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Bolting the Landscape: An Ethnography of Yosemite as a Significant Climbing Destination

Vanessa Taylor

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Yosemite Valley is a transformative landscape that helps to shape climbers' identities and fosters a unique sense of community, which continually reinforces its status as a renowned and evolving climbing destination. The historical influence of Yosemite Valley on rock climbing began in the 1950s and has since defined itself as a prominent destination for climbers worldwide. This ethnographic research analyzes how climbers forge a meaningful connection with the Valley by forming a deep sense of place that intertwines with their personal identities as climbers and investigates the intricate relationship between climbers' identities and the Yosemite landscape. This research also explores the social dynamics within the Yosemite climbing community, and how climbers validate and reinvent their identities through shared practices, rituals, and narratives. The findings of this research underscore the importance of recognizing the cultural and personal dimensions of climbing experiences in this iconic destination. By understanding the historical and cultural influences that have shaped Yosemite's climbing heritage, this work provides insight into the broader context of rock climbing and its ever-evolving relationship with the natural environment, particularly within National Parks.

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Chapter One: Introduction

> I was up there [on Magic Line], and this cold breeze comes out of the crack, and I was like 'whoa, dude.' It just felt like, it was happy I was there. Then I turned around and looked at Half Dome and thought about growing up here…and it just hit me, like this moment, like chills, I almost started tearing up. It was that special. All I could do is say "thank you so much" you know? Up on El Cap I know there's a moment waiting for me. Just that kind of moment though. Where it's driven by nothing except that, trying to find that feeling and that vibe and send it hard to where it's just like, I think once you get to a place like that, that's pretty special to feel that in your life and share that…Here is the best place, I wouldn't even need to go anywhere [else], just climb here. I just reach this place where I'm so free in my mind and my spirit and everything, that it's so fun, and it's just such a gift. I think too with climbing, not to take it so seriously you know, this whole climbing thing. It just takes care of you. You're stretching and you're working your muscles and you're doing all that. So, it just takes care of you, you know?
>
> – Lonnie Kauk, professional athlete, and Ahwahneechee descendant

As I carried a crash pad[1] through Camp 4 in Yosemite Valley, I wondered why people continued to come here and participate in this sport, as did climber Lonnie Kauk. Lonnie, a well-known rock climber within Yosemite Valley and beyond, spent an afternoon talking to me about his life growing up in Yosemite Valley, how the sport had changed since he was a child watching his climbing-legend father, Ron Kauk, push the boundaries of the sport, and what climbing continued to mean to him. While climbing can be a highly individualistic sport, where each experience is embodied by the person performing it,

[1] A bouldering mat or crash pad is a foam pad used for protection when bouldering. The primary purpose of a crash pad is to add a foam layer between the climber and the ground, to lessen the impact of a bouldering fall.

members of the climbing community also share similar sentiments about the reason they continue to climb and be drawn to Yosemite specifically.

FIGURE 1: PHOTO OF HALF DOME FROM BEHIND. PHOTOGRAPHED BY VANESSA TAYLOR

My interest in working in Yosemite comes from a deeper interest in how heritage and cultural history are tied to specific landscapes, and how people make meaning within them. Though the Valley itself is only 5.938 square miles, less than 1 percent of the 1,169 square mileage of Yosemite National Park, it is where most visitors to Yosemite arrive and spend their visit. Within Yosemite Valley are a multitude of sites, emblematic rock

formations, and climbing destinations. These sites have been laid out in various guidebooks[2] over the past few decades, while others are still being discovered by climbers.

The questions that inspired my initial research included: Is Yosemite Valley a sacred site for climbers, and how do they identify with this space? If it is considered a sacred site, could Yosemite be conceptualized as a pilgrimage destination for climbers? How is spirituality or sacredness manifested by climbers in this space through their interactions with it? As climbers claim space in the Valley, do they allow for sharing and collaboration in their use? Or is there competition as they stake their claims on the spaces? I had hoped to determine why Yosemite was so special to the climbing community, and why people from around the world continue to be drawn there. Yosemite Valley is a fertile site for this type of investigation and makes a noteworthy case study for anthropological inquiry and analysis, as I will show throughout my research. This thesis will be useful for those readers who are interested in Yosemite, cultural landscapes, climbing history and heritage, and the general climbing community.

Nature of Project

I first visited Yosemite in high school in 2008, on a school field trip. It was winter, and the Valley felt alien to anything I had known up to that point, not having spent much time in the outdoors by then. I did not go back to Yosemite until New Year's Day 2020 with a few climber friends of mine when I was still relatively new to climbing. By then I had a general understanding of how the history of the Valley affected the sport in a larger

[2] A guidebook is a book of information about a place, designed for the use of visitors or tourists. In this case, it is a climbing specific book that lays out climbing sites around the Valley.

way, but I had no idea the sense of awe I would feel by participating in climbing there. At 28, I was on the older side for a newer climber, but much younger than many of the climbers who had been climbing in the Valley for almost half of their adult lives. I noticed something about climbing in the Valley that I had neither seen nor felt at any other crag[3] before. There was a culture, community, and energy to the area not generally felt at any other crag I had been to. Less than two years later the significance of the experience I had in that landscape became the inspiration of my master's thesis.

In general, this thesis is interested in investigating the climbing community's experiences in interaction with Yosemite Valley, in Yosemite National Park in California's Eastern Sierra Nevada Mountain Range. This includes climbers who associate themselves with Yosemite and those who don't; those who climb there a handful of times a year, individuals who travel across the world for the opportunity to climb some of the most seminal routes[4] and problems[5], those that return consistently to climb there, and climbers that have only ever dreamed of getting the opportunity but have yet to make it. I wanted to discover what draws people to this park, whether it is in some way a religious or almost pilgrimage-like pull, or if it is to test themselves in some way against the "greats" of rock-climbing history and that is tied to their identities. I had also initially intended to look at whether Yosemite Valley was considered a "sacred site" for climbers, and if so, if it then qualified as a secular pilgrimage destination. I could not consider this potential without

[3] A crag is a small rock-climbing area usually containing numerous climbing routes or problems.

[4] A climbing route is a path by which a climber reaches the top of a mountain, or cliff face, most often used when describing a roped climb.

[5] A short route (aka problems), 10 - 25 feet tall, often on short cliffs and boulders that aren't large enough to justify roped climbing, most often used when describing bouldering.

also looking into where their ideas of sacredness intersected or overlapped with other stakeholders' use and draw to this space, including the displaced Indigenous population (including Indigenous climbers), tourists, and National Parks Service staff.

Positionality

It is also important to note who I am, where I come from, and how I relate to this project. I am a Black, Mexican, and French female-identified climber. I grew up on California's coastline, less than 4 hours from Yosemite National Park, which I had visited once or twice before adulthood. Though I had climbed a few times throughout my life, primarily at indoor rock-climbing gyms, I began climbing in earnest during 2018. I did not get the opportunity to climb in Yosemite Valley until New Year's Day 2020, and it changed my relationship to climbing in the outdoors. Prior to that moment, I had never felt a spiritual connection to climbing; it was just a fun sport to get my body moving. Waking up in that Valley, climbing on the famed Yosemite granite, and knowing the history of that space and all of those who had come before made me feel connected to the landscape in an intense way. Not only is the rock quality almost perfect for climbing, but being off the beaten path in one of the most visited National Parks and feeling silence and contentment struck me as not many outdoor experiences had. This led to wanting to study climbing from an anthropological perspective.

While I tried to be aware of the biases that I brought into this research, I am also aware that it is impossible to fully eliminate them. In fact, and to some extent, as I was incorporating autoethnography into my final research I wanted to actively acknowledge some of the biases that I carried into my work. I approached my research as a self-identified

climber who shares many of the same common ideals and values as my participants. I recognize, however, that their narrative accounts and identities were unique to them. I wanted to give voice to their individual accounts and not inject my own preconceived notions of their identities and attachments onto their narratives while simultaneously fulfilling the role of an anthropologist by interpreting the findings using the relevant literature. I tried to maintain a balance between the participants' narratives, my own understandings of connection to this space, and my role as an anthropologist.

