

**Rock Climbing on the Niagara Escarpment: Emerging Entanglements of Care
at the Crag**

by

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ABSTRACT

ROCK CLIMBING ON THE NIAGARA ESCARPMENT: EMERGING ENTANGLEMENTS OF CARE AT THE CRAG

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The increasing popularity of rock climbing on the Niagara Escarpment poses both environmental and social challenges. To explore these issues, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Ontario rock climbers exploring their experiences in relation to two main themes. First, following the post-human turn in anthropology, this research explores the environmental challenges on the Escarpment by attending to how climbers cultivate intimate relationships with the cliffs through affective encounters that in turn motivate environmental care. Second, drawing from gender studies, this project documents how social injustice manifests within this community as microaggressions, exclusion, and lack of mentorship opportunities. Overall, these findings reveal that the community is concerned with issues related to a growing and diversifying population, suggesting a need for changes in management and policy, as well as in community attitudes and acceptance. This research contributes to discussions of social and environmental justice in anthropology by drawing connections between gender, colonialism, and rock climbing.

DEDICATION

This thesis is for all the climbers who shared their energy with me and trusted me with their stories. It is also for everyone who has given parts of themselves to developing, nurturing, and improving the Escarpment, the community, and each other.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Designated as a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve, the Niagara Escarpment is home to a unique assemblage of nonhuman species and subjects, including limestone cliffs, an ancient forest, and a unique assemblage of animal and plant species (Canadian Biosphere Reserves Association 2020, Kelly and Larson 2007). In recent years, rock climbing on the Escarpment's cliff-faces, or *crag*s,¹ has become an increasingly popular way to recreate outside, suggesting a change in relationships between climbers, the land, and land managers. Although there is an established body of literature on the ecological impacts of rock climbing (e.g., McMillian and Larson 2002), less is known about how climbers think, feel, and interact with nonhuman worlds and with each other. We know that climbers can develop meaningful relationships with places (Kulczycki 2014) and that they are faced with self-governance challenges like diversity and inclusion (Carter, Hutson, Lam, Rose, and Furman 2020), but these topics have yet to receive significant attention on the Niagara Escarpment.

1.2 Purpose and Goals

The increasing popularity of rock climbing on the Niagara Escarpment poses both environmental and social challenges. This research explores these challenges by investigating how rock climbers relate to the crags of the Niagara Escarpment and to other members of the community. Using interviews and observational data, I explore how climbers cultivate intimate relationships with the Escarpment through affective encounters, which in turn, motivates care. Further, I catalogue community concerns related to gender, including microaggressions,

¹ See Appendix A for a glossary of climbing terms.

exclusion, and representation. The findings yield details about the community that can inform policy for both land managers and local climbing organizations (LCOs).

1.3 Theoretical Framework

Posthumanism is a mode of thought that upsets dichotomous ideas of nature-culture, mind-body, and male-female,² and challenges the anthropocentrism and empiricism in knowledge production by examining the ways in which humans interact with the worlds around them to construct subjective understandings of nature (Haraway 1988).

Within the posthumanist framework lies the *affective turn* in the social sciences. This new tradition positions humans as feeling subjects who develop embodied understandings of the world through their senses and relations to others (Merleau-Ponty 1962, Deleuze and Guattari 1988). Further, this perspective attends to multispecies interactions, such as how we *become with* others as we communicate across species boundaries (Haraway 2008). From this standpoint, researchers can explore the capacity of nonhuman worlds to affect humans through our exchanges with it (Abram 1996, Haraway 2008: 3, Latimer and Miele 2013, Latour 2007, Lingis 2000). This perspective also seeks to understand the world beyond human perception by exploring the *materiality* of objects, which can refer to both the physical properties of something, as well as the sensory experience of it (Gagné 2020). In the case of rock climbing on the Escarpment, this materiality refers to the crags, rocks, and cliff-face flora and fauna. According to this perspective, these nonhumans beings are understood as actor-subjects imbued with agency instead of passive objects (Bennett 2009, Frost 2011, Latour 2007). This perspective allows for deeper understandings of the networks of more-than-human life through its attendance to human-

² Braidotti (2019). For examples, see de Castro (2004) and Latour (1993).

nonhuman relationships, such as those with insects (Raffles 2011) and other animals (de Castro 2004, Haraway 2008), moss (Kimmerer 2003), mushrooms (Tsing 2015), forests (Kohn 2013), and glaciers (Gagné 2018, Satsuka 2015).

This posthumanist tradition, which employs affectivity and materialism as ways of understanding agencies beyond-the-human, is aligned with scholarship from anthropology and geography on knowledge and place. I build from discussions about different forms of knowledge, such as *intersubjective* (Abram 1996: 38), *situated* (Haraway 1988), *embodied* (Ingold 2000), and *local* (Frake 1996, Raffles 2002) to begin conversations about gendered experiences in rock climbing. Further, by employing the concepts of *place* and *place-making*—from anthropological traditions in phenomenology (Basso 1996, Casey 2013, and Tuan 1977)—I attend to the shared, affective experiences that contribute to how climbers understand the Niagara Escarpment. Together, these perspectives imply that humans are never thinking or acting alone, instead, they are building their knowledge about the world through interactions with the broader network of living and non-living beings. This raises questions about other ways of being, feeling, and relating in, on, and with the Escarpment. How are climbers affected by the material worlds of the crags, rocks, and cliff-face flora and fauna of the Escarpment? What embodied understandings do climbers cultivate through their intimate encounters with rocks, and how do they come to know the Escarpment as place? In what way are climbers and landscape engaged in a reciprocal relationship? Lastly, how do rock climbers *become with* the crags of the Escarpment, and how does this process differ for individuals with othered (marginalized) identities?

Despite the utility of posthumanist framework for insights into affective and embodied encounters with material worlds, this perspective has been criticized for its incommensurability with literature on racial inequities and social justice. While some scholars argue that a

posthumanist perspective is essential to analysing systems of injustice because it allows for a better understanding of human experience (Wolfe 2009), more recently, the perspective has also been critiqued for expanding thought beyond-the-human prematurely and perpetuating human inequities (Rose and Walton 2015). Scholars like Ellis (2018) argue that beyond-the-human social justice is not yet conceivable as racialized communities are still reeling from the dehumanization and degradation of the 19th century. Similarly, Karera (2019) argues that posthumanism is “unequipped to account for the suffering of racialized bodies” (p. 39). Jobson (2020) echoes these sentiments, proposing that scholars cannot embrace this liberal anthropology and depart from the human-as-subject when not all human subjects have been liberated. Instead of expanding beyond the human, Jobson (2020) argues for an anthropology that embraces a radical humanism of repatriation, repair, and abolition. Lastly, scholars argue that posthumanism is not the apparent catch-all panacea it appears to be because Indigenous ontologies cannot be easily integrated as they precede this framework by millennia (Bignall, Hemming, and Rigney 2016). Overall, posthumanism’s offerings are limited for those who have been and continue to be denied quintessential aspects of humanity such as voice and freedom of movement and identity.

Until social justice is achieved for all human subjects, posthumanism is unsuitable for matters of social injustice. To reconcile this incommensurability, I attempt to bring posthumanism and decolonization literature into conversation with each other by approaching climber interactions with the Niagara Escarpment from a decolonial perspective that accounts for these injustices both *beyond* and *among* humans.

1.4 Significance and Contributions

In this thesis, I explore how rock climbers understand and interact with the nonhuman worlds of the Niagara Escarpment as well as gendered interactions within the community. I

demonstrate that through affective encounters with the cliffs, climbers develop caring relationships with place, however, instances of gendered exclusion and microaggressions reveal the need to extend this care to the human members of the community as well.

Given the lack of knowledge about rock climbing on the Escarpment, my primary goal was to provide an ethnographic description of both human-cliff and human-human relationships. Using this two-pronged approach, I address both phenomenological and social conversations happening in environmental anthropology. Specifically, I bring a political dimension to phenomenology in anthropology by highlighting the ways in which broader social injustices manifest while humans recreate with nature. It is through this exploration that I make my contribution to environmental anthropology. By drawing the connections between rock climbing, colonialism, and social justice, I highlight the complexity of climber-cliff relationships and the potentials for extending care to all members of the community. Further, this anthropological approach to rock climbing on the Escarpment also provides rich nuances to interdisciplinary research on the topic by showing how humans are not only inextricable from nature, but also that human social issues are inextricable from our experience of the outdoors.

1.5 Chapter Overview

Chapter Two provides an overview of the Niagara Escarpment, climbing and access on the Escarpment, the anthropology of climbing, and the gendered and racialized natures of sport and outdoor recreation. Chapter Three details the methodological considerations and procedures. Chapter Four presents climber's experiences on and with the Escarpment and demonstrates how climbers cultivate meaningful relationships with place, which facilitates environmental care and influences perspectives on access and development. Chapter Five focuses on relationships among members of the climbing community and presents climber concerns around exclusion and

representation. Last, Chapter Six discusses the implications of these findings and recommendations for land managers and local climbing organizations.

2 Literature Review and Context

2.1 Overview

Bringing together literature from anthropology, geography, sport and leisure, and gender studies, this research seeks to establish an overview of rock climbing on the Escarpment and the relationships among all its actors. Although this chapter is organized around three themes—the Niagara Escarpment, Rock Climbing, and Decolonizing the Outdoors—there are some common veins throughout. Rock climbing access on the Niagara Escarpment is a tenuous situation and is further complicated by issues relating to racism and colonization, but the meaningful experiences that climbers co-create in this climbing place hold potential for growth, care, and change.

2.2 Niagara Escarpment

2.2.1 Indigenous Land

The Niagara Escarpment is known as *Gchi-bimadinaa* (The Great Cliff that Runs Along) in Anishinaabemowin and as *Kastenhraktátye* (Along the Cliffs) in Kanyen'kéha:ka or Mohawk language. The expansive stretch of cliffs passes through numerous First Nations' territories. These nations include the Attawandaron Nation (or Neutral Confederacy); the Anishinaabek Nation, which includes the Chippewas of Nawash Unceded First Nation at Neyaashiinigmiing (Cape Croker), the Odawa, and the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation; the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, which includes the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora Nations; and the Wendat (Huron) and Tionontatehronnon (Petun) Nations (see Keeshig 2017, The Great Niagara Escarpment 2021, and Warrick 2008). These peoples are the

original stewards of the land, and as a settler, I am a visitor without entitlement. Throughout this thesis I try to uphold the Treaties by attending to how we interact with the land and each other.

2.2.2 Natural History

“The Niagara Escarpment is the perfect escape. It is a ribbon of wilderness and rural beauty cutting across this huge heavily populated region. It is just a miracle, through a fluke of history and nature, that it remains today at all.”
(Robert Bateman, 1989)³

Etched into the land by undulating glaciers more than two million years ago, the Niagara Escarpment is a vast stretch of limestone cliffs running through 735 kilometres of Southern Ontario from Niagara Falls to Manitoulin Island (Kelly and Larson 2007). Among these cliffs, there are gulleys, forests, and towering rock formations that make up the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve (Canadian Biosphere Reserves Association 2020) and numerous protected areas (Ministry of the Environment 2020a). The Escarpment is also home to more than 200 at-risk nonhuman species, including the Jefferson salamander, all native turtle species, and the American chestnut (Bruce Trail Conservancy 2020, Conservation Halton 2020b, Ministry of the Environment 2020b).

In 1989, the Cliff Ecology Research Group at the University of Guelph learned that the Escarpment is also home to an ancient old-growth forest of eastern white cedars⁴ (*Thuja occidentalis*, Kelly and Larson 1997, 2007, 2008). Despite their small size, the cliff-dwelling cedars comprise the “most extensive and least disturbed old growth forest” in eastern North America (Kelly and Larson 2007: 93), with the oldest individual beginning its life in AD 688.

³ Quoted in Kelly and Larson 2007: 141.

⁴ *Giizhik*, *giizhikenh*, or *gisheekandug* in Anishinaabemowin.

2.2.3 Climbing Access

The Niagara Escarpment's unique topography allows for many types of use, including hiking,⁵ birding, skiing, hunting, mountain biking, angling, and kayaking. The Escarpment's cliffs also allow for rock climbing (see Figure 1); however, the access situation is tenuous.

Kelly and Larson's (1997) publication on ancient cedars marked the beginning of a "dark period" for Ontario climbers (Grippled 2019a). Researchers began to investigate the impact of rock climbing on the local ecology, and they concluded that in areas where rock climbing occurs, there was lower species density and diversity.⁶ Labelled as an ecological threat, rock climbing became understood as a nuisance, which led to the closure of numerous crags (see also Dwyer 2016). Today, there are 47 documented crags on the Escarpment, although rock climbing is prohibited at more than half of these sites; climbing is *allowed* only at eight crags and *tolerated* at six more (Ontario Alliance of Climbers [OAC] 2020b).⁷ Rock climbing is allowed at sites managed by Conservation Halton (2020a) and the Niagara Parks Commission (2020a) where there are strong relationships between climbers and land managers. At crags like Lion's Head, climbing is only tolerated by the provincial park authorities, and the relationships among climbers, these authorities, and locals are strained, evidenced by recent bolt removal, and increased parking restrictions (Grippled 2020b, Alexandropoulos 2020, Rodgers 2021). Where climbing is prohibited, it is usually due to the potential for "significant damage to vegetation"

⁵ Popular among hikers, the Bruce Trail runs the entire length of the Escarpment. The main trail is 909 kilometres long, with 44 kilometres of side trails. With 10,157 members, the Bruce Trail Conservancy has many supporters and is one of Ontario's largest land trusts (Bruce Trail Conservancy 2021).

⁶ Most notably, research has focused on effects of rock climbing on lichen, a symbiotic organism involving algae and fungi (Adams and Zaniewski 2012; Kuntz and Larson 2006); vegetation, generally (McMillan and Larson 2002); and snails (McMillan 2000; McMillan, Nekola, and Larson 2003). Also see the meta-analysis on impacts of rock climbing on biodiversity by Holzschuh (2016).

⁷ This is not accounting for temporary closures due to COVID-19 restrictions. See OAC (2020b) for the up-to-date list of crag access statuses.

(Ministry of the Environment 2020c, 2020d), such as at some locations near Guelph (Grand River Conservation Authority 2009).

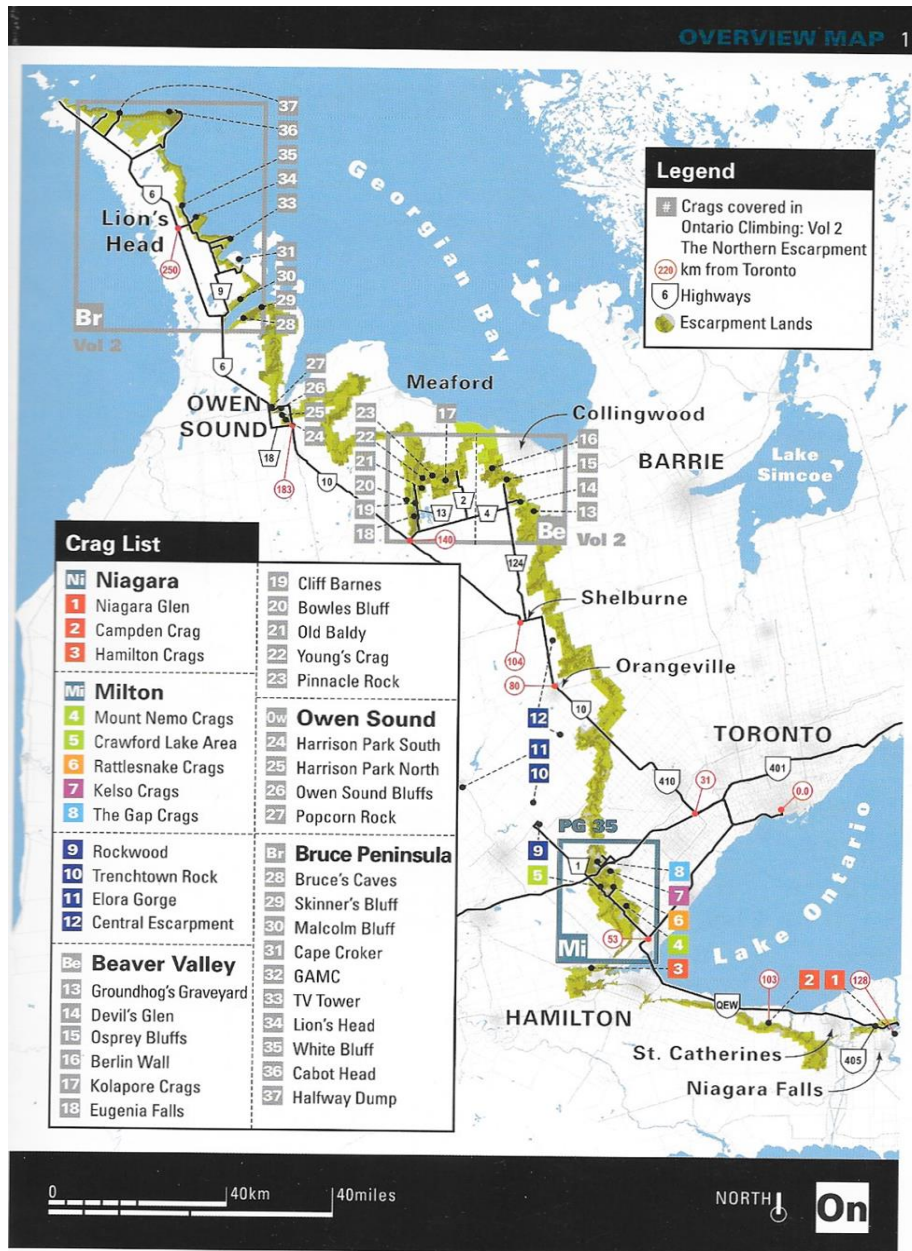


Figure 1. Map of Niagara Escarpment and rock climbing sites (Alexandropoulos and Dwyer 2016)

In recent years, the climbing community has been growing rapidly, increasing concerns about environmental impacts among both the climbing community and land managers (OAC

2018). When asked about their access concerns, Ontario climbers said they were most worried about new climbers who are uneducated in local traditions and ethics and the impact of overcrowding on natural areas.⁸ Most Ontario climbers appear to be conscious and concerned about their impact according to the most recent OAC member survey. For example, most respondents agreed that behaviours such as bushwhacking and climbing around raptor nests are unacceptable.⁹

There is some preliminary academic research on the environmental perspectives of rock climbers and how they interact with climbing landscapes. On the Niagara Escarpment, Thompson, Hutson, and Davidson (2008) concluded that rock climbing facilitated “caring attitudes toward the Niagara Glen” (2008: 30). Elsewhere, in rock climbing places such as the Red River Gorge in Kentucky (Clark, Maples, and Sharp 2020) and the Adirondack Mountains in New York (Monz 2009), researchers have reported that when climbers are aware of the environmental impacts of the sport, they feel strongly about reducing the harm.

As an expanding and visible user group, climbers must minimize their impacts and demonstrate environmental care if they wish to maintain access to the climbing cliffs. Although these topics have been discussed considerably in informal settings, this issue necessitates academic attention, especially with the scarce literature on climbing on the Escarpment. The current research focuses on addressing the experiences, attitudes, care practices of the members of this group, the implications of them, and barriers to access. As Kelly and Larson put it, “The climbing community are stewards of this forest, whether they like it or not” (2007: 144).

⁸ This information is drawn from the results of the 2019 OAC Climber Survey, which were previously published in Schaefer, Duncan, and Lam (2020) but also incorporated into this thesis (see “Methods”).

⁹ Ibid.

2.3 Rock Climbing

The sport of rock climbing as it is known today has its roots in 19th and 20th century mountaineering. Nettlefold and Stratford (1999) ascertain that with a lack of “virgin peaks” to ascend, mountaineers turned to cliff faces to as a new place to discover and conquer (p. 134). From mountaineering, climbers turned to *traditional climbing* on more vertical faces, which eventually led to *sport climbing* revolutions around the world.¹⁰ Sport climbers ascend cliffs using ropes clipped into permanent hardware such as bolts to protect themselves from hitting the ground if they fall. This research focuses on both sport climbing and bouldering (shorter routes with mats for protection instead of ropes) on the Niagara Escarpment.

2.3.1 Background

There has yet to be a survey estimating climber numbers and demographics on the Niagara Escarpment, but a sketch can be drawn from OAC member surveys and other sources.

At the time of writing, there were 4,845 members in the public Facebook group, *Ontario Climbing 2021*, and 487 in the private group, *Ontario Climbing – For Women and Gender Diverse Climbers*. The 2019 OAC member survey received 418 responses,¹¹ and a report compiled by the AAC estimates that there were 7.7 million climbers in the USA in 2018 (AAC 2019). Although Ontario numbers are unknown, the OAC reported that climber numbers have increased at a rate congruent with the global increase in interest (OAC 2018).

Results from the 2019 OAC survey ($N = 418$)¹² reveal little diversity among Ontario climbers. Respondents indicated mostly male pronouns (*He/him* = 60.5%, *She/her* = 36.0%,

¹⁰ See Robinson (2013) and Pennington (2021) for more nuanced accounts.

¹¹ See Footnote 8.

¹² These numbers may not be representative of the Ontario climbing population because new climbers may not yet know about the OAC. Fifty-two percent of respondents had at least six years of experience.

Fluid or nonbinary = 1%), which is congruent with population of the *Ontario Climbing* Facebook page ($M = 60\%$, $F = 40\%$),¹³ but lower than reports from other sources.¹⁴ Regarding orientation, most reported straight or heterosexual orientation (*Straight/heterosexual* = 84.7%, *Gay/lesbian* = 2%, *Queer/bi/pan/ace* = 8%, *Prefer not to say* = 6%). In 2019, the OAC added a question about ethnicity to the member survey. Respondents could select all that apply, and “white” was selected as one of the options for 74.2% ($n = 273$) of those who fully completed the survey ($n = 384$). The next most selected responses were Chinese ($n = 44$), Southeast Asian ($n = 10$), and Latin American ($n = 8$). Most respondents were aged 26 to 35 (59.5%), held a diploma or degree (89.4%), and reported a household income greater than \$50,000 (77%).

The 2019 OAC member survey inquired about climbing habits and how individuals learned to climb. Nearly half of respondents were new to climbing (48.9% had less than five years of experience), and during the climbing season, nearly half climbed outside on a weekly basis (48.4% at least once per week).¹⁵ The crags visited most often were Mount Nemo, Rattlesnake, and the Niagara Glen, and the most popular styles among the climbers who responded were sport (92% occasionally or often), bouldering 90% (occasionally or often), and top rope (87% occasionally or often). When asked how they learned to climb, 68% reported “inside” or “mostly inside”.¹⁶

¹³ These numbers are current as of June 2021. Thank you Ken Chase for retrieving this data.

¹⁴ *Climbing Magazine* (2016) reported a larger gender gap in their reader survey ($M = 74\%$, $F = 26\%$). Similar numbers were reported in the ACC’s 2019 State of Climbing Report ($M = 72\%$, $F = 41\%$, Prefer not to answer 1%), however, the gap was smaller among non-members ($M = 58\%$, $F = 41\%$, Prefer not to answer = 1%, AAC 2019).

¹⁵ The Canada magazine *Gripped* reported that 85.8% of respondents had climbed outside at least once ($N = 811$, 57% of respondents were from Ontario, *Gripped* 2020a).

¹⁶ The survey question did not include a definition for “learning to climb.” This question was open to various interpretations that may have included skills such as climbing technique, belaying, rope management, and anchor building and cleaning.

Rock climbing, generally, is beginning to gain the attention of researchers from many disciplines. Psychology research suggests that like other exercise, rock climbing improves physical fitness and mood (Gallotta et al. 2015). Climbers are motivated by social benefits, sensation-seeking, and improving self-image were the main motivators for climbers (Ewert, Gilbertson, Luo, and Voight 2013; Kiewa 2001). Further, recent research reveals that self-awareness and humility are paramount to success for some climbers (Monastero and Brymer 2020). However, climbing could also have detrimental effects; anecdotal evidence suggests that eating disorders are common among both female and male climbers (e.g., Wickes 2020).

In the literature from sociology, outdoor recreation, and tourism and leisure, rock climbing is commonly understood as a more than just a sport. The unique subculture associated with rock climbing has led some authors to discuss the sport through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social practice (Beames and Telford 2013), while others describe it in the context of "lifestyle sports" (Wheaton 2016).¹⁷ Others have looked at serious rock climbers through the lens of authenticity and identity, examining the liminality of travel and the experience of life outdoors (Rickly-Boyd 2012), as well as the "dirt bag" stereotype and identity as a tourist typology (Rickly 2016). Lastly, economic analyses of reveal that climbers spend considerable amounts on gear and climbing-related travel, and contribute positively to local economies (e.g., Bailey and Hungenberg 2018; Maples, Sharp, Clark, Gerlaugh, and Gillespie 2017). The American Alpine Club (AAC) reported that American climbers contributed USD \$12,450,000,000 to the economy in 2018, \$168,989,622 of which was on gear (up 14.4% over the 36-month study period, AAC 2019). Climbing is no longer an extreme, fringe sport.

