoor exploration. The grant money helps fight systemic barriers towards accessing the outdoors. In 2020, The North Face created the Explore Fund Council, a diverse group of artists and scholars including Jimmy Chin of *Free Solo* fame and Chris Dean from Memphis Rox. The council's purpose is to allocate funding that will "create more culturally-relevant exploration opportunities and connect diverse communities to the benefits of exploration."[179] The seven million dollars The North Face allocated to this council is the largest amount the company has invested in diversity and inclusivity to date.[180] The North Face is not the only outdoor adventure group investing in diversity. REI's "Co-op Films," a collection of short outdoor adventure documentaries sponsored and funded by the outdoor equipment company, includes several films focused on diversity including *Brothers of Climbing* (2017) about a Brooklyn, NY-based organization whose goal is to "make the rock

[179] "Celebrating 10 Years of the Explore Fund," The North Face, November 9, 2020, https://www.thenorthface.com/en-us/approach/10-year-anniversary-explore-fund.

[180] Andrew Weaver, "The North Face Leans on Outside Expertise (and Celebrity) to Promote DEI," *Outside Business Journal*, October 30, 2020, https://www.outsideonline.com/business-journal/issues/the-north-face-reset-normal/.

climbing community more diverse."[181] The American Alpine Club (AAC) partnered with outdoor gear brands The North Face, REI, Eddie Bauer, Mammut, and Patagonia to launch their Climb United initiative in 2021. Based on their annual survey, the AAC found that eighty-two percent of the member respondents felt that the club should address issues of diversity and inclusivity within the sport. One project that Climb United has taken on is a guideline and management system for published route names with derogatory or discriminatory names.[182] Organizations like The North Face and the American Alpine Club are not merely responding to survey results; as the demographics of North America change, so too must the outdoor adventure industry. In *The Adventure Gap*, Mills states: "by 2042, the majority of US citizens will be nonwhite. Which begs the question: What happens when a majority of the population has neither the affinity for nor a relationship with the natural world?"[183] Brands like The North Face and clubs like the AAC can read the writing on the wall. In order to remain relevant and solvent, new bodies need to be enticed into the "natural world" wearing, of course, the latest fashions from the outdoor clothing industry and carrying an AAC membership card in their pocket.

While brands like The North Face have an interest in attracting new bodies into outdoor adventure sports, overcoming a long history of racially defined spaces makes getting black bodies into outdoor climbing a challenge. Kitted out with their new North Face gear,

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[181] REI Staff, "Brothers of Climbing: Represent and Reach," REI, March 1, 2017, https://www.rei.com/blog/climb/brothers-of-climbing.

[182] "The American Alpine Club Launches Climb United Initiative," The American Alpine Club, April 12, 2021, https://americanalpineclub.org/news/2021/4/12/the-american-alpine-club-launches-climb-united-initiative.

[183] Mills, *The Adventure Gap*, 38.

the crew from Memphis Rox heads out for their ice climbing destination: Hyalite Canyon in Gallatin National Forest. The group bump up the snow-packed road in a truck convoy before strapping their packs to sleds for the hike to base camp. Once at camp, Anker instructs the group to find a place where they can pitch their tents in the snow. Consisting only of a small, one-room cabin where they will cook their meals and an outhouse ("Heads up that there is no toilet paper," Anker tells the incredulous climbers), the camp is a far cry from the urban landscape of Memphis. With the cabin too small to comfortably sleep all the members of the expedition, the climbers troop outside and begin setting up their tents. Over shots of the climbers digging out platforms in the snow and unfurling North Face tents, Dean narrates, "African Americans have worked too damn hard to get into housing. Here we are, negative ten-degree weather, sleeping outside." Later in the film, Campbell expands upon this sentiment, explaining that racist policies such as segregation, voter suppression, and redlining have negatively impacted black Memphis residents for generations: "Memphis is the way that it is because of redlining. The federal government denied black people, people of color, access to housing credit and that handicapped those neighborhoods' ability to thrive." As Dean and Campbell suggest, a history of housing insecurity and the inability to thrive in American society due to racist policies has made willingly sleeping in a tent in the winter an absurd proposition for the Memphis Rox climbers.

Furthermore, due to the United States' history of lynching, outdoor spaces became coded as dangerous for people of color in ways white climbers do not experience. During the late 1800s and throughout the 1900s, at a time when conservation organizations and burgeoning mountaineering clubs like the AAC sought to preserve American wilderness spaces in order to enjoy the ultimate freedom of climbing, those same treed natural areas

were becoming indelibly linked with the horror of lynching for black Americans. Carolyn Finney contends that in the early twentieth century white Americans utilized lynching in order to restrict the movement and freedom of African Americans: "In nearly every state in the union and particularly in the South, black people were subject to extralegal actions that often resulted in their death by hanging. A tree became a painful symbol for many black people, reminding them that the color of their skin could mean death."[184] Lynching tainted the symbolic freedom of the wilderness in the collective consciousness of black Americans even as those natural spaces were being constructed as near-religious havens of self-determination for white Americans. As Eric Foner argues, even as civil liberties began to expand for white Americans following the First World War, "African-Americans were excluded from nearly every Progressive definition of freedom."[185] What was excluded was the so-called "freedom of the hills," including climbing and mountaineering.

In addition to racist policies that have made accessing the outdoors difficult, dangerous, and absurd for people of color, black climbers also contend with being an outlier within the outdoor adventure sports community. In the film, Campbell speaks of two experiences of this while on a climbing trip to New Hampshire:

> When you're ice climbing you're often the only black person. It definitely weighs on you maybe more than people would think. [...] You go out to these places you don't know in the middle of rural wherever. I went climbing in New Hampshire. I had this

[184] Carolyn Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationships of African Americans to the Great Outdoors* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, n.d.), 60.

[185] Eric Foner, "The Birth of Civil Liberties," in *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 185.

> bad experience with a shop owner there who tried to kick me out of the store. I was just trying to buy a jacket. We got to the crag, we were climbing, we came down from the climb and this person screams, 'A black person!' I roll my eyes and I go 'Oh my god.' She pulls her hood back and *she's* black. She was so excited to see another black person ice climbing.

Campbell's stories speak to the dangers of being black while participating in outdoor sports pursuits. The film visualizes Campbell's account of running into another black ice climber through a series of black and white cartoon animations. Andy Glynne contends that there are three main reasons to use animation in documentary film: to represent an "individual's internal processes," when trying to represent the "unfilmable," or to provide anonymity.[186] The animation in *Black Ice* does a bit of all three. The sequences capture Campbell's internal experience, provide a visual element to accompany his narration as there were no cameras present at the time, and retain the anonymity of the people in his story. Barry Thompson, the motion graphics designer, has a long association with climbing documentaries. Some of his work can be seen in films like *The Alpinist*, *The Dawn Wall*, *Valley Uprising*, *Meru*, and numerous Reel Rock productions.[187] In his drawings for *Black Ice*, Thompson draws the shop owner as a physically imposing man, his mouth open, a speech bubble above his head containing a series of symbols representing swear words. When Campbell meets the other black ice climber, she is drawn as a pretty woman with a broad smile and bright, friendly

[186] Andy Glynne, "Drawn From Life: The Animated Documentary," in *The Documentary Film Book*, ed. Brian Winston (London: British Film Institute; Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 75.

[187] Barry Thompson, "Barry Thompson Films," accessed June 12, 2023, https://www.barrythompson.net/.

eyes. Although lasting only a few seconds each, the animated clips, placed in between shots of Campbell's interview, serve as one of the documentary's rhetorical devices to help the viewer empathize with Campbell.

During this segment, Campbell also talks about Ahmaud Arbery, a black man who was murdered in Georgia in 2020 while out for a jog. As Campbell speaks, the camera switches back and forth between his interview and shots of him ice climbing. In a typical Reel Rock film, the narrative would focus on the danger of the ice climbing, Campbell's picks and crampons clinging to brittle ice, their half-inch of contact the only thing keeping Campbell from a fall as he ascends the multi-story frozen waterfall. In *Black Ice*, Campbell's accounts of maltreatment or even death due to racism while participating in outdoor activities spell out yet another dimension of danger, one that is far more hazardous. While Campbell explicates the social wounding that black sporting bodies undergo, *Black Ice* also tells the story of how vulnerable bodies both benefit from and have an effect upon the sport of climbing.

C. Black Ice and the Vulnerable Body

Black Ice is "told through the eyes" of Martin and Dean, and while they are participants both in front of and behind the camera, at the center of the film is the story of S'lacio Bankston, a teenager from South Memphis and a member of the Memphis Rox climbing gym. The previous section outlined the complicated history and context of the relationship between the black body and the sport of climbing. The following section details how, as a documentary film, *Black Ice* constructs the narrative of the vulnerable climbing body primarily through Bankston's story.

The first the audience sees of Bankston is during the film's opening sequence while Martin and Dean joke about the amount of snow on the road and the symbolic meaning of "black ice." Bankston, seated next to the other two men in the back of the car, grips the door handle in both gloved hands. His wide eyes constantly scan the foreboding scenery on the other side of his window and he seems oblivious to Martin and Dean's bantering. Although speaking to each other or to the camera operator seated in the passenger seat of the car, Martin and Dean's lighthearted dialogue might also be for the benefit of Bankston, to assuage the fear that Bankston's posture indicates. In seating Bankston in the same car with Martin and Dean, the film also sets up the main relationships of *Black Ice*: Martin and Dean as the storytellers and envoys, bridging the cultural gap between the black Memphis climbers and the climbing community at large, and Bankston who the two have taken under their wings as the "embodiment" of the film's message.