Yosemite and Climbing as Heritage

Yosemite Valley is an actively managed heritage site with a variety of stakeholder groups, including the climbing community. Climbing as a sport is also a heritage activity, with the history of the sport in Yosemite having a heritage of its own. This work is important not just to academia, but also to the larger population of people spending their time and working in the Valley. Many of my participants have felt that their relation to and experience in the Valley was consistently overlooked, and showed great interest in the work I was doing. I believe that this thesis will give the climbing community, the park staff, and other stakeholder groups a greater idea of the various types of connection to be had in this place.

Climbers are still a minority amongst the visitors to Yosemite National Park. By speaking with them, collecting their stories, and documenting their experiences, it will help to validate the experience of climbers in National Parks such as Yosemite. The research in general has the potential to elicit a more engaged dialogue between the National Parks Service and climbers around varied uses of space, especially between the climbing and

Indigenous communities in the park as Wahhoga Village continues to be built next to Camp 4. My contribution, via this paper, is to "heritage-ize" climbing in my thesis and show its importance.

Yosemite has been designated as a World Heritage Site since 1984, yet many people I had spoken with were not aware of this fact. Across the world, obtaining a spot on the World Heritage List is a point of pride and draws both attention and tourism to a site. Yosemite, and the National Parks System as a whole, do not seem to advertise this achievement much, if at all. I believe there are a variety of reasons why this is the case, and that with a more collaborative management system Yosemite could become something even greater than it is. With its awe-inspiring waterfalls, monolithic granite cliffs, peaceful meadows, and some of the largest trees on earth, it is no wonder that it was chosen for preservation and protection.

Despite some academic research having been done on recreation within Yosemite National Park, very little has been done on climbing within that space and why climbers continue to be drawn to it. On the National Park Service website, Yosemite is described as follows:

> At first glance, Yosemite's natural wonders are easy to observe. Sights around the park are iconic in the human experience of national parks. Beyond the rocks, plants, and animals, is a story about people in Yosemite written on that very same landscape. It tells a story of different cultures (sometimes working together, sometimes in violent clashes) creating the place we call Yosemite National Park and defining how we experience it. Yosemite's rich human history tells a story of conflict, dreams, diversity, hardships, adventures, and preservation of one of the first national parks. (National Parks Service 2021)

While a relatively accurate summary, the significance of this space is much more than a single paragraph can encapsulate. Yosemite National Park, and especially Yosemite Valley, have become representative of what connecting to the outdoors may look like (Ness 2011:72). Climbers from around the world converge here to glimpse the famous rock monoliths Half Dome and El Capitan, and the towering Bridalveil Falls. The drive to be a part of the Yosemite legacy is especially true for climbers worldwide, who feel an almost religious pull to "tick[6]" off some of the climbing Yosemite is known for. The history of climbing as a sport, especially within North America, is deeply rooted within Yosemite Valley.

Though research has been done on Yosemite National Park in relation to art (Ansel Adams more specifically), tourism, and the displacement of the Indigenous population, not as much has been done on sport practice within the park. Similar work on climbing has been done elsewhere, such as Devil's Tower in Wyoming being a contentious site between the climbing and Indigenous communities, but not in Yosemite and with climbing, which is surprising considering the identity of climbing that is tied to this place.

Chapter Summaries

As my thesis covers the experiences of the contemporary climbing community, I wanted to begin by providing some of the historical context in which the climbing community flourished in the Valley. In Chapter Two, Background, I provide a brief historical contextualization of climbing in the United States, focusing on the development

[6] Climbers often mark important or hard to see holds with chalk, resulting in what we call a 'tick' mark.

of the sport in Yosemite National Park and its overall importance. I discuss how the landscape here forced the development of new climbing gear, which in turn drew more climbers to the Valley. I highlight the major figures in climbing history that did, and continue to (if only in spirit), dominate the genre of outdoor climbing and the Valley itself. The chapter concludes with the contemporary experience of climbing in the Valley, particularly during my fieldwork there in late 2021.

In the following, Chapter Three, Theoretical Framework, I discuss the relevant anthropological and social science research on cultural landscapes, as well as supplemental research on sport and pilgrimage. This chapter is organized into three sections. The first establishes my research within the bounds of placemaking and ties to landscape. The second discusses how the anthropology of sport plays a role within my research. The third defines pilgrimage and its place within the potential of Yosemite being classified as a secular pilgrimage destination. While this was a larger focus of my initial research, as I explain in the final chapter, it became less relevant throughout my fieldwork.

Chapter Four, Project Design, provides the overall trajectory of my research, which was based in the method of participant observation, and so was primarily guided by those whom I had the opportunity to interview and converse with while in the field. It is divided into 5 sections. The first outlines the reasoning behind my site selection and study population. The second section is a more in-depth view of the research questions guiding my fieldwork, and what they implied for my overall research. The third section is an overview of my research methods and strategy while in the field, including the use of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, autoethnography, and a published

survey. Lastly, I go over ethical considerations while engaging in this type of human-based research.

In Chapter Five, "Findings, Analysis and Discussion," I present the findings I have made, and put them in conversation with the interview and survey data I gathered. It covers the interviews I conducted through detailed descriptions of my main participants and their experiences with climbing and participating in the sport within the park. It also incorporates the survey data, which received 91 total responses recorded over a 6-month timeframe, with the participants covering a range of ages, genders, ethnic backgrounds, and climbing ability. Within the data I discuss connecting themes regarding this actively managed heritage site, as well as overarching themes that came out of my fieldwork and survey responses. I analyze, explore, and identify the importance of the data I gathered, then evaluate and interpret that information. I tie this back to my earlier stated research questions, and how my data both supported and contrasted with my intended research.

The concluding chapter, Six, remarks on the main takeaways from my findings, limitations of this study, reflections on the research experience, and the overall implications of my research. I broadly cover how COVID-19 affected my research process, as well as the limitations of going into the field during a time in which climbers interact and stay in the park in different ways than they did in the past. The research emphasizes the importance of recognizing the cultural and personal dimensions of climbing experiences in Yosemite and provides insight into the broader context of rock climbing and its relationship with the natural environment. Finally, I discuss the social dynamics within the Yosemite climbing

community and how climbers validate and reinvent their identities through shared practices, rituals, and narratives.

Chapter Two: Background on Yosemite National Park

This chapter provides a historical background that provides context for this thesis. First, I provide a history of the area Yosemite encompasses, as well as the Indigenous displacement that occurred during its inception, and its development into what is now Yosemite National Park. I then include some of the major figures and sites that make Yosemite so iconic to so many climbers. Lastly, I look at previous academic research done on climbing in Yosemite. While climbing has only taken root in Yosemite within the last 40-50 years in earnest, there are early records of many individuals who took up the challenge of ascending the granite monoliths of the Valley. With famous climbing sites such as Camp 4 listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and the overlap of Yosemite being a World Heritage Site, it is unique among most of the National Parks in the United States. With complex relationships amongst the various stakeholders in the park, its history is as important as the present-day usage of the space. The heritage of Yosemite's landscape is a troubled and complicated story, which I hope to unravel at least partially through this chapter.

Indigenous Dispossession and the Birth of "Yosemite"

The history of Yosemite National Park is, as with most protected places, a long and complex one. The park's inception and early history present an opportunity to look more deeply at American conceptions of 'wilderness' and the forming of connections to it.

Although Yellowstone National Park was created first in 1872, Yosemite is considered the 'birthplace of the national park movement,' and lives in the imagination of people worldwide as a pristine natural landscape in which they can escape contemporary society. White settlers began interacting in earnest with what is now Yosemite and its surrounding wilderness in the early 19th century. In the haze that was the American Gold Rush, thousands of potential prospectors invaded the central Sierra Nevada Mountain range, home to Ahwahnee (the native name for Yosemite) and the Ahwahneechee (the various tribes that inhabited the valley and surrounding areas). The "discovery" of Yosemite Valley, the renowned heart of the national park, took place in 1851 during a military campaign to subdue and relocate the native presence in the Sierra Nevada (Spence 1996). By the 1860s, settlers had set up mining operations and outposts throughout and surrounding the park.

