

# TRANSGRESSING GEOGRAPHICAL AND GENDER BORDERS: A STUDY OF ALTERNATIVE MANHOODS IN YOSEMITE'S CLIMBING HISTORY

## TRANSGRESIÓN DE LAS FRONTERAS GEOGRÁFICAS Y DE GÉNERO: ESTUDIO DE LAS MASCULINIDADES ALTERNATIVAS EN LA HISTORIA DE LA ESCALADA EN YOSEMITE

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### Abstract

The last few years have been eventful as far as mountaineering in Yosemite is concerned with the soloing of el Cap and the freeing of the Dawn Wall. The documentary film *Valley Uprising: Yosemite's Rock Climbing Revolution* (Mortimer et al. 2014) not only traces the history of climbing in the Park but offers a more profound analysis of the evolution of society and gender roles in America in the last half-century, showing that, although the Valley is fairly isolated from urban communities, it is by no means disconnected from the ideological, political and cultural revolutions that the country has lived through. Yosemite is, in actual fact, a liminal space where gender roles and identities are contested, contracted and re-formulated. This article analyses three differing climbing styles that have dominated Yosemite in the 20th century, to prove that they overstep the physical borders of the territory and that each becomes paradigmatic of the dissenting masculinities that have continuously threatened the establishment outside the geographical limits of the Park. This genealogy of the particular masculinities of each group allows us to see that these manhoods—perceived as deviant or dissenting outside the Park—were, for insiders, the normative modes of being a man.

**Keywords:** masculinities, liminality, power, subversion, counterculture.

## Resumen

Los últimos años han estado plagados de acontecimientos relevantes en el mundo de la escalada, tales como la escalada en libre del Dawn Wall o la escalada en solitario del Cap. El documental *Valley Uprising: Yosemite's Rock Climbing Revolution* (Mortimer et al. 2014) no solo narra la historia de la escalada en Yosemite, sino que además ofrece un profundo análisis de la evolución de la sociedad americana y de los roles de género en el siglo pasado. El documental muestra a la perfección que, a pesar de su aislamiento geográfico, Yosemite no está completamente aislado o al margen de las revoluciones ideológicas, políticas y culturales que sacudieron al país en el siglo XX. Yosemite es, en realidad, un espacio liminal en el que se han cuestionado, y aún se cuestionan, desafían y reformulan, tanto el género como la identidad. Este artículo analiza las tres escuelas de escalada que han dominado este deporte en Yosemite durante el siglo XX para demostrar que todas ellas traspasan los límites físicos del territorio donde se practica este deporte, ya que cada una de estas escuelas representa a una de las masculinidades alternativas que continuamente desafían y amenazan el status quo fuera de los bordes que delimitan el espacio natural. Esta genealogía de las masculinidades de Yosemite permite entender que estas maneras de ser un hombre, percibidas como aberrantes o disidentes fuera de este microcosmos, eran vistas como normativas por los individuos que pertenecían a cada una de estas escuelas de escalada.

**Palabras clave:** masculinidades, liminalidad, poder, subversión, contracultura.

The last few years have been eventful as far as mountaineering in Yosemite is concerned: the success of the film *Free Solo* (Chin and Vasarhelyi 2019) in the BAFTAs and Oscars, the freeing<sup>1</sup> of the Dawn Wall (and the accompanying film documenting the feat), the death of legendary climber and BASE jumper Dean Potter, and the release of the documentary film *Valley Uprising: Yosemite's Climbing Revolution* (Mortimer et al. 2014), point towards a growing interest not just in the sport but in the Valley. While people have seen climbing as pure escapism for decades, and while they have seen the Park as a peaceful retreat from the hustle and bustle of modern-day city life, both the sport and Yosemite are by no means disconnected from the ideological, political and cultural revolutions that the country has gone through. The borders that separate the National Park from urban spaces are far more permeable and flexible than what we have been led to believe. In fact, it may be argued that Yosemite “was actually intensely

engaged with the broader world” (Taylor 2011: 3) and can be viewed as a microcosm reflecting social and cultural changes, a liminal space, and “a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise” (Turner 1987: 7).

Through a study of the history of climbing in Yosemite from the 1950s to the 1990s, this article traces an archaeology not just of the different groups that dominated the sport in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but it also creates a genealogy of the countercultural movements that surpassed the geographical borders of the Park, permeating the sporting practice and gender identities of the three elite groups that in turn exercised power over the Valley for 60 years: the Beats, the Stone Masters, and the Stone Monkeys. The analysis of these gender identities and modes of being will centre on middle-class white masculinities, as the sport itself, probably due to its origins, attracted this demographic, especially during the 1950s, 70s, and 80s.

The article will first analyse Yosemite's liminal character and its potential as a significant and transitional scenario where limits are blurred, where the canonical meanings of manhood can be negotiated or redefined, and where novel understandings of what being a man is can take root. The second part of the article will be a study of the three most significant groups that made Yosemite their home and of the masculinities associated with each of them. Special attention will be paid to the correlation between the three groups and the countercultural movements that were questioning established gender roles during the 1950s, 70s, and 90s and to the changeability of the concepts of hegemonic and subordinated masculinities. While Yosemite's extreme masculinities would be considered subordinated, marginalised, or rejected as an acceptable way of being a ‘man’ (Connell 2005: 75) and deviant within an urban context, they become hegemonic masculinities or “configurations of gender practice [...] which guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (77) within the borders of the National Park.