¹⁷ These definitions and understandings of climbing seem to vary by culture. Rahikainen's (2020) cross-cultural analysis found that, whereas in Canada climbing is commonly understood as a "lifestyle sport", in China it is considered a form of "serious leisure".

2.3.2 Anthropology of Climbing

The anthropology of rock climbing literature intersects with tourism and leisure studies and sport psychology but is situated predominantly in the material and affective turns in the social sciences. Rock climbing is coming to be understood as an affective, phenomenological interaction with the material world, which contributes to meaningful understandings of place. Through this perspective, insights into other ways of feeling, being, knowing, and relating to the natural landscape through rock climbing begin to emerge. Phenomenological accounts of climbing reveal that climbers are physically and emotionally bound to the rocks that they climb (Jenkins 2013). Climbers form loving relationships with the rock (Dutkiewicz 2015) and with their gear (Barratt 2012), and also experience intense emotions like fear while on the wall (Rossiter 2007: 299–301). This fear is sometimes romanticized in narratives of masculinity, risk-taking and conquest over nature (Robinson 2004, 2008; Wheaton 2016; de Léséleuc, Gleyse, and Marcellini 2002; Moraldo 2015).

By tuning into the material world through their senses, climbers cultivate knowledge that can be understood as situated (Haraway 1988) and embodied (Ingold 2000). Ness (2011) discusses how meaning-making happens through physical contact with the rock in Yosemite National Park, while Goodrich (2004) and Dutkiewicz (2015) explain how information about climbing routes is stored within the body, not within the mind. This is clear in Rickly's (2017) discussion of how climbers can communicate information among themselves through mimed gestures instead of words. She continues that is through this climbing body that climbing spaces are created and understood as meaningful. Dutkiewicz (2015) further explores how climbers learn with the rock, developing a climbing-specific habitus where climb and climber are mutually constituted. Regarding climbing bodies, Lewis (2000) discusses how rocks shape

climbing bodies and how climbers navigate their surroundings through touch and embodied movement instead of through sight. Lastly, authors have explored how these constructions and experiences of meaning in rock climbing are fundamentally gendered (e.g., Kiewa 2001) and racialized (e.g., Henderson 2020), which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Climbing landscapes are understood as an intersubjective experience where conventions of human as actor-subject and nature as object are upturned (Abram 1996: 38, Sayes 2014). Barratt (2011) explores how technical climbing gear (e.g., cams) can become active, co-participants in the climbing process, while Stinson and Grimwood (2020) undergo a similar analysis of bolt-hangers as actors on the Escarpment (see also Stinson 2019). For outdoor enthusiasts, the landscape is understood as more than a passive resource to be consumed; it is a lively actor that athletes are a part of (Brymer and Gray 2010). In a similar way, Lewis (2000, 2004) argues against actor-subject distinctions because climbers become one with the rock when they climb, faintly echoing Haraway's (2008) ideas about *becoming with* other species. This reciprocity among actors can also be seen in Rossiter (2007), who argues that networks turn cliffs into climbs and humans into climbers through a mutual exchange. Further, she upsets the idea of nature-as-object by positioning the climbing landscape as a "lively nature that seduces, threatens, insists, and after all decides whether you fall up or down" (Rossiter 2007: 294).

Last, individuals come to understand landscapes through meaningful relationships with place (Hirsch 1995), which are cultivated through experience (Tuan 1977) and co-created (Ingold 2000: 175). The importance of the landscape for climbers has been explored by Kulczycki (2014), who identified three main factors in meaning-making in Western Canada: physical, social, and experiential. Physically, climbers attend to rock type, formation, and holds; socially, climbers construct the idea of notorious climbing sites as "mecca"; and experientially,

climbers understand climbing sites as an “escape” from everyday life—all of which contribute to place-meaning. Meaning-making among climbers is also social; for example, de Léséleuc (2004) emphasizes the role of social belonging for climbers in France. Returning to affectivity, the emotions felt by climbers are inextricable from the climbing landscape (Kulczycki 2013, Kulczycki and Hinch 2014), and that the experience of climbing places and emotions for them are closely intertwined (Hutson and Montgomery 2010).

2.3.3 Community and Conflict

Local climbing organizations (LCOs) play a significant role in negotiating climbing access with land managers, building a sense of community, and setting expectations for appropriate climber behaviour (see Carter 2020a, 2020b for example of this). LCOs are an effective way to distribute surveys to the community and to assess self-governance challenges related to fixed hardware, attitudes toward acceptable behaviour, and diversity and inclusion (Carter et al. 2020). On the Niagara Escarpment, the Ontario Alliance of Climbers (OAC) is the acting LCO, and through their website and social media, they distribute information about access issues, appropriate behaviour, and news and events.

Despite the dedication of LCOs, there are still conflicts within climbing communities, most of which can be reduced to incommensurable attitudes toward nature and what constitutes appropriate relationships with the nonhuman world. These disagreements can lead to self-governance challenges such as bolting “wars” (Bogardus 2012, Carter et al. 2020) and disputes over the degree to which manufacturing holds (Dawn 2019, Ramsey 2010) and using chalk (McKee 2021) are appropriate. In Ontario, discrepancies over bolting practices are not uncommon (Carter et al. 2020), but the most recent conflict is related to the removal of fixed hardware. In June of last year, anonymous climbers removed protective fixed gear from an area

at Lion's Head near Tobermory. Media outlets reported that these routes were made inaccessible to allow for the regeneration of the ledge's natural ecology, but there is some speculation that this action was taken to prevent inexperienced climbers from visiting the area and potentially threatening access, highlighting the intragroup conflict (Grippled 2020b). Some preliminary research has been done on the use of social sanctions within the community to regulate these issues (e.g., Carter 2019). Lastly, issues pertaining to the diverse needs of a growing community that now includes individuals from equity-seeking groups has been identified as an "emerging challenge" for rock climbing communities (Carter et al. 2020).

2.4 Decolonizing the Outdoors

Contemporary ideas about outdoor recreational activities such as rock climbing have been largely inherited by 19th century American wilderness enthusiasts and nature writers. Famous writers like John Muir transformed forests, valleys, and mountains into places of reverence, respect, and wonder, while also contributing to the budding conservation movement (Wulf 2015: 387). However, this wilderness and conservation discourse is located within a social, cultural, and historical specificity that privileges access for dominant groups (DeLuca 2007, Satsuka 2015: 199–202), and contributes to the erasure of Indigenous peoples through overt racism and acts of violence, such as romanticizing Indigenous territory as *untouched nature* (Cronon 1996; DeLuca and Demo 2001; Purdy 2005; Guha 1989). In this section I will explore how sports and the outdoors have been constructed in the image of the dominant voice, which excludes women, Black and Indigenous People of Colour (BIPOC), and perpetuates the ongoing harms of colonization.

2.4.1 Gendered Sport

There has been a “female athletic revolution” in the last decade, with more women participating in lifestyle sports, such as rock climbing, than ever before (Wheaton 2016: 124). Some claim that rock climbing even “transcends gender” because male participants view diversity to be quite high (Robinson 2004), but the playing field is still uneven. Despite promising observations, sport and outdoor recreation are not exempt from broader cultural gender norms, and these remain spaces for performances of hegemonic masculinity and femininity (Butler 1988, Haraway 1988). Historically, vigorous exercise was understood as a masculine activity, so women were excluded, stereotyped, and erased from this realm. The experience of outdoor sport is inherently gendered, privileging masculinity in expectations, bodies, and interactions.¹⁸

At the turn of the century, researchers began exploring what it meant to be a gendered person in sport. They found that women often reproduced dominant ideas of femininity and avoided appearing athletic to avoid discrimination (Krane 2001), while men engaged in risk-taking and other typically male behaviours as a way to perform masculinity through sport (Robinson 2004). Entire sports were gendered; rock climbing and mountaineering were ubiquitously “male sports” (Csizma, Wittig, and Schurr 1988; Young 1997). This literature on gendered sport focused mostly on *team* sports, leading some authors to theorize about whether, as a *lifestyle* sport, rock climbing is exempt from gender expectations (Wheaton 2004: 16).

¹⁸ Some have argued that gendered outdoor recreation is intertwined with other dualisms like nature and culture. Nettlefold and Stratford (1999) describe how dichotomous ideas of the masculine human and feminine nonhuman-natures have pervaded climbing landscapes throughout the recent past, whereby “climbing [mountains] also came to be seen as another form of masculine domination over feminine Nature” (1999: 133). In this account, nature is simply the stage where masculine men play out their dramas of self-discovery, exploration, and growth. More locally, in Wall’s (2009) analysis of Ontario summer camps in Ontario, she argues the all-male camps were a place for young boys to play out narratives of masculinity, shaping “men” by taming nature.

Historical accounts of mountaineering are problematic in their narrow scope in that they selectively gender history by ignoring women's contributions¹⁹ and prioritizing male voices and analyses of male texts (Hunt 2019). Women were journeying across the Alps alongside men (and against the medical advice of the 1800s), but few of these women published autobiographies and only received attention from historians as addendums to male expeditions (Moraldo 2013, Roch 2013). Essays such as "Why do men climb mountains?" (Byhre 1965) further secured women's inferior place in the outdoors by erasing them altogether. These gendered accounts reinforce sports as a male space where women do not belong and are not welcomed.²⁰

The exclusion of women from climbing spaces—and the subsequent reproduction of crags as male places—is reinforced through microaggressions such as stereotyping. Most notable are the "crag girlfriend" stereotypes that pose climbing women as accessories to male climbers (Appleby and Fisher 2005: 19) and the corresponding presence of "girlfriend routes" (namely, less demanding climbs; Stinson and Grimwood 2020: 5). Women in masculine sports are subjected to speculations on their sexuality as well through stereotyped portrayals of "women athletes as mannish, failed heterosexuals" (Cahn, 1996: 41). Women are even subjected to sexism and biases when they are in positions of leadership, which is perhaps why they more likely to doubt their competence in the outdoors (Warren and Loeffler 2006, Evans and Anderson 2018, Rogers and Rose 2019).²¹ Others have argued that antifeminine attitudes, of which these are examples, are often reproduced in the very spaces where women are absent or

¹⁹ See (Walsh 2017) for a brief history of white women in climbing.

²⁰ Women are not only excluded from sport, but as participants in *research* on sport. It is well-known that women have been historically excluded from research in sport physiology (Bruinvels et al. 2017; Costello, Bieuzen, and Bleakley 2014) and sport sociology (Young 1997), but somehow this disparity has continued into the present day (e.g., Heirene, Shearer, Roderique-Davies, and Mellalieu 2016).

²¹ In contrast, Hall (2018) argues that women's experiences of masculine sports vary widely, and that some women report positive emotional benefits from facing risk and fear in male-dominated spaces.

lacking, which is still the case with rock climbing (Anderson 2008). Thus, it is no surprise that some women avoid sports that they perceive to be male-dominated (Irvin, Stokowski, Dittmore, Forsythe, and Christian 2021), for although climbing allows for some transgressions from gender norms, hegemonic masculinities are still reproduced in these spaces (Plate 2007).^{22,23}

There is emerging research in sport on gendered bodies and gendered ways of knowing, as every body holds specific, partial knowledge that contributes to the objective truth (Haraway 1988). The gendering of children's bodies begins early through participation in sports (Metcalf 2018) and outdoor recreation (Wall 2009, see chapter 5), meaning that girls and gender-diverse children experience these places differently than boys. For example, Young (1990) explains that women learn to limit the movement of their bodies in sports to avoid taking up too much physical or social space. In climbing, these differences affect the way that different genders construct meaning in the sport (Kiewa 2001), and in the way women experience fear. Women report more fear in the outdoors regarding physical injury, getting lost, or being attacked or assaulted by another person (Coble, Selin and Erickson 2003; Wesely and Gaarder 2004), which one researcher suggests is the result of women being stereotyped as “weak” and “vulnerable” (Clark 2015).²⁴ Haraway's (1988) *situated knowledges* also troubles climbing as a male sport by giving focus to affective, gendered ways of knowing (Stinson and Grimwood 2020).

Regarding gendered expectations for musculature and strength, muscles on women embody a “cultural contradiction between athletic prowess and femininity” (Cahn 1996: 41).

²² There is some recent research on how climbing can be a place to express alternative masculinities that challenge the hegemony, but this work is sparse (e.g., Manzenreiter 2011, Martínez-García 2020).

²³ Antifeminine attitudes are also evident in sexist and misogynistic route naming practices that exclude women and reinforce climbing places and male spaces. See Appendix B: The Trouble with Route Names.

²⁴ The way women navigate fears of gender-specific violence is an ongoing negotiation, undoubtedly intensified for those with divergent or intersectional identities (Wesely and Gaarder 2004).

Where the “ideal” climbing body is one that is strong, but not so muscled that it is no longer “feminine,” muscular climbing bodies are perceived as masculine (Appleby and Fisher 2005: 18).²⁵ Others have used the idea of a ‘lived body’ to explore how women mobilize their bodies—literally and figuratively—to overcome gender limitations in climbing situations (Chisholm 2008). Similarly, Dilley (2007) explains that women’s climbing bodies destabilize cultural expectations of gender by allowing women to reach beyond what they taught was possible, and Allee (2011) writes about the potential of empowered climbing bodies when individuals get to explore their bodies as both feminine *and* strong. Ultimately, having a strong body can be empowering for women who climb (Appleby and Fisher 2005).^{26,27}

Gender dichotomies are also problematic in that they exclude individuals with identities that diverge from binary expectations. Expectations for cisgender, binary participation in sport leaves little room for nonbinary and transgender individuals in sport (e.g., Love 2014).²⁸ This exclusion is reflected in the media; in a recent review, there were not any photographs transgender or nonbinary climbers in either *Climbing Magazine* or *Rock and Ice* (Frazer and Anderson 2018). Male and female bodily expectations also pose challenges for disabled sporting bodies. Athletes with disabilities often have difficulty expressing other identities such as queerness and are sometimes perceived as genderless, even if they strongly identify with one or more genders (Sparkes, Brighton, and Inckle 2014).

²⁵ Kyra Condie, a competitive climber for USA Climbing, shared her own struggles with accepting her muscular body in Vickers (2021).

²⁶ Research from another outdoor sport, freeride skiing, shows that competence and strength helps women redefine themselves outside of allusions to masculinity, using terms like “badass” and “hardcore” instead of “tomboy” (Malterud, Engelsrud, and Vereide 2021).

²⁷ A large study on the USA Climbing team found that women perceived no difference in the constraints to their abilities compared to men and even reported higher levels of motivation (Evans and Gagnon 2019).

²⁸ In 2020, the Fairness in Women’s Sports Act was passed as a law in the state of Idaho banning transgender athletes from competing at all (Moreau 2020).

In sport and outdoor media, there is a lack of adequate representation of climbing women. In guidebooks, women are underrepresented, expert voices are mostly male, and Black presence is virtually non-existent in both photographs and articles (Abel 2017). In major climbing magazines, 24% to 29% of photographs are of women, who are often depicted in lower risk activities than men (Frazer and Anderson 2018). This disparity does not go unnoticed; 41% of *Climbing Magazine's* female readers felt “under- or misrepresented”, and 59% felt that advertisers did not know how to speak to them (Ellison 2016). Similar trends appear in social media, whereby although there are some positive portrayals of strong women, often women are still aestheticized (Gray, Norton, Breault-Hood, Christie, and Taylow 2018).

Gender becomes particularly salient in the interactions between men and women in climbing. Large reader surveys from climbing magazines indicate that 48% of women have felt objectified by a man while climbing (Ellison 2016) and 64% of women have felt “uncomfortable, insulted, or dismissed” in a climbing gym (Jun 2016b). Concerningly, 47% of women have experienced sexual assault or harassment in a climbing context (e.g., unwanted touching, forced kissing; Lieu and Rennison 2018), and women were subjected to microaggressions two and a half more times than men (Jun 2016b). Among Canadian guides, compared to 3.5% of men, 46% of women experience gender discrimination, particularly, being perceived as less competent (Lotus Mountain Consulting 2019). Further, up to 40% of women guides experience sexual harassment or violence, most often from supervisors or peers (Lotus Mountain Consulting 2019, Newman 2019).²⁹

²⁹ Gender also becomes salient in differences among climbing parents. In a reader survey, women reported that they were more likely to stop climbing during parenthood than men (Schwartz 2009: 76), and anecdotal evidence suggests that female guides delay motherhood until later in life (or forgo it altogether) because the social pressures of motherhood are not compatible with the risks and lifestyle of climbing and guiding (Newman 2019).

2.4.2 ‘White’ Outdoors

Just as sports are a stage to act out hegemonic notions of gender, many authors have explained how the *outdoors* and *nature* are places where hegemonic masculinities are reproduced through ideals of “rugged manhood” and conquest over the “wild” (Cronon 1996: 13–14; Senda-Cook 2012; Gaard 2014; Robinson 2008; Moraldo 2015). Wilderness spaces have been constructed in the image of white masculinity (Finney 2014; Rose and Paisley 2012; Hunt 2019) and continue to be reproduced and reinforced white spaces today (Raad 2020, Henderson 2020). The United States and Canada have a racist history of outdoor recreation, and the construction of outdoor spaces in the white image continues to exclude Black and Indigenous People of Colour.³⁰

The history of outdoor recreation in Canada and the United States is rooted in an idea of the ‘white outdoors’ or a ‘white wilderness’. DeLuca and Demo (2001) discuss how the environmental narrative is constructed by the powerful, and thus, the ‘white wilderness’ is how we have come to understand outdoor spaces. Conservationists like John Muir romanticized Yosemite in the imagine of whiteness, offering the “domesticated sublime” to the emerging middle-class settler families of the late 19th and early 20th century (DeLuca and Demo 2001: 551). Finney (2014) argues that erroneous ideas about race, history, gender, and culture influence present day constructions of the outdoors. Further, she discusses how Black participation in environmentalism was whitewashed, cast to the margins, or ignored completely. Essentially, the

³⁰ Following other authors, I included grey literature my review to share Black voices and perspectives that have been historically omitted from academic conversations (see Finney 2014).

history of white supremacy in broader Western culture has perpetuated the “white narrative” of the outdoors as the only way to interact with those spaces.³¹

Environmentalism and outdoor recreation often obscure histories of marginalized groups (Henderson 2020, DeLuca 2007). Regarding race, those with representational hegemony control the way others construct their identities and shape their relationship with the environment (Finney 2014, hooks 1992), and historically, these narratives were overwhelmingly white. For example, Abel (2017) criticizes John Long’s (2010) *How to Rock Climb!* for ignoring entire cultures and continents in its discussion of climbing history.³² There are innumerable articles of white, colonial conceptions of nature, but a dearth in how BIPOC think about, interact with, and experience the outdoors.

The way that outdoor spaces are imagined serves to exclude BIPOC, which Stanley (2020) describes in her article about “unlikely hikers”. The author uses Carter (2008)’s ideas of ‘racial spatiality’ to explain that there are so few Black hikers in the USA because the Black racialized body is not seen to belong in outdoor spaces. Authors like Braun (2003) have explored how these racial stereotypes about who belongs outdoors are reproduced in these outdoor spaces. Cultural narratives and stereotypes render Blackness incompatible with the outdoors, effectively limiting certain groups from accessing these spaces (Finney 2014). Further, BIPOC and other racialized groups experience barriers in accessing the physical, mental, and social health benefits of recreating outside because of racialized violence (Taylor, González, and Razani 2021), including racism against Asian communities since the COVID-19 pandemic (see de Jesus 2021).

³¹ See Diouf’s (2020) article in *Melanin Basecamp* for an accessible summary of how the outdoors has been written as a white space.

³² Examples of this include early cliff-dwelling cultures like the Anasazi and Ancestral Puebloans, as well as individuals from cultures who ascended peaks for spiritual purposes such as many Indigenous peoples in North America (Abel 2017).

BIPOC bodies are also excluded from sporting spaces. In her introduction to *lifestyle sports*, Wheaton (2016) explains that sports with distinct subcultures serve as a stage for the performance of whiteness, barring those who do not fit the image.³³ Similar to how children's bodies are gendered in sport at an early age, children of cultural and visible minorities are 'othered', which affects how children understand their bodies and capabilities moving into adulthood (MacDonald, Abbott, Knez, and Nelson 2009).³⁴ These challenges are amplified for individuals with intersecting identities, such as womanhood (Crenshaw 1989), but the research is limited. Cortis (2009) discusses how sporting norms exclude women from culturally diverse backgrounds, while Ariail (2020) explores how Black women actively challenge stereotypes and realities of race, gender, and sexuality in sport.

There is an imbalance in media representation, reflecting the cultural biases and reinforcing the stereotypes that prioritize whiteness, which legitimizes the outdoors as a white space. In *Black Faces, White Spaces*, Finney (2014) discusses the 2006 "green" issue from *Vanity Fair* that only included three Black individuals of the 63 pictures and profiles. Similarly, Frazer and Anderson (2018) found that 97.6% of images of people in outdoor magazines were of white individuals. Black women were the most underrepresented, visible in only 0.1% of images in *Climbing Magazine* (Frazer and Anderson 2018). Abel (2017) found similar results in her review of climbing guides mentioned above. She notes that although the gap in gender

³³ In their study on skateboarding culture, Wheaton and Beal (2003) explain that although skateboarders made claims of diverse and inclusive community, their descriptions of a 'generic skater' clearly reflected values of hegemonic white masculinity. Further, the stereotyping of Black and Asian skaters still occurred in group interactions.

³⁴ Outdoor enthusiast survey methods are also complicit in the erasure of BIPOC. Until recently, ethnicity was not reported in reader surveys (e.g., Ellison 2016), nor in the OAC member surveys. Further, a report on "Diversity, Inclusion and Mental Health" among Canadian mountain guides only addressed "diversity" in terms of gender and ignored issues of race and ethnicity (Lotus Mountain Consulting 2019).

representation was narrow, there was a noticeable absence of climbers of colour. Between the four guides, there were 298 photographs of climbers, of which climbers of colour were discernible in only six, and only one of these climbers was identified as a woman (Abel 2017). Reflecting on this disparity, Braun (2003) argues that the narrow and stereotyped portrayal of Black individuals in outdoor media is not a reflection of reality. Rather, the author says, the media is a place where ideas about race and wilderness are actively reproduced within the dominant cultural norms, which Finney (2014) echoes is a major challenge for BIPOC seeking to recreate outside.

2.4.3 Colonialism and Conflict

Building from the previous section, the following paragraphs explore the specific ways in which ideas of the “white outdoors” are inextricable from colonialism and conflict.

Many authors argue that the reproduction of mountains as a place for white masculine identity formation is the result of colonial processes (Driscoll 2020, Taylor 2006), even referring to mountaineering as “an exercise in vertical colonialism” (Schama 1996: 423). This is not surprising as the relationship between Indigenous erasure and the construction of wilderness places as sublime has been well-established (Cronon 1996, DeLuca and Demo 2001, Guha 1989, Spence 1999). Moreover, others have discussed how the idealized nature and Indigenous dispossession and appropriation are reproduced locally in post-war Ontario summer camps (Wall 2009), but also on the larger scale of National Parks³⁵ (Spence 1996, 1999; Taylor 2016).

³⁵ In Yosemite National Park, California, Indigenous villages were razed after the forceable removal of the Miwok peoples from the valley (Spence 1999, U.S. National Park Service 2018), but this history is often overshadowed by the iconic climbing sportscape (Taylor 2006), which was further popularized by mainstream films like *Valley Uprising* (Mortimer, Rosen, and Lowell 2014) and *Free Solo* (Vasarhelyi and Chin 2018).

Colonialism intersects with rock climbing in the way land is used and in route-naming practices, and colonial notions of ownership, conquering, and the sublime are reproduced in these spaces. Climbers continue to re-enact colonial narratives of claiming and conquering land by drilling through Indigenous rock art and petroglyphs to install bolt hangers for climbing in places like the Grampians National Park in Australia (Gunn, Goodes, Thorn, Carlyle, and Douglas 2020), and more recently, near Arches National Park in Utah (Clarke 2021). Further, climbers have argued for the right to climb at sacred Indigenous sites, such as at Devil’s Tower in Wyoming (Dussias 2000, Hanson and Moore 1999) and at the recently closed monolith at Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park in Australia (James 2007, Patrick 2019).

Climbers’ sense of entitlement to land is emulated in climbing guidebooks, as the practice reproduces colonial narratives of land conquering and territorialism. Guidebooks are useful for their topographical maps, route catalogues, and helpful hints for the climber, and further, can be tools for understanding the climbing landscape (Nettlefold and Stratford 1999, Rickly 2017) and sources of historical geography (Taylor 2006). The trouble with these guidebooks is that their route-naming practices also perpetuate colonial power relations by celebrating a conqueror-mentality and prioritizing white, male, able bodies (Nettlefold and Stratford 1999, Stinson and Grimwood 2020). Guidebooks celebrate “being the first to tread virgin territory” (Taylor 2006: 213) by affording route-naming privileges to the first person to climb a route. This *first ascensionist* gains a sense of entitlement and “ownership” over the vertical wilderness (Bogardus 2012: 300, Lawrence 2019: 50). Through this naming practice, guidebooks become “a recreational deedbook” that embodies a “masculine and classist code” (Taylor 2006: 213). Guidebooks perpetuate colonial narratives and reflect entitled attitudes toward the land.