Like much of America's history, Yosemite's landscape is fraught with tension between the Indigenous peoples who once singularly inhabited the Sierra Nevada Foothills and the white settlers who wanted to use the park for resources and recreation. Since the first published descriptions in 1833 to the "discovery" of the Valley in 1851 by non-native people, many have been drawn by the magnitude and beauty of the 'pristine' wilderness that is Yosemite. While the National Park Service has finally begun to acknowledge the past Indigenous history in Yosemite, it continually fails at recognizing the contemporary living and breathing Native communities that live nearby and their sustained presence on the landscape of the Valley. This includes their overlapping identities of being Indigenous and rangers, climbers, and other overlapping stakeholder identities. The Ahwahneechee are still petitioning to become a federally recognized tribe but have made little progress in their

40-year battle. Though not a major point of this thesis, I partially investigate the history and processes that have created this supposed disappearance and subsequent policies that have displaced the Native Americans out of Yosemite, as well as where the tribes stand now. This is an important context for the comprehensive view of this troubled landscape.

The displacement and forced removal through violence of the Indigenous groups that once occupied what is known as Yosemite Valley was a long and slow process. The way in which this eviction was carried out is unique to the parks system, though it is still a dark history. Unlike many protected landscapes that are now recognized as national parks, the Indigenous ties to the Valley were kept for a relatively long period. As I will describe below, many of the communities living in the Valley were incorporated into the park, first as performers, then as employees. While many families were allowed to continue living in the park while they held these positions, unlike any other national park, they were eventually displaced, and their land was taken by the government (Spence 1996).

Tourism played a large role in the continuous removal of the Indigenous people of Yosemite, as well as the conservation of the park for tourist purposes. The first tourists could be said to have entered the park in 1855, when San Francisco entrepreneur James Mason Hutchings and a few friends entered the Valley and began almost immediately to write about its majesty and splendor. Hutchings' lyrical description of the place, along with Charles Leander Weed's photographs and Thomas Ayres' sketches, "turned Yosemite Valley into a tourist magnet and a lure for new settlers" (Dowie 2009:4). It also sparked the first mass migration of white settlers into the Valley. They subsequently set up hotels, businesses, and settled livestock on the land, drawn by the promise of an untouched wilderness to make a claim to. Landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, designer of

Central Park in New York City and arguably one of the earliest proponents for the park's development, "specifically acknowledg[ed] the role that art and photography played in the park's establishment" (Diamant 2014:11). As more tourists arrived, more space was needed to accommodate their pursuits. As Wolfley states, "The federal policy of reducing the landholding of Indian tribes in the West coincides with the federal movement to preserve large areas of land for the national good" (Wolfley 2016:59). Because Yosemite was seen as a "pristine, untouched wilderness," conservation efforts to erase the presence of human intervention on the landscape and maintain a contrived sort of serene beauty were undertaken with fervor. The earliest proponents of the park decided it needed to be saved (Dowie 2009).

Olmsted took a keen interest in Yosemite, and subsequently petitioned Senator John Conness of California to introduce a federal bill to protect the area. The "Conness Bill," as it came to be known, passed both houses with ease. On June 30, 1864, President Abraham Lincoln signed into law the act which created 'The Yosemite Grant,' a public trust ceded to California as a park "for resort and recreation...to be left inalienable for all time" (Dowie 2009:5; Diamant 2014:10). It was the first time in U.S. history that land was set aside for public use, recreation and preservation, and the act is seen by many as the birth of the modern national parks system. Though enacted within the turbulent years of the Civil War, Olmsted believed "what was at stake was...also the fundamental responsibility of government for the advancement, well-being, and happiness of all of its citizens" (Diamant 2014:14). Olmstead later became the first chair of the California Yosemite Park Commission. Yosemite embodied Olmstead's landscape ideals, being "established by government of great public grounds for the free enjoyment of the people – a prescription

for our state and national parks systems" (Diamant 2014:13). The people he mentioned, however, did not include the Indigenous residents of the Valley.

The well-known 'Godfather of Conservation,' John Muir, arrived in California in 1868. While many consider him to be the voice of the national parks, and especially Yosemite, he is known to have been quite hostile to the Indigenous peoples there. "The Ahwahnechees he found to be particularly ugly, some of them altogether hideous...having no place in the landscape" (Dowie 2009:6). Muir firmly believed the Indians had to leave Yosemite to preserve its idyllic landscape. In his writings, Muir insisted that Yosemite Valley, before the arrival of Euro-American settlers, had been "unoccupied virgin wilderness" (Dowie 2009:8). Muir's denial of the Indigenous peoples' heritage nurtured a historical fiction that informed federal policy for years to come. According to Wolfley, this "idyllic 'uninhabited wilderness' preserve for recreationists, vacationing tourists and visitors, however, left no room for native peoples, and accordingly, they were forcibly removed..." (Wolfley 2016:56). After spending years exploring and working in Yosemite, the famed traveler and naturalist lobbied for additional protections for Yosemite and played an instrumental role in its designation as the third National Park, in 1890. In 1892 John Muir founded the Sierra Club, recruiting 181 members who almost immediately began to pressure the government to form Yosemite National Park. With his role as its president until the end of his life, Muir led movements to preserve areas in what is now the park and in the surrounding wilderness. In 1903 Muir toured then-president Theodore Roosevelt around the park and later lobbied successfully for the Yosemite Grant to be turned back over for federal protection. In 1906, President Roosevelt did just that, and signed the document to expand the protections of Yosemite a National Park.

In 1916, the National Park Service (NPS) was established with the purpose "to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations" (Wolfley 2016:60). That same year, Yosemite hosted its first Indian Field Days (Cothran 2010; Ladino 2012:19). "The Indian Field Days were initiated as part of a park strategy to promote tourism in Yosemite during the late summer season when visitation typically dwindled" (Ladino 2012:21). Though many of the Native Americans were put on display for the benefit of the tourists, they were sometimes able to exploit this new "economy of authenticity" (Cothran 2010:195; Ladino 2012:21) to earn money for themselves. Unfortunately, this potential monetary gain came at the expense of expressing a false authenticity that was implemented by the NPS and tourists alike. Enacting this form of "authentic" behavior created both opportunities and restrictions for those who chose to navigate their roles (Cothran 2010). "Only through their confirmation of popular white conceptions of how Indians were supposed to look and behave" (Spence 1996:117; Ladino 2012:21) were they able to both stay in the park and make a potential living.

By employing Yosemite Indians to work these events, the National Park Service hoped to continue the process of "converting" the Indigenous participants into productive working United States citizens, a small step toward assimilation. 1929 was the last year the Indian Field Days were held however, as the remaining Indigenous residents left in the Valley began to recognize the control the NPS held over them and their culture, and no longer supported the project. As Boyd Cothran notes in *Working the Indian Field Days*,

"The Yosemite Indian Field Days were a complex moment in the history of American Indians and their relationship with the National Park Service" (2010:217).

For decades after, as the park became the domain of tourists, the only way Indigenous people could continue to live in Yosemite Valley was through employment with the National Park, sometimes as rangers but more often as hospitality workers or "performers of heritage" (Spence 1996). Like the Aboriginal reserve Uluru in Australia, as it was turned into a park and World Heritage Site, the Indigenous groups were slowly pushed out and barred from "park property" as tourism increased (IWGIA 2013). They were moved from their traditional homes and placed into park housing, often being shuffled around more than once. As a case in point, Alexander notes that "In the 1930s, more development in Yosemite prompted park officials to relocate the longtime residents back to the site of their ancestral village Wahhoga, where some of today's tribal members have their earliest memories" (2018). They were assigned to pre-constructed cabins, which gave the Park Service more control over the Indigenous population within the Valley, as they only assigned them to those who had valid year-long work there.

In the subsequent decades, fewer employment opportunities, along with continuing restrictions on Indian behavior in the park, pushed the remaining Indigenous population to the neighboring towns outside of Yosemite. In 1969, the last Native American Village was razed by park staff and the few inhabitants left were forced to find more isolated housing or move out of the park. By 1997 Jay Johnson, a descendent of the Ahwahneechee, became the "lone holdout -- the last Ahwahneechee to have spent a lifetime in the ancestral home" (Diringer 1997). With no other housing options in the park, later that year after retiring from his position in the National Park Service, Johnson and his wife moved to Mariposa,

where many other Yosemite 'Indians' primarily settled (Diringer 1997), meaning the last of the Indigenous people from Yosemite had been removed from the park.