Still, as the article will argue, this hegemony of supposedly subordinated masculinities within the Park is short lived for, as Raewyn Connell points out, hegemony is not a monolithic entity, but “open to historical change” so that “there could be a struggle for hegemony, and older forms of masculinity might be displaced by new ones” (2005: 832-833). This fact explains the rotation of power that allowed the three groups to unseat their predecessors and impose their own ideologies of gender and sport, an argument that serves as the organising principle of this article.

## Liminality, Identity, and Geographical Borders

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, society viewed untamed nature, and especially mountains, as dangerous, unpleasant and undesirable places to inhabit; writers talked about savage groups living there, about monsters and dragons using the peaks as dwelling-places which would be better avoided by any God-fearing man (Macfarlane 2009: 14-15). It was not until the coming of Romanticism that this view changed and that the wonder of mountains became part of our culture. As Fletcher explains, “in the western view, the nature-culture division is seen as characterised at the extremes, by spaces of ‘civilization’ and ‘wilderness’” (2014: 115) which are clearly defined and separate from one another. In the present day this idea of mountains as awe-inspiring places has become ingrained in the popular imagination and it has strengthened with the passing of time and with the urbanization of our lives: the more we live in the city, the more we yearn to escape to the mountains to experience the wild and the wilderness (Macfarlane 2009: 15). Thus, because they are spaces away “from society, [...] an ‘out-of-ordinary’ experience, [...] [they are] subversive of the central values of society, whereby individuals are free to choose and seek liminoid experiences on a voluntary basis” (Foster and McCabe 2015: 49).

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While we consider mountains as the epitome of all that is opposed to city life and civilization, they are, in fact, a cultural product, a reflection of our own experiences and memories. As MacFarlane explains, “what we call a mountain is [...] in fact a collaboration of the physical form of the world with the imagination of humans— a mountain of the mind” (2009: 19). When we refer to mountains as wild, savage or bleak, we do not really describe their intrinsic attributes, but our own culturally-dependent views on them. When we talk about National Parks, this “disjunction between the imagined and the real” (Macfarlane 2009: 19) is even more marked: places like Yosemite or Yellowstone are not really natural but cultural spaces with clearly delineated borders and limits. Even if they are marketed as natural spaces, they are in fact, “small pockets of wilderness within an overarching human landscape [...] that [have] been extensively mapped and managed, tidied and trimmed, purged of much of their ‘wilder’ elements” (Fletcher 2014: 118). Although we are told that they are savage and wild, the National Parks are not absolute or natural spaces, but clear cultural spaces stemming from human intervention upon nature, proof that “an ostensibly wild, unruly ‘nature’ has been transformed into our contemporary concept of the ‘environment’, a domesticated landscape to be managed by and for human interests” (Escobar in Fletcher 2014: 118). Hence, National Parks are an intersection of nature and culture, of wild and urban, they are an in-betweenness, a junction between untouched nature and cities, standing at the edge of both and none, areas in which boundaries are

blurred. While Natural Parks are liminal spaces, a wilderness where the rules of urban life do not entirely apply (so unruly and extreme masculinities are perceived as normative here) they are still not completely untouched by society. The boundaries separating them are flexible, which means that the inhabitants of the Natural Parks, as much as they think that they live on the margins, are still influenced by social and cultural movements (in this case, countercultural movements). Thus, National Parks are not just liminoid spaces because the climber's body is in conversation both with the rock and the air (Varley 2011: 92), but they are also the stages on which climbers perform their identities as the National Parks are "environmentally, socially and physically quite distinct from whatever their [the climbers'] versions of everyday life happen to be" (93) while still being permeable and susceptible to the influence of cultural and social movements beyond their physical and geographical borders.

Furthermore, as Varley explains, "the liminality of [...] [Yosemite], poised as it is on the margins of so many facets of modern life, promotes a sense of *communitas* and belonging, woven together with an adventure-narrative drawn from the activity's historical and cultural origins" (2011: 87). This article argues that the three groups of climbers studied are examples of the spontaneous *communitas* that inevitably emerge from liminal spaces and experiences: all of them are a "communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders" (Turner 1995: 96) after moving or being pushed towards the margins of mainstream society. In fact, as Fletcher explains, "ecotourism", including adventure sports like climbing, "is strongly associated with the counterculture [and] practitioners commonly describe their pursuits as a form of escape from or resistance to aspects of mainstream modern social life with which they are dissatisfied" (2014: 91-92). Soon these peripheral groups or spontaneous *communitas* become hegemonic within the borders of the liminal space they inhabit and, after a time, see their dominance challenged by peripheral groups who move from the borders of their *communitas* towards the centre.