Bankston is seen again in the introduction to the Memphis city-scape and the climbing gym. The documentary highlights that this is Bankston's story as each member of the climbing team is introduced. Bankston is seen showing the film crew his home where he was raised by his grandparents. He points to a picture of his younger brother, a grinning child in a smart white suit, but Dean's narration reveals that the boy is now in prison. Of Bankston's own childhood, Dean says, "S'lacio, he was doing what he had to do to survive, he got into the neighborhood trade: gang activity." As Dean narrates, the camera follows Bankston through a narrow hallway into a cramped bedroom with peach walls and a bed that looks too small for his lanky frame. In showing Bankston in his childhood bedroom, sitting on the couch on his phone, looking at family pictures, Barr and Mortimer emphasize that Bankston is like any other teenager, but one who had to contend with desperate life

circumstances. “I got shot when I was seventeen, back in high school when I was going into my twelfth-grade year. The doctor told my grandma I could be dead right now,” Bankston tells the camera crew. An image of a younger Bankston, his arm in a sling, screws and wires holding his jaw together appears. Bankston was shot in the back and the chest, and one of the bullets traveled up his neck and out his mouth, knocking out his bottom teeth and resulting in a speech impediment. The shooting also decreased mobility in Bankston’s left shoulder leaving him unable to raise his left hand above his chest. “It made me realize that the old me wasn’t going to get me anywhere. The new me will do something right.” With these words, the film first shows a shot of Bankston walking out of his house, and in the next shot he is at Memphis Rox picking up a pair of climbing shoes. The editing of these two clips together, following Bankston’s narration, signifies that he has metaphorically walked out of his old life into the world of climbing. Climbing has made Bankston someone he was not before; a new person who “will do something right.”

Bankston exemplifies the physical and social wounding of the vulnerable climbing body. As Campbell later discusses in the documentary, Bankston’s circumstances are a direct result of policies like redlining that kept black South Memphis residents impoverished and with little to no social mobility. Memphis Rox provided a space where Bankston could learn to climb (mostly one-handed) and was given a job working at their juice bar. “Society already put a label on him before he had an opportunity to get to know himself. He’s a kid. You can’t write somebody off before they’re twenty, come on,” says Dean. Martin, also advocating for Bankston says, “S’lacio’s a hard-working brother. I feel like he knows that he got a second chance.” Dean and Martin discuss how climbing forces the South Memphis residents to relearn a more vulnerable style of communication where they express their fears

(such as fear of heights) and have to rely on other people (their belayers) to keep them safe. Due to his speech impediment, Bankston rarely verbally communicated with anyone at the gym. Any speech, including climbing commands, marked Bankston as having been wounded. Additionally, his injured shoulder also made it more difficult than some of the more able-bodied climbers for him to climb difficult routes. As such, his story does not conform to the usual climbing narratives depicted in the Reel Rock introduction montage of bodies pushing the limits of the sport. *Black Ice* chooses to focus on Bankston not only because he embodies Memphis Rox, but also to demonstrate how climbing stories change when they focus on nonconforming bodies.

Climbers with disabilities have been featured in quite a few climbing documentaries. As of 2023, MNTNFILM, the online climbing film archive, lists eighty short films that feature differently-abled climbers.[188] Some of the English-language films include *Climbing Blind* (2020), the Kendal Mountain Festival Grand Prize winner, *The Gimp Monkeys* (2012), a film about the first all-disabled climber ascent of El Capitan, and *Stumped* (2017), which won Best Climbing Film at the Kendal Mountain Festival and was part of the Reel Rock 12 tour.[189] Films about climbers with disabilities generally follow the same narrative structure as

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[188] "Film List: Climbers with Disabilities," MNTNFILM, 2023, https://www.mntnfilm.com/en/colection/climbers-with-disabilities/page:1.

[189] George Bird, "'Climbing Blind' Snares Kendal Mountain Festival Grand Prize," *Variety*, November 18, 2019, https://variety.com/2019/film/festivals/climbing-blind-snares-kendal-mountain-festival-grand-prize-1203407653/; *Gimp Monkeys*, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YGV2ADbKpcQ; Natalie Berry, "Kendal Mountain Festival 2017: Report," UKC, November 21, 2017, https://www.ukclimbing.com/news/2017/11/kendal_mountain_festival_2017_report-71387.

The title "Gimp Monkeys" is in reference to the "Stone Monkeys," the generation of Yosemite climbers that followed the "Stone Masters."

climbing documentaries in general: the climber has a goal in mind (complete a certain route), they at first struggle to accomplish that goal (due to their disability), but ultimately they are successful. As Brylla and Hughes contend, the history of the disabled body in documentary film has been one of de-humanization and objectification. Disabled communities have since adopted the medium as a way of shifting the narrative of disability towards a more positive view.[190] Likewise, climbers with disabilities utilize both climbing and the documentary form to communicate a story of resilience in the face of hardship, adapting to their circumstances, and continuing to set and achieve goals. Additionally, the sport of climbing has its own relationship with disability as it is often a means of attaining a "first" in the sport such as the first blind climber to summit Mt. Everest (captured in the film *Farther Than the Eye Can See* [2003]) and the first quadruple amputee to climb the Matterhorn (*The Limbless Mountaineer* [2014]). In featuring Bankston at the film's core, *Black Ice* takes a slightly different route: there are no massive climbs or record-breaking ascents for Bankston to achieve. Bankston's "wounding," the injuries he sustained from being shot, are not the barrier to climbing that the disabilities in other documentaries are shown to be. Rather, the challenge to be overcome in *Black Ice* is Bankston's ability to safely and financially access spaces like the Montana wilderness. While Bankston's disability is addressed in the film (and discussed in more detail below), the crux of the film does not rest on his mobility issues.

Providing the financial means for Bankston and the other Memphis Rox climbers to ice climb in the mountains of Montana illustrates how non-assimilating bodies also reinvent narratives about wilderness spaces and outdoor climbing. For Bankston, the Montana trip

[190] Catalin Brylla and Helen Hughes, "Introduction: The Bricolage of Documentary and Disability," in *Documentary and Disability*, eds. Catalin Brylla and Helen Hughes (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 2.

was the first time he had ever left Memphis. As the film shows clips of Bankston bouldering at the gym and working at the juice bar, Martin discloses how Bankston was a late addition to the trip roster and that he was unsure if the teenager would be "up for it." "I'm pretty nervous," Bankston admits, "I ain't never been outside of Memphis. But I'm excited." The film then cuts back to Bankston's bedroom where he shyly asks Dean if his jacket, a lightweight cotton zip-up, will be good enough for the trip. "No, no," Dean laughs gently, "We're going to get you a jacket." Back at the gym, Martin and Dean help Bankston pick out the thermal base layers and other cold-weather gear he will need for the brutal Montana winter from the boxes of North Face apparel Anker has sent. In juxtaposing these two locations, the film designates the climbing center as being a place of safety and opportunity for Bankston, a place where he has found employment and can be outfitted in expensive, warm, name-brand clothing, while his home life reads as a less nurturing space, where Bankston only has access to one thin jacket. Once properly outfitted, the film transitions to Bankston and the Memphis team on their flight to Montana. A shot catches Bankston looking out the airplane window as Memphis recedes into the distance. "Being outside Memphis–" Bankston begins, "How does it make you feel?" asks Martin, "It makes me feel great! I feel like a powerful man right now."

When the Memphis climbers reach their winter camp outside of Bozeman, Martin remarks on the incredible change that Bankston undergoes. Several camera operators spread out amongst the group to capture them digging out tent sites in the snow. "We all were a little overwhelmed. It was a different ball game with S'lacio. I've never seen S'lacio let go," Dean narrates as the camera follows Bankston through the snow. Despite the cold and the prospect of sleeping in a tent in the middle of winter, Bankston is seen flopping around in the snow,

making a snow angel, and tossing snowballs at the other members of the group. So quiet at the gym in Memphis that other climbers had rarely heard him speak, Bankston now babbles and laughs with Martin as Martin films him hitting someone in the head with a snowball. A short jump cut in the action leads to Martin, still filming, laughing and explaining to someone off camera that Bankston "hit the cameraman" and Bankston shouting an apology. The inclusion of this moment in the film highlights not only the remarkable change that the Montana mountains have wrought in Bankston, but also the role the film crew plays in the documentary. The "cameraman" is never named in that moment, indicating that he is part of the Barr and Mortimer level of participation: his presence is understood but rarely seen in front of the camera.

Dean then provides some cultural context for Bankston's behavior through narration over Martin's shots of Bankston building a snow castle. "In South Memphis, you can't act like a kid. You don't have the freedom to play. To play is to get in trouble. But out here, you have the freedom to be funny and to play. When we left Memphis, [Bankston] said he can't breathe in Memphis. He's breathing [here]." Dean and Bankston's words hold a deeper cultural resonance due to the Black Lives Matter protests. "I can't breathe," became one of the movement's slogans after the death of Eric Garner in 2014 who died after police officers put him in a chokehold. Garner's last words, spoken repeatedly, were "I can't breathe."[191] Bankston's words and play in the snow enact a freedom not only from the urban Memphis landscape, but also from a racist society that would label the teenager a gangster, unworthy of second chances.

[191] Ben Zimmer, "The Linguistic Power of the Protest Phrase 'I Can't Breathe,'" *Wired*, December 15, 2014, https://www.wired.com/2014/12/ben-zimmer-on-i-cant-breathe/.

In letting go of his guarded Memphis demeanor, Bankston displays a childlike vulnerability, what Lindsey Collins calls "slow wilderness," a feminist perspective on wilderness and outdoor adventure sports like climbing. Rather than seeing climbing as conquest, Collins argues for a relationship between climber and wilderness that is more mutually beneficial, more environmentally aware, and less focused on results or "winning." In this way, both men and women can find a way into wilderness spaces and climbing activities outside of the masculine narrative. Collins contends that "slow wilderness" can be a place of healing or recovery rather than strife and conquest.[192] I argue that slow wilderness exists not only outside of a masculine narrative, but also outside the predominantly white narrative as well. Scholars like Carolyn Finney and Kevin DeLuca and Anne Demo have argued that American society has coded natural/wilderness/outdoor spaces as white spaces. As Finney contends:

> The narrative of the Great Outdoors in the United States is explicitly informed by a rhetoric of wilderness conquest, Romanticism, Transcendentalism, and the belief that humans can either control or destroy Nature with technology [...] Implicitly, it is informed by a legacy of Eurocentrism and the linkage of wilderness to whiteness, wherein both become naturalized and universalized.[193]

From out of American transcendentalism in the 1800s came notions of wilderness conservation and preservation, of which John Muir (1838-1914) became one of the most

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[192] Lindsey Collins, "Trial by Mountain: Suffering and Healing in Difficult Landscapes" (Ph.D., Ann Arbor, University of California, Santa Cruz, 2012), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses A&I (993003908), https://search.proquest.com/docview/993003908?accountid=14522.