Wahhoga Village

With National Park Service policy changing in the last few years, these Indigenous communities are beginning to gain ground, though far more needs to be done. Today, there are policies in place which require the NPS to collaborate with any tribal community associated with the park area, and to consult with Native tribes on projects that may affect their ancestral lands (nps.gov). Unfortunately, enacting these policies is rarely so simple, and often does not benefit the communities for which they are intended. As Jeannette Wolfley points out in *Reclaiming a Presence in Ancestral Lands*, "there is no prioritization of tribal interests commensurate with the trust obligations, rather the tribal interests will be weighed against the NPS mission and other majority interests" (2016:67). Decades of forced displacement and abuse have not erased the Indigenous presence in Yosemite, however. "The Park Service today officially recognizes seven tribes as having traditional ties to Yosemite" (George 2017). The Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation, comprised of many of the descendants from Yosemite and nearby Mariposa, CA, are currently in the process of rebuilding a center for their people on the floor of Yosemite Valley, near historic Camp 4.

FIGURE 2: REBUILDING OF WAHHOGA VILLAGE. PHOTOGRAPHED BY VANESSA TAYLOR, 11/22/2021.

The rebuilding of Wahhoga Village is a project that dates to 1977, when Les James and Jay Johnson, members of the American Indian Council of Mariposa County/Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation and now-retired Park Service employees, asked for their village back (George 2017). In a newspaper interview with Jay Johnson in 1997, the council was still holding out for government lawyers to sign an agreement with the Park Service establishing some form of an Indian-run Cultural Center in the park (Diringer1997). In 2009, they got official approval from the park service to begin building the new village, but safety concerns and building code enforcement halted the process. According to a newspaper article published in 2018, the council was still waiting to get the go-ahead to begin the building process in earnest (Alexander 2018). “They plan to build a seven-acre

enclave with bark homes, acorn granaries, a sweat lodge, and other traditional dwellings. While the tribal members won't live at the property, they will congregate, worship and socialize here, in the heart of a national park" (Alexander 2018). As of 2021, construction had already begun on a roundhouse that marks the center of the new village, as well as planning a large community center nearby. Unfortunately, things had been put on hold once again. The roundhouse will "essentially be a living museum," while the community center will showcase the actual history of the Indigenous people to the public (Alexander 2018). There will be, however, areas that are primarily for the use of the Indigenous descendants of the Valley and off-limits to park visitors. "This is really unique for a park," said Scott Carpenter, the park's cultural resources program manager, who has been helping the group push ahead with the project. "We can't give all of Yosemite back to the tribes… but at least they can get some recognition of their story and continuity of their culture" (Alexander 2018).

FIGURE 3: WAHHOGA SIGN. PHOTOGRAPHED BY VANESSA TAYLOR, 11/22/2021.

Yosemite as a World Heritage Site

Designated as a World Heritage Site (WHS) in 1984 – almost 100 years after it became a National Park – Yosemite was inscribed in large part due to the massive formations made by glacial erosion over thousands of years. According to UNESCO, "These geologic features provide a scenic backdrop for mountain meadows and giant sequoia groves, resulting in a diverse landscape of exceptional natural and scenic beauty." Yosemite's Outstanding Universal Value is defined under:

> Criterion (vii): Yosemite has exceptional natural beauty, including five of the world's highest waterfalls, a combination of granite domes and walls, deeply incised valleys, three groves of giant sequoia, numerous alpine meadows, lakes and a diversity of life zones.

> Criterion (viii): Glacial action combined with the granitic bedrock has produced unique and pronounced landform features including distinctive polished dome structures, as well as hanging valleys, tarns, moraines and U-shaped valleys. Granitic landforms such as Half Dome and the vertical walls of El Capitan are classic distinctive reflections of geologic history. No other area portrays the effects of glaciation on underlying granitic domes as well as Yosemite does. (UNESCO)

Though it carries both National Park and World Heritage statuses, its management is left primarily to the National Park Service. "Yosemite National Park is managed under the authority of the Organic Act of August 25, 1916, which established the United States National Park Service. In addition, the park has specific enabling legislation which provides broad congressional direction regarding the primary purposes of the park. Numerous other federal laws bring additional layers of protection to the park and its resources. Day-to-day management is directed by the Park Superintendent" (UNESCO). According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Yosemite's overall protection and management is "mostly effective." Though having a site on the World Heritage List generally affords admittance to an international stage of recognition and provides diplomatic currency (Meskell 2018), Yosemite does not leverage its status as a WHS. On the National Parks Service website (nps.gov), there is very little mention of its listing as a WHS, and finding even that information is not simple. There are multiple links one must click through, to land on a page with only a few paragraphs of information. The United States' back and forth involvement in UNESCO possibly plays a large role in UNESCO's overall lack of involvement in the management of the site.

In its simplified designation, Yosemite is ignoring the other ecological and cultural features that make the park distinct and worthy of other protections. Tree species such as the giant sequoia are unique to the park, as they "...can only grow along a narrow, 260-mile

strip on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada mountains, between 5,000 and 7,000 feet" (nps.gov). Subject to the effects of climate change, and mostly to the recent wildfires that have spread throughout California over the last decade (due in part because of poor and non-native fire management practices), they are now protected. According to the National Parks Service website:

> Yosemite National Park supports more than 400 species of vertebrates including fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals … Despite the richness of high-quality habitats in Yosemite, approximately 40 species have a special status under California endangered species legislation. Three species—grizzly bear, California red-legged frog, and foothill yellow-legged frog—are believed to be extirpated in the park within recent history. Serious threats to Yosemite's wildlife and the ecosystems they occupy include loss of a natural fire regime, non-native species, air pollution, habitat fragmentation, and climate change.

These ecological features are in need of additional assistance, something that potentially UNESCO can offer. While the National Parks Service has created policies to manage wilderness areas, they are overly taxed, especially regarding the conservation management and tourism regulations of the Valley.

Unfortunately, the overemphasis on the scenic and natural features of Yosemite National Park obscures its Indigenous history, which further negates their contemporary connection to the valley and its surrounding wilderness. As many as seven affiliated tribes claim the park as their ancestral homeland and can trace active use to it over time. Yet based on the museum and other interpretive materials throughout the park, these groups are spoken of as if they are gone, only a piece of the distant past. There is an abundance of materials, both archaeological and firsthand accounts, primarily stored in the Visitor Center Museum, that show otherwise. According to the National Parks Service website, there are over 1500 archaeological sites within Yosemite National Park. Some of these sites are as

recent as the 1960s, in part due to "Only Yosemite National Park [having] ever included a native community within its boundaries" (Spence 1996). UNESCO recognizes that "Yosemite is the sacred ancestral homelands of several traditionally associated American Indian tribes and groups. The landscape reflects generations of American Indian land management, attesting to their deep ecological, cultural, and spiritual ties to the area. Traditional cultural practices continue today and the ceremonies, and spiritual and traditional practices are critically important in retaining the sacred nature of Yosemite and its native culture." The National Parks Website also acknowledges that Yosemite contains numerous cultural resources.

With these protections in place, an increase in promotional material, and the development of accessibility to the park, tourism has increased dramatically over the past decades. This has had both positive and negative connotations and effects. While tourism has brought additional funding into the park, which aids in its conservation, the impact of mass tourism on its ecological integrity is noticeable. According to the IUCN, congestion, overcrowding, and over-development, mostly confined to Yosemite Valley (which makes up around 6% of the World Heritage Site) is the park's biggest threat. With plentiful concessionaires, tours buses, bike rentals, hotels, and activities, development in the Valley has gone the way of the 'Disneyfication' influence of the heritage industry (Harrison 2013). At the same time, visitors want 'authentic' engagement – the ability to experience seclusion and tranquility. This is the same struggle between preservationists and development interests that plagued the management of Yosemite as far back as the 1880s.

While holding all these various statuses and complex histories, the National Park Service has developed a special policy to address wilderness management and stewardship,

known as Director's Order 41. This was signed into the Yosemite Valley charter in 2013, with Section 7.2 specifically addressing climbing within the context of wilderness use management: "The NPS recognizes that climbing is a legitimate and appropriate use of wilderness. However, any climbing use or related activity must be restricted or prohibited when its occurrence, continuation, or expansion would result in unacceptable impacts to wilderness resources or character or interfere significantly with the experience of other park visitors." (https://www.nps.gov/) In the next section, I show why climbing is such an important heritage activity that is tied to this landscape, and why the above troubled history plays such a large a role in the continued role of climbing in Yosemite Valley.