This article, then, posits the idea that Yosemite's (and by extension all National Parks') liminality, its lying in the in-between, its being a point of intersection amidst society and wild nature, confers upon it a further layer of significance; further, it contends that, as Westaway explains in his study of mountaineering and war trauma, its strategic position as distinct but still related to mainstream society turns it into a "liminal and [...] liberal space [...] [which] enable[d] the exploration of realms outside the economy and state regulation" (2013: 174), allowing for the rejection of canonical values and the construction of new ways of being. Moreover, I argue that the act of climbing itself has not only been used as a means to build one's identity, but that it has been redefined by every new generation of Yosemite

climbers so that it can be now viewed “as an alternative countercultural activity embodying a fundamental critique of many tenets of western civilization” (Fletcher 2014: 9).

### **The Beats and the Decline of Climbing Clubs**

Climbing had its origins in Europe in the 1700s; the Romantics were the creators of “a new activity— mountaineering” (Bainbridge 2012: 1) that allowed men to come into touch with Nature and its ‘Sublimity’, creating a new identity linked to this new activity. This pastime appealed to Romantics since it tapped into the idea of a Sublime experience that stirs up both fear and delight in the individual. Authors like “Burke insisted [...] that pain, terror and delight occupy the same space” (Colley 2010: 15) and that space is the mountain, while Ruskin argued that experiencing fear (and consequently the Sublime), an inextricable part of climbing practice, was a desirable rite of passage in the manhood-acquiring process (Hansen 1995: 321).

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Climbing, in its origin, was taken up by the new upper-class professionals (doctors, teachers, etc.) as a means to distinguish themselves from the aristocracy, a social group that, at the time, was seen as corrupt and disinterested in the progress of the Empire. This genteel middle-class who controlled “unprecedented wealth and power” (Hansen 1995: 306) needed to find a “range of cultural codes of status, gentility and masculinity” (Hansen 1995: 306) as well as cultural practices that allowed them to define themselves as the new ruling elite.

From the mountains of Europe climbing travelled to the USA, where the abruptness of the landscape attracted men like the Scottish-American adventurer John Muir, who is often considered to be the father of American National Parks (McGuckin 2015). For more than 80 years —1870s to 1940s— the history of climbing in Yosemite was marked by the dominance of clubs, like the Sierra Club founded in 1892 by Muir. These associations saw the sport as “practice for mountaineering with a conservative focus on safety” (Mortimer et al. 2014: min. 9) and “disciplined members to an ethos of sober fun” (Taylor 2011: 107). The clubs were “venues for socializing as well as climbing” (62) where banquets, meetings and parties were not just common, but expected. The heterosocial (heterogenous) nature of these organisations is extremely interesting as it clearly contrasts with the European clubs on which the American climbing clubs were modelled: while “London’s Alpine Club was a fraternal organization, an all-male enclave that excluded women until the 1970s [...] North American clubs were normally inclusive” (65) and usually encouraged families to join them. More importantly, these clubs not only included men and women, but promoted the

idea that all members were equal independently of their gender and climbing ability. Thus, more experienced or skilled members were expected to help, instruct and support those who did not possess the same amount of talent, a policy which “for those few who had ability and ambition [...] represented a tyrannical force that restrained and even coerced” (107). This meant that many young and ambitious climbers started abandoning these clubs. As Roper, one of the original Yosemite Beats, explains, “we appreciated those groups, for they had taught us well [...] yet we had also come to realize that the club members tended to socialize rather than climb. Rather than seek new adventures they generally preferred the status quo” (1998: 106).

Most of these dissident climbers came from a Beat movement which “called on young people to shake the conformity and explore new ways of life” (Mortimer et al. 2014: min. 8), stemming from a counterculture characterised by a “distinctive individuality” (Holmes 2001: 10) that clearly clashed with the post-war American values of solidarity (Nash 2006: 54). As Chouinard, one of the most prominent climbers of this generation, explains, they were rebellious youths, disenchanted with the materialism and alienation of consumer culture and, as Fletcher explains, inspired by Kerouac and “his call for a rejection of mainstream sedentary society and the embrace of an itinerant life” (2014: 91), they flocked to the Valley in search of a space that they could call their own and in which they could express their own identity, forming “a separate society, living on the boulder-strewn slopes above the flats where the tourists stayed” (Denny et al. 2007). These Beat “pre-eminent climbers [who] were individualists [...] read widely about European traditions [...] and imbibed their climbing values from the Victorians” (Taylor 2011: 110), enforcing a total break with the co-operative spirit of the American climbing clubs and a return to Romantic ideas (Colley 2010: 15; Westaway 2013: 174).

Royal Robbins was the guru, spiritual leader and climber extraordinaire for this new independent climbing community, the Yosemite Beats (Isserman 2017: 322-324). After leaving the scouts and the Sierra Club when he felt that traditional organizations stifled his creativity (Taylor 2011: 146), this fiercely individualistic man in search of a ‘philosophy’ of life (Holmes 2001: 11) found it in the Victorian climbing tradition and in Ulman’s praise of “the sturdy Brits” (Taylor 2011: 150)— who used climbing to define their identity through a type of muscular Christianity based “in the fervent belief that physical exercise and competitive games [...] would fortify the human spirit against the beguiling allurements of big-city life” (Baker 2007: 3). According to Taylor, “Ulman honoured a masculine form of climbing that stressed mastery of the self” (2011: 150) arguing that climbing was “a great challenge to their own qualities as *men*; a chance to conquer

their own weaknesses, ignorance and fear; a struggle to match achievement to aspiration and reality to dream” (Ullman 1941: 22, emphasis in original). Robbins became obsessed with this ethos and turned these century-old ideas into the cornerstone of his identity (Taylor 2011: 151) transforming his sporting practice into “an elevated, almost spiritual endeavour” (Mortimer et al. 2014: min. 25), an ecstatic experience, in consonance with Kerouac’s men in *The Dharma Bums* — one of the most influential books for the Yosemite Beats (Block 2015)—, who claimed that “the closer you get to real matter, rock air fire and wood, boy, the more spiritual the world is” (Kerouac 2008: 157).