[193] Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces*, 28.

visible advocates. As DeLuca and Demo assert, Muir's essays contributed to a social vision of wilderness as sacred places akin to European Cathedrals. The "values of whiteness" woven through Muir's works produced a concept of wilderness predicated on the removal of native Americans as well as the exclusion of people of color and lower class non-Protestant whites. As *Black Ice* demonstrates, the presence of vulnerable black bodies like Bankston's in outdoor adventure sports activates a slow wilderness, a space of healing rather than conquest, a space that is inclusive of previously excluded bodies.

"Day 1" of climbing begins with footage of the Memphis climbers and their guides, Anker, Ainuu, and Campbell, setting off into the woods. Shot from behind Bankston's shoulder, the handheld camera captures a wobbly image of a frozen waterfall, a wall of corrugated ice. Switching to in front of Bankston, the next shot reveals the teenager's open-mouthed bewilderment. "Is this what we climbing?" he asks as the mellow acoustic guitar soundtrack drops out. "This is it! Pretty cool looking, huh?" Anker responds. The only sound is that of the climbers breathing heavily into the gaiters pulled up over their mouths and noses. The camera zooms in on several of the climbers' faces who stare with wide-eyed bafflement at the bizarre wall they will be expected to climb. The soundtrack kicks back in, and Barr and Mortimer insert interviews with Campbell and Ainuu in front of the ice wall, calmly explaining how passionate they are about introducing people of color to ice climbing. Campbell and Ainuu exude confidence through the interviews, a confidence then mirrored through a montage of the two climbing to the top of the ice floe to set the ropes for the others, crampons and ice axes biting deep into the ice.

As is often seen in climbing documentaries about climbers with disabilities, the next segment of the film centers on how Bankston's lack of mobility proves a challenge to his

climbing. One of the guides belays Bankston whose left shoulder only allows him to swing his ice axe just in front of his torso, rather than at head height as the lead climbers have done. Dean narrates, "[Bankston] kind of shut down for a second. Just, okay, 'this is not for me.'" The framing of the shots emphasizes Bankston's struggle. One of the camera operators is seen in the lower corner of the frame, perched casually on the ice, filming Bankston with one hand and holding firm to the ice with the other. Bankston's feet slip out from under him as the camera, held by the operator on the wall, zooms in on Bankston's ineffective swings of his ice axe. While handheld cameras have made filming climbing more attainable due to their lightweight nature, the slightly unsteady shots they produce are a constant faint reminder that a human being has also climbed the route in order to film the scene. In the case of *Black Ice*, the shots reinforce the divide between the film crew, able-bodied, experienced climbers, and Bankston, a physically disabled neophyte. A camera above Bankston picks up Bankston's direction to his belayer to be lowered down to the ground although he is only part way through the route. Once on the ground he admits to the assembled climbers off camera, "It kind of took me back to the day I got shot. Kind of scares me a little bit."

The following day, which happens to be Bankston's twentieth birthday, Campbell decides to workshop solutions with him. Rather than give up on the idea of ice climbing due to his injured shoulder, Campbell believes that Bankston can find movements that work for his body. In a repetition of the framing from Bankston's earlier attempt at ice climbing the day before, the camera, held beside Bankston on the wall, this time shows him opening up his hip away from the wall to use the momentum of his whole body rather than just his arm to swing and stick his axe into the ice. Bankston sinks the axe deeply into the ice several times in a row, each time with a satisfying *thwunk*. "He adjusted really fast," comments

Campbell. Repeating the shot of Bankston climbing from the same position and framing as before supports the redemptive nature of the scene.

If *Black Ice* was a typical climbing documentary, the climax of the film would be Bankston's ascent to the top of the frozen waterfall with his new-found skills as the other Memphis climbers cheer him on from below. However, the true climax of *Black Ice* occurs after Bankston's climb. The newly triumphant ice climber shakily removes his gear, tells the others he is done for the day, and asks for a hug, which one of the group is quick to provide. "This is the best thing that's happened to me. This is my birthday present," Bankston says as tears track down his snow-dusted cheeks. The documentary cuts back and forth between close-ups of Bankston's face and medium shots where the reactions of the other climbers listening to him can be seen. The genially triumphant soundtrack that had accompanied Bankston's climb drops away as Bankston explains:

> If Chris [Dean] had never asked me to come here, I wouldn't be here right now. I just thank God that I'm still living. It was hard for me growing up, growing up in South Memphis. People get killed, robbed, shot at, every freaking day. I just put my life in the streets. Neither one of my parents raised me. Neither one of them. [...] I've been through way too much stuff in my life. Way too much stuff. I'm just trying to make it out of the hood, that's it.

Bankston's emotional speech is the highlight of his *Black Ice* arc, from the quiet teenager afraid to speak due to his speech impediment to opening up about his innermost struggles, fears, and dreams. It also represents the larger message of the film that ice climbing is not the biggest challenge facing Bankston and the other Memphis climbers. The film ends, not with the climb accomplished, the route conquered, but with a return to Memphis. The Covid-19

pandemic has hit the black community particularly hard. Memphis youth march for Black Lives Matters after the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. At the end of the film is a montage of Memphis Rox staff handing out sack lunches, delivering meals, and unloading boxes of hand sanitizer for distribution. The last words of the film are Deans': "It's bigger than just diversifying rock climbing. It's providing space to live and to dream."

The concept of slow wilderness puts people in relationship with nature in a way that fosters healing. However, slow wilderness is only activated through the vulnerability of climbers like Bankston. *Black Ice* represents a new story in the pantheon of climbing narratives because the climbers choose to act like themselves rather than assimilate, to find success in trying new things rather than summiting big routes. Who the climbers are and where they find belonging takes precedence over their actions on rock and ice. In performing a vulnerable climbing body, the slow wilderness is not tied to geographical location, but to spaces of healing and belonging. Memphis Rox is an oasis of slow wilderness within the urban landscape of South Memphis. *Black Ice* takes the stories of the Memphis Rox climbers and shows how those bodies can change perceptions of wilderness and of the broader climber culture. The film demonstrates that climbing can be more than just pushing the boundaries of the extreme; there is room in the stories we tell about climbing for the historically excluded, the nonconforming, and the most vulnerable members of our society.

D. They/Them, Queer Bodies, and Vulnerability

They/Them's begins with a drone shot, moving into a ravine of immense cliff faces, sharp cracks splitting the marbled orange and gray Coconino sandstone in Sedona, Arizona. The film then cuts to the figure of a climber in a red hoody and jeans clinging to the underside of a rectangular rock roof, the ravine stretching behind their body. A slight zoom

emphasizes their delicate footwork as they move towards the camera, traversing beneath the sandstone block above their head. “Keep me really close,” the climber says to their belayer whose presence is only discerned by the length of rope traveling from the climber’s harness down the rock and out of frame.[194] The film then cuts to a close-up of the climber’s bloodied hands, their fingers wedged inside the crack between the roof block and the wall proper, then to their climbing-shoed feet, toes pressing into barely discernable rock nubs. While the majority of this sequence is filmed from the same height as the climber, a brief shot from above the climber gives a nauseating image of how high off the ground the climber appears to be. Back at climber height, with a grunt of effort, the camera captures the climber reaching the edge of the roof and pulling a cam off their harness to insert into the crack.[195] After trying several different-sized cams, the hoody-ed climber finds one that will fit, but asks themself, “Will it stay?” They then turn to look above and beyond the camera to its operator and say, “It probably won’t stay.” If the climber puts any weight on the cam, it could rip loose from the crack resulting in the climber falling until their next piece of gear or the next permanently affixed bolt arrests their fall. Should the next piece also give way, the velocity of the climber’s fall could rip all of their protection out of the crack. “Oh, fuckin’ A,” the climber says, their voice trembling with fear and exertion, “Oh, I wish that this wasn’t what I was

[194] *They/Them*, directed by Blake McCord and Justin Clifton (Patagonia, 2021), https://www.patagonia.com/stories/they-them/video-102573.html. Transcription mine. Subsequent quotations are from *They/Them* unless otherwise noted. All transcription is mine.

“Keep me close,” means to keep only enough slack in the rope that the climber can move freely but not so much as to result in a long fall should the climber slip off the rock.

[195] Cam, short for “camming” device. A spring-loaded mechanical device that when placed in a crack expands to fit the crack.

doing right now." The film's title card comes up on the screen: a black background with the words "They/Them" in white bubble lettering.

Patagonia's 2021 film *They/Them* tells the life story of one of the brand's ambassadors: professional climber Lor Sabourin. On the Patagonia website, the Film page introduces their collection of short documentaries as "films on behalf of our home planet."[196] *They/Them* stands out among the company's more well-known offerings such as *DamNation* (2014) and *Artifishal* (2019) for its focus, not on environmental activism, but diversity and inclusivity within the human population of outdoor adventure sports. Before filming *They/Them*, director Justin Clifton had worked on projects with his northern Arizona production company Sandcast Media such as *Leche y Miel* (2016) about Arizona's agricultural waterways, and *Closing the Gender Gap* (2019), a short film about gender in endurance sports made for Visit Arizona and Outside TV. Blake McCord, a director, cinematographer, and rock climber, knew Lor Sabourin from the northern Arizona climbing community and approached Clifton about the idea of creating a documentary film with Sabourin about their life.[197] This participatory documentary took shape over the course of three years where the directors allowed Sabourin's life and the telling of their life story to dictate the narrative. Partnering with Patagonia and executive producers Monika McClure (Patagonia Senior Film Producer), Alex Lowther (Patagonia Creative Director and former Reel Rock Producer and Editor), and Justin Roth (Patagonia Global Marketing Director), the film was distributed on Patagonia's website and exhibited at a number of outdoor film

[196] "Patagonia Films," Patagonia, 2023, https://www.patagonia.com/films/.