History of Recreational Climbing

I cannot describe the importance of climbing in Yosemite without giving a brief historical background of the sport itself, and explaining what it has become. Climbing today can be divided into four main categories: mountain climbing, ice climbing, bouldering, and "traditional" rock climbing, with the goal of each to be to reach the summit or endpoint of a route in the least number of attempts possible. The "modern" sport of rock climbing can trace its roots back to late-19th century Europe, though as with most sports, the exact origins are unclear. It developed from the sport of mountain climbing as an occasional necessity to climb the Eastern Alps and other large ranges. The creation of the tools necessary for rock climbing were developed in the early 20th century by German and Italian climbers, including new rope handling techniques, pitons, and carabiners.

FIGURE 4: "KLETTERSCHLUSS" (CLIMBING FINISH) TECHNIQUES. LEFT: TITA PIAZ BY GUIDO REY, 1914. RIGHT: ANWENDUNG DES SEILES, 1907. FROM HTTPS://WWW.BIGWALLGEAR.COM/P/CLIMBING-TOOLS-AND-TECHNIQUES1908

FIGURE 5: LEFT: TURNER WITH ROPE SLING AND CARABINER. 1892. CENTER: OTTO LUGENHEIM TIES HIMSELF TO THE RING ON THE SCHRAMMTORWÄCHTER, 1908/ RIGHT: RUDOLF KADEN AT THE RING ON SCHRAMMTORWÄCHTER, 1934. FROM: HTTPS://WWW.BIGWALLGEAR.COM/P/FIRST-CARABINER

FIGURE 6: 1914 CARABINERS USED IN THE SÄCHSISCHEN SCHWEIZ. FROM HTTPS://WWW.BIGWALLGEAR.COM/P/FIRST-CARABINERS-FOR-CLIMBING-SUMMARY

Development of Climbing in Yosemite

It was not until the 1950s when climbing began in earnest as a sport in Yosemite Valley, though innovations in climbing had been taking place over the past few decades as well. The "Golden Age" of climbing (Stevenson 2016:105), as it is sometimes referred to, took place on the monumental walls of Yosemite, Half Dome, and El Capitan during the 1950s and 1960s. Ascending these sheer rock faces was a challenge undertaken by only the most talented and ambitious climbers. The rivalry between two of the godfathers of climbing in the Valley, Royal Robbins and Warren Harding, set the ascent of these two walls in motion. Within Harding and Robbins' fight for big wall supremacy, many other climbers were drawn to the Valley to try to climb these walls quicker, and with better gear.

In the 1960s, climbers had claimed Camp 4 (officially Sunnyside Walk-In Campground) as their home base, often staying for weeks at a time. By the 1970s, mass crowds of young enthusiasts crowded into the Valley and ushered in the age of "dirtbag[7]" climbing. Groups of young people would make their temporary homes in the Camp 4 and live as minimally and cost-efficiently as they could, dumpster-diving, stealing food from leftover patron's plates at the Yosemite Lodge, and sleeping in caves. Rangers and climbers had a contentious relationship through this period as these climbers were free-spirited and felt the authority of the Park System had no right to interfere with their form of engagement in climbing.

The sport of climbing has grown exponentially just in the past two decades with the advent of indoor rock-climbing facilities, and young climbers travel to the Valley to test themselves on the seminal routes on the walls of Yosemite. Strong climbers have achieved rockstar status within the climbing community, and with the release of films such as *Free Solo*, which was the first film of its kind to win an Oscar, climbers have been elevated to the status of celebrity. With climbing becoming such a recognized sport worldwide, earning a spot in what would have been the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo (postponed to 2021 due to COVID-19) for the first time, climbers are still returning to Yosemite to challenge themselves. Though these changes are rapid and affect climbing culture greatly, the overall climbing community is still considered to be deeply ingrained in a "counterculture" lifestyle. Regardless of how the sport has advanced, and the routes being

[7] A person who dedicates their entire existence to the pursuit of climbing, making ends meet using creative means. A dirtbag will get their food out of a dumpster, clothes from a thrift store, and live in a tent or vehicle to save money.

put up all over the world, “for the rock climber...Yosemite remains an unparalleled paradise” (Stevenson 2016:100).

Major Figures – The Legend of the Stonemasters

I began my research with the idea that many climbers would feel some sort of ownership over the Valley of Yosemite and stake some sort of “claim” on the spaces they inhabit within the park. As it turns out, many of them do not associate themselves with the valley at all. I believe this stems in part from the legend of the early Yosemite climbers, and the heritage they left behind. Climbing would not be what it is today without the major figures that pushed the limits of the sport. In their time they were seen as visionaries by some, and as ‘dirtbags’ by others. Though these limit-pushers weren’t in the same upper echelons as Olympic athletes, or making money like some professional athletes, they became “rockstars” in their own right. Writer Luke Zaleski sums it up in the following passage:

> They weren’t the first men to climb mountains. They were just the first to make it look this damn cool. They invented their own bare-bone, white-knuckled style of climbing, yes—taking down unprecedented multi-day ascents, and honing the art of free-soloing, climbing alone without any ropes. They also patented a lifestyle built around the sport and the spirit of scaling steep cliffs, sheer rock faces, and impossibly pitched verticals. All under the influence of the California sun, the psychedelic sounds of the 1970s (especially Jimi Hendrix), and copious amounts of cheap, green reefer. They were known as the Stonemasters, and they would last roughly a decade, from 1970 to 1980, blasting rock ‘n’ roll music, partying around campfires (“there was always a crazy amount of girls around”), and making insane first ascents through Yosemite National Park (and later the world). By decade’s end, the world would change and catch-up, their influence would endure through a many billion-dollar adventure sports industry, but that magic time in the forest couldn’t last forever. But “it was Woodstock forever” for awhile and everyone involved in the scene knew it.

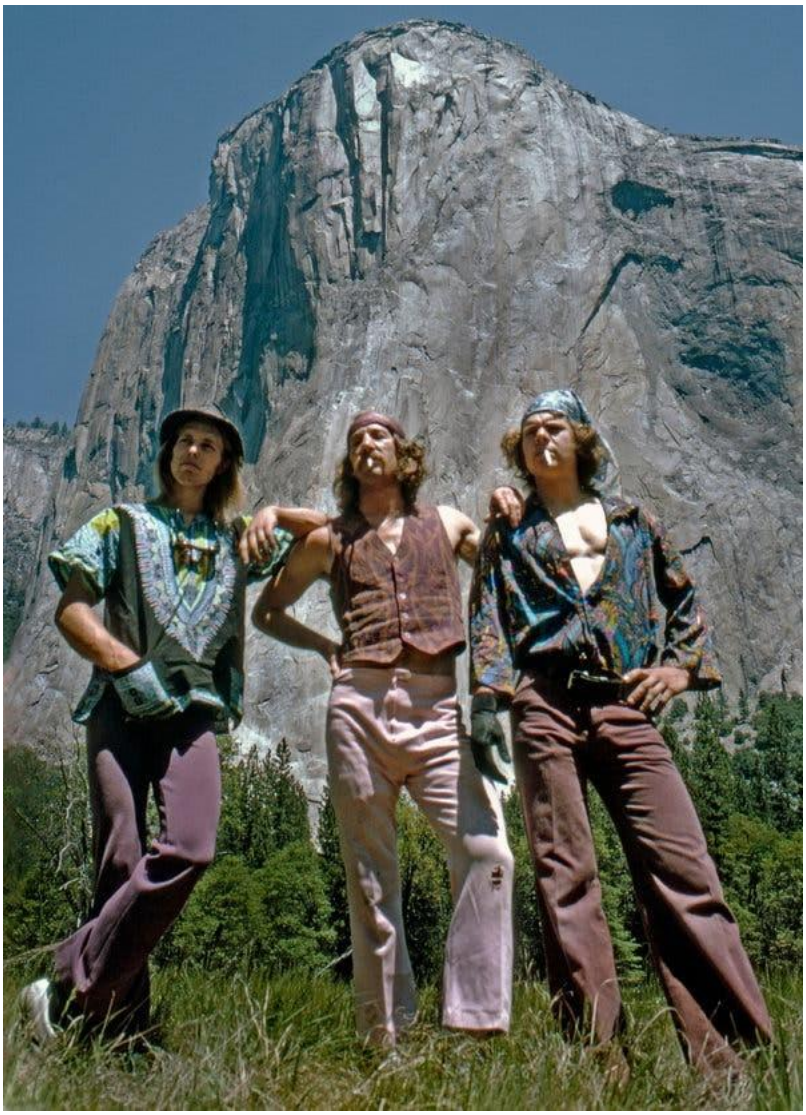

FIGURE 7: FROM LEFT, BILLY WESTBAY, JIM BRIDWELL AND JOHN LONG IN FRONT OF EL CAPITAN IN YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK IN 1975. PHOTO CREDIT...THE JIM BRIDWELL COLLECTION