Under these influences, the Beats saw mountains as the landscape upon which to inscribe their identity in opposition to the bourgeois values and lives of their parents. Mountains then became liminal spaces “marking a spatial transition from one milieu to another, or margins or peripheries reflecting socio-spatial exteriority” (Fourny 2013: 12) and this became the Beats’s mark of Otherness: in Yosemite they could express a non-urban Victorian-inspired identity which stood in clear opposition to the hegemonic manhood of the all-American white-collar breadwinner.

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Like the Victorians before, the Beats used both the sport and the natural space to distinguish themselves from other social classes and groups which still flocked to the Valley during the weekend. The encounter between these two clashing groups meant that Yosemite became a liminoid space where “relations between parties are established and where, at the same time, through this process, the parties present are redefined” (Fourny 2013: 10), where they could live “immersed in a lived critique of routinised everyday life” (Varley 2011: 87) and where they could resist and question the attempts at domination by hegemonic masculinities.

With Robbins at their head, the Beats’ lives and sporting practice revolved around a “homosocial ideal of manly individualism” (Taylor 2011: 181), a homogenous (in class, gender and race) counterculture that despised mainstream values and “defied contemporary social conventions by tossing away the career and family prototype of the ‘American Dream’” (Hanson 2011: 1). In their rejection of the values of their middle-class parents, “the young men of Beat culture [...] valorised masculinity and bonded primarily with other young men [...] [contributing] significantly to their marginalization of women” (Kearney 2017: 49-50). Thus, during the Golden Age of Yosemite, “climbing evolved from a heterosocial avocation that stressed safety and group fun into a quest that reflected the concerns of extremely ambitious individuals in homosocial enclaves” (Taylor 2011: 147). Consequently, this Beat masculinity which had started out as subordinated outside the borders of the Park soon became hegemonic. As Taylor explains “their [Beat] deeds and words revealed that, while many yearned for ‘the freedom of the hills’,

all nevertheless functioned within a stridently-patrolled social system” (2006: 192). In fact, Robbins's Beat rejection of mainstream culture, his Victorian-infused view of Nature, and of sport as a manhood-acquiring process reigned over Yosemite and the sport for more than 20 years as the normative and prescriptive climbing style and identity, until a new generation, who had been relegated to a position of subordination, took over the Valley.

### Along Came the Vandals: The Rise of the Stone Masters

Robbins's dominance over Yosemite was challenged by one of his former rope-brothers, Warren Harding. While Robbins saw climbing as a spiritual experience which elevated the spirit, Harding “pursued hard climbing and hard drinking with equal commitment” (Taylor 2011: 153). His ascents were not just risky but lacked any of the careful planning of the Beats which meant using as many bolts, pitons or screws as necessary, thus ‘defacing’ Robbins's pure walls.

While Harding's style was largely mistrusted by climbers, it was his lifestyle and personality that endured in Camp 4.<sup>2</sup> With the dawn of the 1970s, the times started to catch up with the Beats, who were now abandoning the Valley. They started looking back at their glorious deeds with nostalgia, signalling the beginning of the myth of the Golden Age of Climbing in Yosemite, a nomenclature that not only frames “the Beat era as an apogee [but] also made Beat values normative and, by implication, relegated other views and groups to signs of declension” (Taylor 2011: 190). The exodus of Beats out of the Valley signalled the moment for peripheral groups to take over and “in the early 1970s a fresh crop of climbers began to trickle into Yosemite” (Mortimer et al. 2014: min. 38), heirs of Harding's wild lifestyle: the *dirtbag* Stone Masters. During the 1970s “in camps and on walls, younger climbers were asserting a new cultural framework for nature play, one that seemed to conflict with the traditional values of older climbers” (Taylor 2006: 196). Thus, once more, a subordinated masculinity (Stone Masters) displaces the dominant masculinity (Beats) and becomes hegemonic.

While the Beats viewed climbing as an ascetic experience that elevated them, Jim Birdwell —“the wise elder of this new Valley clan” (Mortimer et al. 2014: min. 39)— argued that climbing “had become a cause to live for— a way to prove the freedom of my mind” (Birdwell in Taylor 2011: 196). As heirs to Harding, this new group of climbers sought to find ever-more perilous routes (Taylor 2011: 196), raising the stakes of the sport and imposing a new style and a new level of athleticism (Mortimer et al. 2014: min. 45) which were a reaction against the normative way to climb that had reigned over the Valley for twenty years. Their drinking, drug-taking, and their fast and risky climbing came to challenge the

purist, contained, and philosophical Beat style. By the 1970s, the Victorian idea that “a gentleman risked his reputation if he acted irresponsibly” which the Beat had adopted as their own, was being displaced by the idea that “notoriety came only to those that pushed the boundaries” since “danger was incrementally becoming an essential element of adventure” (Taylor 2006: 205-206).