[197] McCord and Clifton, *They/Them*.

festivals including the 2021 Kendal Mountain Festival and the Banff Mountain Film and Book Festival, winning Best Climbing Film at both.[198]

As Sabourin, McCord, and Clifton attest in the interview attached to the end of the film where they speak to professional climber Nikki Smith about the filming process, *They/Them* aims to be a film about a human experience rather than a climbing experience. Following the prologue and title card, the narrative of the film demonstrates this aim as it returns to Sabourin on the wall, now sitting in their harness several feet below the roof. Head down, with their knees pushed against the rock and their arms wrapped around their torso, their body is a picture of curled failure. Text appears on the screen beside them reading "Lor Sabourin (*They/Them*)," pronouns accompanying their name. Sabourin's voice emerges over this shot saying, "Part of what brings me to climbing is that I want to try something that doesn't necessarily feel possible." Sabourin's honesty and vulnerability is unusual in the world of climbing documentaries; most climbing films begin with the climber's bravado or rationalization rather than their fear. For example, *Free Solo* begins with similarly aesthetically-pleasing shots of a climber on a massive stone wall, but that body (Alex Honnold) moves confidently upward with no trace of fear. In *Break on Through* (2018), the film opens with shots of Margo Hayes striving to become the first woman to climb a 5.15 sport route, one of the hardest grades in climbing. "If someone can do it, I can do it," asserts Hayes.[199] Rarely does an outdoor adventure sports documentary begin with the subject of the film, visibly afraid and saying "I wish that this wasn't what I was doing right now." The

[198] "About Us," Sandcast Media, 2023, https://www.sandcastmedia.com/#about.

[199] *Break on Through*, directed by Matty Hong, Peter Mortimer, and Nick Rosen (Sender Films and Big Up Productions, 2018), https://www.redbull.com/int-en/episodes/break-on-through-reel-rock-s04-e01. Transcription mine.

film's prologue disrupts the macho "try-hard" attitude that most climbing documentaries emulate. Sabourin demonstrates a kind of climbing that pushes the limits of difficulty but without losing sight of the climber's vulnerability.

Sabourin believes that climbing hard and being vulnerable are inseparable: "If you don't choose a challenge that's hard enough that it's going to make you vulnerable and make you be in stress then you'll just stay the same human. And that's fine. But if you choose something that's hard enough that you have to change in order to get it, you can make a lot of progress." Sabourin defines climbing as "practice being in a vulnerable space." These two statements about vulnerability perform different but interrelated functions. The former argues for the necessity of vulnerability in order to change and make progress both as a climber and as a human being. The latter acknowledges that for some bodies, like the black bodies in *Black Ice*, the climbing crag may not be the most dangerous space they inhabit. For Sabourin, climbing with a vulnerable body not only aids in the progression of the sport, but acts as rehearsal for riskier environments. Like *Black Ice*, *They/Them* follows a narrative structure that focusses not on physical climbing achievements, but on how the climber's identity has affected their role in the climbing community. Footage of Sabourin on their climbing "project," the route they are seen climbing at the beginning of the film, largely serves to delineate Sabourin's diegetic present from their past. The main narrative arc of the film centers on Sabourin's life, exploration of gender identity, and struggles with their body portrayed in the film through interviews, archival footage, and b-roll footage of Sabourin's everyday life with voiceover narration from Sabourin.

After the opening sequence, the film depicts several scenes of Sabourin climbing at the Red River Gorge in Kentucky. Drone footage shows a ribbon of rock running through a

heavily-treed forest, the foliage beginning to turn the gold and red of autumn. Chris Ruggiero's original score accompanies the images; the gentle piano notes mirror the serene environment of the crag. Over a series of clips shot from above and to the side of Sabourin's deft movements on the rock face. A slow-motion shot captures Sabourin reaching for a small pocket in the rock and then falling, the decelerated footage creating the illusion of their body drifting down the cliff until the rope goes taut, casually catching their fall in mid-air. Sabourin's narration explains that the Kentucky crag "was a special place" for them. The soundtrack, long shots of the forest, and slow-motion add an ethereal, peaceful quality to the Red River Gorge, reflecting Sabourin's attachment to the space. McCord and Clifton then weave in an interview with Sabourin and their mother, Anne Sabourin, and archival photographs of Sabourin climbing in the Red River Gorge as a teenager. During the interview, Anne Sabourin remarks that climbing outdoors seemed to be what Lor was working towards rather than remaining a gym climber. These scenes represent the beginning of Sabourin's journey as a professional climber as they began climbing outdoors at expert levels.

The soundtrack, a hopeful cascade of piano notes, then drops out as Sabourin reveals that despite this being a generative time in their life as a climber, they were struggling mentally and emotionally, primarily with their identity. They reference a portrait a friend had taken of them in their climbing gear, that they can look into that younger self's eyes and remember the pain they were experiencing. The image in question appears and Sabourin, wearing a red helmet over unruly red hair, is framed just off center. They are smiling slightly, but their blue eyes look into the camera with a desperate intensity. Sabourin's narration explains how confused they were about their identity and that they only found out much later

in life that there were other people who identified as gender nonbinary. The film then cuts to archival footage of Sabourin as a baby and then a young child, the same flyaway red hair framing their round face. Several clips show Sabourin in frilly dresses. "Calling Lor 'my sister' never felt super fitting," says Claire Sabourin in an interview with the filmmakers. McCord and Clifton then switch to Lor Sabourin and Claire Sabourin speaking to each other online. Despite the supportive presence of their mother and sister during their teenage years, Sabourin continued to struggle with their mental health. At odds with several shots of Sabourin confidently moving over the Kentucky rock, Sabourin's narration speaks of the fear that accompanied their evolving identity as a teenager. The score shifts into a minor key and Sabourin says, "It's really uncomfortable to ask someone to change the pronouns that they use for you because it's an obvious outing of yourself." While the obvious danger in the footage is from Sabourin falling while climbing, their words testify that they also felt a sense of risk in openly identifying as nonbinary.

The film cuts to Sabourin at a climbing gym in Flagstaff, Arizona, where they are shown teaching two other climbers how to fall properly. A return to a major key in the score indicates the emotional shift from Sabourin's fear as a teenager to the comfort and confidence they have found as an adult. Sabourin's voice over explains that when they began questioning their identity as a teenager, when constant misgendering led to a devaluation of self, Sabourin also experienced a bad fall that almost ended their passion for climbing. It was then that a friend introduced Sabourin to The Warrior's Way, a climbing philosophy that helps climbers build confidence and strengthen the mental side of the sport. Based, in part, on discussions of the warrior's way in Carlos Castañeda's Don Juan books, Arno Ilgner crafted a self-help toolkit for climbers looking to up their mental game, culminating in Ilgner's 2003

book, *The Rock Warrior's Way*.[200] The Warrior's Way has grown to include online courses, personal training sessions, workshops, and clinics with Warrior Way-trained instructors. Once discovering the benefits of The Warrior's Way to their climbing and their personal life, Sabourin became an instructor. "Falling and climbing are both dangerous," Sabourin explains to their students, "so learning [falling] as a skill minimizes the risk [...] then when you're climbing, you're not as distracted by the fear of falling because you know what's going to happen." Just as rehearsing a fall made Sabourin less afraid while climbing, rehearsing risk-taking in climbing allowed them to be more open and authentically themselves in their everyday life, saying, "Over time [The Warrior's Way] changed my perspective on stress and fear. And it gave me a lot of resources that I could use in climbing and also in other aspects of my life." One of those aspects is their poise, demonstrated in their teaching as the film intercuts shots of Sabourin giving instruction, their focus fixed on the other climbers.

As an instructor of The Warrior's Way, Sabourin introduces a queering of the term warrior not only from how it is depicted in dominant climbing narratives, but also from Ilgner's definition. As discussed in Chapter 1, military language and behavior found its way into American climbing culture particularly following World War II. However, while mountaineering warriors were expected to become martyrs to society's conception of masculinity, The Warrior's Way encourages climbers to minimize risk through rehearsal of falling and fear-inducing situations. Ilgner's courses prepare climbers to behave as warriors who "live consciously, responding to stress. They know stress is required for learning so

[200] Arno Ilgner, "History of the Warrior's Way Method," The Warrior's Way, 2022, https://warriorsway.com/history-of-the-warriors-way-training/.

they lean into it."[201] Sabourin draws on this sentiment in saying that challenge creates change if one does not want to "just stay the same human." Becoming comfortable with falling has overturned a common climbing aphorism: "The leader must never fall." Training the body to fall off the rock, and to expect to take many falls in order to become a stronger climber, subverts both the story of "real" climbers or the "best climbers" never fall, and the body's instinctive knowledge that falling from a great height is deadly. In The Warrior's Way, falling is a queer failure.

While The Warrior's Way offered Sabourin a way to utilize climbing as a tool for improving self-confidence and mental health, other aspects of climbing culture reinforced the damage that adhering to a dominant narrative can inflict, namely eating disorders. The film returns to the canyon in Arizona where the opening sequence took place. Over drone footage taken from above and beside the six-hundred foot wall of stone, Sabourin narrates that the route (named Cousin of Death) is their new project; a five-pitch trad climb rated 5.13+, the hardest grade they have ever attempted. Sabourin explains that they will "work" i.e. rehearse each pitch individually, determining the movements and gear placements before they attempt to climb the entire route from the bottom up. After a montage of Sabourin working the fourth pitch, the camera captures Sabourin taking a break, anchored to a small ledge several hundred feet in the air. Sabourin plucks balls of green food from a resealable plastic bag and pops them into their mouth. "I feel like my green bars, they can be an interesting discussion topic," Sabourin says to Blake McCord, operating the camera and sharing the ledge with them, "It's like, something that I am one-hundred percent sure that I will eat on my climbing

[201] John Campbell, "There's Always Something," The Warrior's Way, *Arno's Blog* (blog), September 7, 2019, https://warriorsway.com/theres-always-something/.

day." They explain that if they were having a "good mental day" they could eat something else, but on a bad day, without the green bars, they would not eat anything.