Route-naming practices in guidebooks are inherently problematic, but they cause further harm when the names themselves contain violent imagery, slurs, or degrading stereotypes that target women, Black and Indigenous People of Colour, Asian communities, members of the LGBTQ2S+ community, and individuals with physical disabilities. There are many disagreements in the media about whether these sexist, racist, and otherwise harmful routes should be renamed (e.g., de Bruijn 2019, Pullan 2020, Kandula 2020). Journalists argue that while the decision to replace harmful route names should be obvious, there is pushback from climbers defending first ascensionists' claims to ownership and naming rights. In the time that has passed since harmful route names were first noted in the literature 25 years ago (Loeffler 1996: 222), it has received little academic attention aside from Jennifer Wigglesworth's dissertation research (summarized in Anderssen 2019 and Wigglesworth 2019).³⁶

Many scholars are working upset the oppressive narratives that perpetuate colonial harm in rock climbing. Hunt (2019) argues that instead of re-writing stories of masculine colonial narratives, we must centre historically erased and excluded voices. Attempts at this can be seen in both grey and academic literature where authors centre women's history in climbing and mountaineering (e.g., Phillips 2017, Walsh 2017, Roche 2013). Stinson and Grimwood (2020) trouble masculine conventions by attending to the affects and feelings of climbers in Ontario instead of "rational," masculine thought. Other accounts are more expansive, going beyond only including voices of cis, straight, able-bodied, white women. Finney (2014) centres the stories of Black conservationists like MaVynne Betsch, Eddy Harris, and Shelton Johnson, while Stanley (2020) presents an ethnography on self-dubbed 'unlikely hikers', which includes fat hikers (sic),

³⁶ See Appendix B: The Trouble with Route Names for a larger discussion of this issue.

lesbian women, and hikers of colour. McHugh and colleagues (2018) conducted a meta-analysis of the significance of outdoor sport and recreation for Indigenous youth in Canada. Lastly, Ray (2018) draws from disability studies to explore the ableist notions of environmentalism and argues that moving beyond the colonial narrative requires making space for every kind of body in the outdoors.³⁷ In these ways, authors are challenging and disrupting colonial narratives and practices within climbing to create a more accessible outdoors.

2.5 Present Research

Rock climbing activities impact the ecology of the Niagara Escarpment and the access situation in Ontario is precarious. While, generally, rock climbers derive meaning from their climbing experiences, climbing happens in a colonial space that hinders access to certain users. Still, little is known about how these different factors interact on the Niagara Escarpment to affect the relationships that Ontario climbers have with place and each other. The present research is an ethnographic inquiry into how Ontario climbers understand and recreate with the Niagara Escarpment.

3 Methods

3.1 Orientation and Approach

The purpose of this research is to explore how rock climbers relate to the Niagara Escarpment and the implications of these relationships. I examine the interactions between climbers and the Escarpment, as well as the interactions among community members.

³⁷ Across three major outdoor magazines, Frazer and Anderson (2018) found that 99.8% of images were of able-bodied individuals, and that the major climbing magazine *Rock and Ice* contained zero images of climbers with physical disabilities.

To build an understanding of this community, I use semi-structured interviews, observations and fieldnotes, and raw survey data from the OAC. The information gathered from the semi-structured interviews comprise the bulk of the data, giving a detailed picture of how climbers think about and interact with the Escarpment and other climbers. This qualitative approach was dove-tailed with my own observations and fieldnotes. The raw data from the OAC member surveys was used to quantify climber demographics and provide a snapshot of what the population may look like.

3.1.1 Timeline

This project took place between May 2020 and July 2021. During the proposal-writing stage in summer 2020, I reached out to the OAC to build a relationship, and later, I volunteered by analysing, summarizing, and visualizing the results of the organization's 2019 annual member survey. A summary of the results was published online (see Schaefer, Lam, and Duncan 2020), but I also include the survey results in this thesis, discussed below in "OAC Member Surveys". I am grateful to Dr. Patrick Lam, one of the Directors of the OAC, for his support and guidance through this process.

While awaiting approval from the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board in the autumn of 2020, I began collecting observational data at climbing sites on the Escarpment of individuals interacting with each other and the landscape. To prioritize the safety of myself and others during the COVID pandemic, I did not conduct participant observation but still chose to climb when it was safe to do so, abiding by local and provincial guidelines.

In January and February 2021, I conducted 19 semi-structured interviews, which were transcribed and analysed in March and April 2021. During this time, I also analysed the raw data from OAC member surveys. Writing took place during May, June, and July 2021.

3.1.2 Positionality and Ethical Considerations

Rejecting illusions of objectivity in empirical cultural studies, late 20th century anthropologists emphasized the importance of reflexivity by positioning themselves within their ethnographic writing (e.g., Rosaldo 1989, Abu-Lughod 1995). Most understand ethnography as a way of “both being in and seeing the world” (McGranahan 2018: 2), as our own identities and biases cannot—and should not—be separated from our writing because all modes of knowledge production are socially situated (Haraway 1988, Harding 1992).

I am often considering how my own social position as a white cisgender woman, a climber, an OAC volunteer, and a researcher affect all aspects of my research. As a woman, I benefit from insider status when speaking with other women about gender issues and I have a personal interest in dismantling sexism in climbing. However, as a *white* woman, I am an outsider to issues of race, which often left me confronting the impacts of my own whiteness and privilege in my interviews (Watson and Scraton 2018). As an OAC volunteer and an academic researcher, I am afforded trust from some climbers, but distrust from others.³⁸

During data collection, I was often faced with decisions that prompted me to revisit my initial ethical considerations. This is not uncommon in anthropological research as interviews are a reflexive and performative space where identities are renegotiated and where relations unfold throughout the encounter (Vacchelli 2018: 177). During some encounters, I felt uncomfortable asking certain questions because I was cautious of placing the burden of representation on any one individual. Additionally, my intent was to centre voices that have been excluded from dominant narratives, so I did not ask all male participants about gendered issues, but this

³⁸ Following the climbing closures and bans resulting from Kelly and Larson’s (1997) publication (Gripped 2019a), many Escarpment climbers became distrustful of researchers and other institutional authorities.

sometimes led to confusion among interlocutors.³⁹ To help mitigate such issues, I reminded myself to remain open to alternative understandings while still holding space for my own experiences as a woman and a climber.

3.2 Research Design

3.2.1 Summary of Design

Both qualitative and quantitative data were included in the analyses for this project. I prioritize the qualitative data, which consists of semi-structured interviews and observations and notes that I collected in the latter half of 2020 and beginning of 2021. Through these interviews and observations, I gathered the stories and experiences of climbers to understand rock climbing on the Niagara Escarpment from their perspective. The quantitative data was collected by the OAC from 2009 to 2019 from their annual member surveys. I incorporate this data in my thesis to provide a snapshot of the demographics and beliefs of the broader community while also disseminating information that is not yet available elsewhere.

3.2.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

3.2.2.1 Purpose and Rationale

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect rich data on the research themes (affective experiences at the crag, attitudes toward nature and conservation, environmental care practices, ethics, and mentorship) as well as to document how broader social issues such as gender, race, and COVID-19 are manifesting within the rock climbing community in Ontario. This method was used to explore how climbers understand their interactions with the Niagara

³⁹ Some male interlocutors inquired about why I did not ask them about their gendered experiences, to which I explained my intentions and encouraged them to share their opinions if desired.

Escarpment, and each other, and to capture the nuances in the attitudes, experiences, and beliefs that are not available through quantitative research alone.

3.2.2.2 Recruitment and Consent

At the time of project conception, I had intended to conduct 20 to 25 interviews virtual interviews. This number was derived from Bernard's (2011: 154–55) estimate that interviews with 10 to 20 knowledgeable people is enough to uncover and understand core ideas in a culture and to reach “data saturation”. This estimate is supported by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson's (2006) evidence-based recommendation for non-probabilistic sampling. After conceptualizing “data saturation” and running analyses, Guest and colleagues (2006) suggest that 12 interviews is ideal, but that overarching themes can be distinguished with as few as 6 interviews. Because I was gathering perspectives from different subgroups within the community, I chose to conduct more interviews. My goal was to reach data saturation within the larger sample of climbers, but also amongst the two primary genders (men and women) and level of experience (beginner [0–3 years], intermediate [4–7 years], and advanced [8+ years]). My final consideration for deciding the number of interviews was that I wanted to include both expert informants that could provide cultural data (as prescribed by Bernard 2011: 143), as well as reflections from new members of the community.

I recruited interlocutors through my personal networks and snowball sampling. I first reached out to three of my personal contacts who met the study criteria (over 18 and involved in rock climbing on the Niagara Escarpment), who provided names of individuals who might be interested in an interview and proceeded from there. I used a *participant matrix* similar to the one described by Galletta (2013: 40) to ensure that I was building a sample encompassing a diversity in identities, perspectives, and experiences.

Of the 20 individuals that I contacted for an interview (via email or social media), 19 responded requesting more information. In response, I sent the study documents (i.e., information letter and consent document) by email. These documents included information about the purpose and nature of this project, potential risks, data security, and potential outputs of the research project (e.g., academic publications, public summaries of results). Individuals were instructed to review these documents and inform me of any questions or concerns. At this time, some respondents expressed concerns about the proposed video-calling software (Microsoft Teams), to which I offered accommodations such as using different software or to conduct the interview by phone instead. During the scheduled interview time, I reviewed the information letter and consent document again with the interlocutors and obtained verbal consent. All 19 people who responded to my initial contact agreed to participate (although one individual withdrew from the study during the data analysis phase). After providing informed consent, interlocutors were reminded of the potential outputs of the research and asked whether they preferred to be identified by their first name or a pseudonym. If they chose to use a pseudonym and requested their identity remain confidential, I made a note to exclude directly identifying characteristics from the outputs.

I stopped recruiting after 19 interviews despite receiving a plethora of recommendations for more interviewees. At this point, I felt that I was approaching data saturation because I was no longer encountering wholly new information in each interview. If time was not a limiting factor, I would have continued seeking out knowledge and perspectives from individuals who are Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC).

3.2.2.3 Conducting the Interviews

The 19 interviews took place from January 25 to March 26, 2021 over the phone or video conferencing software and were recorded using an audio-recording device. Although I had intended for the interviews to last only 40 to 60 minutes, most ended up running longer due to my interlocutors' enthusiasm and grace. Including the 10-minute consent process, interviews lasted 85 minutes on average.

The interview themes were generated during the proposal stage, however, throughout the course of interviewing, I revised the specific questions within each theme. Further, ineffective questions and questioning methods were omitted from the later interviews. See Appendix A for the Interview Guide.

The interview structure was guided by Galletta's (2013) prescriptions for organizing a semi-structured interview. To begin the interview, I invited my interlocutor to develop a narrative so that I could better understand their experiences climbing, while also building some trust and rapport. After eliciting some grounded data about the general topic, I moved into the second stage of the interview. The focus of the second stage was elaboration. I followed up with specific questions pertaining to my interlocutor's narrative to allow them to clarify and elaborate on their experiences and beliefs. The third and final stage was driven by my theoretical grounding. At this point, after having built rapport, I invited my interlocutors to reflect on the experiences they shared with me through theory-driven questions. I chose this format because it allowed for a flow that resembled natural conversations, while still holding space for me to address the research topics.

3.2.2.4 Interlocutor Demographics

I interviewed 19 individuals who identified as rock climbers on the Niagara Escarpment. During transcription, one individual requested to withdraw from the study. The remaining 18 individuals were included in data analysis.

Of the 18 interlocutors, eight identified as men, nine as women, and one as nonbinary. Fourteen individuals identified as white, and the remaining four described their racial or ethnic identity as “mixed” or as a combination of multiple identities, which will not be described in the interest of interlocutor privacy. The mean age was 31.78 years ($SD = 9.80$, $Range = 34$). Outdoor climbing experience among the interlocutors is summarized in Figure 2. The mean number of years climbing on the Niagara Escarpment was 9.89 ($SD = 10.01$, $Range = 31$). The climbing experience among the interlocutors is summarized in Figure 2. The mean number of years climbing on the Niagara Escarpment was 9.89 ($SD = 10.01$, $Range = 31$). The majority said that their preferred style of climbing was sport climbing outdoors, but many also reported enjoying bouldering, traditional, multipitch, alpine, mountaineering, and indoor climbing.

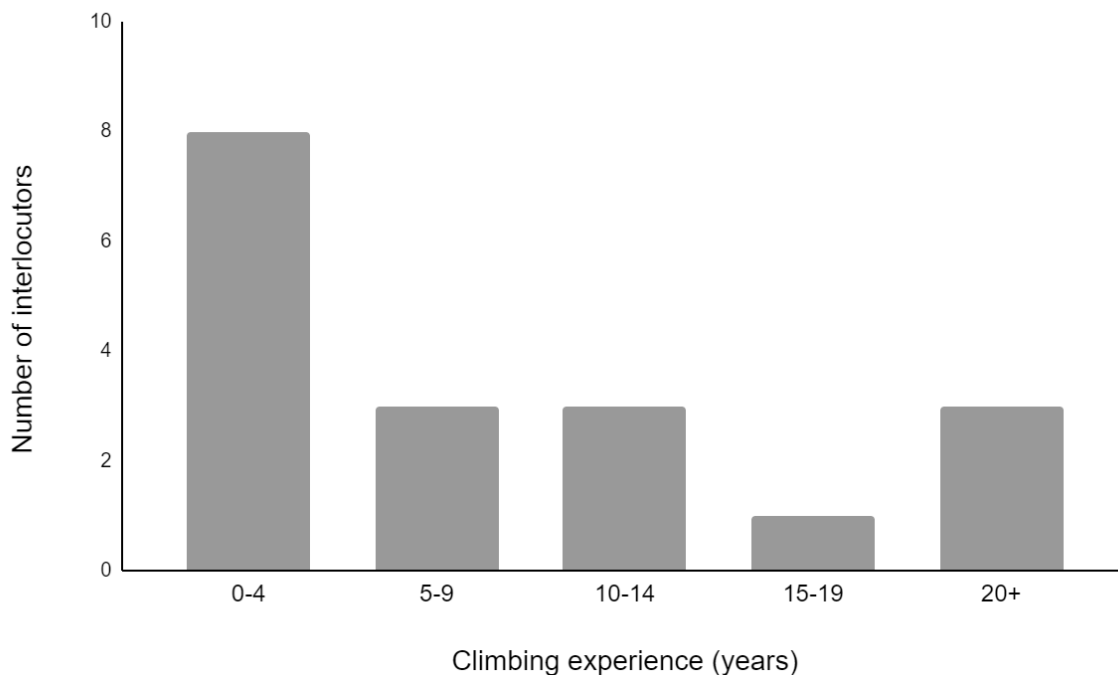


Figure 2. Rock climbing experience among interlocutors in years

3.2.2.5 Transcription and Data Analysis

Transcription took place from March 8 to April 30, 2021. As I transcribed the interviews, I began indexing general themes based on my review of the literature: affect, environmental ethics, mentorship, and gendered experiences. I also added two new themes—community care and access—during the transcription process.

Data analysis took place concurrently with transcription during March and April 2021. Because the interviews were semi-structured, my approach to analysis was neither wholly inductive nor deductive. For this reason, I chose to analyse the interviews using the *flexible coding* method described by Deterding and Waters (2021). This method was developed to address the limitations of *grounded theory*, which applies only to purely inductive coding and was not developed in congruence with qualitative data analysis (QDA) software. Instead, this flexible coding method utilizes the accessible electronic retrieval functions of QDA software to

process data more organically. This is done in three stages: i) indexing codes and memos, ii) applying analytic codes, and iii) validating the findings. I used NVivo 12 QDA software.

Stage one involved creating *index codes and memos*, which I did as I was transcribing the interviews. I indexed themes by highlighting sections of text and colour-coded them according to the questions in my interview guide. As per Deterding and Waters' (2021) recommendation, I also coded "aha" moments or "great quotes," where interlocutors spoke in a way that was "particularly concise, articulate, or poignant" (p. 727). At this stage, I also began making note of themes and threads across the different interviews. I kept these in a running document, which served as a starting point for defining my analytic codes.

During stage two, I began generating and applying *analytic codes*. Based on the notes I made during the transcription and indexing, I was able to refine some broad analytic codes for each index. For example, within the "Gendered experiences" index, I began noticing how the climbers who were not men shared common stories about being excluded from climbing spaces. Thus, "exclusion" became an analytic code within the "Gendered experiences" index. I proceeded to generate and apply analytic codes for each index, only looking at 1 index at a time and only applying 1 to 2 analytic codes at a time. As recommended by the authors, I did not look at the respondent attributes (e.g., age, climbing experience) during this stage to reduce confirmation bias.

In the third stage and final stage, I tested for validity and refined my themes. To bolster the theoretical validity of my codes, I used the "query" feature to inspect the story taking place within each index and code. I made note of cases that were exceptional or did not fit the pattern. These notes directed me to the codes and cases that needed revision or re-examination. Once I

was satisfied that I had applied my codes accurately and reliably, I moved toward contextualizing and narrating my findings.

Deterding and Waters (2021) suggest that *indexing*—the main component of their *flexible coding* approach—may not be useful for single-researcher teams processing less than 30 interviews, such as this project. However, I find this approach valuable for its flexibility and transparency. The indexing method allows for clear data organization and facilitates multiple re-readings of the text, which is useful for numerous overlapping themes.

3.2.3 Observations and Fieldnotes

3.2.3.1 Purpose and Rationale

In my research journal, I recorded my observations in the field, reflections, questions, and interview notes, which enriched my understandings of climbers' experiences by providing context to their stories and allowing for ongoing analysis in the field.

3.2.3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection took place from September 2020 to April 2021. I recorded my personal observations and experiences while conducting interviews and while participating in the sport because I am a member of the community. This data included fieldnotes, screenshots of public forums, diary entries, personal photographs, and interview notes, which I digitized and uploaded to NVivo for analysis. This data was indexed alongside the interview transcripts according to the process described earlier. Following indexing, I used this data in two ways. First, to help generate or identify analytic codes, and second, to apply analytic codes using the same method used for analysing the interview transcripts.

3.2.4 OAC Member Surveys

3.2.4.1 Purpose and Rationale

Complementing the interview and observational data, I include results of raw data from two of the OAC's annual member surveys (2009, 2019). Due to convenience sampling, this data may not accurately represent the wider climbing population,⁴⁰ but it provides a rough sketch the community and how demographics and attitudes have changed over time.

3.2.4.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The OAC is a non-profit membership-based local climbing organization operated by volunteers that seeks to improve legal access to climbing in Ontario. Member surveys are conducted annually to help the organization better understand the community they represent by inquiring about demographic information, climbing habits, and environmental attitudes. The surveys are distributed online through email and social media and collected on a volunteer-response basis. The 2009 survey received 155 responses. The 2019 survey, designed by Dr. Patrick Lam and Dr. Laura Duncan, received 418 responses (368 complete, response period: June 23 to July 19, 2020). SPSS was used to generate descriptive statistics on participant information to determine changes in the community profile over time.

3.3 Conclusion

Using semi-structured interviews, observations and fieldnotes, and secondary survey data, this project explores the entanglements among rock climbers and the Niagara Escarpment

⁴⁰ Population estimates are unavailable, however, at the time of writing, the Ontario Alliance of Climbers has 2,932 followers on Facebook. The independent public Facebook group, *Ontario Climbing*, group has 4,845, members and the private group, *Ontario Climbing for Women and Gender Diverse Climbers*, has 487 members.

in Ontario. The results are discussed in the following chapters. Chapter Four discusses how rock climbers interact with the Escarpment's crags in terms of affect, care, and development. Chapter Five examines how rock climbers relate to each other and discusses inclusion, exclusion, and representation. Lastly, Chapter Six summarizes the findings and provides recommendations for land managers, the community, and future research.

4 Entanglements with the Escarpment: Affects, Care, and Ethics

4.1 Chapter Overview

Rock climbers in Ontario cultivate meaningful relationships with the Niagara Escarpment through movement in climbing places. Through interactions with these material worlds, climbers develop affective and reciprocal relationships with the Escarpment, which manifests as an ethic of care within the community. Norms about environmental care and stewardship are shared throughout the community and influence ideas about land use, access, safety, and development.

4.2 Affective Encounters with the Escarpment

The Escarpment is a place where rock climbers can interact with the nonhuman worlds of cliff faces in meaningful ways. Climbers come to know the material worlds of the Niagara Escarpment and cultivate deep relationships with place through affective, bodily encounters with the rock. I share how movement with the material is important to the construction of meaning and how climbing is a creative way to connect deeply with outdoor spaces.

4.2.1 Movement and Materialism

Movement and physical interaction with the material world are necessary conditions for rock climbing. One of the first accounts of embodied knowledge and climbing bodies explores how the environment inscribes itself on climbers and how climbers interact with the material

world using tactile and kinaesthetic senses to help them navigate and make sense of climbing spaces (Lewis 2000). More recently, Rickly (2017) discusses how these climbing spaces are created and reproduced through bodily interaction with them. In this subsection, I explore how climbers in Southern Ontario interpret their interactions with and movements on the rock, the role of the climbing body in these interactions, and how these interactions with the material world of the Escarpment creates meaningful affects and intimacies.

As movement is central to the climbing experience, it is not surprising that many climbers reflected on the feelings and meanings of movement while climbing on the Escarpment. This can be seen in an excerpt from my interview with DK, who was explaining to me how movement is his favourite part of climbing:

I really love the movement of rock climbing... The coordination of basically your entire body to do these strange movements and hold tension in these strange positions. And to get into a physical flow state when you're really cruising through a problem or a route... There's something just so good about the way that your body moves when rock climbing. (DK)

DK is explicit about the importance of movement to his climbing experience. For others, the importance of movement was evident in the way that they described different routes on the Escarpment. For example, when describing one of his favourite routes, Ben tells me, "*the movement on it is perfect,*" and later emphasizes that the best part is the "*really aesthetic movement.*" Others gave similar descriptions; Thomas told me about how a "*neat move*" could make a climb enjoyable, and DK described good climbs as being those with "*great movement*".

Through movement, climbers can connect with the material worlds of the Escarpment and learn how to think with their climbing bodies. Describing what initially captivated her about climbing, JJ says:

...Just understanding rock... that element of concentration... the fact that everything disappears when you're climbing. Your focus in that immediate moment is

incredible. And nothing else exists at that time... just understanding what to do and the subtlety of movements... where your feet go, what your fingers are doing, how quickly your hands open up.... (JJ)

JJ shows how climbers connect with the rock through the moving and climbing body.

The role of the body in climbing experiences was emphasized by others as well. Sabrina described to me how the climbers she admired most “*were the ones who made climbing look effortless... really understanding their body movement... really just embodying movement*”. For Mike, the climbing body was also a curious body, whereby climbing was a way to push boundaries to see what the body is capable of. This curious body was also evident in the way that people described the problem-solving nature of climbing, which Sabrina described as “*unlocking sequences*”. Climbing bodies are also knowing and feeling bodies. In describing an iconic route, Thomas recalled to me a step-by-step description of the sequence of movement, which reflects Goodrich’s (2004) discussion about the embodied nature of spatial knowledge among climbers. Further, the climbing body as knowing and feeling was also evident when interviewees described processes of listening to and respecting how their bodies were feeling, especially when emotions of fear or anxiety were present. In these ways, climbers come to know the rock through their body’s movements.

Through climbing bodies, individuals come to understand the material world of the Escarpment. Many of the climbers I spoke with attended to the material properties of the rock in their descriptions. For example, DK and Harrison emphasized “rock quality” as a factor in their enjoyment, which varied based on cleanliness, density, presence of interesting features, and absence of loose or unstable rock. This reflects Kulczycki’s (2014) research on climbing in Western Canada, whereby the type of rock, rock formations, and handholds in the rock were all essential to the construction of place meaning for climbers. Further, almost every climber

mentioned the feeling of the rock under their hands as part of their descriptions of their climbing experiences. For example, Kaitlyn says, *“I love the feeling of the rock on my fingertips... It totally takes you out of all those thoughts and into the moment and being there and present... tuning into your heartbeat and that sensation on your fingertips...”*. In this way, the physical movement on and with the rock become affective experiences for climbers. The next paragraph will explore how affect emerge from these physical interactions with the material worlds of rocks, and how they are part of meaning-making on the Escarpment.

The stories about climbing on the Escarpment revealed how the material properties of the rocks evoked certain emotions through the climbers’ interactions with them. When describing her first time climbing outside many years ago, Sabrina says, *“I was hyper aware of how hard the rock was, and how unforgiving it would be if I hit it. I was hyper aware of all the space behind me.”* She then said how this sensorial experience of the Escarpment’s cliff face led to feelings of fear, which Rossiter (2007: 299–301) has also described as being essential to the climbing experience. Kacy gave a similar description of the boulders at Niagara Glen, using words like *“unrelenting”*, *“immobile”*, and *“unforgiving”*. These descriptions of the properties of the rock are not passive, but active. They imply an affective relationship with the climber.