The Beats, as marginal and subordinate as they had started out, had become normative in the climbing world, as evidenced by the “1971 *Mountain* magazine cover featuring four European climbers in matching sweaters before the North face of the Eiger” (Taylor 2011: 210). This image attested to the normalization of the Beat style as the reigning climbing practice in outdoor sports. Birdwell appropriated this image and subrogated it when, in 1975, he posed in front of The Nose with his two climbing partners, all of them clad in hippie clothing, smoking cigarettes and defiantly looking into the camera. This photo followed their one-day ascent of The Nose, and the subversion of the asceticism of the Beats “underscored the degree to which the climb was as much an aesthetic statement as a technical feat” (Taylor 2011: 211), a challenge to the Beat dominance over the Valley.

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By the time the Stone Masters established themselves as the reigning group in Yosemite, it was not just the Beat Golden Age that had passed, but also the American Dream with “the cultural rift in America [...] growing wider” (Mortimer et al. 2014: min. 37). The 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of countercultures that questioned authority in ways that the Beats had not. Counterculture was based on the idea of breaking with the alienating institutions of mainstream society and its outdated notions of manhood, and while the archetypical image of the hippie (long hair, beard, flowery shirts and fringe vests) might not seem traditionally masculine, the fact is that “the revitalization of masculinity formed an important dimension of [the] countercultural movement” (Hodgdon 2003: 112) to which hippies subscribed. The hippies felt that the traditional social institutions (Hodgdon 2002: 384) were responsible for the post-war crisis of masculinity and for the lack of spirituality in an industrialized consumer society. Thus, they proposed two possible alternatives for the hippie revitalization of gender: anarchism and mysticism (Hodgdon 2002: 385; 2003: 112). While mystical hippies strove to recover the human connection with God and the Universe through various means (drugs, eastern religions and communal living), the anarchist hippies, who “saw freedom as the total absence of imposed authority” (Hodgdon 2002: 385), opted for *dirtdragging* and an outlaw lifestyle.

The anarchist movement believed that the image of the man as the breadwinner was more repressive than liberating or asserting, for it implied the subjection of men to a higher authority in the workplace in the name of economic enrichment (Hodgdon

2002: 384; 2003: 112). Money was the root of all evil, the cause of the crisis of masculinity and so they sought to love without it (Hodgdon 2002: 384; 2003: 112). The Stone Masters —“connected to the West Coast’s cultural capital in the San Francisco Bay Area” (Chaundy-Smart 2015: 73) and living in a liminal space as Yosemite was, with its permeable ‘borders’ which allowed for the exchange of ideas—created their own anarchist collective around Camp 4 and the figure of Birdwell, “who looked every inch the counterculture hero” (Fawcett 2011: 51). The most influential anarchist collective in the urban area closest to Yosemite, San Francisco, were the Diggers, a group established in 1966 and which professed admiration for the dispossessed, racial and social minorities, outlaws and criminals, as groups that had maintained their marginal character and their individuality in the face of mainstream bourgeois pressure to conform (Hodgdon 2002: 385). The Stone Masters, heavily influenced by the Diggers, “cultivated an outlaw masculine ideal that valorised brotherly generosity, visionary artistry, candour, indifference to authority and social connections, and trust in the legitimacy of one’s own impulses” (Hodgdon 2003: 113) while keeping “pace with the rest of society in questioning authority, consuming intoxicants, and using leisure to define themselves” (Taylor 2011: 198), turning climbing into both their identity and profession (Fawcett 2011: 52).

As hippies “sought to reclaim an ‘authentic’ and ‘natural’ masculinity by constructing a new society” (Hodgdon 2002: 385), the Stone Masters transformed Camp 4 into a place the Beats would no longer recognize, morphing it into the new pilgrimage destination for youths eager to explore and experience the *dirtbag* life. As Ron Fawcett explains “reaching Camp 4, Yosemite’s infamous *dirtbag* campground, felt like reaching the Promised Land” (Fawcett 2011: 44), a micro-society built up around Birdwell and his particular brand of hippie masculinity, a spontaneous community.

The twilight of the Stone Masters came in the 1980s, when the group began to separate from the philosophy that had been at the core of their foundation. Some of the members of the clan started getting media attention and publicity contracts, leading to a split: while “many [...] embraced this emerging trend of sport climbing which involved competitions on artificial walls” (Mortimer et al. 2014: min. 58), others despised this professionalization of what had originated as a counterculture movement. The Stone Masters were no longer the anarchist hippies who constructed a Promised Land in Yosemite (Fawcett 2011: 44), but an elite group of athletes with contracts signed with leading brands and star appearances on television.