The Stonemasters was their official title, but they were in fact a group of teenagers who inhabited the Valley during the 70s and grew through early adulthood in tents in Camp 4 and ascending any wall in the Valley that they could. They were made up of a core group of men and women who formed a tight bond and pushed one another's limits, including Ron Kauk, John Long, John Bachar, Lynn Hill, famed leader Jim Bridwell, and a few others. Climber Lynn Hill, in one of her essays of the time, notes "We were bonded by our

desire to master every form of rock climbing from around the boulders of Camp 4, to the classic Valley free routes, to the big wall routes on El Capitan" (Hill n.d.). They stayed true to the times, rebelling against the trappings of materialism, commercialism, and reliance on the artificial constructs of modern society in the 1970s. Climbing gave this group a sense of freedom and adventure in a majestic landscape with no one to answer to but themselves (and occasionally park rangers).

As the decade went on and people recognized the classic style and performance of the Stonemasters, more people wanted to emulate them. Dale Bard, on reflecting on the time for a GQ interview, said of climbing:

> Climbing changed and it became a sport. It lost its passion and its lifestyle. We became well-known, and this Stonemaster thing did catch on a little bit. And everybody wanted to be that romantic Stonemaster. And so they thought it was vogue, so to speak, to live in the dirt and be a bum, and they had no concept that we were doing this just because we loved climbing.

Toward the end of the decade, many of the Stonemasters were becoming sponsored athletes, and competed in climbing competitions around the world. Their exploits were broadcast on television and their faces were put on posters. Because these early athletes in Yosemite had climbed some of the hardest rock faces in the Valley and created gear specifically for these ascents that needed little alteration, they are seen as pioneers of the sport that can't be easily matched. They became legends in their own right, and their history constitutes the heritage of climbing that I am investigating in this thesis.

Chapter Summary

The background chapter of this thesis aimed to establish the contextual framework and historical foundation necessary for understanding the significance of Yosemite Valley

as a significant climbing destination. This chapter not only engages with the rich history and cultural significance that have shaped the climbing landscape in Yosemite Valley but also incorporates the important aspect of Indigenous displacement and the site's status as a World Heritage Site. It began by exploring the historical and cultural context of Yosemite Valley, emphasizing its importance to the Ahwahneechee people and their displacement from the area. It acknowledged the complex and painful history of Indigenous displacement and its impact on the Ahwahneechee community, their cultural practices, and their connection to the land. Next, the chapter explained the process of Yosemite Valley becoming part of Yosemite National Park, which marked the first instance of federal protection for a natural area in the United States. It examined the key milestones and influential figures involved in the establishment of Yosemite National Park. This includes the efforts of early conservationists and visionaries like John Muir and the role they played in advocating for the protection of Yosemite Valley's natural wonders. Continuing with the discussion of Yosemite's significance, the chapter explained the natural features and geological composition that contribute to its World Heritage status. It highlighted the awe-inspiring granite formations, towering cliffs, pristine waterfalls, and diverse ecosystems that make Yosemite Valley a unique and irreplaceable natural landscape.

Building upon the historical and cultural context, the chapter provided a comprehensive overview of the origins of rock climbing in general, highlighting its evolution from a niche recreational activity to a globally recognized sport. The chapter then examined the pioneering climbers who played a pivotal role in shaping Yosemite Valley's reputation as a climbing destination. It profiled notable climbers, their groundbreaking ascents, and their impact on the development of climbing techniques and ethics within the

valley. Lastly, the chapter discussed the modern era of climbing in Yosemite Valley, including the influence of technology, the evolution of climbing ethics, and the challenges associated with balancing conservation efforts and the increasing popularity of climbing. As one of the creators of the guidebook sums up:

> The Valley has a complicated past, full of inspiration and beauty in addition to genocide and greed. Being a tourist—and this includes boulderers—means adding yourself to the story of Yosemite. It is important to understand the history and context of the Valley so that you can make an informed contribution of your own. Native Californians, the National Park Service, the concessionaire, millions of yearly visitors, and countless plants and animals make up the living history of Yosemite. Stay updated on the happenings in the Valley, be mindful of your impact, and add your voice. Preserve the grandeur of the world's most awe-inspiring places. (Joslin 43)

By incorporating the aspect of Indigenous displacement and the process of becoming a national park, the background chapter acknowledges and highlights the complex history of Yosemite Valley, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the social, cultural, and environmental dynamics that have shaped it into a significant climbing destination. Overall, the chapter establishes a comprehensive foundation by intertwining the historical, cultural, and natural aspects of Yosemite Valley. This sets the stage for the ethnographic description that follows, which explores the experiences, practices, and social dynamics of climbers within this historically significant and geologically captivating climbing destination. The following chapter focuses on the theoretical framework that supports my research, as well as covering the relevant literature. This will help inform the methodology section that follows.

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework

This chapter establishes a theoretical framework that not only encompasses the multifaceted nature of placemaking, but also considers the intricate connections between landscape, the anthropology of sport, and the concept of secular pilgrimage within the context of Yosemite Valley. Building upon the contributions of scholars like Basso, Ness, Smith, Harrison, Donnelly and Young, and Badone and Roseman, I utilize these authors to serve as a microcosm through which to unravel the intricate cultural, social, and individual factors that shape climbers' experiences and identities in this significant landscape.

Looking at climbing in Yosemite is important to determine if it does indeed have a legacy of heritage practice. I am going to, in essence, 'heritage-ize' climbing for the purpose of this thesis. I am using Laurajane Smith's definition of heritage, laid out in her 2006 book *Uses of Heritag*e, and defined as "... a set of cultural practices and a body of knowledge which represent the ways in which people in the present engage with the past." This definition encapsulates the idea that heritage is not just about preserving the past but also about how people in the present interact with, interpret, and use the past for various purposes, including identity formation, education, and cultural expression. Smith's work investigates the complexities of heritage and its multifaceted roles in contemporary society.

In recent years, anthropological interest has grown in the way we make meaning and how those understandings can be tied to landscapes. The connection between

sport practice and an anthropological perspective is also a growing field of interest. These new sources of inquiry are important to the study of climbing in Yosemite Valley and climbing as a heritage activity. As an actively managed heritage site, I considered the anthropology of religion, cultural geography, and cultural anthropology as relevant to heritage studies fields. What I noticed was an overall lack of research on the topic of spiritual ties to landscape through sport practice. My thesis subject is important in helping to fill this gap. Climbing as a sport has a strong sense of heritage, as well as the history of climbing having its own heritage as well. These are significant things to note in the study of this new topic. In the following, I will be positioning my study within other fields for context, as well as giving the background on these perspectives and how they apply to climbing in Yosemite.

Placemaking: Constructing Meaningful Spaces

Placemaking refers to the process through which individuals and communities imbue spaces with meaning and significance. It involves the active construction of a sense of place (Basso 1996) through interactions with the physical environment, cultural narratives, and personal experiences. Within Yosemite Valley, climbers engage in placemaking by forging a deep connection with the landscape and the specific features that make it an ideal climbing destination.