The capacity of the rock to evoke deep emotional states can best be seen in the following passage from Sabrina:

I need to know every little intimate detail about a hold to be able to send the route or to climb it the way that feels fulfilling to me. It’s just such an intimate thing... to not be pounding your fist against it, but just settling your fingers onto it... and pressing your weight... and your face close, and then shifting... For me, it feels very intimate... and beautiful. And that’s what I love about climbing in Ontario. Sometimes you step ten feet away and it doesn’t even look like there’s any holds there. But then, once you get to know that piece of rock really, really well... it’s a completely different and special relationship... (Sabrina)

In this way, the movement on and interactions with the material worlds of the Escarpment creates an emotional response and an intimacy between climbers and the rock. This is consistent with Ness's (2011) research on how meaning-making happens through physical contact with the rock in Yosemite National Park, California. The movement with the material becomes affective and creates meaning. In the next sections, I will further explore how these affective encounters with the rock and the landscape are important to generating meaning among climbers and place.

4.2.2 Generating Meaning

Climbers begin to cultivate meaningful experiences on the Escarpment through movement on and with the rock. For those I spoke with, climbing on the Escarpment served many purposes. Climbing is an exciting way to re-create outside with friends, but it was also deeply personal in that it helped climbers process and cope with adverse life events, rebuild and strengthen bonds with family, and served as an outlet during troubling times (e.g., during COVID, see Appendix C). The meanings generated, negotiated, and reproduced in these spaces varied between individuals but centred around three themes: personal discovery and growth, mental health, and community and relationships.

First, personal discovery and growth were a source of meaningful interactions with the Escarpment for many that I spoke with. This is perhaps because there are many paths for this type of personal development. As Mike says, "*You get to decide what your relationship is to climbing... I think there's multiple layers in terms of what drives people to climbing and what keeps people in climbing.*" Mike continues that these drives could be centred around performance, overcoming fear, technical systems, nature, or discovery of new places, a view that was shared by many others. In this way, each climber's journey into climbing on the Escarpment

was unique, but they all shared similar process of self-reflection, learning, and feeling inspired, and they evolved and shifted over time. Further, this sense of self-discovery often went beyond the experience of climbing, as can be seen in JJ's excerpt:

It sets you free... I'm seeking life, not death... [and climbing] allowed me to set myself free and embrace the beautiful part of life that a lot of people get to miss... It's a pretty magical experience that's pretty hard to let go. And... trying hard and failing makes people uncomfortable... so it's not great for your ego at times, but you get to find out who you are... You get to find out sort of what you're made of. And I don't want to be dishonest with myself. I want to find out who I am, you know, in the throes of things... And climbing was the sport that did it for me. (JJ)

In JJ's candid and honest description of her climbing experiences, she shows how climbing can add value and meaning to one's life through self-discovery. Although many had similar sentiments, they expressed this process of growth in a different way. For Sabrina, her current goal is to remain focused on growth by striving to be the type of climber she admires: *"someone who is always interested in learning, always interested in improving, always keeps the kind of excitement and giddiness for climbing... and try not to get bogged down in expectations."* To her, being a good climber means cultivating a *"non-judgmental attitude"* and *"staying open to where I can improve"*. This type of growth is closely connected to lifestyle and self-esteem, which was another way that climbers generated meaning while climbing on the Escarpment.

Second, mental health was factor in how climbers derived meaning from their interactions with the Niagara Escarpment. For some people like Natalie, climbing was "cathartic," in that it was a way to relieve tension and stress. Others like Stacey and DK described enjoying the mental break or "escape" of climbing because they were able to tap into flow states. Similarly, LO says the experience is meditative. She tells me, *"I feel like it's my happy place. I feel like, when I'm outside, and when I'm climbing on the Niagara Escarpment, I can breathe. It requires so much dedication and focus that it's like a form of meditation... where*

you're focusing solely on one thing and forgetting about everything else." Others were more explicit about the benefits of climbing to mental health. Carys said that climbing improved their mental health in that not only did they feel better afterward, but that it helped in building self-esteem and confidence. For Kaitlyn, pushing herself mentally in climbing helps her challenge feelings of self-doubt and fears of failure, which, she explains, rolls over into other areas of her life as well. On the other hand, Tasmin pointed out that climbing can also become taxing on one's mental health when success and self-esteem become intertwined: *"When you're sending and you feel strong... you feel amazing and you feel good about yourself and you're proud. And it's really good for your self-esteem. But, if you're having an off day, or the conditions aren't great and your project's not going well, or you're just falling or whatever... you just feel terrible about yourself."* Although climbing can evoke the full spectrum of emotions, Tasmin clarifies later that, overall, her life is richer for it. These accounts demonstrate how climbing on the Escarpment becomes meaningful by improving mental health, which is congruent with past research that climbing places can have relaxing and restorative effects (Kulczycki 2014) and are beneficial for self-esteem and mental health (e.g., Gallotta et al. 2015)

Last, community and relationships played a large role in meaning-making for those who climb on the Escarpment. Almost everyone I spoke to were explicit about the role of other climbers in generating positive, meaningful experiences. LO explains the significance of community to her climbing experience:

Since the start, climbing for me has been a really important community... You spend a lot of time climbing outdoors, so it's someone that you can get along with for an eight or ten-hour day, and still be friends at the end of it. And I think now, still, the people that I climb with are people that I consider friends, people that have similar interests and values to me... Community is a really important piece for me. (LO)

LO emphasizes the importance of friendship and climbing with like-minded people. Stacey also emphasizes the importance of interacting with others in climbing spaces. She explains, *“I’m not a rock climber because of rock climbing. I’m a rock climber because of the people, and I just get to do this really awesome thing with them. You know what I mean? Like, it started off as a sport, but it’s not a sport... It’s a family. It’s... Yeah, it’s my people!”* The way Stacey equates the climbing community to family clearly demonstrates the meaningful social interactions that happen in climbing spaces.

These findings are not surprising as they are congruent with established theories on place, particularly, that the sociality among people at sites contributes to place-making (Davenport and Anderson 2005; Fishwick and Vining 1992). The importance of social worlds in meaning-making has also been demonstrated in climbing communities in Southern France (de Léséleuc 2004) and Western Canada (Kulczycki 2014). In the next section, I build on theories of place in an exploration of how these meaningful experiences connect Ontario rock climbers to the Niagara Escarpment.

4.2.3 Relationships with Place

Through meaningful interactions between humans and the material world, individuals and communities can develop a *sense of place* (see Basso 1996, Tuan 1974). For climbers, meaning-making happens through their kinaesthetic and affective interactions with climbing spaces, transforming them into meaningful places (de Léséleuc 2004, Kulczycki 2014). Place-making among climbers is understudied in Southern Ontario on the Niagara Escarpment, aside from a few papers from a small group of researchers on people-place relationships in the Niagara Glen (Thompson, Hutson, and Davidson 2008; Hutson and Howard 2015; Hutson and

Montgomery 2010). This section will explore how individuals construct the Niagara Escarpment as a climbing place, as well as their relationships with it.

For rock climbers in Ontario, being outside is crucial to the climbing experience. In the 2009 OAC survey, 62.3% of respondents selected *Connection to Nature* in response to “Why do you climb?”. In the 2020 OAC survey, being outside in nature appears to be the most important motivator for climbing in Ontario, with 89% reporting that it is *quite important* or *extremely important*. Mike, who is one of the OAC’s Directors, echoed this sentiment in our interview, telling me that, personally, he thinks that the inspiration that comes with being outdoors is a primary motivator for climbers. This sentiment surfaced in my interview with Sabrina as well. Reflecting on why she was first drawn to climbing on the Escarpment, she says: “*I knew there was this huge, beautiful space that I could be in, climbing outside. And the promise of that was so enticing to me... Even now, I feel it’s a constant journey of getting to that... that beautiful place.*” Climbing facilitates the construction of the Escarpment as a beautiful, appreciated place.

Rock climbing adds value to the Escarpment because it is a conduit for the appreciation of natural spaces. Nearly everyone I spoke with indicated that rock climbing gave them a reason to be outside and enjoy the outdoor space. To these individuals, climbing is an interesting way to interact with the outdoors, and Ben argues that “*climbing can be a gateway to appreciation for nature.*” This is perhaps because climbing reinforces the meanings that people attach to nature. DK said that the nature experience is “inherently meaningful” because it serves as a reminder that there is life beyond the human-centred realities of city life. For others like Felix, being able to enjoy the Escarpment through rock climbing “adds value” to the province. He argues that Ontario “would be a less welcoming place without it” and Natalie said that in the absence of mountains, the Escarpment is a “source of pride”. Some people also indicated that being able to

climb on the Escarpment is the only reason for them to stay in Ontario. For example, Mike reflects: “*Living in Toronto, if the Niagara Escarpment didn’t exist, I would have long ago moved out west. It’s a pretty special resource that we have here close to the GTA.*” The Niagara Escarpment is a significant place for rock climbers in Ontario and facilitates meaningful relationships with outdoor spaces.

The Niagara Escarpment as a climbing place is essential to meaning-making. This is evident from the relationships rock climbers form with the Escarpment. Climbers saw both the broader Escarpment and individual routes as lively actor-subjects, with whom it is possible to form relationships with. For example, Sabrina shares:

When I’m climbing on the Escarpment, each climb is like this little relationship that I develop... It starts off rocky, and you go through all these emotions... You’re pissed and then you’re happy, and then you’re at peace and you’re frustrated... For me, it feels really intimate... There’s nothing else that knows me the way rock climbing knows me... the way Ontario limestone knows me. That’s why I love it. (Sabrina)

Here we see the personification of the route, the rock, and the Escarpment—an underlying theme in my interviews. Climbers understand climbing spaces on the Escarpment as lively actor-subjects, with whom they built relationships that were *intimate*, *reciprocal*, and *enduring*. The following paragraphs will attend to each of these three properties of the relationships with the Niagara Escarpment.

First, climbers were decidedly clear about their relationship with the Escarpment being *intimate*. Harrison and Sabrina both used the word “intimacy” to describe their relationship or their experiences. Others described their relationship using words that evoked a sense of intimacy, such as “sacred” (Kaitlyn), “love” (Brad, Sabrina), “trust” (Kaitlyn), and “home” (Stacey, Ben). Many others compared their relationships to a romantic partnership. Sabrina describes this well when she enthuses, “*It’s a love affair. It’s love! It’s pure and unadulterated*

love. I think about it when I'm not there. I wonder how it looks... I wonder how it feels... I think about when I'll get back to it. I think about times where I was there before... Yeah, it's a total love affair." Sabrina's description demonstrates the intimacy shared among climber and Escarpment, and points to the role of the tactile sensations and material properties of the rock discussed earlier in this chapter.

Second, the relationship between climbers and the Escarpment was *reciprocal* in nature, again returning to this notion that the Escarpment is a lively actor-subject and not a passive landscape. While some scholars like Taylor (1995) argue that humans are usually selfish in their motivations to protect nature, others argue for a perspective of *moral ecologies* where relations between humans and nature are expected to be reciprocal, mutually beneficial, and sustainable (Baker et al. 2017, Dove and Kammen 1997). Some climbers were also explicit about the reciprocal nature of their relationships. Kacy says, "*We're so lucky as climbers that we get to literally touch it, and be in it, and part of it. As climbers, even more so, we get something back from it.*" Kacy emphasizes the material interactions that spawn the reciprocity. She continues to say that it gives back in terms help you learn about yourself, which fits with meanings of self-discovery discussed earlier in this chapter. Kacy reflects further on her relationship:

As climbers, when we go to a place on the Niagara Escarpment, we have so many emotions that we feel, and so many things that we experience, physically and mentally, when we are in, and on, and around the Escarpment... It's impossible not to feel protective of it, or love it, or feel connected to it... Because you're not just a passive passerby... like, I'm *touching it*. And then, I'm feeling sad or angry that I didn't send my project... Or, that I'm happy that I did climb this climb... It's a buffet of emotions you experience as a climber. And that all happens on the Niagara Escarpment for Ontario climbers, right?... It's like a relationship... I love the Escarpment. Of course, I love the Escarpment! It gives me so many things. And, it gives me the opportunity to experience so many different emotions and feelings... From happiness to frustration to, you know... love... (Kacy, emphasis hers)

Kacy's reflections reveal how reciprocal the relationship is in terms of emotionality. She expresses gratitude for the opportunity to be so affected by the Escarpment. This appears to be true for JJ as well, who extends the metaphor of romantic human partnerships from earlier to illustrate the reciprocal exchange that happens between herself as a climber and the Escarpment:

It's a marriage. It takes compromise. It takes a lot of care and communication and support and truth... That's my relationship with the crags. I love them very much. I try to go out there and take care of them, treat them well, show them a lot of respect. And in return, it does the same. The cliffs give me the freedom, the love of the outdoors, the peacefulness, the contentment that I feel when I'm out there... Just like being in a good marriage... you need to give a lot, and it gives a lot back. (JJ)

Not only does JJ's wisdom highlight how the Escarpment gives to her, but she also alludes to how she tries to give back to it as well (which I discuss in further detail in the section on "Access" later in this chapter). Clearly, climbers view the relationship as reciprocal, but it is less obvious how the Escarpment views this relationship. The cliffs give humans a place to climb, and the climbers try to reciprocate by treading lightly and offering protection. It is unclear whether, as an actor-subject, the Escarpment understands or appreciates these actions.

Third, climbers have *enduring* relationships with the Escarpment. Their relationships were enduring in that they were long-lasting and a source of nostalgia, but also in that they anchored emotions, experiences, and memories. One element of the longevity and nostalgia was the timeless or permanence of cliffs. In Ben's words:

For me, it's a very familiar feeling. It's something that I've visited since I was a kid, since before I was a climber. And then it was really the first outdoor space that really sucked me in... initially for sport climbing, but then to appreciate the place as a whole... The Escarpment is always going to have that feeling of 'home' for me... I guess it's like an old friend. It's been omnipresent in my life. Now that I do the math, I've spent more than half of my life visiting and revisiting these places. (Ben)

Ben continued that his relationship has changed throughout the course of his life. Whereas he used to be motivated by the discovery of new places through climbing, he is now content

revisiting old favourites and appreciating them simply by walking through. Natalie told me about how her relationship has changed as well. Although the Escarpment sparked her love for climbing, she climbs elsewhere now, so her feelings toward the Escarpment are more nostalgic.

This sense of longevity and nostalgia was also captured in my interview with Thomas:

I do always recognize the cliffs of Kelso when I drive the 401 [highway]. I think about driving up past Glen Eden and rising up in the Escarpment. I remember my father would always acknowledge whenever we would drive up the Escarpment. I mean, it is definitely a fixture in my life... as an anchor to this part of the world... It definitely has a place. It definitely has a role. It definitely anchors memories that are really strong. (Thomas)

Here, Thomas describes the omnipresence of the Escarpment, but he also explains that it is an anchor for strong memories. This feeling was not lost on others. Sabrina shares how she can recall significant chapters and events in her life through the memories that were anchored to different places on the Escarpment. For others like Stacey, meaning is anchored to the Escarpment through the sense of stability it added to her life during a time of uncertainty:

For some people it's a point of adventure, or it's a point of fitness, but for me... it's stability. It's not about the sport; it's about what the sport brings into my life... And the sport didn't abandon me. It stayed there and waited for me. That is what the Niagara Escarpment is to me. And that's why going there lets me forget about everything else. Because the two most important things in my life—my brother, and my ability to keep going—are rooted there. (Stacey)

Although the reasons for why the relationships of these climbers are varied, the common theme is that the Escarpment exists as a constant presence in the imaginary of those who have climbed on it. Mike suggests that this feeling of omnipresence comes from the Escarpment serving as the foundation for all the meaning-making that happens, appreciating “*the beautiful moments that it has provided, the opportunity for friendships, the connections with people, with nature, with places...*” In this way, the Escarpment becomes a meaningful place for those that recreate with it.

For climbers, the Niagara Escarpment is a place where they can recreate outdoors in a deep and meaningful way. Movement and material properties connect climbers to place through affective encounters, and the meaningful experiences generated through climbing are intertwined with the relationships climbers build with place. The ways these climbers imagine, negotiate, and reinforce meanings are consistent with Brymer and Gray's (2010) phenomenological analysis of outdoor sports. These authors found that instead of understanding the outdoors as a space to be consumed, the athletes instead cultivated intimate and reciprocal relationships and viewed themselves as interactive part of the landscape—like the athletes that I spoke with. Climbers come to know the material world of the Niagara Escarpment through touch and cultivate deep relationships with place through affective, bodily encounters with the rock.

4.3 Teaching Care at the Crag

Climbers cultivate meaningful relationships with the Escarpment through their affective encounters with place. The meanings that climbers assign to these places influence the way that the community interacts with these spaces and how ethics of environmental care are transmitted in a period of rapid community growth.

4.3.1 Ethic of Environmental Care

Care is active, and it is negotiated through our ideas about what constitutes life and ecology (de la Cadena 2010; Kohn 2013). Thompson, Hutson, and Davidson (2008) suggest that the “caring attitudes” of Escarpment climbers are inextricable from the interactions that happen in place within the community and within these climbing places (p. 30). Care for these climbing places is developed through repetitive acts of intimacies with the land, and this care has become a central pillar of the community's code of ethics.

According to climbers, care is one way to reciprocate the love the Escarpment has given them. Mike, an OAC Director, developer, and long-time Escarpment climber, says that although people usually start climbing on the Escarpment as a fun way to get outside, they develop a caring relationship for it over time. Stacey agrees, recalling that her respect and appreciation for the Escarpment has increased over time, which has reinforced her desire to keep it clean and take care of it. On the other hand, Ben's caretaking is motivated by his awareness of the overlap between climbing places and wildlife habitat. Still, others like Kacy were explicit about care as reciprocity, stating that her community contributions were "*part of all [her] love for The Glen.*" Affective encounters facilitate a desire to practice environmental care for these spaces.

Woods and company (2018) define care as a value that is "reproduced through our everyday relations" (p. 28). For climbers, this reproduction happens as a function of the community's ethic of care. Everyone agreed that certain behaviours were unacceptable, such as leaving garbage, walking off trail, disturbing nesting birds, mismanaging excrement, and trampling flora. These ethics are deeply ingrained in the beliefs of the climbers and reproduced through their actions in the community. LO says she chooses her climbing partners based on a "respect for the environment," valued second only to safety. Mike also points to the virtue signalling that happens for this ethic, describing how climbers will post pictures on social media of the trash they have collected, demonstrating the social value of care. Here, climbers are demonstrating their commitment to the shared values, and gaining social capital by indirectly giving back to their social network.⁴¹ Environmental care is highly valued among climbers and reproduced through their everyday interactions with the community and the landscape.

⁴¹ According to Robert Putnam's (2001) definition of social capital.

4.3.2 Pedagogies of Protection

Before information about best practices (including environmental ethics and climbing safety and technique) was widely available on the internet, formal mentorship was the primary conduit for this knowledge. For those who received this formal mentorship, the experience was paramount to their development as both a climber and an individual, and it stoked their love for the sport. However, only a few of the climbers I spoke with were fortunate enough to have this experience, and the knowledge they gained was not focused on ethical environmental practices, but rather, climbing-specific knowledges, such as physical techniques, technical gear knowledge, safety, and overcoming physical and mental challenges.

Among the interlocutors, it seems that their experiences with mentorship centred around safety and technique rather than environmental ethics partly because most climbers already had a sense of outdoor etiquette prior to climbing. For example, Sabrina said, *“I’ve always been an outdoor person, so it’s not something I had to learn necessarily... I always knew you pick up after yourself and leave no trace.”* This sentiment was shared by others, most of whom grew up with families who regularly engaged in outdoor activities. However, some discussed the climbing-specific environmental impacts that they learned over time:

I knew about [environmental ethics] coming into it. Climbing gave me a more climbing-specific framework for how I’m interacting with the environment... I learned a little bit more about the specific environmental risks with climbing... that I might not have had to learn about or had any exposure to before climbing... (Natalie)

Natalie then goes on to give examples of these climbing-specific environmental practices, like not slinging trees and not grabbing onto roots and plants on cliff faces.

These findings suggest that formal mentorship is not the main conduit for transmitting information about environmental care; instead, the process is more informal and organic. JJ

spoke about having many people who acted as a “*mentor-for-a-day*,” while Harrison emphasized the “*communal sharing of knowledge*.” DK explained, “*I don’t really have a mentor on the ethical side of things. That I figured out through just being in the community and seeing how the community behaves.*” Similarly, Brad says mentorship “*kind of happens naturally... it’s more a social and friendship-type thing.*” For many, the transmission of ethics and care came through interactions with people he saw regularly at the crag. For example, Mike says:

It wasn’t really a defined relationship... [But] those guys were pretty instrumental in setting the tone and teaching us about what was acceptable behavior... We talked at length and a lot about having this place be... a place that’s enjoyable for everybody... You strive to leave it better than you found it. (Mike)

Mike continued to say that through cautionary tales of bad behaviour, this informal mentorship served as a foundation guiding his own principles of ethical behaviour.⁴²

On the teaching side, many climbers shared that their strategies for transmitting these ethics revolved around community-building and facilitating conversation.⁴³ JJ tries to teach new climbers that the Escarpment is more than just an outdoor gym “*very jokingly, humorously, warmly, but with education.*” Brad emphasizes the importance of keeping an “*open dialogue*” and KA always brings his respect and humility to these conversations. Mike emphasized the importance of an “*open mind*” and being “*inquisitive*” because here are always opportunities for the teacher to become the student. Below, Stacey and KA both emphasize the importance of these pedagogies of environmental care, especially for access. Stacey begins by saying that

⁴² Not all informal learning experiences were positive and productive. Three climbers shared stories about aggressive and condescending interactions. Although well-intentioned, such interactions can be harmful to individuals with marginal identities. In Henderson’s (2020) thesis on wilderness and exclusion, he argues that behaviour policing is sometimes used in outdoor spaces to force marginalized individuals to conform to dominant ideas of race and gender. Henderson argues that this “expert exclusivity” is commonly used to exclude novices from activities and maintain the status quo.

⁴³ Not everyone felt comfortable confronting other climbers that they did not know, but all agreed that healthy conversation is key.

because guided instruction is not always accessible, climbers must be open to learning from others:

You need to be open to communication with the people that are out there... As a community, we need to better ourselves... If we don't, then all the new people are going to outgrow the old people and we're gonna lose our crags... we're gonna lose the sport. (Stacey)

In contrast, KA talks about his own experience in sharing his knowledge:

I enjoy bringing people out because if I can show them the first time how to keep it clean, hopefully they'll show all their friends the next time how to keep it clean... I really enjoy our crags. I don't want to lose them. So, anybody I can tell is an extra person fighting in the right direction... People who are going without that knowledge are going to hurt [access] for a lot of people. (KA)

Both climbers make it clear that these teachings are essential to maintaining access to crags.

Passing on knowledge about crag etiquette in terms of respectful behaviour and caring actions toward the Escarpment are essential to continuing crag stewardship. Further, educating the community about good behaviour signals to land managers that climbers are a caring user group capable of self-regulation.

4.3.3 Reconciling Rapid Growth

In recent years, more and more people are climbing outdoors, which is increasing the pressures exerted on climbing places worldwide. Population estimates are not available for Ontario climbers, but the annual increases in responses to the OAC member survey indicate substantial growth (155 in 2009 to 418 in 2019).⁴⁴ This increase in new climbers is believed to contribute to the increase in poor outdoor etiquette, which is a major concern for Ontario

⁴⁴ The actual number of climbers in Ontario is presumably much higher. At the time of writing, the public *Ontario Climbing* Facebook group had 4,845 members, and the private Ontario climbing group *For Women and Gender Diverse Climbers* had 487 members.

climbers.⁴⁵ There is some academic support for this claim; Schwartz and colleagues (2019) reported that those who learned to climb indoors knew less about Leave No Trace, and 68% of the 2019 OAC survey respondents learned to climb mostly at an indoor climbing gym. Many interlocutors believed that the link between gym-learning and poor outdoor etiquette could be explained by the increasing lack of mentors.⁴⁶

While some lamented that knowledge transmission is no longer taking place because beginners are teaching beginners, others attributed poor attitudes and behaviour to “a lack of true curiosity” and “no sense of responsibility”. Still, many expressed their desire for mentorship to fill the gaps in their knowledge, while others thought it unnecessary because “*Climbing is quite self-explanatory*”. Also, “the internet” was blamed for its inability to teach “attitude” and “style”.⁴⁷ There was no consensus on how rapid growth, bad behaviour, and knowledge transmission were connected, but everyone agreed on the importance of these issues. All climbers were concerned by poor outdoor etiquette on the Escarpment and agreed that good stewardship was key to reconciling the challenges of rapid growth and securing access for future generations. Mike explains:

[We have] a responsibility to pass on some of those things to the people that are young and are still eager and finding their journey through the sport... That’s something that I’ve really enjoyed... influencing the folks that are going to be around after I’ve moved on... to maintain the crags, to hopefully continue to pass along some of these ethics or philosophies around nature, and around respecting it, and around creating experiences for each other that are really positive. (Mike)

⁴⁵ “Poor behaviour” and “lack of education” were identified as the most pressing access concerns for respondents (83.4% of which had 3 or more years of experience) to the 2019 OAC survey ($N = 419$).