In 2006, the International Federation of Sport Climbing (IFSC) introduced BMI (Body Mass Index) testing for all athletes competing in IFSC sanctioned events. With BMI testing, the IFSC aimed to discourage climbers from becoming underweight in an effort to protect climbers from developing eating disorders.[202] Disordered eating in climbing stems from the belief that in order to climb hard grades of routes, climbers must be as strong and light as possible. Caroline Treadway's documentary, *Light* (2021), explores this climbing narrative through her own experience of an eating disorder and that of several professional climbers. As Treadway attests, during her early career writing for climbing magazines, no editor would publish a story about eating disorders; they were too taboo. "Sometimes I felt like the whole sport was in denial," Treadway says. The female climbers interviewed in *Light* report that not only were they trying to lose weight in order to win competitions and climb hard routes, but that movements over the rock felt more aesthetically pleasing when they were at their lowest weight. "Light" female climbers not only saw positive results in their performance but in their embodied experience of the climbing itself. While interviewing professional climber Kai Lightner, the only male climber who agreed to be in the film, Treadway asks if the subject of eating disorders is more difficult for men to discuss. Lightner responds, "For men, talking about eating disorders, the problem is that, in order to talk about

[202] "Official Statement on BMI Testing 04/08/2021" (International Federation of Sport Climbing, April 8, 2021), https://cdn.ifsc-climbing.org/images/ifsc/Footer/Commissions/086_IFSC_Medical_Statement.pdf.

them, you have to admit to being vulnerable."[203] Lightner goes on to explain that while training competitively, he felt pressured to be as small as possible. In order to be the "best rock climber possible," Lightner modified his body to "fit the mold that's already been set," that of a light, lean, non-vulnerable climber. A 2020 study published in *Frontiers in Sports and Active Learning* found that of six-hundred and four climbers, 8.6% reported having an eating disorder, with that number rising to 42.9% in elite female climbers. With the majority of the study's sample being male-identifying climbers, and given the difficulty in discussing the subject for men, the percentage of climbers with an eating disorder was likely underreported.[204]

On the ledge of the route Cousin of Death in the Arizona canyon, Sabourin jokes with McCord as he films them finishing their lunch of "green bars." "It's funny when people ask about [the green bars]. Like, I'm not about to tell you about my sweet Keto diet, I'm about to tell you about my eating disorder [...] and most people don't want to know about your eating disorder." While the previously cited study on disordered eating in climbers demonstrates its prevalence, the study was limited to climbers who identified their biological sex as either male or female. The lack of data on transgender or gender nonbinary climbers and eating disorders creates an incomplete picture of how a body made vulnerable due to disordered eating affects the broader story of climbing. For the climbers in *Light*, disordered eating stemmed from performance pressure, to climb hard routes and "be the best." As Sabourin

[203] *Light*, directed by Caroline Treadway (YouTube, 2021), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thtDQJGrO5s. Transcription mine.

[204] Lanae M. Joubert, Gina Blunt Gonzalez, and Abigail J. Larson, "Prevalence of Disordered Eating Among International Sport Lead Rock Climbers," *Frontiers in Sports and Acting Learning* 2, no. 86 (July 24, 2020), https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7739584/.

explains in *They/Them*, their exercise and eating disorder began when they were a child due to societal pressures to conform to a binary gender system. As a teenager, Sabourin's body dysphoria increased, and they adopted an eating disorder as a way to manage that dysphoria. After an intervention from friends, Sabourin began a journey of recovery, but not without difficulties. "Being light for climbing is something people really prioritize," Sabourin states. Beyond pressure from the climbing world to remain as light as possible, Sabourin's weight gain in recovery led to an increase in their body dysphoria due to feeling more feminine. Heather Sykes contends that "fat phobia" has long been a cultural indicator of a binary gender system. Athleticism denotes masculinity while fatness implies femininity.[205] Through their eating disorder, Sabourin maintained a nonbinary body, one that diminished any traces of femininity, thus assimilating into the "neutral" i.e. muscled, athletic and masculine body.

In order to fit into the heavily male-dominated climbing culture, female climbers have unconsciously adopted a tactic of muscular assimilation. For cisgender female climbers, muscular assimilation looks like conditioning the body to read as the masculine climbing ideal (long, lean, and lightly muscled) in order to be accepted as a "real climber." In an article by Appleby and Fisher, interviews with female climbers reveal the widespread archetype of the lean body: "climbing is a strength-to-weight-ratio [activity]," reports one respondent, "so you can have an advantage in that sense...if you have a strong upper body but you're lean all around...I think that's advantageous."[206] Assimilation also means female

[205] Heather Sykes, *Queer Bodies: Sexualities, Genders, & Fatness in Physical Education* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2011), 64.

[206] Karen M. Appleby and Leslee A. Fisher, ""Female Energy at the Rock:" A Feminist Exploration of Female Rock Climbers," *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal* 14, no. 2 (2005): 18, https://doi.org/10.1123/wspaj.14.2.10.

climbers adopt masculine climbing culture tropes in order to prove their worth and belonging. "Real climbers" physically and mentally train like male climbers and buy into the dominant masculine narratives such as the desirability of risk as discussed in Chapter 1 and the "try hard" narrative from Chapter 2.

Greg Lowe and Robert Carmichael's 1981 film *First Ascent* depicts female climbers Lynn Hill and Beth Bennet assimilating to masculine climbing standards. The film begins with Hill falling from a route after attempting a difficult section, her belayer Bennet catching her fall. "Climbers don't like to admit to anything like fear, not to one another," says Hill in a voiceover, and the camera shows Bennet lowering Hill to the belay station. "It's not a bad fall," she casually tells Bennet, demonstrating both a blasé attitude toward the risk involved and a distaste for revealing a vulnerable feeling like fear. "I'm not strong enough to do it," Hill continues, a reference to the "try hard," culture of athleticism; if Hill only worked harder (i.e. worked out) she could climb the route successfully. Hill's narration returns with her saying, "Once you've accepted the risk [of climbing] you just push it to the limit," again calling upon the risk narrative with an addition of the limitless potential of climbers who just "try hard." Bennet then takes a turn on the route and fails on the same section that Hill found challenging. The film transitions to a workout montage where Hill and Bennet are seen lifting weights, biking up mountain roads, running, bouldering, doing pull-ups, and squeezing hand-grip-strengtheners. As Hill explains, "we had the skill [...] we just weren't quite strong enough [...] I only know one way to get stronger: hard work."[207] Hill and Bennet, with their lean frames, compact muscles, and low body fat perform the "ideal" climbing body. In

[207] *First Ascent*, directed by Robert Carmichael and Greg Lowe, (Sports Imagery Inc., Pyramid Films Inc., 1982), https://player.vimeo.com/video/284257494?dnt=1&app_id=122963. Transcription mine.

Carmichael's film, the curvy or fat "feminine" body must be excised in order for Hill and Bennet to successfully climb the route.

Hill and Bennet complete the route but, despite the film's title of *First Ascent*, the two were not the first climbers to get to the top in free-climbing style. The film's title refers to the climbers as making the first *all-female* ascent. Muscular assimilation requires conformity not domination, a reinforcement of the achievements of the white male body rather than new bodies breaking new records. Climbing culture has celebrated female climbers and mountaineers for *repeating* firsts such as Junko Tabei as the first female to summit Chomolungma/Mt. Everest, or Margo Hayes becoming the first female to climb the grade 5.15. However, female bodies are not as easily celebrated when achieving true firsts in the sport, such as Lynn Hill's free climb in a day of The Nose on El Capitan in Yosemite National Park in 1994. Hill reflects on the backlash that emerged following her record-breaking climb, saying,

> It was unusual that I was able to do [the Nose], and of course because I'm a small woman some men made comments such as 'She was able to do it because she has such small fingers' or 'She could fit better inside the corner (Changing Corners).' [...] Both are true facts, but there were other sections of the route that were perhaps more difficult for me because of my small size. I think those statements indicate hints of that jealousy that come from sexism and the idea that men always have to be better – if a woman does something before a man, some men try to find a reason to undermine the achievement instead of just recognizing the beauty and vision of the ascent. No matter what size you are, you still have to be a very good climber to free climb the

Nose, so why couldn't they accept the fact that a woman is capable of making such a breakthrough ascent?[208]

In adapting their bodies and personal narratives to the male ideal, women in climbing have also unconsciously agreed to the "assimilation not domination" aspect of muscular assimilation. Patrick Miller's essay on muscular assimilation touches on pushback from white journalists when black athletes not only began to assimilate into mainstream American sports, but to dominate them. Miller cites academics and journalists who looked to pin black athletic achievement on being a less evolved race, the so-called "missing link" theory.[209] Similarly, while Haye's and Tabei's accomplishments could be lauded because men had already achieved those "firsts," Hill's free ascent of the Nose disrupted the idea that women and people of color should conform to male standards but not overshadow men in climbing.

Also uncelebrated, or worse, attacked, are those bodies that cannot or choose not to assimilate. Sabourin experienced a failure of muscular assimilation, not because they do not have the long, lean, lightly-muscled body of the ideal climber, but because they do not fit into the binary of male and female. In an interview for *Climbing Magazine,* Sabourin recalls a climbing photographer telling them they did not look like a climber: "'When people are looking for a picture of a climber girl, they're looking for this, and if they're looking for a climber dude, they're looking for this.' [The photographer] said Sabourin was neither."[210] Citing two different "looks" for climbers, male and female, was not only invalidating to

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[208] Dean Fleming, "California Climber: Lynn Hill," *California Climber*, 2018, 36.

[209] Miller, "Sport and the Paradoxes of Racial Reform," 171.

[210] Ari Schneider, "Gender Bias: Nonbinary Climbers Sound off on Discrimination in Climbing," *Climbing*, August 25, 2020, https://www.climbing.com/people/gender-bias-nonbinary-climbers-sound-off-on-discrimination-in-climbing/.

Sabourin's identity, but also inaccurate. The established "look" for climbers, regardless of gender, is lean and lightly muscled. The photographer's assertions in Sabourin's story correspond with society's continued unease with non-binary bodies. In Laure Schulze's essay "On the Muscle," about female body builders, she cites the juxtaposition of "conventional" femininity and the athletic body as problematic for her non-body-building interview subjects: "[B]odies can drift out of difference, ceasing to be a radically female body, into an unsettling sameness, a body that seems no different from a male body, a body that simply reconfirms the conventional binaries of sex and gender. That drift is experienced as unpleasurable and disturbing, it provokes anxiety rather than intrigue."[211] In other words, as Camporesi and Maugeri have found, even other athletes believe that "a woman in sport should look like a woman."[212] For climbing, this means that women should emulate the male body by decreasing curviness and fat, but still conform to traditional standards of femininity, meaning not showing up the men.

More than anxiety-producing, nonbinary and transgender bodies are made invisible in competition climbing. The International Federation of Sport Climbing's policy on gender and sexuality states that the federation promotes a "zero-tolerance" approach to transphobia. However, their policies still limit competitors to choosing between either a male or female identity. The USA Climbing Rulebook also stipulates that competitors must register as either male or female, whichever gender identity "is most aligned with the competitor's sincerely

[211] Laurie Schulze, "On the Muscle," in *Building Bodies* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 28.