Keith Basso's work on Western Apache placenames provides insights into the ways in which language and naming practices shape individuals' understanding of place. Basso argues that placenames carry cultural meanings and embody the history, relationships, and spiritual significance of a particular landscape (Basso 1988). Similarly, Thomas Thornton

notes that “place names are a particularly interesting aspect of culture because they intersect three fundamental domains of cultural analysis: language, thought, and the environment” (1997:209). In Yosemite Valley, climbers encounter a rich tapestry of placenames that reflect the Indigenous and historical significance of the area. These placenames contribute to climbers' construction of a sense of place and their navigation of the cultural and natural landscapes within Yosemite Valley. I found key contributing work in this to come from Basso’s research, especially within his book *Wisdom Sits in Places* (1996). Through naming practices and ancestral ties, the Western Apache create meaning through stories and identities tied to their landscapes. This framework helped me understand how, when climbers name routes, problems, and larger areas of the Valley, it creates meaning for them and a tie to that place.

The influence of symbolic and interpretive anthropology informs Basso’s work. The title of one of his early books, *Portraits of “The Whiteman:” Linguistic Play and Cultural Symbols among the Western Apache* (1979), is an example of this theoretical orientation. Symbolic anthropologists tend to view culture as more of a mental phenomenon, and generally reject the idea that culture can be modeled in a tersely logical way. When symbolic action is then studied across cultures, it is done so using a variety of analytical tools and with interdisciplinary approaches. Basso draws on psychology, history, poetry, sociology, and even to some extent physics. One of the main concerns of symbolic anthropology is how the researcher can investigate and comprehend other peoples’ worlds of meaning. In the Geertzian version of symbolic anthropology, the concern revolves around “how symbols shape the way social actors see, feel, and think about the world” (Ortner 1984:129). To this end, meaning making is contingent on any given person at any

given time, and is an embodied practice. Basso follows in the Geertzian tradition to some extent, using language and "placenaming" as symbols to communicate knowledge amongst a group and to its future generations, and as acts of remembering. In *Wisdom Sits in Places*, Basso's prose (which you can see are influenced by the poets he draws from) speaks to the lack within anthropology of attention given to what he considers one of the "most basic dimensions of human interaction—that close companion of heart and mind, often subdued yet potentially overwhelming, that is known as sense of place" (Basso 1996:106).

In the context of placenaming, which he uses as a basis for much of his linguistic interpretation, he claimed in his 1996 book that the actual use of toponyms[1] in everyday interactions had gained very little attention from either linguists or ethnographers. He argued that "place-names are arguably among the most highly charged and richly evocative of all linguistic symbols...place-names may be used to summon forth an enormous range of mental and emotional associations—associations of time and space, of history and events, of persons and social activities, of oneself and stages in one's life" (Basso 1996: 76).

Basso's overarching sense of place and connections to historic landscape is the focus of most of Basso's later work with the Western Apache. Though not a "theory" in and of itself, this is a concept which carries a compelling amount of symbolism within it and has helped formulate an understanding of Indigenous ties to sacred geographic places. This method of placenaming carries forward into continued understandings of place-making and work in mapping Native landscapes and enforcing Native sovereignty. In the volume *Meaning in Anthropology* Basso et al.'s essays on sociolinguistic forms applied to meaning making and cultural theories is something that was new to both the field of

linguistic and cultural anthropology in the late 20th century. His ability to easily navigate the two fields, not as a linguistic anthropologist strictly but as an expert in both, has helped shape the interdisciplinary approaches taken to them today. In Wisdom Sits in Places, Basso states:

> [T]hrough a vigorous conflation of attentive subject and geographical object, places come to generate their own fields of meaning. So, too, they give rise to their own aesthetic immediacies, their shifting moods and relevancies, their character and spirit. Even in total stillness, places may seem to speak. But as Sartre makes clear, such voices as places possess should not be mistaken for their own. Animated by the thoughts and feelings of persons who attend to them, places express only what their animators enable them to say ... Human constructions par excellence, places consist in what gets made of them-in anything and everything they are taken to be-and their disembodied voices, immanent though inaudible, are merely those of people speaking silently to themselves. (108-9)

Basso's ethnographic studies of how meaning is tied to landscapes and spaces (albeit through language) is relevant to my focus on meaning-making in what can be considered sacred sites and places. Basso's approach in letting his consultants and collaborators educate him at their own pace and with understood restrictions is something I practiced in the field, as well as accepting when it was time to let a subject rest. As Basso explained in *Wisdom Sits in Places*, relationships to places can be defined and expressed in a myriad of ways and across a wide range of timeframes. The importance of a sense of place is deeply interwoven within his earlier mentioned work, both for an appreciation of the spaces themselves and how we understand ourselves through them. Basso stated it best when he said "[P]laces and their meanings are continually woven into the fabric of social life, anchoring it to features of the landscape and blanketing it with layers of significance that few can fail to appreciate...In large ways and small, [people] are forever performing

acts that reproduce and express their own sense of place—and also, inextricably, their own understandings of who and what they are" (Basso 1996:110).

Ties to landscape encompass the emotional, sensory, and embodied connections individuals develop with a particular place. These connections go beyond the cognitive and intellectual realms, involving a deep-rooted sense of belonging, attachment, and identity formation. Within the context of Yosemite Valley, climbers develop profound ties to the granite cliffs, towering waterfalls, and breathtaking vistas. These ties are shaped by the physicality of climbing, the awe-inspiring natural features, and the challenges and triumphs experienced within this unique landscape.

The most comparable work I have found is by Professor Sally Ann Ness, in part describing one climbers experience working on a specific rock-climbing problem in the park, and how it is emblematic of how climbers embed significance into place via bodily practice. Ness's work highlights the significance of embodied experiences in shaping individuals' relationships with place. She emphasizes the ways in which sensory and emotional engagements with the environment contribute to the construction of personal and collective identities. In Yosemite Valley, climbers engage their bodies, senses, and emotions in navigating the vertical terrain, feeling the texture of the rock, and witnessing the beauty of the natural surroundings. These embodied experiences deepen their ties to the landscape and contribute to their evolving identities as climbers.

Ness bases most of her research in symbolic action and cultural performance theory. She also looks at the connections between place, embodiment, and mobility, especially in Yosemite National Park. One of the questions she asked while doing ethnographic work on meaning-making in Yosemite is "what, if any, forms of significance can be registered

by such activity other than the inscription of the predetermined, ideologically saturated landscape into personal constructions of self and world?" (Ness 2011:71). She looked at climbing in a variety of her work as a place between the symbolic and the experiential. This relates strongly to my work in finding the narrative associated with meaning-making in the Valley outside of the dominant, Anglo-Saxon, National Park rhetoric and incorporates the voice of a minority stakeholder subgroup.

> Yosemite National Park - and in particular its focal Yosemite Valley landscape - affords visitors a very wide variety of possible activities by which to construct experiences of place… Over the past half century, the practice of climbing has grown to become the most spectacular expression of the contemporary relationship between nature and humankind that occurs in Yosemite National Park. (2011:72)

Ness argues that within the act of climbing, one can create distinct senses of place. One is embodied, characterized by the inward movements of conventional forms of significance and represented through the physical experience of a climb's individual participant. Another is illustrated in a more outward expression of significance, conceived tangibly, in individualistic, unintended, spontaneous movement processes.

Ness describes the climbing community as a 'translocal ethnoscape,' (2011) involving a sense of identity split between or blended from multiple locations, especially in multiple ethnic regions. The ethnoscape refers to human migration, or the flow of people across boundaries, which can be individual or in groups. She explains that:

> The case of rock climbing in Yosemite National Park illustrates the inscription and the processual emergence of symbolism into and out of bodily experience. Climbers internalize technical disciplines preconceived by translocal- in some respects, market-driven- multinational interests and emplace them into the Yosemite landscape while simultaneously originating significance via bodily encounters that are unmediated by conventional symbolic processes. (71)

By drawing on her own experiences, Ness attempts to demonstrate how Yosemite performs so that – through the logic of the replicability of embodied performative relations – she and millions of other visitors end by feeling, thinking, and acting as though the park belongs individually and personally to them and they to it. She argues in her article *Bouldering in Yosemite: Emergent Signs of Place and Landscape* that the process of embodiment informs large-scale processes of meaning-making, and in the context of Yosemite construct experiences of place (2011).