⁴⁶ A Chi-square test was performed on the 2019 OAC survey data to determine the relationship between climber experience (<1, 1-2, 3-5, 6-10, 11-20, >20 years) and source of education (informal/self-taught, formal/guided). Interestingly, there was no significant difference, χ^2 (df, $N = 362$) = 1.07, $p = .96$, suggesting that among this sample, newer climbers did not lack formal mentorship any more than older generations of climbers. These findings are incongruent with the reports from the interlocutors.

⁴⁷ Climbing “style” is often constructed in the white image (see Erickson 2005, Henderson 2020).

In response to the rapid growth, it appears that a sense of community and comradery is essential to the knowledge sharing process and precedes performing care and preserving access.

4.4 Land Use and Development

4.4.1 Perspectives on Access

The ways in which climbers interact with outdoor spaces and demonstrate care for them is instrumental in securing and maintaining access to these climbing places. Access issues on the Escarpment are well-known among most Ontario climbers and frequently discussed. In response to a 2009 OAC survey question about access knowledge, 61.3% of respondents indicated that they were *Aware* or *Very aware*. In the 2019 OAC survey, more than half of respondents (52%) indicated that access to climbing areas is *Very important* or *Extremely important* in their decision to live in Ontario. When asked about their “biggest access concern”, “losing access” (30.1%) was in the top three concerns, in addition to “poor behaviour” (37.5%) and “poor education” (22.6%).⁴⁸ Despite the attention given to access issues, climbers are still worried about losing it.

For JJ, a long-time access advocate, her main worry is how easy it is to lose access. She laments, “*It can take one day to lose a crag; it can take years, if ever, to open it.*” She goes on to explain her passion for defending access and the importance of it:

I’m committed to the crags and trying to keep them there. I do my best to show them respect and be a part of them and fight for them... It was important to fight for something that we loved... that gave me an incredible amount of happiness, that was also part of my recovery [from an illness]... We would spend days at the Glen... and I would just be able to walk around and be in a happy place... I was not afraid to put in a good fight to save what would be important to many generations to come... It gave us incredible memories, and many, many years of just beautiful times and friendships. And that’s where access is really important. (JJ)

⁴⁸ The response format was open-ended and allowed for multiple responses. Percentages reflect the number of people to mention the concern in their response out of the total respondents.

JJ's devotion stems from the memories, meanings, and emotions anchored to the Escarpment, and her advocacy work is both an effort to reciprocate love to the Escarpment, as well a gift to future generations.

Many others demonstrated their knowledge of the precarious access situation on the Escarpment and expressed their frustrations. While JJ's motivations for maintaining access stemmed from love, Ben explains that other individuals care about protecting these places only for the sake of accessing them, and that these climbers adjust their practices.

It was really more, 'If we want to keep being able to come here, we have to do X, Y, and Z'... It's nice to hope that everyone is altruistic and has a specific and conscious relationship with nature, but that's obviously going to be different for everyone. People will care about what they need to care about in order to continue to recreate. So, when there's places where... you have to all of a sudden care about not making extra trails, people will care about that. When Halfway Log Dump was closed... people learned to care about not removing vegetation... because that was what caused that closure. (Ben)

Ben's explanation illustrates that while some climbers are romantic about preservation and access on the Escarpment, others' motivations are more pragmatic. Still, for others, access was a privilege as opposed to a goal.⁴⁹ Some argued that climbing access was a privilege that *could* be sacrificed for the sake of conservation and *should* be sacrificed to honour Indigenous Treaties. Further, some pointed to the problem of developing climbing on Unceded Territory, especially during COVID-19. In our discussion about access, Sabrina explained:

The climbing at Lion's Head, that area could very well get closed down because of some Treaties... I tried to imagine one day somebody saying, 'Well, we can't climb there anymore because these treaties were not honoured.' And I would think, 'Well, fuck. Right! They weren't honoured, so we can't climb there. We got to find somewhere else to climb.' (Sabrina)

⁴⁹ In response to the 2009 OAC survey, 68.3% viewed climbing in public lands, parks, and conservation areas as a *privilege*, not a *right*.

Thus, for some, access was a right, but for some, it is a privilege that should be sacrificed in the spirit of reconciliation. Last to the point, others believed that access should be sacrificed for environmental protection—as opposed to environmental protection being used as a means to an end to maintain access, as Ben described earlier. Ben discusses this orientation toward access:

Not everything needs to be a climbing route. You don't actually have to go everywhere. These places are valuable beyond that, and that's been something that I've been feeling more and more... sometimes because it conflicts with my development. I've gone places and then encountered falcons, and then been like, 'Okay, so I can't come back here until October,' and, 'Do I need to [come back]?'... These places are more important than just the climbing that's on them. (Ben)

Environmental protection is seen as both a necessary act of care and as a means to maintain access. These views run parallel to the ideas that climbing access is both a privilege and a reward for respectful behaviour and are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

4.4.2 Threats to Access and Safety

There are many threats to climbing access on the Niagara Escarpment. Every interlocutor was able to list several actions that threatened climbing access at Ontario crags. They agreed that land managers and landowners commonly close crags due to mistreatment of the environment (e.g., littering, slinging trees, trampling or removing vegetation, disturbing animals or birds, leaving human or pet faeces in the open) and actions that are disrespectful toward other humans (e.g., being disruptive or crass, playing music, trespassing, camping illegally, neglecting to adequately supervise unleashed pets, climbing in large groups).

More experienced climbers also noted that access is threatened because the climbing community is misunderstood by land managers, landowners, and the public. Climbers are sometimes wrongfully blamed for others' poor behaviour. LO explains:

People don't understand climbing... They don't understand the lengths that people go to try to be safe. I think it's perceived as dangerous. And so if an accident were to happen... the thought is, 'Well, of course that happened! Climbing is dangerous!'... when hiking can be just as risky... And I think they don't understand how important the natural environment is to a lot of climbers, and the steps that they take to try to preserve that... When there's garbage at the bottom of a cliff, climbers get a bad reputation for that when the reality is—I know at Lion's Head—hikers throw garbage over the cliff. (LO)

LO clearly articulates different situations where climbers are wrongfully accused; however, she continues that not all climbers are perfect either:

Sometimes certain climbers do certain things that warrant [a bad reputation]. Like, the image of the dirtbag climber,⁵⁰ sleeping in your van, not paying for a campground... But I think that's not the majority, at least not anymore. I think climbers can bring revenue to somewhere like Lion's Head... eating at restaurants and staying in motels or at campgrounds... I think that there is an opportunity, but it's just a group that's not welcomed by the broader community. (LO)

A few climbers mentioned that part of advocating for access involves helping the public understand this user group. JJ says she tries to show people that climbers are not “*just a bunch of thrill-seekers out there haphazardly wandering about doing reckless things.*” She argues that climbing is a form a serious leisure and that given proper education, most climbers will act in a respectable manner. Others expressed their frustrations as well, arguing that the lack of recognition was demoralizing. Ben says, “*My perception is that... a lot of climbers nowadays, their belief in environmental ethic is undermined by seeing different user groups being treated differently in the same spaces.*” He followed up with an example of how the Bruce Trail Conservatory encounters very little barriers to access, despite the environmental disturbances that day hikers cause. Many others echoed this frustration, arguing that overall, the community is

⁵⁰ The image of the “dirtbag” climber that LO describes is explained in detail in Rickly's (2016) paper where she explores this subculture of the climbing community and how it relates to tourism mobilities. Contrary to this stereotype, on average, climbers are an affluent group (77% have household incomes of \$50,000 or more according to the 2019 OAC survey) and have a positive impact on local economies (Maples et al. 2017, Bailey and Hungenberg 2018).

dedicated, responsible, and serious about climbing and representing the community well. Further, they lamented that the only difference between climbers and other user groups is that they are not allowed self-regulate because climbing is not written into the recreation plan of most Ontario Parks and Conservation Areas, meaning climbers always must be on their best behaviour.

Unsafe behaviour also threatens access, and conversely, poor access jeopardizes safety. Brad, and others, describe the increasing number of climbers and injuries on the Escarpment, which threatens access by contributing to the image of the irresponsible climber described above.⁵¹ On the other hand, limited access to climbing areas produces unsafe situations where injury is more likely to occur. For example, fewer crags cause overcrowding, which can lead to communication failures due to excessive noise, or causing climbers to seek out more dangerous, less crowded areas. Limited access also threatens climber safety because it is difficult to establish safety and rescue plans when climbers are not recognized users. One climber shared a frightening story that reflects this lack of safety infrastructure at Lion's Head. She explains:

If you ever need to get rescued at Lion's Head, you're fucked. [laughs] They don't know how to get there. I called and I got a voicemail. And I called a different number... and they were like, 'Well, we don't know how to get there. We only have one boat... Can we call you back?'... And when they finally managed to get there by boat... he said, 'What are you doing here anyway? Aren't there gyms for this? You better not get hurt because we're not coming back here today.' (LO)

LO continues about how easy it would be to put numbered rescue markers at the base of cliffs, similar to that in Conservation Halton parks where climbing is welcomed. Safety markers reduce response time and ease rescue and retrieval during emergency evacuations. Legitimizing climbing in Ontario Parks and Conservation Areas to improve access would also improve safety.

⁵¹ "Unsafe behaviour" was a common answer to 2019 OAC survey's "biggest access concern" question.

4.4.3 Perspectives on Nature and Development

The meaningful encounters that climbers have with the Escarpment influence not only their perspectives on access, but on nature and development as well (Davenport and Anderson 2005). In Ontario, crag development is the result of individuals who dedicate their personal resources to locating, cleaning, and bolting routes for community use.⁵² Crag development can also include establishing infrastructure like parking lots, bathrooms, and trails.

Contrary to mountaineering and wilderness zeitgeists of the 20th century, most present-day Escarpment climbers do not view themselves as conquerors of untouched nature. As discussed earlier, most members understand climbing as a privilege and see the landscape as an active co-creator in their experience, similar to other outdoor sports enthusiasts (Brymer and Gray 2010). These climbers were opposed to ideas about controlling or altering “nature” to accommodate their temporary desires, especially in the context of manufacturing routes. This opposition to controlling outdoor spaces can be seen in an excerpt from my conversation with JJ, who compares her relationship with the crags to a healthy marriage:

...it takes a lot of communication, a lot of effort, a lot of frustration, and a lot of respect, and lack of owning... You don't own a person; they are not property. Just like cliffs are not our property... you have to show it respect. You don't own it. You need to work with it, and be responsible around it, but you don't control it. You can't manipulate it in a way in order to serve your own needs. (JJ)

JJ's explanation challenges narratives of domination, instead demonstrating the tremendous care some climbers put into their relationships with nonhuman spaces. Overall, many others agreed with this. The climbers troubled romantic notions of a “pure” and “untouched nature” (Cronon 1996), instead focusing on the realities of the histories of these places, which reflects DeLuca

⁵² The ethics of bolting and manufacturing routes has been long-debated, see Bogardus (2012), Dawn (2019), and Ramsey (2010).

and Demo (2001)'s pragmatic view of nature and development.⁵³ Performing their ideas of respect for the landscape is paramount how climbers understand *nature* in these places.

For climbers, their attitudes toward the development of infrastructure around a crag are a delicate balancing act between a desire to climb and a belief that these areas should be protected from unnecessary human intervention. While discussing crag closures, Kelly reflected on her own conflicting feelings:

I, on one hand, disagree with how humans in general have used land for their benefit and have exploited it. But, on the other hand, I feel very strongly about being able to access certain spaces for recreation activities... There are these two very conflicting perspectives that I hold within myself about being able to access natural land... There has to be a compromise... we aren't entitled to just do whatever we want... we have to keep things as pristine as possible to be able to use them. (Kelly)

Kelly's perspective on land use illuminates how many climbers negotiate between their values. They asked, "How do you create parking lots without impeding on green space?" Some drew comparisons to other dilemmas afflicting growing urban populations, and even equated it to downhill skiing, in that what was once a niche backcountry sport now boasts theme-park-esque line-ups and five-star accommodations. Many climbers wondered how to maintain the sport's integrity while also making space for all those who wish to join. On this subject, Thomas adds: *"It becomes a question of how do you balance it? How do you balance the environmental needs with the growing populations and the real benefits that come from having people go outside?"* When being alone in nature is quintessential to the outdoor experience, altering the land through development to make room for more people becomes paradoxical (Henderson 2020).

⁵³ Despite their disinterest in romanticizing an *untouched* nature, some still expressed concern over areas getting "wrecked," "spoiled," or "overused", thus depreciating their value. The climbers expressed frustration over this degradation, but also reflected how this makes it ever more important to show respect and care to the Escarpment.

Some climbers suggested a harm-reduction approach to development in response to the question how to balance a growing population's desire to climb with the need for environmental preservation. This approach was described as "*minimally-invasive*," while still enabling climbing.⁵⁴ In line with the harm-reduction mindset is the notion that intentional, mindful development has the potential to make recreational activities more sustainable for both humans and the landscape.

In some places, climbers argue, development can even improve safety for both humans and the Escarpment. For example, although building parking lots encroach on limited green space, they would reduce the number of cars parked off-road near Metcalfe, The Swamp, and Devil's Glen, which would reduce traffic hazards and disturbances to local humans and wildlife.⁵⁵ Others suggested development in the form of garbage receptacles, portable bathrooms and low fences along (to prevent bushwhacking and the creation of spider trails—networks of unplanned trails that cause erosion and reduce vegetation), all of which would add convenience to the human experience while protecting wildlife.

Ultimately, climbers emphasized that for a harm-reduction approach to crag development to be feasible, two conditions must be met: 1) development needs to be proactive and address threats before they happen, and 2) development planning must happen in conversation with all stakeholders and be realistic about who is using the space. Further, most climbers insist that they do not categorically oppose intervention from land managers; they simply wish to be part of the

⁵⁴ For example, fixed anchors are less invasive than decades of slinging cliff-side trees.

⁵⁵ Others like KA suggested a shuttlebus service to tackle parking issues. Shuttlebuses in the Adirondacks Mountains in New York are being discussed as a way to reduce ecological damage and traffic congestion while increasing visitor and wildlife safety (U.S. Department of Transportation 2021). Shuttlebuses are common in climbing places in Western Canada and elsewhere in the world.

conversation. Finally, some individuals added that conversations about development should also focus on larger-scale threats to the future of the Niagara Escarpment, such as quarrying and condominium-building instead of only the minimal, localized impacts of conscientious user groups. These practical conversations about development and climbing places must happen within the broader conversations of land use and stewardship.

4.5 Discussion and Conclusion

Rock climbers on the Niagara Escarpment cultivate intimate and meaningful relationships with place through their movements on and with the rock. These findings reflect research on climbing and place from elsewhere in Canada (Kulczycki 2014) and the world (de Léséleuc 2004, Ness 2011) suggesting that becoming with place is quintessential to the climbing experience. From these encounters, Escarpment climbers come to embody an ethic of care, which they try to impart on new community members to mitigate issues of rapid community growth. Despite this emphasis on open communication and community, members from outside of the dominant group are often excluded from this informal mentorship practice, which I discuss further in the next chapter. Last, although climbers are knowledgeable about and attentive to protecting climbing access on the Escarpment, they struggle to balance the desire to climb with environmental protection. Overall, the rock climbers I spoke with have meaningful relationships with the Escarpment, and they strive to show respect and good stewardship in their interactions beyond the human.

5 Relationships among Climbers: Community Concerns

5.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter explores how rock climbers on the Niagara Escarpment are negotiating social challenges within their community. With attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion in sport and the outdoors, I present the gendered concerns of climbers in Ontario while also pointing toward how these issues can be complicated and exacerbated among individuals with intersecting identities. Although rock climbers in Ontario feel welcomed and included in some ways, experiences of exclusion and microaggressions not uncommon. Further, although the sport can be especially empowering for women and gender-diverse individuals, representation is crucial to building a community inclusive of all bodies. I present how broader social issues are manifesting within this community, and how climbers outside of the dominant group navigate and negotiate their mobilities within the sport.

5.2 Toward Diversity and Inclusion

Historically, rock climbing was a sport available to only to a privileged few. Today, there is increasing diversity in the gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation of participants, suggesting that the sport is becoming more accessible. It appears that the community is becoming more diverse, but that entry to the sport is often facilitated by experience in similar outdoor activities (for example, hiking or camping in childhood and adolescence).

Comparing responses in participant demographics between the 2009 and 2019 OAC member survey data, it appears that the climbing community in Ontario is becoming less homogenous. In 2009, 21.9% of individuals selected *female* and 77.4% selected *male* when asked about their sex. Ten years later, in 2019, 36.4% indicated that they used *she/her* pronouns, 60.5% said *he/him*, and 1.4% said *fluid* or *nonbinary*. Although still male-dominated, there is an

increased presence of women and gender-diverse climbers in the sport. In 2019, of the climbers with *more* than 10 years of experience, 26.3% identified themselves as women, but among those with *less* than 10 years or less experience, 39.2% identified themselves as women. The two most likely explanations are that women either stop climbing after a certain period, or that there are many more women entering the sport today than there were ten years ago. Questions inquiring after sexual orientation and ethnicity were introduced in the most recent survey in 2019. Regarding sexual orientation, 84.7% responded *straight/heterosexual*, 1.6% *gay/lesbian*, 8.1% *queer/bi/pan/ace*, and 5.5% *prefer not to say*. The ethnicity question was modelled after the Canadian census questionnaire and respondents could select all that apply, and the majority selected *white* (see Schaefer et al. 2020 for full summary).

Although the member survey indicates that the member population is mostly white, male, and straight, most climbers—regardless of gender—expressed positive sentiments about the climbing community, insisting that there was diversity in its members and that they felt welcomed and accepted. When I asked interlocutors whether they felt that the climbing community in Ontario was inclusive, I received enthusiastic, affirming responses. On training in the gym, Carys (they/them) told me “*I’ve seen a diversity of different genders across the spectrum within climbing gyms, and it’s never like, a weird odd-person-out type thing, and it feels pretty inclusive.*” To support their claims, some climbers provided comparisons to other sports. KA (he/him) says:

I think the climbing community is very inclusive, like, more so than most communities... I think climbing is one of the only sports where, yes, we do separate men and women for competition, but a climb is not graded off if a man did it or if a woman did it. It’s just graded. And then whoever does it, does it... Climbing is way more inclusive. You’re only testing yourself here... As long as you know you can do it, it doesn’t really matter who you are. (KA, he/him)

KA (he/him) celebrated the lack of gender segregation in climbing, a sentiment that was echoed by Stacey (she/her), a competitive multidisciplinary athlete. While reflecting on gender differences in other sports, she celebrates climbing because *“Women can definitely be stronger. And... [Climbing] is probably one of the only sports I’ve ever been in where I don’t feel lesser than to be a female. Which is fantastic.”*

At first glance, these responses seem to indicate that the “female athletic revolution” described by Wheaton (2016: 124) is coming to fruition and that claims about the sport transcending gender (e.g., Robinson 2004) may be accurate. However, these claims lose traction when the background and experience of the climbers that I interviewed are taken into consideration. In Bunn’s (2015) ethnographic work with rock climbers, the author found that most climbers had experience with other outdoor sports or activities prior to climbing. Bunn suggests that a background in outdoor recreation is a conduit for rock climbing, which appears to be true for many of my interlocutors as well.

Most of the women and gender-diverse interviewees had experience in outdoor activities such as camping, hiking, cross-country skiing, and mountain biking prior to getting involved with rock climbing. Further, they also reflected on how their comfort around men may have facilitated their entry into these outdoor activities. JJ (she/her) and Sabrina (she/her) both mentioned that they were raised alongside brothers, and Kacy (she/her) said her parents joke that she’s the son they never had because of her love of the outdoors. This group of women felt comfortable in male-dominated outdoor spaces prior to rock climbing, which may have affected their ease and comfort getting into climbing. Another woman, Natalie (she/her), also reflects on how her fitness level may have facilitated her entry into the sport:

I don't feel personally like my gender is a factor when I'm at the crag... I'm also aware that, my whole life, I've been athletic, and I've played sports, and so... I feel more comfortable with the culture... But I can totally see how for someone who's coming into climbing brand new and maybe fitness or sports have never been a big part of their life... that being female would be an additional obstacle coming into climbing. Like I said, I personally haven't really experienced any sort of... exclusion as a female in climbing. And I haven't personally witnessed it. But that's far from saying that I don't think it's out there or it doesn't happen. (Natalie, she/her)

Natalie's reflection on her entry into rock climbing suggests that although not all women find their gender to be a hindrance, this feeling is not shared by everyone because it is dependent on one's other intersecting experiences and identities. Thus, for some women, the climbing community is an inclusive and accepting space, but feelings of inclusivity and belonging are not shared by everyone in the community, as evidenced in the gender-related challenges and frustrations that follow.

5.3 Facing Challenges and Finding Empowerment

In this section, I trouble the sense of the community described in the last section by presenting the gendered and racialized interactions experienced within the community of Escarpment climbers. The emerging self-governance challenge of *diversity, inclusion, and representation* identified by Carter and colleagues (2020) was evident in the interlocutors' narratives, where they described tensions and challenges stemming from stereotyped images of women and BIPOC in these spaces (e.g., Rogers and Rose 2019, also see Braun 2003).⁵⁶ In the following subsections I discuss how individuals outside of the dominant white, cisgender male group negotiate their experiences with exclusion and microaggressions, the impact of these

⁵⁶ Because I failed to recruit multiple women of colour for this research, the following sections focus primarily on gender-based issues while highlighting how these issues compound when they intersect with racialized identities (Crenshaw 1989). I also present media examples as data following Finney's (2014) argument that examples from popular culture are valid and valuable when discussing Black perspectives because of the historic exclusion of these voices from the academic literature.

interactions, and how despite these interactions—or in spite of them—women have defined themselves and their bodies as strong, capable, and empowered.

5.3.1 Exclusionary Experiences

Despite the comments shared above about the community feeling inclusive, the women and gender-diverse climbers that I spoke with also shared stories with me about times that certain aspects of the climbing worlds were inaccessible to them because of one or more of their identities. Here I share their stories of feeling excluded and undermined, and the effects of this limited inclusion, including the burden of representation and having to preform additional labour to move as freely as their male counterparts in these climbing spaces.

The first examples of exclusion involve being left out of conversations and having their opinions dismissed. When asked if any aspect of their identity affected their experiences climbing outside, Carys (they/them) responded:

...Just getting told ‘no’ a lot for no reason... Getting shut down or talked over... Like, when it comes to directions, picking where we’re going, trying to figure out where things are on a hike, trying to get to the actual wall. And this could just be my friend group, but I have been like... kind of seen as not part of the conversation... Or decisions are made that go against what I’m saying... And normally that would be fine if someone had more experience than me, but usually it’s been in situations where the experience level has been the exact same. And so, it comes down to feeling like it has nothing to do with my experience, and more so just they don’t take me as seriously... (Carys, they/them)

Here Carys discloses that they have been ignored in the decision-making processes that arise during a day climbing outside. They highlight that they feel that they are not taken as seriously, which might be due to their gender identity. Sabrina, a woman who identified herself as mixed race, shared a similar experience:

The last time I was working *Titan*—which is a 14a at Lion’s Head—I was working it, and then about four, five other people were working it. And the four to five other people were white and were male. There are a set of fixed draws at the bottom of the

route... The way I experienced that time was that... I was not taken seriously because I was a girl. And probably because I'm not white. None of the other guys ever asked me how I felt about any of the draws being changed—like, the length of the draws—they just went and changed them. They changed the length so that it was suitable to what they needed in order to send the route. And... in some way, I've experienced that sort of attitude throughout my time climbing. (Sabrina, she/her)

Sabrina explains how she is also excluded from the decision-making process and not taken as seriously, despite climbing at an elite level. She also reflects that this is likely because of her identity as a woman who is not white.

Carys and Sabrina's experiences of being undermined and dismissed are not surprising considering that climbing areas have been constructed in the Western colonial imaginary as spaces for the reproduction of white masculinity (Hunt 2019). When occupying a space where you are not assumed to fit, you are rendered invisible. Miho Aida, a filmmaker, environmental educator, outdoor guide, and Japanese woman summarizes this feeling in Baker (2017): "*...often I feel invisible—whether playing outside, attending environmental conferences, or working in outdoor education. For example, other climbers will typically approach my climbing partner to ask questions about the route, even when I'm clearly geared up as the lead. Why don't they see me?*" Although individual experiences can vary widely, the similarity of these experiences demonstrates how broader cultural norms manifest within the climbing community to exclude individuals from equity-seeking groups.