But it was not just the Stone Masters that had changed, Yosemite itself had also suffered a major transformation, becoming a tourist attraction complete with hotels and restaurants and losing a part of its character as a liminal space, a realm of possibility

and intersection. This change in the landscape and the change in their climbing philosophy brought the Stone Masters' reign over the Valley to an abrupt end.

### Yosemite in the 1990s: Grunge and the StoneMonkeys

After the Stone Masters abandoned their lives of hard climbing and wild excesses for a life of sponsorship and publicity deals, Yosemite saw the arrival of “a critical mass of ambitious young climbers [who] revived the Valley scene” (Mortimer et al. 2014: min. 65), a group of young men and women described as “a right bunch of misfits” (min. 66) that would change the reigning ideas about the sport and its homosocial character, a new generation of climbers which was hugely *influenced by* and *influential on* the gender identity embedded in all fields of the grunge subculture.

The Stone Monkeys mostly belonged to what has been known as the ‘Generation X’, which, drawing from Sally Kane’s ideas, Callais defines as a group of Americans born between 1965 and 1980 typically characterized by cynicism, political apathy and a disdain for authority (2012: 6). This generation is better known for its actors —Johnny Depp, Winona Rider or River Phoenix— and grunge music personalities —Nirvana’s Kurt Cobain or Eddie Vedder from Pearl Jam— young men and women who publicly displayed a gender identity which frontally opposed the hypermasculine attitude of the rock bands of the 1970s and 1980s. Their attitude was soon labelled as grunge and it

was the ultimate expression and fusion of most of the defining cultural, ideological and social threads of the modern western world. Feminism, liberalism, irony, apathy, cynicism/idealism (those opposite sides of one frustrated coin), anti-authoritarianism, wry post-modernism, and not least a love of dirty, abrasive music; grunge reconciled all these into a seminal whole. (McManus 2008)

Both the Generation X actors and the lead singers of grunge bands became the representatives of this new way of being: women were now “intelligent, non-conformist, cool” (McManus 2008), while (white middle-class) males came “to impersonate the new type of man, torn angrily between hegemonic masculinity and the ‘new men’ of the 1970s, and [...] the ideal man of the ‘post-feminist’ era” (Lay 2000: 235). A plethora of academic articles and books have proved that grunge icons like Eddie Vedder or Kurt Cobain were not just fiercely feminist but displayed a brand of masculinity that consciously moved away from the macho aesthetics of rock and into a more fluid and less restrictive understanding of gender. It can even be argued that, in fact, “grunge masculinity provides new modes of masculine performativity that do not require the subjugation of the feminine” (Johnson 2014: 53).

Such a construction of gender is also present in Yosemite: torn between the assertively masculine Beat model and the fiercely homosocial world of the Stone Masters, the Stone Monkeys were also trying to come to terms with the irruption of women into the elite climbing world and the subsequent disappearance of its homosocial subculture. Climbing has been, from its origins, a male-dominated sport (Plate 2007: 4) not only because male participants have always greatly outnumbered female participants but also because “although many women are involved, the sport retains a particularly male image and culture” (Robinson 2008: i) associated with concepts like risk, discipline, strength and athleticism that is only now starting to be challenged.

In Yosemite the Beat group was “overwhelmingly young, single and male [...] a homosocial hierarchy with the strongest enjoying the greatest prestige” (Taylor 2011: 140) and where “the few women [present] were wives or dates” (142) who would usually try climbing to accompany their ‘men’. Thus, although some women like Elizabeth Robbins, Jan Baker or Penny Carr did excel at the sport, their feats were always obscured by that of their male counterparts. Similarly, Beverly Johnson and Lynn Hill had been a part of the Stone Masters, although their gender had pushed them towards the margins of a group Hill describes as “a fraternity of men, [...] [where] there was little encouragement or, frankly, inclination for women to participate” (Taylor 2011: 221). Moreover, top athletes like Birdwell saw Stone Masters female climbers more as pets than competitors (218-219). The routes themselves were a testimony of a subordinate/hegemonic masculinity that still relied heavily on the objectification of female bodies, with routes bearing names like Jugs, The Cuntress, or Nipples, and with panties and dildos being left at the top of routes as a testament to male prowess both on and off the walls (222). It was not until the 1990s that Hill was taken seriously as a sportsperson: soon she became “the top athlete in the world” (232) and her triumphs in El Cap and the World Cup favoured the incorporation of even more women to the sport as climbers in their own right.

The permeable borders of Yosemite meant that both the success of female climbers and the changing ideology of gender embedded in the grunge masculinity model affected the Stone Monkeys and their gender identity and climbing practice. In the same way that grunge masculinity is seen as “incorporating all extremes, the ‘macho’ and the softie, everything to the right degree” (Lay 2000: 235) in its “disavowal of the patriarchy perpetuated by glam metal cock rock” (Johnson 2014: 54), the Stone Monkeys’s identity and climbing style is also a palimpsest which rejects the homosocial element of the climbing culture, while still retaining and embracing some of the Beat and StoneMaster ideas. Just as “the grunge subgenre of rock emphasized a rejection of many of the musical and cultural values

of glam metal” (Johnson 2014: 37) showing “an aversion against [...] [the] excesses of theatricalism” (Lay 2000: 234) of previous generations, the Stone Monkeys sought to abandon the antics of the Stone Masters and took the sport to new heights, stripping climbing down to the bare minimum with their emphasis on speed, lightness and their preference for free soloing, while still rejecting the homosocial model of the Beats, replacing it with a more inclusive one. A new spontaneous *communitas*, a new liminoid group had emerged in Yosemite, the promised liminal land, representing “a ‘freedom to’ transcend social structural limitations, a playful ‘as-if’ experience” (Foster and McCabe 2015: 49), while still vacillating “between embracing and resisting the past” (Taylor 2011: 259) and a homosocial culture that ignored women’s experience.