[212] Silvia Camporesi and Paolo Maugeri, "Unfair Advantage and the Myth of the Level Playing Field in IAAF and IOC Policies on Hyperandrogenism," in *Gender Testing in Sport*, Ethics and Sport (London: Routledge, 2016), 47.

held core identity," leaving no option for climbers who identify as nonbinary.[213] Additionally, in following the International Olympic Committee's policy regarding trans bodies, competition climbers who have transitioned from female to male can compete in the male category "without restriction," but male to female transgender climbers must pass a testosterone test at least twelve months prior to competing, and they cannot change their gender identity for a minimum of four years.[214] Dafina-Lazarus (D-L) Stewart argues that policies are rooted in the patriarchal belief that bodies assigned male at birth are "inherently more athletically capable" than bodies assigned as female.[215] In a competition like the 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell, which I explored in Chapter 2, nonbinary climbers would also have to choose between registering male or female. Despite the focus on community and the performance of gender-bending in terms of costuming, the policies of Horseshoe Hell have likewise excluded actual nonbinary bodies from the competition.

Outside of competition climbing, nonbinary and/or transgender climbers also face discrimination and violence from within the climbing community. The middle section of *They/Them* shows Sabourin working through several more pitches of Cousin of Death with two of their climbing partners. Their partners both talk about who Sabourin is to them as a

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[213] "USA Climbing Rulebook v.1.0 2021-2022" (USA Climbing, 2022 2021), 22, https://usaclimbing.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/USA_Climbing_Rulebook_2021-2022_v10_202110151.pdf.

[214] "Appendix 2 - IOC Guidelines November 2015" (International Federation of Sport Climbing), accessed September 13, 2022, https://cdn.ifsc-climbing.org/images/ifsc/Footer/Athletes/181124_Policy_Statement_Gender_Identity_Transexuality.pdf.

[215] Dafina-Lazarus (D-L) Stewart, "Using Intersectionality to Study and Understand LGBTIQ People in Sport," in *Sex, Gender, and Sexuality in Sport: Queer Inquiries* (London: Routledge, 2019), 39.

person and as a role model. Meanwhile, the clips of Sabourin climbing through hard sections of rock affirm their competence at climbing. Juxtaposed with this display of belonging and excellence while climbing outdoors, the film then depicts Sabourin at their home climbing gym in Flagstaff, Arizona, discussing the abuse they have endured as a result of their visibility as a transgender climber. "The truth is, is that every day I experience violence of some kind that makes me feel like it's not safe to be in my body and not safe to be visible." Sabourin's statement begins as narration over images of them sorting plastic climbing holds in the gym, and then cuts to the interview where they are speaking to the interviewer behind the camera. Sabourin's body position in the interview is in stark contrast to the mundane task of sorting the holds. Sabourin is hunched in on themselves, their left shoulder turning away from the camera as though they might get up and run at any moment. Held within the shadowy recesses of the indoor bouldering cave, its sharp walls slanted inwards towards Sabourin, the framing of the interview gives the impression of the climbing gym – and by extension the climbing community – as oppressive and menacing.

In a 2022 article, Sabourin writes about the isolation of often being the only transgender person in The Warrior's Way clinics they teach, the anxiety of finding a safe bathroom, and violence from strangers especially while traveling from crag to crag in rural America.[216] *They/Them* then broaches the subject of a 2021 article in *Rock and Ice* by Owen Clarke, an interview with Sabourin about their ascent of an expert-level route done in the traditional (trad) style. The title of the article claims Sabourin as the "First Non-Binary

[216] Lor Sabourin, "Queer Fear: The Power Of Affinity Spaces In The Climbing Community," *Climbing*, June 6, 2022, https://www.climbing.com/people/power-of-affinity-spaces-in-the-climbing-community/.

Climber to Send 5.14a Trad."[217] In the film, Sabourin talks about the backlash they received following the article's publication. The film flashes still images of the *Rock and Ice* article and then the comment section as Sabourin states how terrifying and disheartening the comments were to read. Some of the comments shown in the film read: "Who gives a fuck," "I'm not sure why we're celebrating this," "I don't get it. Is he born as a male or a woman [sic]? I identify my self [sic] as a Shovel. Am i [sic] the First shovel to Climb a 6+ Then? Why is there no article about me?" and "there are only two genders." As Sabourin explains, the comments are from people within their own community, the climbing community, whom they might see while out at the crag. In between shots of Sabourin talking about this issue is b-roll footage of them setting routes in the gym. The combination of the footage of Sabourin at work and their narration demonstrates how they potentially share spaces and even create routes for people who wish to harm them. Sabourin also states that *Rock and Ice* chose not to remove some of the comments due to not wanting to "censor" anyone's opinions. "That language," argues Sabourin, "directly translates into experiences of real violence in [transgender people's] lives."

In the wake of the *Rock and Ice* article, Clarke published a follow-up piece in *Climbing* arguing that Sabourin's climb was more than a contrived first, it was a representational first. All climbers, Clarke argues, should have representation in the

[217] Owen Clarke, "Interview: Lor Sabourin, First Non-Binary Climber to Send 5.14a Trad," *Rock and Ice*, February 9, 2021, https://www.rockandice.com/climbing-news/interview-lor-sabourin-first-gender-neutral-climber-to-send-5-14a-trad/.

community and the media that reports on that community.[218] However, representation is only one aspect of why Sabourin's climbing, and their visibility is newsworthy. Sabourin is rewriting climbing narratives tied to muscular assimilation. Sabourin's queer failure of muscular assimilation instead performs the vulnerable climbing body. By not conforming to a gender binary, Sabourin's body is not female and thus marked as lesser and nonthreatening (i.e. the sentiment of "she climbs well *for a girl*"), nor male and thus "deserving" of accolades due to already having the ideal climbing body.[219]

Nor is Sabourin the only climber to reject (or be incapable) of conforming to the dominant climbing body. S'lacio Bankston in *Black Ice*, would also fail at muscular assimilation should he be content with climbing easy routes and never "progressing" in the sport. The constant bettering of the body, the drive to climb harder or riskier routes, as discussed in Chapter 2, is part of the ideal climbing body. To not take part in that definition of climbing success is also a queer failure of muscular assimilation. The vulnerable body may not succeed at pushing the physical limits of climbing, but it succeeds in bringing value to other aspects of the sport. For example, Drew Hulsey, a self-identified plus-sized climber, found meaning in climbing outside of the competitive push to constantly climb harder.

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[218] Owen Clarke, "Every Climber Should Get Representation, But the Climbing Community Isn't Entirely Onboard—Lor Sabourin Works to Change That," *Climbing*, June 24, 2021, https://www.climbing.com/people/every-climber-should-get-representation-but-climbing-community-isnt-entirely-onboard-lor-sabourin-works-to-change-that/.

[219] The hypocrisy of how the climbing community responded to Sabourin can be seen with their reaction to climber Carlo Traversi's 2022 ascent of a difficult but previously climbed route. As the *Climbing* article states in its title, Traversi is not the first to complete the route but the fourth. Yet, comments from Traversi's Instagram account and the Reddit community r/climbing have nothing but positive things to say such as, "Nice work man!" "Such an underrated climber," and "Such a crusher." No one comments on why the fourth completion of the route is making headlines or why other climbers should care.

Feeling out of place, surrounded by "buff men" giving unsolicited and unhelpful advice, Hulsey at first struggled to identify as a climber. Then Hulsey found that changing the story he was telling himself allowed him to find his identity as a climber:

> A couple of months in, I had to shift my perspective to enjoying climbing as it is. I knew and still know I want to love this sport for everything it gives me—not just for the strength that it takes. I can climb easy stuff for the rest of my life, and that will be OK. I can do this sport at my own pace, and I can enjoy it without having to fit a certain body type.[220]

Hulsey not only rejected the ideal climbing body, but also the "try-hard" narrative of continual grade progression. Climbers like Sabourin, Bankston, and Hulsey not only provide more diverse representation in the sport, they also call into question the long-held identity of what a climber should look like and what that climber's goals should be. To quote Halberstam, they have gained the "perspective of the loser in a world that is interested only in winners [...] and in losing [queer failure] imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being."[221]

After Sabourin's disclosure of the pain they experienced following the *Rock and Ice* article, the film ventures into the broader societal violence Sabourin has endured. A clip shows a close-up of Sabourin's hands, stained with remnants of chalk and swollen from grappling with the hard Arizona rock. However, their fingers are not gripping stone, but typing away on a laptop balanced on a box that, given the brand name (five ten), once held

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[220] Drew Hulsey, "Climbing for Every Body," *Climbing*, August 13, 2021, https://www.climbing.com/people/climbing-for-every-body/.

[221] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 5, 88.

climbing shoes. Sabourin's narration reveals that they are volunteering as a responder for an online crisis chat hotline. Like other people on the hotline, Sabourin has experienced crisis themself. McCord and Clifton cut to a shot of Sabourin sitting on the floor, slumped against a shelf. "There was definitely a time in my life where whenever something went wrong, I took it as proof that I shouldn't have decided to stay around [...] I would imagine escaping when things got tough." The film then transitions to archival footage of Sabourin as a teenager at a track meet, running along the track, then walking across the field after the race, head down, shoulders slumped. Sabourin's voice over relates how they hit a low point in their life as a teenager when people they cared about rejected them for their gender identity. Footage of a teenaged Sabourin rock climbing at an indoor gym plays behind Sabourin, saying that coming out made everywhere they went feel unsafe. Their narration, over more footage of climbing indoors, reveals that during this time they were also raped and threatened with "outing" by a classmate as a teenager. The juxtaposition of Sabourin's words and the images of them climbing, along with the somber music score, again posits that the act of climbing is not the most unsafe aspect of Sabourin's life, but perhaps the only place of refuge. To deal with the stress from these incidents, Sabourin explains that they leaned into their identity as an athlete, hiding their queerness behind the safer persona of a runner and a climber. When a serious hip injury left them without the athletic body they had come to rely on as a coping mechanism, Sabourin attempted suicide.