This exclusion is pronounced for people of colour, especially women of colour. Finney (2014) explains how stereotypes in popular culture render Blackness incompatible with the outdoors, which limits access to—and movement in—these spaces by means of the actions of others. Elite climber of colour Indigo Johnson highlights the exclusion and erasure of Blackness in her contribution to *Climbing* magazine: "*The more I became invested in climbing, the more homogenous my friend group got. Did climbing rocks automatically categorize me as white?*"

Was I not allowed to be a multi-racial climber?” (Johnson 2016: 73). This also reflects Mill’s (2014) discussion in *The Adventure Gap* about racial expectations for certain activities, and how Black individuals can lose credibility in their communities if they participate in “white” activities, of which climbing is one. This builds off bell hook’s (1992) ideas about resistance to white culture, which can work to further exclude POC from the sport.

The effects of these challenges to inclusion are evident in two ways: first, the burden of representation, and second, having to exercise extra labour to participate in the same way.

While some climbers described feelings of invisibility, others shared how their identities led to hypervisibility. One climber, Kelly (she/her), reflected on how her identity as a woman made her self-conscious of her skills in a group of male climbers:

I feel like when I lead, I have to try extra hard not to show any ineptitude in my technique... in particular, when I belay my male peers... I don’t want to look like a stereotype of a bumbling female climber, I guess. Like, less skilled or less knowledgeable... I always avoided belaying [one man], because I felt like every time I belayed him, I choked because it was like, I wasn’t doing it well enough. And then, every time I got into that situation, I would choke again, because I knew he was gonna expect me to short clip him or something. And so, I kind of avoided practicing my technique because I did not want to make mistakes. And part of the reason why I didn’t want to make mistakes is because I didn’t want to be seen as a gumbly [beginner] or incompetent, and... that may be something to do with my gender... because there’s maybe an expectation that I might not be good. (Kelly, she/her)

Here, Kelly is describing how she is self-conscious of how her gender feels salient in situations as her skills and technique come to be questioned by men. This led Kelly and I to a conversation about the portrayal of Sanni McCandless in the film *Free Solo* (Vasarhelyi and Chin 2018). In the film, she is portrayed not as a serious climber, but as an accessory to her male counterpart, despite climbing at an elite level herself. The film documents an unfortunate incident where McCandless accidentally drops her partner, Alex Honnold. This incident has become a running joke among male climbers. In an OAC town hall meeting, someone referred to

the film as “the one where Honnold’s girlfriend drops him”. When I shared this comment with Kelly, she remarked, *“If you screw up, then it looks bad on [all women], which is horrible, and probably why I didn’t want to belay that male climber that I mentioned earlier... It’s because I didn’t want to seem like a know-nothing woman”* (Kelly, she/her). What Kelly is describing here is the pressure experienced by individuals from equity-seeking groups to represent their entire gender or group. For women, this may look like pressure to work harder to avoid degrading stereotypes, such as the “crag girlfriend” described by Appleby and Fisher (2005: 19).

Sabrina continues about the isolation she feels, as the disparities in gender and race become more pronounced at the more elite levels.

Especially once you get into harder grades, you’re just surrounded by more guys... and so the group gets smaller and the attitudes get amplified... And it’s really off-putting... You really have to stay focused on what you’re there to do, and not be distracted, and keep your boundaries... But it’s hard... When you’re the only girl there, you’re the only Black girl, it’s so isolating. It’s super isolating, you know? They talk over you. Or when you speak up, they talk to you in this condescending... [trails off] (Sabrina, she/her)

Sabrina’s experiences feeling frustrated and isolated by the dominant group exemplifies what has been written about the outdoors being constructed as a space for the reproduction of racial stereotypes and dominant narratives (Braun 2003, Finney 2014, Hunt 2019). These experiences also reflect findings from sport and leisure research whereby Black athletes had to work harder to gain the respect of their peers within the sport community (Wheaton and Beal 2003) and how cultural norms in sport function to exclude women from culturally diverse backgrounds (Cortis 2009). It is not surprising then that these interactions serve to further isolate and exclude BIPOC.

These examples show that despite increasing representation of diverse rock climbing bodies on the Escarpment, these spaces are still subject to hegemonic power relations that

privilege the white and male experience and presence over others. These ideas pervade climber culture and serve to exclude and disadvantage climbers outside of the dominant identity, who suffer the burden of representation and must work harder, physically and emotionally, to reach the same levels.

5.3.2 Experiences of Microaggressions

Dominant narratives are also maintained and reinforced through microaggressions (Liu et al. 2019). I define a *microaggression* as any subtle negative aggressive remark or action directed to a person based on their identity or group membership. In sport, microaggressions have been persist based on race (Lee, Bernstein, Etzel, Gearity, and Kuklick 2018) and gender (Kaskan and Ho 2016) as subtle biases against members of groups that have been historically excluded. This section discusses microaggressions experienced by individuals based on their gender while rock climbing on the Niagara Escarpment. Specifically, I present examples of lower expectations for women and gender-diverse climbing bodies, the diminishing of accomplishments, as well as negative interactions with other women.

The first example in this section stems from gendered assumptions about strength. Generally, physical strength is often attributed to male bodies and masculinity. This stereotype is evident in rock climbing culture as well, as seen in a comment from Sabrina (she/her): “*There were a couple of strong girls in my gym that I looked up to, but I found that... I don’t know. The impression I had was that, if you were a strong girl in the gym, it was because you climbed like a guy.*” The underlying bias here—that strength is a property of men—manifested in interactions as microaggressions. Kelly (she/her) reflects on this assumption:

There was an expectation that I just wouldn’t climb quite as hard or be physically able to climb as hard... I got more, ‘Oh, it’s okay. If you don’t get this, it’s all good.’ Which is nice... But I received that more than some of my guy friends who would

instead be pushed and told to go through with a climb... There was just an expectation that I had... a peak, or a maximum level of performance. Whereas for some of my guy friends, it was like... the level that they could reach was infinite. That said, I still got a lot of encouragement. It was just that I felt like the expectations were less high for what I could do. (Kelly, she/her)

Kelly's experience demonstrates how assumptions about femininity and strength affect the interactions she had with others and her perceived potential. This contradicts Appleby and Fisher's (2005) findings where women attributed their success to male climbing partners pushing them harder. However, Kelly's experience is congruent with the work on masculine and feminine stereotypes in climbing (e.g., Dilley 2007).

The second set of examples in this section pertain to disparaging remarks from men that either accidentally or intentionally downgraded, dismissed, or diminished the accomplishments of women and gender nonbinary climbers. During our conversation, JJ (she/her) was telling me about her experiences climbing twenty years ago when she climbed almost exclusively with men because they were the ones that wanted to try hard and push their limits. Reflecting on this experience, JJ said, "*And sometimes those guys were still not great to me... because if I ended up sending their project first, they have an issue, and somehow find an excuse for why they didn't send, or that I got lucky.*" Here, JJ presents one example of how her male counterparts would downplay her accomplishments, such as sending a difficult route. She continued with another example: "*I watched plenty of guys take their girlfriend down emotionally when she would start excelling... or she would get stronger than him. And [the boyfriend's] ego just couldn't stand it.*" These instances of diminishing accomplishments even among close friends or partners reveal that the insidious nature of such biases and assumptions about strength.

The diminishment or dismissal of accomplishments appeared in the narratives from other climbers as well. Carys (they/them) told me about an instance where the microaggression took the form of attributing a success to male involvement:

I had a friend who was in a competition and was upset that a girl could get a problem that he couldn't. And he made a comment about how like, 'Well, she wouldn't have really got it if I hadn't showed her the beta.' But I'm pretty sure she would have eventually figured it out. (Carys, they/them)

In Carys's example, the man's comment that attributed the woman's success to his advice effectively dismisses her accomplishment. Kacy (she/her) shares a similar example of women's successes being attributed to anything other than their strength or ability.

[Being a woman] certainly impacts your experience as a climber. I've had, frankly, men and women, say all kinds of shitty things to me in climbing. It's the typical things. It's like, 'Oh, well, you could only do that because... because girls have smaller hands!'... Like, 'Well, you're not really good at powerful stuff, but you're good at technical face climbing. (Kacy, she/her)

These indirect comments described by Kacy and Carys are part of a larger narrative that paints climbing as a masculine sport and erases the presence of strong women (Allee 2011).

The last set of examples of gendered microaggressions highlight that these negative comments come from women as well. Kacy (she/her) expanded on her comment earlier about having negative experiences from men and women:

Frankly, I'm gonna be honest, in my experience, I've had probably more difficult interactions with other female climbers than I have male climbers. I mean, a couple months ago, I was in the Glen, and someone found out that I had sent a certain problem. And this woman who I've known for a long time said to me, 'You sent that?!' And I was like, 'Yeah, I did.' And then she was like, 'Well, did you repeat it?' And it's like, would you ever say that to a guy? (Kacy, she/her)

Here Kacy points to having her success questioned, which she suggests may have been influenced by her own gender. JJ (she/her) shared a similar experience with me:

There are people of the same gender that can also be a problem. And women with insecurity... That's really what it is. Not necessarily a true maliciousness, but the

insecurity that they feel turns them into something else, and then they want to undermine other people in order to win. (JJ, she/her)

To JJ, these subtle aggressions may be the result of insecurities. Wigglesworth (2018), whose dissertation research focuses on harmful route names in Ontario, suggests that women's complacency in perpetuating stereotypes may be due to internalized misogyny.

These remarks that serve to undermine the nondominant group is not unique to Ontario climbing; it is part of a larger culture of underestimating women in a male-dominated sport. In an informal survey on women's experiences receiving unsolicited comments from male climbers, Abel (2014) reports that the comments fell into four categories: 1) making assumptions about ability or desires, 2) discouraging women from trying certain routes, 3) attributing women's strength to something other than their strength (e.g., "tiny hands" or lower centre of gravity, or downgrading the difficulty of the climb), and 4) just generally being "bro-y, cocky, or douchey". Similarly, in a large survey by *Climbing Magazine* (Ellison 2016), seventy-six percent of women said that they had someone of the opposite sex assume that they were weaker or less experienced because they were a woman. Further, not even professional guides are exempt. Sheldon Kerr, a certified mountain guide, is quoted discussing how inexperienced customers on climbing trips frequently assume they know more than her despite being an experienced guide with international certifications (Newman 2019: 53–55). The prevalence of these microaggressions may explain why women are more likely than men to doubt their competence in outdoor scenarios (Warren and Loeffler 2006; Evans and Anderson 2018).

Microaggressions from men and women regarding expectations for climbing women were a source of frustration for many of the women I spoke with. To exist in climbing spaces, those outside of the dominant group (such as women, gender-diverse individuals, and BIPOC) must engage in additional labour because they cannot *become with* the Escarpment as easily as

their white, straight, cisgender, male, able-bodied counterparts. For those from historically excluded groups, their interactions with nonhuman worlds are incumbered by stereotyped expectations for their bodies, abilities, and desires.

5.3.3 Strength and Empowerment

The last subsections presented examples of the negative interactions experienced by women, gender-diverse, and BIPOC rock climbers with other community members who climb on the Escarpment. In this section, I demonstrate that, despite these negative interactions, most of the climbers who were not part of the dominant group also told me about positive gender-related experiences of strength and empowerment that they developed through rock climbing on the Escarpment. Below, I present three quotes from women who discuss the confidence climbing gives them, how they want to model strength for new climbers, and the troubling roots of these feelings.

For Stacey, rock climbing in Ontario empowers her by reminding her that she's competent and confident in her abilities both on and off the rock.

[Climbing] subconsciously reminds me that I am capable, and I think it allows me to apply myself with that perspective outside of climbing... Going climbing on a regular basis not only makes me strong and healthy, but it makes me cognizant of my abilities. Even if it's not directly related... It's a subconscious reminder that I am capable... and I guess that comes back to being a female. So yes, there is very much a role of gender in climbing for me... (Stacey, she/her)

Although Stacey does not initially attribute her feelings of competence and confidence to being a strong woman, she reflects at the end that her identity as a woman play into these feelings. Later in the interview, Stacey (she/her) and I were discussing gendered interactions within the community and she reflected on another source of her empowerment.

I have guys willing to learn from me! Like, what man is ever willing to have a woman teach them something? (laughs) It's empowering in a way... With the balance

of [genders] that I find in this sport, it makes me feel empowered as a woman. Which is outrageous to think! Being considered equal to a man makes me feel empowered? Like, that's disgusting. But, at the same time, it is what it is... and I'm gonna take it for what it is. (Stacey, she/her)

Stacey identifies that she feels conflicted that equality is one source of her gender empowerment. On a different note, JJ (she/her), who has been climbing for more than 30 years, seeks now to empower other women by being visible and inspiring them to be strong.

I've tried to play a role in inspiring women to be strong, to get into the sport, to not be afraid. And I did that through comps, and through being outside, and just putting myself out there and exposing myself in every capacity possible... On the good and the bad end of things... If I had a bad day and cried because I whipped for the thirtieth time on my project... It was still valid. I mean, dudes would throw their shoes and they'd have their fit, and I'd have a little cry just out of frustration. (JJ, she/her)

In addition to encouraging women to be strong, JJ also told me about how strength and being honest with herself is essential to a cultivating a good relationship with the sport, the Escarpment, other climbers, and with oneself. She encourages individuals to embrace the full range of emotions that come with being a rock climber, and not to be ashamed of these emotions because they are a disparaged as a feminine trait.

These quotes from JJ and Stacey are examples of how the women and nonbinary climbers in my interviews understood their rock climbing activities as a source of strength, confidence, and empowerment in their social interactions within the community and beyond. The feelings of competence that Stacey describes challenges past findings that women in outdoor leadership and recreation doubt their abilities (e.g., Rogers and Rose 2019), which suggests women negotiate microaggressions and exclusion in different ways.

The women I spoke with understood their strong climbing bodies as a source of empowerment, which upsets the “cultural contradiction between athletic prowess and femininity” (Cahn 1996: 41). These findings are congruent with research on women's

empowerment in sport (Rana 2018, Malterud et al. 2021), outdoor recreation (Evans, Walters, and Anderson 2020), and wilderness therapy (Karoff, Norton, Tucker, Gass, and Foerster 2018). Allee (2011) attributes the physical and social empowerment of women climbers to having strong climbing bodies, which she argues helps them eschew dominate cultural narratives about weak femininity. Further, there are potential therapeutic benefits in women with a history of mental illness who embrace their strong climbing bodies (Meier 2020). These individuals did not seem troubled by ideas that their bodies can be strong regardless of gender, which suggests that norms around gender and athleticism are changing in climbing. These changing norms provide a promising opportunity for individuals to engage in a physical activity despite past cultural expectations of what their bodies are capable of.

5.4 Mentorship and Representation

In chapter four, I discussed how environmental care is embedded within climber culture and the importance of community in transmitting these ethics. However, this community care is not available to all climbers. Specifically, there is a dearth of mentorship opportunities for individuals with marginalized identities,⁵⁷ which is dismaying considering that mentorship has substantial positive impacts for individuals from underrepresented groups. Positive mentorship experiences have beneficial outcomes for outdoor educators (Riley 2019), women in conservation leadership (James 2020), and women of colour in higher education (Tran 2014). Further, mentorship is a primary motivator for women's participation in outdoor leadership (Avery, Norton, and Tucker 2018). In this section, I highlight the importance of mentorship and

⁵⁷ For example, KA (he/him), who describes his ethnicity as "mixed", says, "It's just a lot harder to find mentorship in a place where people still consider you an oddity."

representation for climbers who are members of groups who have been historically excluded, while also discussing how gatekeeping is an additional barrier to entry for the community.

5.4.1 Partner Selection and Safety

Individuals climb as much for meaningful social interactions as they do for the physical activity. As she recalls learning how to lead climb, Kaitlyn reflects:

Dave and Maria are both such patient, positive people, so climbing with them was so nice... I remember, they kept being like, 'You're doing so awesome!'... I felt really connected to them... I was talking to my one good friend, Andy, who's also a climber and we were talking about climbing and what it means to us, and we were both saying how, like, yeah, the sport's wonderful, but it's the community you develop and the friendships... Climbing changed my life.⁵⁸ (Kaitlyn, she/her)

Kaitlyn's reflections demonstrate the meaningful possibilities of climbing with partners that make you feel safe and supported. However, outdoor spaces are not safe places for all individuals. The impacts of the racist history of outdoor recreation⁵⁹ are still felt today as the outdoors are a place for the reproduction of white (Rose and Paisley 2012, Hunt 2019), able-bodied (Ray 2018), and male (Anderson 2008) privilege. These are places where individuals experience fear of gender-based violence (Wesely and Gaarder 2004) and race-based violence (Taylor, González, and Razani 2021), which has no doubt been amplified by recent surge in anti-Black violence in Canada and the United States during the resurgence in Black Lives Matter protests following the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor in the spring of 2020. These safety concerns are compounded by the physical risk and danger inherent to rock climbing.

⁵⁸ All names have been changed.

⁵⁹ See Finney (2014).

One way that rock climbers from nondominant groups negotiate their safety concerns by selecting partners perceived as 'safe'. JJ explains what is important to her in climbing partners:

...just how much they cared. Because there are the folks that don't care as much, or... don't practice due diligence when it comes to safety. And it's important to me, and for various reasons... It's my responsibility to look out for my own life when I'm out there, and not just be desperate for a climbing partner... There are times I didn't climb because I didn't feel comfortable with any of the folks. (JJ, she/her)

JJ is talking her decisions regarding physical safety. Sabrina demonstrates that 'safety' also discusses emotional safety and freedom to be herself:

I don't like going out with groups of people. I like a couple other people who I know really well, who I feel safe with—safe to hold space for me when I get frustrated. And I come down and I cry and I throw my shoe against the wall, they're not looking at me like, 'Oh, this poor girl. She's so in over her head.' They'll just be like, 'Okay, give her space. She's pissed.' You know, just as they would with anybody else. (Sabrina, she/her)

Sabrina also told me about her experiences as a Black woman existing in a white dominated space during the height of the Black Lives Matter protests during the summer of 2020. She shared her pain and frustration as white climbers began to attend to her racialized experiences as a climber and an individual. Further, she gave examples of racialized encounters she had in small towns near climbing sites. For BIPOC, 'safety' concerns while rock climbing go beyond simply not getting hurt on a route; they are connected to the broader concerns of racialized discrimination, oppression, and violence.

Another intersection of safety-related concerns is that which is experienced by individuals who live outside the gender binary or otherwise identify with the LGBTQ2S+ community. Carys (they/them) shared their anxieties regarding recently coming out as a gender nonbinary person:

I... feel more nervous going out [climbing] and, you know, specifically looking very androgynous... and now that I've come out as non-binary, going by different pronouns, I don't know how the reaction would be. I do have a bit of fear there, but

I've had no experience with it since I've come out... But I mean, seeing those macho things going on, and knowing the experiences that I had, like, when I identified as a woman... there's a very good likelihood that some things would happen that were uncomfortable... I just don't know what they would be. (Carys, they/them)

All three of these stories represent the ongoing safety concerns that climbers outside of the dominant group must navigate. The decisions climbers from underrepresented groups must make to keep themselves safe physically and mentally is one of ways that their mobilities are limited in outdoor spaces (Stanley 2020).

5.4.2 Importance for Underrepresented Groups

As described above, individuals from equity-seeking groups face unique challenges accessing rock climbing spaces and moving freely in outdoor spaces. In lifestyle sport subcultures, ideas of identity and community in sport subcultures often serve to reinforce the power of the white, male, middle class (Yochim 2010: 105), but women are challenging these masculine norms and ideals in outdoor education settings (Rogers and Rose 2019). Creating a space where those from historically excluded groups, such as women, BIPOC, LGBTQ2S+, and people with physical disabilities is paramount to supporting them in their outdoor adventures. Due to the demographics of my sample, this section focuses primarily on the importance of representation and community mentorship for women. I demonstrate this with examples from my interviews about the benefits of climbing with other women.

The importance of representation and community mentorship for women is evident in Tasmin's reflections on the cultural contradiction of strength and femininity:

It's not that I don't want to learn from men or have anything against men, I just... I look up to female climbers who are really strong a bit more just because... I don't know, I just feel like I can relate to them more... As a woman, you build up super strong upper-body muscles and it's not really considered feminine, but you embrace it. ... You see other really strong women who were okay with that and you want to be

more like them. It's like, reaffirming. So yeah, in that sense, I would prefer to learn from a woman... It's just easier to relate to them, I think. (Tasmin, she/her)

Tasmin's desire to climb with other strong women suggests that representation is important because the cultural stereotypes of weak women are still pervasive and affective. Even Kyra Condie, Team USA competition climber, admits her own struggle with being a strong and muscular woman (Vickers 2021).

Other reasons for enjoying climbing with the same gender included more similar body types, which is better for figuring out problems. Kaitlyn explains:

I like meeting more female climbers... Because when you have a male mentorship, like, Brian's body structure is just so different than mine, so his beta is going to be so different than mine... He'd be like, 'Oh Kaitlyn, just do this!' And I'm like, 'Brian, I can't *just do* that!' (laughs) That's not how my body mechanics work; I have a different centre of gravity and things like that. So... I really like being introduced to more female climbers... Like, Sarah and I are similar height and things like that, so her beta is more similar to mine... I definitely enjoy when there's other females climbing with me.⁶⁰ (Kaitlyn, she/her)

In addition to the physical benefits, the women climbers I spoke with also described feeling more supported and confident when climbing with other women. Kelly tells me:

I've been in my best lead shape once I started climbing with [another woman] because I didn't have some of the psychological hurdles about failing to meet expectations... So I could feel freer to take on new challenges without that barrier... and felt like making mistakes, there was a bit more of a cushion. [She is] a bit more forgiving... Having someone who's not going to judge me means that I can take more risks and try harder. (Kelly, she/her)

Kelly's feelings of freedom that come from climbing with other women are reflected in an article in *Climbing* magazine where Shelma Jun (2016a) discusses how she's not afraid to admit she's scared when climbing with other women. One explanation for these feelings is the sense of camaraderie that develops among the members of the nondominant group. This can be

⁶⁰ All names have been changed.

seen in Tasmin's reflection on climbing with other women: "*I don't know too many other women who I'm close with who climb outside, which is why when I do meet them, I'm like, 'Oh, yeah! Heck yeah!'*" Tasmin's enthusiasm is evident. Similarly, Carys (they/them) explains how this camaraderie develops among not-men in a male-dominated spaces:

You usually see women... band together, I guess. I've had some very friendly experiences with other not-male-identifying people at the gym... I think it's more so me being fed up with seeing some guys shirtless and yelling around the gym, that when I see someone who isn't a dude just killing it... I'm like, 'You are amazing! I just want you to know that!'... Those little snippets of conversation... I love that stuff! (Carys, they/them)

These reflections about climbing with others who are from the dominant gender category demonstrate the benefits for mental wellbeing that feeling represented can provide. It is congruent with Appleby and Fisher's (2005) findings that women feel motivated by 'female energy' at the rock, especially once they start breaking into more advanced levels. As they progress in skill, women usually seek out like mentors and companions because it relieved the "performance pressure" of feeling like they had to prove their right to be there (Appleby and Fisher 2005: 19). Further, this also reflects Meier's (2020) work that the sense of community found in climbing improves confidence and wellbeing.

Lastly, the importance of representation and community for under-represented groups comes from JJ's reflections on negotiating new ideas of femininity and masculinity in sport.

Thankfully, now, with so many more women playing all kinds of sports and excelling, like Serena Williams... You know, people who are exceptional that play hard, and grunt, and do all of these things and show that they can be at the top of their game, and they're no less feminine. It's just part of the sport... That's why I try to pave the way for anyone else. I mean, I've got muscle. I've got muscles on top of muscles. I do try really hard. I get really uncomfortable. But I can dress up pretty, I can look a certain way. And also, I can look a certain way when I am dirty and disgusting... and all of it is perfect. And it's not male or female. It has to do with the fact that this is what goes on when you're doing this sport. (JJ, she/her)

Here we see again the renegotiation of the ideal climbing body for women, and it also touches on Tasmin's reflections about looking up to strong women. When the "ideal" climbing body is imagined as strong, but not too muscled so that it is no longer feminine (Appleby and Fisher 2005: 18; Cahn 1996: 41), seeing strong women with muscles in the sport is critical to redefining the climbing body and negotiating ideas and masculine and feminine bodies in sport.

Ideas about mentorship and representation for women and BIPOC in climbing are underdeveloped in the academic literature but commonplace in sport media, suggesting that they deserve more scholarly attention. Newman (2019) featured a piece about Angela Hawse, current president of the American Mountain Guides Association (AMGA) who explains how lack of female mentorship is something that she wants to change because currently women are pressured to conform to masculine climbing culture, which is a major barrier to entry (55–56). In another article, "Mentors Wanted," Kathy Karlo (2020) notes how if you were a woman in climbing ten years ago, you'd be hard-pressed to find a mentor that you could see yourself in, which is something that an interviewee, JJ, mentioned as well, although she says that now it's slowly changing. Lastly, in Williams's (2020) article published in *Melanin Basecamp* about saving Coral Cliffs climbing gym (the only gym owned by a queer Black woman in the USA) Abby Dione, the owner, is quoted lamenting the lack of mentorship in gyms, arguing for the importance of seeing "friendly, familiar faces" at the gym and learning to take ownership of the sport. She seeks to resolve the tensions "between climbing counterculture and new climbing communities" by helping new climbers—especially queer and BIPOC climbers—find their passion for the sport in a supportive and safe environment. Clearly, representation matters.