Yosemite itself changed in the 1990s: society, walking inexorably towards the new millennium, saw the popularisation of outdoor sports, a “rush to consume nature as experience” (Taylor 2011: 233) which meant that the number of people taking up sports like hiking or rock-climbing dramatically increased. Beats like Robbins or Chouinard had capitalised on their fame as climbers, founding companies that provided these “well-educated, relatively wealthy, aggressively consuming professionals who claimed wilderness as a private playground” (233) with the gear needed to enjoy these landscapes that they had previously enjoyed.

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The arrival of masses of weekend-climbers meant that Yosemite was no longer a “closed society” (Taylor 2011: 233), but rather a product ready to be consumed. This led to a dilemma in the ranks of Yosemite climbers, who had resisted professionalization for decades and who believed “climbers who took lucre for their love were whores” (235). Traditionalists like Robbins or Birdwell tried to oppose professionalization, while still seeking to benefit from the interest that the sport had awoken in ‘civil’ society through the sale of sports clothes and climbing gear. Soon the climbing community split into two. Traditionalists argued that while it was acceptable to work as a mountain guide or to be an entrepreneur, they “adamantly opposed publicizing climbs because it adulterated the sport” (235): professionals were not real climbers, since they had sold out to ‘the man’.

Paradigmatic of this split between tradition and innovation, between homage and rejection, between respect and a desire to inscribe one’s name in the history of climbing is the man who “spearheaded the revolution” (Mortimer et al. 2014: min. 68), Dean Potter, who performed some of the most astounding feats of climbing in the last century (Taylor 2011: 272). Potter resembled traditionalists in his vision of climbing as transcendental (Mortimer et al. 2014: min. 51), as more than a sport and closer to a ritual, as a way of creating art. He was called “soulful and spiritual and likened to Stylite monks for his fanaticism” (Taylor 2011: 272),

a label that appealed to the Beats, who had been condemned for their staunch defence of what they perceived to be 'the right way to climb'.

His fierce advocacy for the purest form of climbing —free solo— and his regarding climbing as art, as well as his way of inscribing his identity and vision in the history of the sport, are the reasons that first attracted Patagonia to sponsor him. The company, founded by one of the original Beats, Chouinard, hoped to attract more customers capitalising on Potter's innovative view of the sport (Taylor 2011: 272), while still hoping to appeal to traditionalists, like the founder himself, who saw themselves reflected in Potter's spiritual quest through climbing. He was seen as the perfect spokesperson for the climbing establishment.

Meanwhile, outside the borders of Yosemite, the popularity and visibility of this new grunge masculinity was perceived as a threat by a hegemonic culture that sought to neutralise this emerging masculinity by incorporating elements of it into its own discourse of truth, thus taming it into normativity through what Demetriou calls the "‘dialectical pragmatism’ of internal hegemony, by which hegemonic masculinity appropriates from other masculinities whatever appears to be pragmatically useful for continued domination" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 844). This was met with an even more extreme performance of subversive masculinity by these young men, in an attempt at resisting erasure.

Similarly, Potter's identity and vision were far more complex than Patagonia had bargained for. Potter was, indeed, a visionary, but the "male adolescent narcissism" (Lay 2000: 234) exhibited by most of the members of the Generation X meant that he was willing to break all the Beat and StoneMaster rules that had ensured the functioning of the climbing subculture. He was one of the many climbers who believed that he could very well make a living out of his spiritual quest, an idea that clearly contradicted the ethos of his sponsor. When he decided to climb the forbidden Delicate Arch, he argued it was done "as an artistic expression and to commune with nature" (Taylor 2011: 272), never taking into account that the arch was a cherished symbol of the state and a delicate landmark respected by all local climbers. His ascent meant that even more strict rules were enforced to prevent a repeat of the feat, enraging locals and Park authorities.

To add insult to injury, Potter had made sure that his 'piece of art' had been thoroughly documented in video and photographs, practices that contradicted his claims to artistry and spirituality as well as traditionalists' ideas on professionalization: his climbing practice was a slap in the face to a climbing establishment that had tried to use him as a symbol for a hegemonic climbing masculinity with which he clearly did not agree.