As Sabourin says at the beginning of the film, being vulnerable can act as a catalyst for change. Many years after their suicide attempt, Sabourin concluded: "The world needs people who are willing to stay when things are hard." From extreme dieting and exercise to achieve the ideal climbing body, to not fitting into the dominant racial, gender, or body

profile, the climbing bodies discussed in this chapter have experienced wounding both physically and socially. However, the woundings Sabourin suffered should not be seen as necessary to perform the vulnerable body. Rather, the vulnerable body is the willingness to remain open and authentically oneself, capable of change but also self-care in the face of violence and abuse. To use Sabourin's words, the vulnerable body enacts "opting in," their choice to keep living after their suicide attempt and to do so in a sustainable and healthy way. The film returns to Cousin of Death, where Sabourin is seen practicing falling from the roof section at the beginning of the film. To the sound of a steadily triumphant soundtrack, Sabourin climbs through the section that had previously frightened them and then up to the anchors at the end of the pitch, casting McCord behind the camera a small smile on the way up. Cutting to a montage of drone shots, the camera captures the canyon bathed in warm light, the rocks glowing orange and yellow above the dark trees far below. No longer a fearsome space, the crag now holds promise and beauty.

Throughout *They/Them*, Sabourin's body performs the vulnerability of admitting fear while climbing, taking time for self-care and recovery, spending time with friends and loved ones both on and off the rock, and exercising in order to maintain a body that will be capable of climbing for the rest of their life. The queer failure of the vulnerable body, to reiterate Halberstam, is "narrative without progress."[222] Neither the *Black Ice* climbers nor Sabourin "progress" the sport in terms of breaking previously held records. There is no final montage in the film of Sabourin completing the Cousin of Death route from bottom to top. *They/Them* ends with shots of Sabourin bouldering in the gym, exercising and climbing with their

[222] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 88.

partner, and giving their climbing partners high-fives and fist bumps while working their project route. *They/Them* ends with Sabourin reaching for self-care rather than the summit.

E. The Film Audience and the Vulnerable Narrative

Black Ice's co-directors, Zachary Barr and Peter Mortimer, and writer Nick Rosen are no strangers to the climbing documentary genre and the audience it attracts. As a creative team, Barr, Mortimer, and Rosen have guided the dominant narratives of climbing culture for the past decade with their documentaries. Films like *The Alpinist* and *Valley Uprising* reinforce such themes as the solo pursuit of pushing past physical and mental limits and risk as an inherent part of the sport. However, Martin's inclusion on the film resulted in a different narrative. As Martin explains in an interview in *Black Ice*, he feels his duty as a black photojournalist is to tell stories that often do not get told about his community. A later quote from Martin in the *Memphis Flyer* reiterates how *Black Ice* differs from other climbing documentaries:

> A lot of climbing films kind of follow the same narrative of: I tried this, I failed, I trained for many years, then I conquered it. Our film is completely outside of that. There's not an end goal. Getting to the top is cool, but it's the things that you went through in your personal life. How did you keep going past that to even get to the base of the mountain, to even begin to climb?[223]

This difference in narrative, focusing on the personal life rather than climbing conquests, subverts the expectations of its target audience i.e. predominantly white rock

[223] Chris McCoy, "Indie Memphis 2021 Thursday: Documentary Delight An Evening of Real Life Stories." *Memphis Flyer*, October 21, 2021, https://www.memphisflyer.com/indie-memphis-2021-thursday-documentary-delight.

climbing and outdoor sports enthusiasts.[224] While Mortimer, Barr, and Rosen's other documentaries perform as typical stoke films, *Black Ice* deviates from this trope as being about the humans that are climbing rather than the climbs that humans are completing. Additionally, as Allison Williams contends in the title of her Outside magazine article: "Stoke Films Are Very White." From the film's explanations of redlining and other racist policies, to featuring the personal life of S'lacio Bankston, a novice ice climber, the film educates its target audience on the difficulties of diversifying the sport, the importance Memphis Rox plays in the South Memphis community, and the privilege some bodies have to travel unafraid into the wilderness. Actual climbing footage makes up only a small portion of the film. The climax of the film is Bankston's emotional sharing of his life experiences rather than his climbing accomplishments. After viewing the film at the American Alpine Club's Craggin' Classic in Bishop, California and listening to Martin speak about the making of the film, the questions and discussion from the (predominantly white) audience had little to do with climbing. Audience members asked how they could make their own home gyms more inclusive and how to support Memphis Rox. Rather than eliciting excitement for ice climbing, the film's narrative motivated action in the realms of equity and inclusivity.

Although *They/Them* offers viewers footage of Sabourin climbing at an elite level, it too fails as a typical stoke film. Like *Black Ice*, the film focusses on Sabourin's personal life, the challenges they have overcome to even make it to the base of the climb. In the film,

[224] The 2019 Outdoor Industry Association and American Alpine Club Demographic surveys report that the majority of climbers are white and male, although the gender gap between male and female climbers is reaching parity. Given these demographics and the exhibition sites for the Reel Rock films (climbing festivals, outdoor sports film festivals, and on the Red Bull sports drink website), and the fact that Mortimer, Rosen, and Barr are also white male climbers, it stands to reason that the target audience would also be majority white.

Sabourin often looks beyond the camera to speak directly to film director and director of photography Blake McCord. The effect is to place the spectator in McCord's position, as if Sabourin is speaking directly to the individual audience member. The intimacy created in such shots allows the viewer to feel as though they are listening to a friend as Sabourin speaks candidly about their struggles with gender dysphoria, eating disorders, and harassment. Additionally, the film uses home footage of Sabourin as a child, further drawing the viewer into Sabourin's life experiences. What is accomplished from these elements is a more complete picture of Sabourin as a complex individual rather than a stereotype. This narrative produces empathy as its affect rather than adrenaline. Sabourin's discussion of harassment from within the climbing community then becomes a call to action to reprehend and prevent such behavior in the future. While the footage of Sabourin's Sedona climb accentuates the beauty of the rock, the inclusion of Sabourin's fear while climbing the route fails to raise the typical excitement stoke. Instead, the climbing becomes a visual representation of Sabourin's struggles in their daily life. Sabourin's partner expresses the feeling conveyed in the film regarding their climbing accomplishments: "I'm always excited when Lor sends their projects because they're excited. But I think something I've noticed, especially in the past year, is just a really good balance of rock climbing and other loves and rest as well." Rather than a climbing film featuring a transgender climber, *They/Them* is a film about the life of a transgender person that happens to feature climbing.

Complicating the messaging of both *Black Ice* and *They/Them* is the overt presence of outdoor clothing brands The North Face and Patagonia. *They/Them* was distributed by Patagonia and exhibited on Patagonia's website and YouTube page. The North Face provided the gear and the funding for the Memphis climbers to travel to Montana. However,

these films also serve the brands' diversity, equity, and inclusivity initiatives. As discussed earlier in the chapter, these outdoor gear companies can read the writing on the wall and know that diversifying their customer base is the only way to ensure longevity. That is not to say that their DEI initiatives are purely acquisitive. However, it should be noted that the bodies in films like *Black Ice* and *They/Them* could become vulnerable to exploitation. More research into how these companies' initiatives, media representation, political lobbying, and funding are shaping narratives of climbing and wilderness is needed.

Despite the push for more inclusive storytelling in climbing documentaries from big outdoor brands, narratives like those in *Black Ice* and *They/Them* are unlikely to dominate anytime soon. In 2022, adventure photographer and filmmaker Jimmy Chin, with *National Geographic*, launched a new series titled, "Edge of the Unknown With Jimmy Chin." As Chin narrates in the introductory montage, the series highlights "the world's greatest adventurers," "redefining what's humanly possible" while they "stare down fear" and "risk everything." *The Alpinist* chronicles Marc-André Leclerc's solo mountaineering adventures leading up to his death climbing a new route in Alaska. In 2022, Reel Rock 16, a compendium of climbing films of which *Black Ice* was a part in 2020, features films about the "longest, most ridiculous crack climb ever attempted," the man who climbs "futuristic boulder problems" and a film starring Alex Honnold and Tommy Caldwell described as a "massive link-up of 17 alpine summits [that] pushes a famed climbing duo to the brink." The stories of climbers pushing the boundaries of possibility and risking death in the process continue to captivate, or, at least generate revenue for the streaming platforms like Disney+, Netflix, and Reel Rock. Films about personal struggles and body image are relegated to

female climbers.[225] The narrative of the vulnerable climbing body is itself vulnerable to consignment to the margins of climbing culture and likely to disappear under the stories of the "greatest adventurers" who "risk everything." The drama is built-in when bodies are placed in extreme environments, facing life or death situations. The spectacle of witnessing the limits of the human body does much of the narrative's heavy-lifting. Popularizing the narrative of the vulnerable body, although valuable for its potential in equity and inclusivity, may never overcome the long-standing fascination with extreme risk and death in climbing.

Both the *Black Ice* and *They/Them* filmmakers recognize the precarity of their place in outdoor adventure films. *Black Ice* ends with Chris Dean explaining that Memphis Rox and its climbers are "the little brothers of rock climbing right now." Dean then appeals to the film's intended audience, the climbing community, saying, "We *need* our family. It's bigger than just diversifying rock climbing. It's providing space to live and to dream." The final image of the film shows the Memphis Rox website and a plea for those watching the film to "Donate Now." As a nonprofit, Memphis Rox stays solvent primarily through donations from the climbing community. Supporting the South Memphis climbing gym not only keeps the space open, it keeps the dream of climbers like Bankston alive. A climber like Bankston would never become one of Chin's "greatest adventurers" by the standards of the current climbing culture. Yet, his journey to Montana and the risk he takes with his emotional vulnerability is every bit as powerful as yet another film of Alex Honnold free soloing some remote rock wall.

At the end of *They/Them*, Sabourin says:

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[225] "RR16," Reel Rock, accessed September 22, 2022, https://reelrocktour.com/products/reel-rock-16-online.

> ‘Sending is a success, but self-care is a process. In the end, the long-term change and day-to-day investment [of self-care] matters so much more [...] You can’t wait for other people to tell you you’re allowed to exist, you have to first decide that you’re allowed to exist and take care of yourself as such. It’s really empowering, I think, just to make that decision [...] I’m like in the full-frontal trust-lean right now. Just like, ‘please, world, don’t drop me on the ground.’”