5.4.3 Gatekeeping and Intergenerational Knowledge

The last subsection explored the importance of representation for those who have been historically excluded from the sport. The women and gender nonbinary climbers explained how it's easier to relate to women, that there were benefits like obtaining better *beta* and feeling more confident, and that seeing others like them was exciting and helped them to negotiate their own ideas of masculinity and femininity in the sport. These examples suggest that mentorship and representation can be effective tools to disrupt the gatekeeping and elitism in the sport that can bar the entry of certain groups of people. This next subsection explores such instances of gatekeeping within the community and how it functions to maintain the status quo.

Because rock climbing is male-dominated, most individuals are introduced to the sport by a male partner, friend, or relative. In their research on female climbers, Appleby and Fisher (2005) found that 87.5% of their interviewees were introduced to climbing by a man, and some women reported conforming to hegemonic gender roles (e.g., dressing feminine and “cute”) to obtain entry. A more recent magazine survey reported a lower rate: 64% of women were introduced to climbing by men, suggesting that this might be changing (Ellison 2016). Among the women and nonbinary climbers in my research, everyone's story involved being introduced by a male friend, partner, friend's partner, or family member. In this way, men often serve as gatekeepers to the community, and some women have discussed how they conform to hegemonic gender norms to initially gain acceptance (Appleby and Fisher 2005).

Intergenerational knowledge also functions as a gatekeeper to climbing for certain groups.⁶¹ Kelly (she/her) explained to me how knowledge of outdoor spaces and climbing is

⁶¹ I use the term *intergenerational knowledge* to refer to any information or skills transmitted from a more experienced to a less experienced climber, regardless of whether kinship is biological or fictional.

often passed through kin relations, and this knowledge facilitates outdoor experiences for those who have historically participated in these spaces while excluding those who have not had this knowledge imparted upon them. To illustrate her point, she shared an example:

Thinking about how I learned about camping... my father always took me camping. I knew where food was meant to go and these rules about how to keep a safe campsite, and these bits of knowledge were passed down over time. But I noticed that when I was camping in Killarney, there were people who were camping for the very first time who didn't know these things, who were just learning the rules, and they would learn by *being fined*... So, there's a lack of education there. And I think the same thing can apply to climbing because it's a lot easier to feel comfortable in an outdoor space when this knowledge has already been accumulating. (Kelly, she/her)

Kelly's point illustrates how a lack of intergeneration knowledge transmission can exclude new climbers. Without the technical and environmental knowledge required to abide by the group norms and park regulations, new climbers are at a disadvantage that hinders their comfortable access to outdoor climbing spaces. Lack of intergenerational knowledge also hinders participation in rock climbing in more specific ways. For example, Sabrina explains the frustrating and often isolating process of trying to figure out a route without having any knowledge about it (i.e., *beta*).

As a female climber, when you get up into harder grades, you can't use anybody's *beta* but your own. You can't use the other guys' *beta* because they've got, like, three feet on you and whatever... I found it frustrating that people—these guys—wanted to get on it and call it soft [easy], without ever having to put in the time of sitting there on the rope for two hours, trying to figure out how you're going to do this move because you have no information from any anybody else. All you have is this piece of rock in front of you, and you have to figure it out on your own. (Sabrina, she/her)

Without a mentor or a community to pass on knowledge about routes, individuals from under-represented groups must undergo additional labour to achieve the same ends as those who have benefitted from such knowledge transfer. In this way, intergenerational knowledge serves as a gatekeeper to the rock climbing community. When compounded with other issues discussed earlier, such as the burden of representation and other microaggressions, entry into climbing

spaces can be uncomfortable, difficult, and frustrating for some new climbers. Mentorship and representation are crucial to facilitating the participation of individuals from under-represented groups in rock climbing in Ontario.

5.5 Discussion and Conclusion

Although the community membership is becoming more diverse and members have some feelings of inclusivity and community, rock climbing on the Niagara is still subject to dominant narratives of gender, race, power, and the outdoors. Individuals from underrepresented groups are subjected to acts of exclusion and microaggressions, reflecting broader social biases and systemic injustices. Making space for individuals from under-represented groups and creating mentorship opportunities holds promise for increasing wellbeing.

To discuss issues of exclusion and justice, certain distinctions about bodies and natures must be acknowledged, which troubles the applicability of posthumanism to this topic. For women and BIPOC, and individuals from other equity-seeking groups, outdoor recreational spaces (natures) are often a distinct, categorical space by product of their exclusion from it. Here, the posthumanist approach of blurring mind-body and nature-culture boundaries may be more harmful than helpful because these distinctions are necessary tools for examining the way that certain bodies are excluded from some natures. These individuals do not *become with* the Escarpment in the same ways as their white, straight, cisgender, male, able-bodied counterparts who are unincumbered by *a priori* assumptions about how they should exist in and with these spaces. Prioritizing voices, stories, and understandings that have been historically dismissed would give better insight into the ways humans interact with nature beyond our current understandings, unlocking new potentials for care among all humans and nonhumans.

6 Implications and Concluding Remarks

6.1 Summary of Arguments

The increasing popularity of rock climbing on the Niagara Escarpment poses both environmental and social challenges. This research further examined these challenges by exploring how rock climbers relate to the crags of the Niagara Escarpment and to other members of the community. In exploring both relationships *beyond* the human and *among* humans, I demonstrate that posthumanist and decolonial discourse can be brought into conversation with each other to provide a holistic picture of rock climbers in Ontario. Through their physical interactions with the rock, climbers develop affective and intimate relationships with the Escarpment that motivates their care for these places. Environmental care is transmitted through informal interactions among community members. Although this community of climbers is often inclusive, those outside of the dominant group are faced with microaggressions, exclusion, and lack of representative mentorship opportunities.⁶² Overall, these findings reveal that the community is concerned with issues related to a growing and diversifying population, suggesting a need for changes in management and policy, as well as in community attitudes and acceptance.

6.2 Implications for Management

Through their relationships with place, rock climbers become invested in the wellbeing of the Escarpment. As the climbing community grows, land management strategies should consider climbers as a legitimate user group to realistically address the community's evolving needs. This

⁶² Further issues among climbers arise in discussions over whether sexist, racist, or otherwise harmful route names should be changed. See Appendix B: The Trouble with Route Names.

section explores the significance of this relationship with examples of effective management strategies from other climbing sites in Ontario and the United States.

Climbers have deeply personal relationships with the Niagara Escarpment that they have cultivated through their physical and emotional interactions with the rock. For Ontario climbers, the Escarpment is more than just a place to climb, it is where community happens, and where physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing are actively co-created. These findings are congruent with research on climbing places elsewhere in Canada, which emphasize the importance of place and meaning-making among climbers (Kulczycki 2014). Place meanings can be strong predictors of environmental concern and influence perspectives on development in watersheds and river landscapes, respectively (Brehm, Eisenhauer, and Stedman 2013; Davenport and Anderson 2005). Further, this approach of centring feelings and meanings can be useful for influencing stakeholders in environmental negotiations (Phillips 2014), which could prove beneficial in defending recreational sites and wildlife habitats on the Escarpment from quarry proposals (Cilliers 2020).

Although climbers have meaningful relationships with the Escarpment, they are not a recognized user group in recreational land use plans except for climbing sites within Conservation Halton (Mount Nemo, Rattlesnake Point) and Niagara Parks (Niagara Glen). In these places, the OAC has formed an alliance with land managers to develop climbing areas in a sustainable way. These alliances are beneficial to both parties and allow for “environmental, educational and recreational initiatives that Niagara Parks would not otherwise have the internal resources to achieve” (Niagara Parks Commission [NPC] 2020b: 70). Through discussions between the OAC and the NPC, a decision was made to allow bouldering in the Niagara Glen

given climbers adhere to certain guidelines (e.g., must purchase bouldering permit, must not top-out on boulders with plant growth; Vaughan, Middleton, and Brown 2009: 39, 42).

Building relationships between climbers and land managers in other places such as in Lion's Head Provincial Park and Devil's Glen would be beneficial for all stakeholders. Legitimizing climbers as a user group would facilitate conversations with land managers to mitigate risk and minimize impacts, as well as engaging climbers as citizen scientists.⁶³ Climbers' intimate and enduring relationships with the Escarpment demonstrate that they are not reckless thrill-seekers, but instead, caring co-actors that can be mobilized in the interest of protecting these places because they already see themselves as stewards of the Escarpment. Generally, outdoor recreationists are effective stewards and advocates for the land (Schild 2019), and the exclusion of climbers from these conversations alienates this large, caring constituency from Escarpment conservation efforts.

Although managing climbers and climbing areas can be difficult (Monz 2009), including climbers in management decisions often yield positive outcomes.⁶⁴ In their report for the Access Fund, Attarian and Keith (2009) recommend consulting LCOs for any issues regarding climber trails, camping sites, water resources, wildlife disturbances, and parking. Regarding overcrowding, there has been success at Mount Hood Oregon where land managers worked with climbers and devised a solution to reduce crowding and preserve solitude by designating a

⁶³ As climbers also frequent remote sites on the Escarpment, there is a potential to mobilize them as citizen scientists. Citizen scientists have made significant contributions to gathering data on species populations that scientists could not achieve alone, such as that on monarch butterflies (Ries and Oberhauser 2015) and 13-year periodical cicadas (Beasley, Benson, Welch, Reid, and Mousseau 2012). Although some climbers are still distrusting of scientists due to the climbing bans that followed Kelly and Larson's (1997) publication on ancient cedars, this population could nonetheless become a valuable resource for information about species inhabiting remote cliff faces, such as bats and nesting raptors.

⁶⁴ The reason for this, McCool, Nkhata, Breen, and Freimund (2013) argue, is that introducing a social perspective can help land managers understand how everyday users such as climbers mobilize for collective action in stewardship.

separate area for beginners and guided trips (described in Attarian and Keith 2009: 45). A few of the climbers I spoke with reflected on the possibility of implementing this strategy in Ontario as well, wherein funnelling new climbers to the Conservation Halton crags could reduce overcrowding at the northern crags. Attarian and Keith (2009) also provide examples of successful negotiations for issues with fixed anchors, litter, and unsightly chalk, and further, these authors provide resources for land managers to help develop site-specific climbing plans.

Acknowledging rock climbing as a recreational activity in parks and conservation areas would facilitate productive conversations between land managers and the OAC. Legitimizing climbers by including them in management plans and discussions would foster better stewardship and allow for management strategies that are more pragmatic than blanket climbing bans.⁶⁵ Open dialogue is especially useful in places where different user groups—or members within one user group—have different understandings of place at the same site (Chapin and Knapp 2015). To meet the needs of all stakeholders, conversations must take place among climbers, land managers, and locals.

6.3 Implications for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Decolonizing rock climbing and other outdoor recreational activities means making space for those who have been historically excluded. Women, BIPOC, members of the LGBTQ2S+ community, and climbers with physical disabilities experience barriers to access resulting from the historical dominance of white, cisgender men in rock climbing. Some of these barriers were evident in Chapter 5, where I presented examples of experiences of microaggressions and

⁶⁵ Rock climbers' understandings of the Escarpment as more than just a place to climb also allows for them to contribute suggestions for sustainable solutions that extend beyond the human, as recommended by Fox and Alldred (2019).

exclusion among women and gender nonbinary individuals within the Ontario climbing community. Concrete actions must be taken to overcome systemic barriers to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). By increasing representation and mentorship opportunities, dismantling ableism and heteronormativity, and decolonizing and Indigenizing rock climbing practices and traditions, together, rock climbers in Ontario can build a more inclusive community centred around diversity, equity, and justice for all members.

There is a clear lack of positive representation in climbing media for women, BIPOC, members of the LGBTQ2S+ community, and climbers with physical disabilities (e.g., Abel 2017, Frazer and Anderson 2018, Gray et al. 2018). This paucity persists despite the value that adequate representation would add to the lives of these individuals (Jean-Baptiste 2021) and the possibility that homogenous spaces can even serve as sites for the reproduction of negative attitudes toward non-dominant group members (Anderson 2008). As discussed in Chapter Five, a lack of representative mentorship can be a substantial hindrance to accessing and moving freely within climbing spaces. Increasing mentorship opportunities for those from equity-seeking groups would facilitate positive interactions with outdoor recreation by providing knowledge, resources, gear, support, and a sense of community for those without intergenerational, gendered, or racialized privilege. Intentional support through mentorship and representation has the potential to reduce microaggressions and exclusion and to help individuals from equity-seeking groups feel welcomed and empowered instead of targeted and isolated.

Dismantling the ableism and heteronormativity in outdoor recreation is imperative to improving access to the sport. These communities each face unique challenges that should but attended to separately, but they are similar in that physical disability and queerness and are often rendered invisible in climbing spaces, functionally excluding individuals from these groups from

climbing spaces. Of the photographs of climbers in *Climbing* and *Rock and Ice* magazines in 2018, on average, 0.075% included an individual with a physical disability, and zero featured images of transgender or gender-diverse climbers (Frazer and Anderson 2018). Since then, there have been a few features of climbers with physical disabilities—*adaptive climbers*—and nonbinary climbers, but these instances are still not commonplace (see Schneider 2020, Clarke 2021, Grippled 2018). Despite progress in representation, there are still some systemic barriers for climbers who are not straight, cisgender, and able-bodied. The USA Climbing rulebook (USA Climbing 2019) recently revised its rules “to include Gender Non-Binary Participation” (p. 8), however, the corresponding Rule 3.5.5 requires climbers to nonetheless register as “male” or “female” and to provide documents supporting their identity, which can be prohibitive and emotionally laborious for gender diverse climbers. The lack of media representation and systemic barriers to climbers that do not fit the archetype reinforces the idea that the outdoors is a cis, straight, able-bodied place. However, scholars have begun to argue for the inclusion of all bodies and all iterations of genders and identities moving forward (Allee 2011, Ray 2018), and for the capacity of assistive technologies for social inclusion in ableist spaces, such as climbing (Kath, Neto, and Buzato 2019).

Decolonizing outdoors recreation requires honouring Indigenous knowledge, history, and sovereignty (Muller, Hemming, and Rigney 2019), especially in places where climbing takes place on sacred or Unceded land. Indigenous climber, activist, and Anthropology PhD Candidate, Ashleigh Thompson explains that to climb respectfully, individuals must educate themselves on whose land the climbing sites are located on, local Tribal protocols, and Indigenous activism in the area (quoted in Rozul 2020). Although the onus is on the individual, I recommend including land acknowledgements and Indigenous history in all climbing guidebooks

to facilitate this process. Lastly, climbers and land managers can increase their own awareness and work toward becoming better allies by accessing any of the numerous resources online, such as those published by Melanin Basecamp (e.g., Rozul 2019, Robles 2020).

Decolonizing the outdoors also involves creating safe spaces for those from equity-seeking groups who have been historically excluded, such as women and BIPOC. Threats of physical violence are a significant barrier to access for BIPOC (Taylor, González, and Razani 2021) and women (Coble, Selin and Erickson 2003; Wesely and Gaarder 2004). Although these threats are manifestations of broader social issues, individual members can take concrete actions to make these communities safer for others, such as welcoming new members and challenging their internal biases (Robles 2020). Another step toward a safer outdoors would be to change harmful route names. According to elite climber, Nina Williams, this involves acknowledging the harm done unto others and confronting the role that guidebook authors play in gatekeeping this aspect of climbing history (quoted in Pullan 2020). Lastly, creating safe climbing spaces requires challenging the “expert exclusivity” happening in the sport (Henderson 2020). The elitism and gatekeeping discouraging new climbers is the same exclusivity that is hurting women, BIPOC, and individuals from other historically excluded groups. By privileging only elite and experienced climbers, this attitude reinforces the status quo of a bygone era where crags and cliffs were only accessible to a privileged few.

Ultimately, the OAC, the LCO overseeing the Escarpment, plays a key role in facilitating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in its community.⁶⁶ As community representatives, the OAC has a responsibility to attend to the community’s shifting demographic and needs, and

⁶⁶ For more on LCOs, see Carter (2020a, 2020b).

importantly, to the racism, sexism, and ableism that is reproduced therein. Currently, the OAC is establishing a DEI Committee to address such issues, which will hopefully improve accessibility for those who identify with equity-seeking groups. Access concerns in climbing no longer pertain to only legal access to climbing sites, but also to the barriers that individuals from certain groups face when trying to access the sport.

6.4 Limitations and Further Research

The scoping nature of this research only allowed for a general overview of the many dimensions and nuances of rock climbing on the Niagara Escarpment. This approach allowed for a better understanding of the ways climbers interact with the Escarpment and each other but left little room for in-depth investigations such as the impact of harmful route names. Further, the perspectives of land managers and community members were not accounted for. Based on these limitations, among others, I have identified three areas for further study: 1) research on Ontario climbing community, 2) Indigenous issues and concerns, and 3) racism in climbing.

Regarding the Ontario climbing community, this research provides a snapshot of the population. A large representative sample of the population is needed to accurately describe climber habits and beliefs. Additionally, more research is needed on the least and most experienced group members. Rapid population growth suggests that newer climbers account for a large portion of the population. Surveying this group on their pro-environmental behaviours and knowledge would be useful for developing education programs in lieu of mentorship opportunities. Additionally, gathering life histories from the most experienced Escarpment climbers is valuable to Canadian historians and the international climbing community. There is a rich and unique history of climbing on the Niagara Escarpment, given that a thriving community grew in the absence of mountains and with large distances between crags. Older guidebooks and

David Chaundy-Smart's (2015) autobiography provide a glimpse into this history, but there is value in interviewing the original climbers and developers who are still alive today. Lastly, as the Escarpment is home to a vast array of humans and nonhumans, there is value to including the perspectives of land managers and local landowners to better understand community attitudes and barriers to climbing access on the Escarpment.

Further research is needed to better understand how social, cultural, and political contexts affect women's commitment to climbing and barriers to access (as recommended by Dilley and Scraton 2010). As argued by Wheaton (2016), although women's presence in male-dominated sport spheres offers possibilities for change, it is still a place where dominant narratives are nonetheless reproduced and reinforced. Broader cultural expectations of gender manifest within climbing communities and it is important to better understand how masculinity is privileged and reinforced in these spaces.

This research project excludes Indigenous voices, which perpetuates researcher complacency and prioritizes settler experiences over that of Indigenous peoples. Further research should attend instead to Indigenous perspectives given the colonial themes in climbing and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from parks for settler tourism and recreation (Spence 1999). Academics should consider the ways in which land claims are negotiated and the nature of development on Unceded Territory. Finally, further understanding is needed regarding Indigenous relations in eco-tourism, such as of rock climbers and the Chippewas of Nawash Unceded First Nation (Anishinaabek Nation) at Cape Croker Provincial Park (Grippled 2019b).

Echoing Finney (2014) and many others, I argue for the inclusion of more BIPOC voices in research on environmental engagement and attitudes to upset the erasure and exclusion of these voices and bodies from the outdoors. Although such issues have gained traction on social

media, they have yet to be thoroughly explored in the academic literature. Further research can apply critical theory to better understand how racism and underlying biases manifest within climbing communities, especially along the Niagara Escarpment.

6.5 Contributions and Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this research was to explore how rock climbers relate to the Niagara Escarpment, and in doing so, I examined how rock climbers interact with the nonhuman worlds of the Escarpment's crags as well as how they interact with each other. I found that the ethic of care embedded within climber culture suggests that they already see themselves as stewards of the Escarpment, and if they are legitimized as a user group, climbers can be mobilized to protect natural spaces by working with instead of against land managers. Further, the interviews with women and gender diverse climbers revealed that although the community is inclusive overall, broader social issues like sexism still manifest within member interactions in the form of microaggressions, exclusion, and resistance to changing harmful route names.

This research contributes to several bodies of literature. This is the first ethnographic account of rock climbing on the Niagara Escarpment, and it provides an overview of multiple aspects and dimensions of rock climbing from affective encounters to gendered interactions. In complement to the existing biological research on the impacts of rock climbing, this study provides a holistic picture of the interactions among networks of actors, which holds management insights for sport and leisure researchers on the Escarpment. Understanding how rock climbers develop an ethic of care through their affective encounters with the material world adds another theoretical perspective to the robust fields of materialism and phenomenology. Further, to gender studies, this research gives voice to those who have been underrepresented in this historically male-dominated space. By exploring the challenges faced by women and gender

diverse climbers, I also add to the literature on gender and outdoor recreation in documenting current issues in the Escarpment climbing community. Throughout this project, I draw from both posthumanist and decolonial scholarship, demonstrating that the incompatibility of the two perspectives can be nullified when perspectives *beyond* the human and *among* humans are brought into conversation with each other.

With this ethnographic account of rock climbing on the Escarpment, I also add to conversations about social justice and the environment in anthropology. Specifically, I shed light on social nuances that are often left aside by phenomenology by developing a critical approach to gendered climbing experiences. Women and gender diverse climbers do not *become with* the Escarpment in the same ways their male counterparts do because they are subjected to stereotyped expectations and microaggressions due to their gender expression. By drawing the connections between rock climbing, colonialism, and social justice, I highlight the complexity of climber-cliff relationships and the potentials for extending care to all members of the community. Thus, with this novel account of rock climbing and gender on the Niagara Escarpment, I show the potentials for deeper conversations within environmental anthropology when the phenomenological is discussed alongside the political.

Through this research, I have developed a better understanding of how climbers relate to the Niagara Escarpment and to each other, and I seek to contribute to the development of better relationships among all actors, human and nonhuman.

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APPENDIX A: GLOSSARY OF CLIMBING TERMS

Anchor	Any device or method that is used to secure a climber to the wall. Can be permanent and fixed or constructed and placed as needed.
Belay	A technique used to secure rope to prevent a climber from hitting the ground should they fall. The person engaging in belay technique is the <i>belayer</i> .
Beta	Climbing advice; usually pertaining to a route, problem, or move. (See Stinson 2019).
Bolt (also <i>bolt-hanger</i>)	Steel or titanium protection drilled into the wall; commonly used in sport climbing. Climbers protect themselves from falls by clipping their rope through a quickdraw clipped into the bolt. Also used as permanent anchors.
Bouldering	A style of rock climbing wherein the routes or <i>problems</i> are less than three meters high and climbers are protected with mats instead of ropes.
Crag	A cliff face that can be climbed, and its general vicinity.
Lead	Abbreviation for <i>lead climbing</i> , or <i>leader</i> . Refers to the person who places the quick draws or removable protection as they climb, or the process of doing so. Can be in any style (e.g., sport, trad).
Project	A challenging route that a climber makes multiple attempts on and may take weeks, months, or years to complete or “send”.
Quickdraw (abbr. <i>draw</i>)	Two carabiners attached by a sewn fabric sling used to connect two points. In sport climbing, typically used to connect a climber’s rope to a bolt to protect the climber.
Route	A designated path that an individual can climb.
Send	Term used to describe the successful completion of a route without resting on protection or falling.
Sport climbing	A style of rock climbing involving the use of permanent protection (fixed bolts that carabiners can be clipped into).
Top-rope	A style of rock climbing wherein the climber is protected by a rope runs from their harness, through an anchor at the top, and back down to the belayer.
Trad climbing	Abbreviation for <i>traditional climbing</i> . A style of rock climbing wherein the climber must place their own protection as they ascend the route (e.g., camming devices, nuts).
Wall	Can be used to refer to any climbing surface.

For a more expansive glossary, please refer to Rock and Ice (2016) or Stinson (2019).

APPENDIX B: THE TROUBLE WITH ROUTE NAMES

As per climbing customs, the first person to ascend the route is afforded naming rights. While this practice helps climbers navigate vertical spaces, it also reflects larger social power dynamics (Stinson and Grimwood 2020). Such power relations are evident in two ways. First, in the practice itself, whereby the first ascensionist is awarded a sense of ownership through naming rights (Bogardus 2012: 300, Lawrence 2019: 50). Second, in that some of names given to routes include harmful slurs and derogatory sentiments toward equity-seeking groups such as women, BIPOC, members of the LGBTQ2S+ community, and other ethnic communities. Some of these route names are still present in the guidebooks, but have been recently redacted on climbing websites, such as “Female Belay Slave” at Mount Nemo. However, there are still many questionable and explicitly offensive route names that are still in use, such as “Pussy Whipped” and “Yellow Fever”. A list of harmful and questionable route names from the Escarpment and elsewhere in Ontario are presented in Table A-1.