Accused of seeking publicity regardless of the consequences, Potter lashed out against his critics and showed his disregard for 'authority', refusing to apologize

and arguing that it was his prerogative as a top athlete, a label Beats and Stone Masters had rejected, to pursue his vision and make economic profit from it at the same time (Taylor 2011: 273). Potter, dropped by Patagonia soon after, became a controversial figure in Yosemite climbing, by baring “the tensions between industrial and romantic orientations to nature” (273). Before his climb of Delicate Arch, Potter had appealed to the older climbing generations, Yosemite’s *status quo*, since the Beats identified with “his desire to escape society for a solitary engagement with wilderness” (273) and the Stone Masters appreciated his unwillingness to accept the rules and regulations that limited his artistic vision and his *dirtbagging*. But when this *status quo* censured him and put pressure on a climbing practice which he used to express his identity, Potter rejected both traditions. Soon he turned his back on sponsors, taking his sporting practice and philosophy to the extreme with the invention of new varieties of climbing, like high-altitude slack-lining, or free BASE— soloing a wall and using a BASE jump suit as a descent method (Mortimer et al. 2014: min. 50).

This parallel fight against the dialectical pragmatism of hegemonic masculinity in climbing and music not only underscores Yosemite’s permeable borders, but strengthens its character as a liminal space where identities can be challenged and where, in spite of its marked ‘separateness’ from mainstream society, the struggle between hegemonic identities and subordinate ones can still be felt, as a place where liminoid communities can attempt to “reconfigure[re] social roles, hierarchies or values” (Thomassen and Balle 2012: 84).

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## Conclusion

This article demonstrates, through the study of three different periods of climbing in the Valley, that Yosemite, due to its permeable borders and thanks to its separatedness from mainstream society, has been the breeding ground for dissenting identities that bear witness to the energy of the counterculture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Beats, the Stone Masters and the Stone Monkeys shared the values and ideas of countercultural groups outside the Valley that emerged as points of resistance against hegemonic gender identities which “spread over time and space at varying densities, at times mobilizing groups or individuals in a definitive way, inflaming certain points of the body, certain moments in life, certain types of behaviour” (Foucault 1990: 96). When pushed to the margins and borders of society, these groups find refuge in the apparent wilderness of the National Park, a liminal space that allows them to experiment with testing and challenging the limits of identity and gender. Yosemite, as a liminoid space, becomes the breeding ground for dissenting identities and “a preferred way to express manhood,

[...] a stage for extreme performances of manliness” (Taylor 2011: 104). The remoteness of the Valley, “the strange vertical world of the rock climber [...] an alien, marginal, liminoid world” (Varley 2011: 85) attracted those looking to escape a society that did not accommodate their dissenting or non-conformist identities, becoming thus a place “where they could experiment with new forms of social relations and address issues of identity” (Westaway 2013: 174) which would have been left untackled outside the geographical limits of the Park.

As differing as the climbing philosophies studied may be, they all merge in one respect: after a period of struggle during which they are seen as subordinated masculinities, they become the normative way of being a man, turning into hegemonic masculinities within the geographical borders of the Park. The liminal nature of the area where these climbers establish themselves (on the borders and peripheries of society) and the undeniably liminoid character of climbing, an activity “pursued at the margins of modern life socially, geographically, bodily and elementally” (Varley 2011: 93), mean that these three groups start out as existential or spontaneous *communitas* (Turner 1995: 132) “displaying comradeship and homogeneity” (Foster and McCabe 2015: 49), living on the boundaries, free from norms, and so can be understood as border masculinities.

This article has traced an archeology of three border *communitas*, who alternated in their rule over the Park and the sport and who, in their attempt at differentiating themselves from previous generations, rejected the values and philosophies of their elders; three distinct climbing styles and gender identities heavily influenced by countercultural movements which originated beyond the geographical limits of the Park. The study of this ‘rotation of power’ shows that, in spite of all their dissimilarities and attempts at distinguishing themselves from one another, the Beats, the Stone Masters and the Stone Monkeys share one very basic similarity: as separated as the Valley may be from mainstream society, the influence of counterculture could still be felt within its borders, as is proved by the climbers’ acceptance of the lifestyle of the Beats, the hippies and the grunges, countercultural groups formed by “the ‘cool’ members of the adolescent and young-adult categories [...] who ‘opt out’ of the status-bound social order and acquire the stigmata of the lowly, dressing like ‘bums’, itinerant in their habits, ‘folk’ in their musical tastes, and menial in the casual employment they undertake” (Turner 1995: 112).

All three groups were seen as the elite of the sport, displaying hegemonic masculinity, while they were also viewed as outcasts since their philosophies rejected the previous climbing style and ethics. The Beats’ homosocial group rejected the heterosocial and egalitarian ideas of the climbing clubs; the Stone Masters rejected the measured style and asceticism of the Beats; the Stone Monkeys

rejected the rigidity of the Beats, the sexism of the Stone Masters and the traditional homosociality of Yosemite climbing. Furthermore, these fringe microsocieties which inhabited the periphery and rejected the status quo were seen as outcasts in their rejection of the established rules of American mainstream society. Thus, Yosemite surfaces as the liminal space where these otherwise subordinate masculinities become hegemonic and dominant, as the borders where new modes of being can be expressed, experimented with, questioned and tested.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>. Freeing refers to climbing natural rock faces with no assistance from pegs, using ropes and belays as a security measure, rather than a method to progress vertically.

<sup>2</sup>. Camp 4 is one of the many campsites located inside Yosemite National Park; from the 1950s onwards, it became the preferred campsite for rock climbers and is still closely associated with the sport.

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