While Sabourin considers “sending” (climbing a route cleanly) a type of success, their greater goal is giving themself permission to exist and to feel empowered by their existence. The narrative of the vulnerable body, one that encourages process over success, also brings empowerment through its existence. In allowing themselves and their personal stories to be filmed, the participants of *Black Ice and They/Them* foster a narrative that opens the sport to different ways of being and doing that are just as valuable as “crushing” (climbing hard grades well) and risking one’s life. What would climbing culture look like if the prevailing story was one of openness and honesty about the fear involved and the rate of injury and death? What stories of vulnerable bodies do we miss out on because they do not fit the dominant narrative? What would the climbing body look like if it did not have to assimilate? The only way to answer these questions is if more bodies tell the story of vulnerable climbing.

Epilogue

For a moment, my body was suspended in the air, then the soles of my feet were slapping hard onto the rock face in front of me. The rope tied to my harness went taut and the leg loops cinched tight around my thighs. My feet stung with the force of the impact of the fall.

I caught my breath and then called down to my belayer, "Are you good for me to try another?"

He assured me he was, and I climbed back up to my high point. I passed the bolt where the rope was secured with a quick draw that had just caught my fall, and then climbed higher. When I had gone a full body-length past my last secure point, I warned my belayer, took a deep breath, and let myself fall. The time in the air seemed to last an eternity before the rope stopped my fall again.

"Whoa, that was a good one!" The climbing instructor cheered.

I felt a giddy smile stretch across my face. I was doing it! I was letting myself fall and nothing bad had happened. After a few more practice falls, my belayer lowered me to the ground and I untied from the rope, passing the "sharp end" to another of the workshop attendees. Another climber had been filming me on his phone while I was falling. My homework was to watch myself come off the rock again and again as a way to teach my body: "see, it's okay. You can fall and be okay." Watching the grainy images of myself letting go of the rock and letting gravity do its thing, I laughed at how little I had actually fallen. In the moment, I felt like I had been in the air forever, but actually it was only a few seconds, the distance only a few feet.

The group of us, ten or so, led by professional climber Fallon Rowe, were learning how to love the sport again. We had signed up for the "Climbing Mindset and Managing Fear" workshop at the 2021 American Alpine Club Craggin' Classic in Moab, Utah. Prior to the workshop, some participants had taken bad falls, or had lost friends, or had come close to losing their own lives while climbing. The clinic promised to provide strategies for managing fear and evaluating risk while honoring our bodies and minds. While our minds might have known that taking small falls while sport climbing was relatively safe, our bodies remembered those close calls, bad whips, grief, and terror. All around me were climbers who had let down their guard for the day, who told their stories of injury and fear, who let us in on their secret shame, that they were afraid of not being good enough, climbing hard enough, or taking enough risks to be a "real" climber. In their confessions came a revelation: we *all* felt this way.

Throughout this dissertation, I have endeavored to make sense of the stories our bodies tell in relationship to the narratives that sometimes drive us, the narratives that tell us to risk more, try harder, be someone else. In so doing, I have witnessed how the climbing body affects those dominant narratives and is affected by them in turn. The body is not merely a vessel for communication, but is active in the construction, reinforcement, or disruption of the very stories that shape our behavior. The body *does* something, whether we are conscious of it or not. That has been a secondary intention of this research, to identify the narratives that our bodies reinforce or disrupt or complicate so that we can be aware of the effect our bodies are having on our culture and identity. We can more consciously choose which narratives we wish to replicate when we understand what those stories might be.

We might be forgiven, however, for not knowing what stories our bodies are actually telling because those stories do not exist in a vacuum. As this research has demonstrated, the medium through which the body is experienced and that medium's audience affect the story of the body. Moreover, the medium plays a role in which bodies it includes: the 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell, for example, excludes gender nonbinary bodies; documentary climbing films can tell the stories of the actual climbers themselves, while theater relies on actors to represent those climbers, as with Greig's play *Touching the Void*. Different bodies also tell different stories when they fail to conform to the dominant narrative of what a climbing body "should" be and do. An area for future research is delving deeper into different climbing bodies: differently abled climbers (as seen with S'lacio Bankston in *Black Ice*), female and female-presenting climbers, plus-sized climbers, and climbers of different racial and ethnic identities. This dissertation has only engaged with climbing stories in theater, a live outdoor climbing competition, and documentary films in a primarily North American context. Social media, indoor climbing competitions, climbing games (digital and analog), and other media that depict the climbing body are areas for further study. Additionally, more complete histories of climbing competitions, festivals, documentary films, site-specific theater performances, and indoor climbing spaces, both within North America and globally, are needed.

As Chapter 2 and 3 touched on, the role of big outdoor clothing and gear brands like REI, The North Face, and Patagonia, are an ever-present factor in determining the narratives of the climbing body. From providing funding for expeditions and documentary films to fostering diversity initiatives, these companies have shaped and will continue to shape climbing culture. How we tell stories about nature and the outdoors, what bodies are allowed

access to such spaces, and how those bodies are to perform in those spaces is rapidly changing due to the influence of companies in the outdoor adventure sports industry. This is not to say that their influence is inherently negative; after all, the Memphis climbers would not have experienced ice climbing in Montana without the support of The North Face. However, like having an awareness of the historically-rooted narratives that often drive the bodies in a sport, knowing how these companies are affecting climbing stories, and the bodies that tell those stories, bears further consideration.

The stories presented here in this dissertation only reflect a few of the narratives and bodies the climbing world has to offer, chosen largely from my own perspective on the sport as both an academic and a climber. It is my hope that this research can offer insight to climbers as to how their bodies are shaping the stories they want told. The climbing body has also proven fertile ground for a more complex understanding of the performing arts, in particular how the relationship between the body and the audience actualizes narratives. In a broader sense, this project also offers ways to consider how bodies, and the mediums in which they are presented, perform narratives in our cultures and societies. The enactment of such narratives often results in an unanticipated, or previously unseen, performance of the body: when taking risks to prove one's masculinity the body performs martyrdom, pushing the limits of the sport breaks boundaries between the body and its environment, and the implementation of diversity initiatives uncovers the vulnerable body. Bodies can perform the overarching story *and* their own narrative. Climbing serves as a microcosm for interrogating how bodies reinforce, disrupt, and complicate the narratives of our daily lives.

For me, climbing began as a way of losing myself in thrilling stories of risk and adventure, and then a means of challenging myself physically and finding like-minded

people. It has since become a journey of how to honor my mind and body as a climber, how to allow my body to tell its own story. If you have a body that climbs, you have a climbing body. If you have a climbing body, that body has a story to tell.

Appendix A

Survey Questions from the 2021 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell Competition. Survey entitled: "The Climber as Actor: The Climbing Body in Performance - 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell"

1. In which competition did you participate this year (2021)?
    a. 12-hour competition
    b. 24-hour competition
    c. Both the 12 and 24-hour competitions
2. How did you first hear about the 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell?
3. Why did you decide to compete this year (2021)?
4. Please describe in as much detail as possible how you imagined your experience in the competition would go this year (2021) prior to actually competing.
5. How did you experience the relationship between your body and the rock over the course of the competition?
6. How did you experience your relationship with your partner over the course of the competition?
7. How did you experience the passage of time over the course of the competition?
8. How did you experience "nature," whatever that means to you, over the course of the competition?
9. At any point during the competition, did you experience what Maria Coffey describes as: "Focus, peak experience, epiphany, the reintegrated moment, flow, in the zone—different names that convey the same meaning: the sense of being intensely alive. The moment when life is now, without past or future, beyond earthly mundanities. An intoxicating state. A fleeting sense of immortality"?

a. Yes

b. No

C. I’m not sure

10. If you answered “yes” to the previous question, what events led up to this moment? How would you describe this moment in your own words? What happened after this experience?

11. If you answered “no” or “I’m not sure” to the previous question, was there ever a time that you have had this experience? What events led up to this moment? How would you describe this moment in your own words? What happened after this experience?

Appendix B

2021 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell Climber's Creed:

Partner.

The hour is upon us.

The sun has risen in the east

And desire rises in my soul.

Now we too shall rise

On walls of stone.

Now we crimp

'Till we crush bone.

Now we send

'Till cows come home.

Partner!

I ask of you these things:

Give me ample slack.

Do not give me ample Covid

And

DO NOT FREAKING DROP ME!

Partner!

The wind is nigh in four knots,

Though our knots are not yet knotted.

‘Tis better to check thine knots than not

Lest we rot and be forgotten.

Partner.

I chose you not for thine strength and will

But for thine determination and skill.

We battle our own battle.

We fight out own fight.

When the sun rises at dawn tomorrow

We rise like zombies from the bowels of night.

Partner,

Are we goats?

Nay!

Partner,

Are we llamas?

Nay!

Are we climbers?

Nay.

We are more than that.

We are warriors.

We are the North Forty variation.

[Too soon?]

And yes, partner,

We are jungle cats in leotards.

We are the terror of the Savannah.

Oooh yes. We are lions.

We are lions!

I'm a lion.

WE ARE LIONS IN A FIELD OF LIONS!

LET'S ROAR!

Appendix C

Film Titles

The Alpinist (2021)

An American Ascent (2014)

Artifishal (2019)

Black Ice (2020)

Break on Through (1973)

Break on Through (2018)

Brothers of Climbing (2017)

Climbing Blind (2020)

Closing the Gender Gap (2019)

DamNation (2014)

Das blaue Licht (The Blue Light) (1932)

The Dawn Wall (2018)

Deep and Light (1950)

Der Berg Des Schicksals (The Mountain of Destiny) (1924)

Der heilige Berg (The Holy Mountain) (1926)

The Edge of the Unknown with Jimmy Chin (2022)

The Eiger Sanction (1975)

El Capitan (1978)

The Endless Summer (1966)

Farther Than the Eye Can See (2003)

First Ascent (1981)

Free Solo (2018)

The Gimp Monkeys (2012)

Hoop Dreams (1994)

King Lines (2007)

Leche y Miel (2016)

Light (2021)

The Limbless Mountaineer (2014)

Masters of Stone (1991)

Meru (2015)

Missing in Action (1984)

Mountain of Storms (1972)

Muhammed Ali: In His Own Words (1998)

Olympia (1938)

Rambo (1982)

Rampage (1999)

Showdown at Horseshoe Hell (2015)

Stumped (2017)

They/Them (2021)

Touching the Void (2003)

Valley Uprising (2014)

Venus and Serena (2012)

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