Table A-1

Harmful (or profane) route names in Ontario

AREA OR ROUTE NAME	LOCATION
Abortion Wall	The Swamp
Al Qaeda Area*	----
Beaver Fever	Old Baldy > Entropy Wall
Black Magic	Niagara Glen > Romper Room
Campus Slut*	Metcalf > Boiler Plate
Chinese Democracy	Devil’s Glen > Slippery People
Chinese Torture	Devil’s Glen > Slippery People
Circling the Areola	Mount Nemo > Big Section
Crib Midget	The Swamp > Last Stand
Does Not Deepthroat	Devil’s Glen > Old School Wall
Fear of a Toothed Vagina*	Niagara Glen > Romper Room
Female Belay Slave*	Mount Nemo > Cat’s Tail

Hump the Honeys	The Swamp > Islands
If You Can't Have the Mother, Have the Daughter	Devil's Glen > The Gully
If You Get the Daughter	Devil's Glen > The Gully
Insatiable Mandingo	Cape Croker
Iraqi Freedom Wall* (renamed Pine Rock; routes include: Poison Gas, Guantanamo Bay, Saddam Hussein, Osama Bin Laden, Taliban, Bio Terror, Sleeper Cell, and Weapons of Mass Destruction)	----
Just the Tip	The Swamp > Old World
Layback and Jam it in	The Swamp > Last Stand
Pilgrim	Cape Croker > Left of the Ladder
Piso Mojado*	Cape Croker > Left of the Ladder
Pump and Dump	The Swamp > Islands
Pussy Whipped	Calabogie > Main Cliff > Far Area
Ridden Hard and Put Away Wet	The Swamp > Islands
Scalphunter Wall*	Lion's Head
Screaming Blue Faggots* (renamed Screaming Blue Rancheros)	Berlin Wall
Seeing-Eye Bitch*	The Swamp > Sundial Wall
She's a Tease*	The Swamp > Old World / Abortion Wall
Sloppy Pussy*	McCrae Lake
The Bitch Bent Over*	Berlin Wall
The Roaming Gypsies*	Lion's Head > Nimbus Wall
The Tease	Cape Croker > Left of the Ladder
Tit's Up	Mount Nemo > Big Section
White Rajahs	The Swamp > Sundial Wall
Yellow Fever*	The Swamp > Yellowcard Wall

*Redacted or flagged on Mountain Project's website at the time of writing, but still appearing elsewhere on websites or in guidebooks.

Sources: www.mountainproject.com, www.rakkup.com, Alexandropolous and Dwyer (2016a, 2016b), and Wong (2016)

Figure A-1 summarizes words from the route names that were flagged as inappropriate on Mountain Project (MP) when the website's flagging feature was first launched in early

absent from the word cloud include, “Bitch slap” ($n = 16$), “Asian fever” or “Yellow fever” ($n = 6$), “Gang bang” ($n = 4$), “Gas chamber” ($n = 5$), “Lynch mob” ($n = 3$), “Sexual harassment” ($n = 3$), “Squaw”⁶⁸ ($n = 7$), and “Whipping post” ($n = 10$).

While some route names simply use profane language, others contain explicit hate speech mainly targeting women and BIPOC, specifically Black and Asian women. Recently, journalists and climbers have spoken up about the merits of changing these names that are violent and hateful, but rock climbers both in Ontario and abroad are divided on the subject (see Anderssen 2019, de Bruijn 2019, Dexter 2020b). While some believe that route names are relics and should be preserved regardless of their impacts, others understand harmful route names as a tool for reproducing violent ideologies and maintaining the status quo.

Route Names as Relics

To many members of the community, route names are symbolic and hold historical and value. For Ontario climbers who were in favour of preserving harmful route names, it was this sentimentality that was most important to them. They believed that the route names should be kept to honour the sport’s founding fathers that devoted their time, energy, and money into developing the routes so that future climbers could enjoy them safely. While it is reasonable to acknowledge these contributions to the community, this position lacks consideration for the perspectives and experiences of the others that are affected by the violent names. As one interlocutor points out: *“The main reason why this whole naming controversy has popped up is because of how popular climbing has gotten as of recent. Like, in the last 15 years, I think that popularity and bringing more people into the climbing sphere has also brought more people that would, say, take offense to certain things.”* Essentially, this individual argues that these routes

⁶⁸ This term is included only to demonstrate the extreme racial inequities used in naming conventions and not intended to evoke its profane connotations.

were named when the community was homogenous and that outsiders do not understand the “jokes”. However, the “outsiders” that are taking offense to harmful route names are the ones whose identities are being systematically targeted, such as women, BIPOC, and LGBTQ2S+ individuals.

The resistance of some climbers to changing harmful route names is troubling because it reflects a hierarchy of values where the dominant group prioritizes racist, sexist, and colonial traditions over the respect and dignity of members of equity-seeking groups.⁶⁹ Such backlash to diversity initiatives is not uncommon and can stem from a preference for the status quo and the belief that social equity has already been reached so further work is not needed (Brannon, Carter, Murdock-Perriera, and Higginbotham 2018). Brannon and colleagues (2018) emphasize the importance of recognizing these divergent motivations when implementing diversity initiatives. For the climbing community, this means acknowledging the contributions to climbing development while also attending to the harm that these names are currently causing.

Reproducing Violence

Route names can hold sentimental value for their history, but this history does not resonate with all climbers. Some Ontario climbers are acutely aware of how route names can reinforce hegemonic narratives, magnify privilege, and bar already marginalized groups from the sport. Those who were in favour of changing route names felt this way because they valued ceasing the production of violence against equity-seeking groups more than they valued defending the naming rights of the person who named the route. Ontario climbers gave many reasons for this, the most pertinent being the lack of self-awareness among those against change.

⁶⁹ If these individuals were truly motivated by honouring history, they would be arguing to restore Indigenous place names, not colonial ones.

Most of the climbers in favour of changing harmful route names pointed to the position of privilege that developers are in to be able to establish new routes, and how this privilege can obscure their understanding of the magnitude of offensive names. Kelly (she/her) explains:

If a route name is something that might discourage someone or a group of people from participating in a sport, then it needs to get stripped off a climb. Because this doesn't affect people who are already dominating in the sport and are the ones who are setting the routes and have their place in the hierarchy... of course they're not going to feel like it makes a difference, because it's not discouraging them because their privilege already gave them the opportunity to get to where they are. And I think there's a lack of empathy that... that sends a very clear message, that it's still a white, male sport.

Others like Sabrina (she/her) pointed to the privileged nature of the sport generally, and the “frivolity” of individuals defending their problematic route names when rock climbing in Ontario happens on stolen Indigenous land. Additionally, others reflected on the absurdity of spending time, energy, and resources on developing a route only to name it something degrading. Finally, many were disappointed that an otherwise supportive community could hold such disparaging beliefs.

One researcher found that estimates of diversity and inclusion in rock climbing communities were high (Robinson 2004), however, the marginal perspectives from Ontario climbers reveal that the community may not be as inclusive as members claim. Studies from other fringe sports like skateboarding reveal that the marginal nature of the sport itself leads individuals to feel that the subculture transcends larger hegemonic structures and are thus immune to sexism and racism (Atencio and Beal 2011, Yochim 2010). However, the authors argue that instead fringe sports are spaces where those same power dynamics are reproduced.

Getting Back to the Wrong Traditions

William Cronon (1996) argued that environmentalists are trying to get back to the “wrong nature,” in that they are seeking to return themselves to an imagined state of pristine

wilderness that never truly existed. Cronon argues that this romantic illusion of wilderness is reproduced in the “frontier fantasies” of outdoor enthusiasts, whereby uncolonized land is imagined as space to be discovered and conquered through outdoor recreation (p. 15). Through this perspective, preserving harmful route names can be understood as an attempt to return to the wrong traditions, in that the naming practice reflects a conqueror mentality and many were named by men that held racist, sexist, and otherwise harmful beliefs that were accepted at the time. For some Ontario climbers, these ideas of romantic wilderness are embodied in their route-naming practices and beliefs in preserving them because they believe that route names are relics that reflect and celebrate human achievements over nature. For others, violent route names are not only barriers for those they target but reflect colonial attitudes that do not resonate with them.

In their analysis of Yosemite guidebooks, Taylor (2006) describes how route names reflect the evolving attitudes and values of the community. On the Escarpment, some climbers are ready to re-write anti-racist and anti-sexist beliefs into their community’s values while others wish to hold onto degrading attitudes. This conflict is evidence of the “diversity and inclusion” self-governance challenge in climbing described by Carter and colleagues (2020), but further research is needed to better understand how resistance to changing harmful route names troubles diversity and inclusion goals.

APPENDIX C: CLIMBING DURING COVID-19

Introduction

The COVID-19 health pandemic upset the habits and daily activities of individuals and communities around the world, including outdoor recreationists. The effects of these changes on outdoor rock climbers have yet to be explored. This section provides a summary of how climbers on the Niagara Escarpment interpreted their changing relationships with the sport and the land during COVID-19. I discuss changes and challenges as well as the new appreciations and relationships that arose. These findings yield some management insights for Escarpment parks authorities in pandemic recovery efforts.

Background

The SARS-CoV-2 novel human coronavirus, commonly known as COVID-19, emerged in late 2019 and has led to a global health pandemic. On March 17, 2020, safety restrictions were implemented in Ontario to prevent the spread of COVID-19, including the closure of conservation areas and provincial parks. In mid-May, the restrictions were gradually lifted, which allowed climbers to resume their activities within the public health guidelines for safe travel and social distancing.

The global closures and lockdowns related to COVID-19 had noticeable effects on wildlife in both urban and non-urban settings. Some effects were positive, such as vegetative regeneration, increased wildlife presence, and reduced litter (Soto et al. 2021). On the other hand, negative effects included global disturbances to the health and reproductive success of wild bird species (Gilby et al. 2021; Soh et al. 2021; Hentati-Sundberg, Berglund, Hedjströmb, and Olsson 2021), as well as an increase in social trails in urban parks (Primack and Terry 2021). There were also changes in data collection habits from citizen scientists, specifically, the decreased

reporting of rare species in wetlands and increased reporting of common species in urban areas (Crimmins, Posthumus, Schaffer, and Prudic 2021; Basile, Russo, Russo, Senese, and Bernardo 2021). Lastly, a meta-analysis revealed that although there was an increase of animal presence in outdoor spaces, conservation authorities could not perform restoration and enforcement tasks, which resulted in some individuals engaging in illegal activities like hunting (Bates, Primack, Duarte, and PAN-Environmental Working Group 2021).

Research on the effects of COVID-19 closures on human health, wellbeing, and physical activity revealed changes in the habits and activities of individuals recreating outdoors as well. In one Canadian sample, participants reported a significant decrease in physical activity in general, which was associated with increased work-related stress (Woodruff, Coyne, and St-Pierre 2021). Similarly, another study reported that individuals were spending less days outside, but that they valued the potential health benefits of outdoor recreation more than the dangers of perceived risk (Rice et al. 2020). The authors also reported that outdoor recreation was importance to many respondents' sense of identity and that they planned to use public land more often in the future. These changes are not surprising considering that spending time outside in green spaces benefits mental health (Reece, Bray, Sinnett, Hayward, and Martin 2021).

In terms of COVID-19 and outdoor climbing, there has been little academic reporting aside from Rice and colleagues (2020), who noted that people were climbing less at the beginning of the pandemic. Others studied the ability of the virus survive when exposed to climbing chalk,⁷⁰ concluding that using chalk while climbing reduces surface transmission of

⁷⁰ Climbing chalk is a widely used compound comprised of magnesium carbonate that climbers use on their hands to reduce moisture and increase friction. It is widely-believed to that chalk improves climbing performance. Despite prolific use, chalk is sometimes scrutinized for its unsightly appearance (McKee 2021) and environmental impacts (Alif 2018; Hepenstrick, Bergamini, and Holderegger 2020).

COVID-19 (Owen, Laird, and Shivkumar 2021). Although there is no conclusive evidence on COVID-19 transmission in outdoor climbing settings, the Ontario Alliance of Climbers (OAC) published a document titled, “Guidelines for Climbing During the Coronavirus Pandemic” encouraging climbers to act responsibly and respectfully toward the landscape and local land managers and landowners (OAC 2020a).

Methodological Considerations

As described in the third chapter on methods, I conducted semi-structured interviews and distanced observations. Although experiences related to COVID-19 were not centrally related to my research question, the changes in climbing habits arose organically in almost every interview. I followed up with questions such as, “Have the lockdown measures changed your climbing habits?” and “How has COVID-19 impacted the ways to recreate outside?” The ensuing conversations and reflections are summarized below.

Results

Not surprisingly, the COVID-19 lockdowns influenced climbing activities and altered the way that climbers interacted with and related to outdoor spaces. In Ontario, the first lockdown began on March 17, 2020 and was lifted two months later in mid-May. Climbing guidelines varied from crag to crag, but most re-opened to climbing during the summer.⁷¹ After the initial adjustment period necessitating a change in habits and expectations, climbers gained new appreciations, reckoned with challenges and frustrations, and lastly, found consolation in the new relationships that they negotiated with the landscape and the sport.

⁷¹ Two of the busiest crags, Rattlesnake Point and Mount Nemo, were not re-opened for climbing as soon as the restrictions were lifted. Rattlesnake Point was eventually re-opened partly through summer 2020 with a 2-hour time slot booking system, while Mount Nemo was still closed at the time of writing. Both are managed by Conservation Halton. See OAC (2020b) for list of current crag statuses.

The Adjustment Period

During the initial lockdown period, many climbers experienced a large decrease in their physical activity due to the gym closures, park closures, and travel restrictions. According to the 2019 OAC member survey,⁷² 82% of climbers said that the pandemic had a major impact on their climbing activities, and 64% reported a 100% decrease in their climbing activities since the start of COVID-19. This decrease in climbing activity was salient in the interviews as well. Many climbers observed the restrictions and chose not to climb at this time, especially not at well-known crags where their actions could reflect poorly on the community.

As restrictions were gradually lifted, climbers returned to their activities recreating outside on the Niagara Escarpment. While some climbers were eager to get back and climbed more than they had in previous seasons, others delayed their return or climbed less frequently. One interviewee, LO explained that she climbed less frequently at first because she was cognisant of not burdening local health care systems unnecessarily with any potential climbing injuries.

During this adjustment period following the province's initial re-opening, climbers had to navigate the influx of users on the Escarpment. Outdoor spaces became flooded with an unprecedented number of climbers, many of whom were spending their first season outside because of gym closures. Many interlocutors, including Kacy Wilson of the OAC, expressed their concerns about the increasing number of climbers with, on average, less experience. Another change was in which areas were visited. Popular areas like Rattlesnake Point and Mount Nemo were initially closed, so climbers were pushed to climb further north to climb, which

⁷² The survey was open from June 23 to July 19, 2020. Although is period was after the initial lockdown, items were included to assess changes in climbing behaviour during the initial closures.

exerted more pressure on crags in the Beaver Valley region. Lastly, the interlocutors mentioned that there was an increase in human presence from other user groups, most notably, hikers. The climbers I spoke with lamented the increase in hiker traffic because, although they were glad to see people enjoying the outdoors, they also witnessed a significant increase in litter, parking problems, and disrespectful behaviour, especially at Lion's Head where climbing access is only "tolerated" (OAC 2020b).

Greater Appreciation

Unanimously, the individuals that I spoke with expressed that COVID-19 increased their appreciation for outdoor spaces. For climbers, this appreciation derived from the mental health and social benefits that they gained from the sport. Regarding mental health, Carys shares:

Being back outside was a huge bonus mental health wise for me that I noticed more specifically after COVID. Just the act of being out there... Especially with climbing, you have such a connection... you're actually holding on to the rock... you have just more appreciation, I guess, for the fact that it's there and you get to use it. For months it was taken away and you didn't realize how much you missed it until it was gone. (Carys)

For Carys, the climbing hiatus gave them a greater appreciation for both the sport and outdoor spaces generally because of the mental health benefits. Many others also expressed how important climbing was for the mental health, demonstrating the value of outdoor recreation.

For others, their appreciation grew through the opportunity for social interaction that climbing on the Escarpment provided. This is evident in DK's story about the sense of normalcy climbing helped him regain in his social life:

This last summer I was living on the Escarpment... like, you know, in my van just touring around from place to place spending a lot of time at the crag. And with COVID, just having somewhere to go, somewhere to be, something to do... an excuse to see friends... This summer, amid COVID, it was even more true than ever because the only time I saw anyone other than the people in my bubble was during my time rock climbing. And it allowed me to actually have a good summer and to feel some normalcy... Every day I went to the crag, the world felt normal... So that's something special. (DK)

DK's sentiment was shared by many others. COVID-19 sparked a greater appreciation for outdoor spaces, especially the Escarpment, because it allowed them to resume their interactions with a community that provided so many benefits to them and that they so dearly missed. Others even expressed how with their growing appreciation came a growing protectiveness, especially considering the overcrowding that came with the provincial re-opening.

Challenges and Frustrations

Changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic also left climbers with new challenges and a sense of frustration. Climbers expressed frustration with the larger climbing community, with other user groups, with land managers, and with themselves.

Frustrations with other community members was mostly centred around disrespect for public health guidelines. Some climbers disclosed that they knew of others who were climbing despite the restrictions and they expressed frustration with the selfishness of those individuals. These interlocutors felt that the actions of these individuals were deeply disrespectful because it reflected poorly on – and risked access for – the entire community.

As noted above, climbers expressed some frustration with other user groups. While they acknowledged the benefits of outdoor recreation for everyone, climbers were nonetheless frustrated with the increased number of hikers that led to more litter, noise, and crowding.

Referencing the crowds, Brad and Kelly lament:

I felt this intense longing to be able to go climbing places where it was just, like, pointless. (Kelly)

One big way that affected our climbing was just the crowds. The number of people, not just climbers, but other hikers and stuff at the crags... Trying to get campsites at different areas was harder... (Brad)

Brad and Kelly, among others, also discussed how the increase in hiker traffic added more pressure to the already strained infrastructure. They mentioned widening trails, more human

excrement, less wildlife sightings, as well as overburdening rural towns and amenities, such as small-town businesses, campsites, and parking lots.⁷³

Challenges with land managers also led to some climbers to feel frustrated, specifically about the time slots at Rattlesnake Point within Conservation Halton. Many felt that the 2-hour time slots were not long enough to allow for a safe and enjoyable climbing session, and one climber called it “prohibitive”. Kelly summarizes the reason behind the frustrations well:

[The timeslots] almost reduced climbing to the workout it is indoors and applied it to the outdoor space, and it's so much more than that outdoors. It's being outside and having a day with your friends... spending time talking and relaxing and appreciating being out there... Putting time limits on it drew equivalencies to indoor climbing that just aren't there. (Kelly)

Kelly emphasizes that the timeslots were challenging because they eliminated what is for her the most enjoyable part of climbing outside—the enjoyment of being outside with good company.

Lastly, climbers also expressed frustration with themselves and their ability to perform. Many of those I spoke with were frustrated that they were not able to climb at the level that they had hoped to and that it was difficult to adjust to more realistic expectations.

I remember last season, when I got out for the first time after lockdown, I got so scared. I was leading on an [easy route] that I've done a million times... I got so scared. And then I got so pissed that I got so scared. I was like, “What the hell? You've been in lockdown all this time, now you get outside and you're so scared. What's wrong with you?” You know? And I couldn't give myself a break, and that was kind of how I felt all season... So this year is just about... If you're gonna give anybody grace in this world, give it to yourself. (Sabrina)

Sabrina clearly describes the frustration she felt returning to the sport, which was not unfamiliar to the other interlocutors. However, toward the end, she reflects on how she interpreted and responded to these feelings. In the next section I explore how, in a similar way, other climbers

⁷³ In response to increased traffic, Lion's Head officials closed Moore Street parking in early 2020 and announced a new parking-pass system in early 2021 (see Rodgers 2021).

also sought to negotiate new relationships with themselves, the sport, and the Escarpment during COVID-19.

Renegotiating Relationships

The circumstances surrounding COVID-19 led some climbers to renegotiate their relationships with themselves, the sport, and the outdoors.

Many climbers found themselves humbled when they returned to climbing outside. They talked about how, without being able to train in the gym, they were forced to work out their mental hang-ups outside instead, which led them to develop a stronger “head game” and become more confident climbers. For others, this experience allowed them to shift their focus from “chasing grades” or “projecting” to simply enjoying the experience of the outdoors. LO shares her experience with this:

[COVID] brought a different enjoyment to climbing. Where I could enjoy the movement regardless of the grades... I think last year was the first year in a really long time that I didn't project anything... but I repeated climbs that I had climbed years ago and had a different experience and enjoyment of them than I did the first time around. (LO)

Sabrina expresses a similar sentiment, but in a different way:

We were just appreciating every single second of being outside and wanting to draw it out as long as possible... Honestly, I didn't feel like I had the bandwidth to try really hard on the wall... I had nothing left to tap into, so, I just had fun. I was just trying a bunch of different routes of a lower grade that I haven't climbed in a while... and hung out on the beach and sunbathed. It was lovely. (Sabrina)

Both women allowed themselves to adjust their expectations and search for fulfilment and success in ways that did not involve climbing at their limits to push grades. Instead of pressuring themselves to perform, they shifted their goals to rediscovering the enjoyment of movement on the wall and rekindled their love for the sport.

Lastly, some climbers renegotiated their relationships by searching to explore new, less-travelled places. For some, this was because they were climbing more and quickly tired of their

regular spots, so they set out for new adventures. However, for others, the crowding brought on by COVID motivated them to increase their climbing skill and strength so that they were able to visit areas with more difficult – and less crowded – climbs.

Discussion and Conclusion

The closures and restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the lives of climbers. In both positive and negative ways, it led them to change their climbing habits, develop a new appreciation, navigate frustrations, and renegotiate their relationships. The closures exacerbated and made salient existing issues of access and overcrowding for climbers on the Escarpment, while at the same time strengthening their relationship with it and their dedication to the sport. These findings highlight how important these spaces are for the physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing of all users, while also pointing to the mounting issue of overcrowding. Although just a snapshot, these findings serve as a steppingstone toward further research on COVID-19 and outdoor recreation, as well as leisure and tourism research on rock climbing and multispecies perspectives on the pandemic (Lunstrum et al. 2021).

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interlocutor Information

- How old are you?
- How would you describe your gender, and what are your pronouns?
- How would you describe your ethnicity?
- What styles of climbing do you participate in? Which is your main style?
- When did you start climbing?
- How many years have you been climbing on the Escarpment?

1. Narrative

- Can you tell me about your journey climbing on the Niagara Escarpment?
- Can you walk me through your typical day at the crag?
- What stands out in your memories?

2. General Questions

- Do you have a favourite crag? What makes it special?
- How would you describe your experience climbing in Ontario to someone who knew nothing about you or the sport?

3. Theory-Driven Questions

Material and affect:

- You mentioned _____. What did that feel like?
- How would you describe your relationship with the Niagara Escarpment?
- How is your relationship with the Escarpment unique?

Mentorship:

- What was your experience with climbing mentorship?
- What did you learn from the mentorship? Did they teach you about environmental ethics?

Gender and diversity:

- Do you feel like there are others like you climbing in Ontario?
- Do you think about your gender when you climb? If yes, when is it most obvious?

Care, ethics, and development:

- What ethics do climbers embody? Why do you think this is?
- How do you feel about altering the landscape to make it more accessible to climbers?

Covid-19:

- How has Covid-19 affected your experience?
- Has Covid-19 changed the way you think about or interact with the outdoors?

APPENDIX E: LINKS AND RESOURCES

This is a list of social media accounts, websites, organizations, and the like for anyone who wants them. Feel free to distribute widely.

Affinity Groups, Organizations, and Projects

- Balanced Rock Foundation (only WoC backpacking company in the country)
- Being Green While Black (@BeingGreenWhileBlack)
- Blackoutside.org
- Brothers of Climbing
- The Brown Ascenders (www.thebrownascenders.org)
- Brown Girls Climb
- Brown Girl Outdoor World
- Canadian Adaptive Climbing Society (www.adaptiveclimbinggroup.org)
- Catalyst Sports (for people with physical disabilities, www.catalystsports.org)
- Climbers of Color (www.climbersofcolor.org)
- Flash Foxy (www.flashfoxy.com, @heyflashfoxy)
- “If She Can Do It, You Can Do It Too” (by Miho Aida, www.mihoaida.com)
- Indigenous Women Hike (www.facebook.com/indigenouswomenhike)
- Latino Outdoors (www.latinoutdoors.org)
- Natives Outdoors (<https://natives-outdoors.com>)
- Native Women’s Wilderness (@NativeWomensWilderness, www.NativeWomensWilderness.org)
- Next 100 Coalition (initiative for a more inclusive approach to land management and conservation, www.next100coalition.org)
- Ontario Climbing – For Women and Gender Diverse Climbers (Facebook group)
- OUT There Adventures
- Outdoor Afro (www.outdoorafro.com)
- Outdoor Asian (www.outdoorasian.com)
- Outdoor Muslims (www.outdoormuslims.org)
- Paradox Sports (created *The Adaptive Climbing Initiative*, manual for adaptive climbing)
- Queer Climbing Collective
- Sending in Color
- She Moves Mountains (guiding company for women, owner: Lizzy van Patten)
- TranSending 7 (www.transending.org)
- Unlikely Hikers (@unlikelyhikers)

Events and Festivals

- Colour the Crag (by Brown Girls Climb and Brothers of Climbing)
- Women’s Climbing Festival (by Flash Foxy)
- Women’s Outdoor Summit for Empowerment (www.womensoutdoorsummit.com)

Films

- Titan
- Pretty Strong