Climbing as a Heritage Sport

Laurajane Smith's work on heritage takes center stage as we navigate the intricate terrain of climbers' experiences in Yosemite. Smith's multifaceted understanding of heritage as an ongoing process that shapes both individual and collective identities resonate deeply with the narratives of climbers who ascend Yosemite's walls. In *Uses of Heritage* (2006), Smith explores the ways in which heritage is constructed, defined, and managed, and she introduces the idea of Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD) to describe the dominant, authorized narratives and discourses that shape our understanding of heritage. These authorized discourses often reflect the perspectives and interests of those in power, and they can marginalize or exclude alternative heritage narratives and voices. Smith's work encourages critical examination of who controls and benefits from heritage discourses and how these discourses impact different communities and their relationships with heritage. The concept of AHD, advanced by Smith, serves as a lens through which to examine the narratives and discourses that validate climbing in Yosemite as a form of heritage sport. By recognizing the various voices and perspectives that contribute to this

discourse, we can uncover the layers of significance embedded in climbing as a heritage activity within this landscape.

Rodney Harrison's explorations into the "emotional geographies" of heritage, cited in his 2013 book *Heritage: Critical Approaches*, further enrich our analysis, uncovering the intricate interplay of emotions and attachments that climbers cultivate with Yosemite Valley. In the context of heritage, Harrison refers to emotional geographies as the ways in which people emotionally engage with and are affected by heritage sites, landscapes, and objects. Harrison's exploration of emotional geographies highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of heritage, emphasizing that it is not solely an intellectual or rational endeavor but one that is deeply tied to our emotions and affective responses. This concept has been influential in expanding the understanding of heritage as a lived and emotional phenomenon. Harrison's perspective aligns seamlessly with the spiritual and emotional connections climbers report having with the landscape. Through his lens, Yosemite emerges not just as a geological wonder, but as a space laden with affective ties, shaped by the experiences and personal histories of those who traverse its vertical expanses. As climbers scale its walls, they partake in a complex process of engagement that transcends mere physicality, transforming the rock into a tangible and intangible heritage.

Incorporating heritage discourse into this framework introduces a profound layer of understanding to the dynamics within Yosemite's climbing community. The definitions of heritage, as expanded by Smith and Harrison, allow us to perceive climbing as an intricate tapestry interwoven with cultural, historical, and emotional threads. This shift in perspective enables us to unravel the nuanced significance of Yosemite Valley as a heritage

sport destination, tracing the contours of its transformative impact on individuals, communities, and the broader cultural landscape.

Anthropology of Sport: Community Dynamics and Rituals

The anthropology of sport explores the cultural, social, and symbolic dimensions of sports and physical activities (Donnelly et al 1988). Within the context of climbing in Yosemite Valley, an anthropological lens allows for an examination of the community dynamics, rituals, and shared practices that contribute to the formation of a distinct climbing culture. It highlights the ways in which climbers collectively negotiate meanings, values, and norms within the context of their climbing pursuits.

From as early as 1988 in the Sociology of Sport Journal, we get an idea of how participating in a sport subculture such as climbing can affect one's conception of identity. Donnelly and Young, in the article *The Construction and Confirmation of Identity in Sport Subcultures,* write:

> It is usual in interactionist research to view the process of socialization into subcultures as, in part, a process of identity formation. However, we prefer to examine this process, at least in the case of sport subcultures, as a far more deliberate act of identity construction. That is, through a variety of means, the most significant of which is modeling, the neophyte member begins to deliberately adopt mannerisms, attitudes, and styles of dress, speech, and behavior that he or she perceives to be characteristic of established members of the subculture. Such perceptions among neophytes are usually far from being completely accurate and are frequently stereotypical. Thus, it is necessary to examine also the complementary process of identity confirmation in order to conduct a more complete examination of socialization into a subcultural career. These processes, and neophyte mistakes emerging in them, are examined with respect to ethnographies of climbers and rugby players conducted by the authors, together with supporting material from studies of other sports-related aspects of ethnographic research. (1988)

Donnelly and Young's work on climbing as a sport emphasizes the importance of community and social interactions in shaping climbers' experiences. The contradictions in climbing are primarily between the public and private voices of climbers. The sport is subject to public criticism on occasion (as are most high-risk sports), particularly after accidents or expensive rescues. Consequently, climbers and participants in other high-risk sports have tended to develop an entire mythology that is primarily for public consumption, and body politics are inextricably linked to that story. The ‘daredevil’ behaviors and high risk of extreme sport make up part of that identity, which is then confirmed by others in the sport as well as outsiders who validate that link.

I examined how this construction and confirmation of identity played a role in the importance of Yosemite to the climbing community. Climbing in Yosemite Valley is not merely an individual pursuit but also a collective endeavor that involves shared experiences, mentorship, and communal rituals. The climbing community in Yosemite Valley cultivates a sense of belonging, support, and camaraderie among climbers, reinforcing the significance of the landscape and the shared pursuit of climbing within the community.

Within Yosemite Valley, the climbing culture and community are characterized by shared practices, rituals, and traditions that reinforce climbers' identities and connections to the landscape. Campfire gatherings, storytelling sessions, and collaborative problem-solving are just a few examples of the cultural dynamics that shape the climbing community. These communal activities foster a sense of belonging and collective identity among climbers, creating a shared understanding of the significance of Yosemite Valley as a climbing destination.

Secular Pilgrimage: Transformative Journeys

Secular pilgrimage refers to non-religious journeys that individuals undertake to places of personal, cultural, or symbolic significance. These journeys often involve transformative experiences, personal growth, and a quest for deeper meaning (Badone and Roseman, 2004). Based on my interpretation of climbing within this context, climbers' expeditions to Yosemite Valley can be understood as secular pilgrimages, as they embark on transformative journeys that push their physical and mental limits, challenge their beliefs and values, and offer opportunities for self-discovery.

El Capitan is the world's largest granite monolith, standing around 3,000 feet from base to summit along its tallest face – three times the height of the Eiffel Tower, more than twice as high as the Empire State Building, taller all by itself than the highest points in 17 different states and dozens of entire nations. Half Dome, the most recognizable feature of Yosemite National Park, though not quite as tall along the face, still rises 4,737 feet above the Valley floor at an elevation of 8,844 feet above sea level. It is impossible to walk amongst and below these giants and not feel small. But that smallness reminds us of the greatness of the world around and helps us to remember nature is a magnificent place indeed. Through this lens, I am looking at the application of the Anthropology of Pilgrimage to this site.

Established within the contemporary anthropological research done on the subject, pilgrimage can have a variety of meanings. By looking into works about secular pilgrimages, such as *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism* by Badone and Roseman (2004), I had hoped to determine if pilgrimage as a form of travel applies, whether that be in a secular way, a spiritual way, or a combination of the two.

According to Badone and Roseman, “each category of pilgrims brings its own construction or understanding of the significance and meaning of the pilgrimage journey and shrine” (2004:4-5). Their work on secular pilgrimage provides insights into the motivations, experiences, and transformative potential of such journeys. Climbers who undertake expeditions to Yosemite Valley often seek personal growth, spiritual connection, and a sense of accomplishment. They engage in introspection, confront challenges, and experience moments of awe and transcendence. These pilgrimage-like experiences contribute to climbers' construction of personal narratives and the reaffirmation or reinvention of their identities. In this sense climbers impart meaning onto Yosemite Valley because of their understanding of its historical significance, the physical challenge, and the construction of their identities in relation to it. The ‘journey’ to Yosemite is seen by many as an essential part of the climbing experience and lifestyle. I will explore this idea more in following chapters.

From interviews with some of the Stonemasters themselves, we get a description of what climbing meant to them spiritually at the inception of the sport in Yosemite. Lynn Hill, one of the most famous female climbers in the world, described in an essay: “I felt a part of a special clan of people in which climbing was our sacred ritual. Our style of free climbing was based on an unwritten code of ethics that both respected the purity of the rock and the purity of our ascent” (Hill 2023). Dale Bard, who began climbing in Yosemite at the age of 17 in 1971, said in an interview: “Some folks in the Buddhist religion call it enlightenment. And that is the best way I can describe what a Stonemaster is. You've superseded everything. You've superseded training, you've superseded talent, natural ability because it's just part of your being. That is the definition of a Stonemaster” (2016).

For climbers, the act of journeying to Yosemite Valley and engaging in challenging climbs is not merely a physical pursuit but also a transformative experience. The demanding nature of climbing and the awe-inspiring beauty of the landscape create opportunities for personal growth, self-reflection, and the cultivation of resilience. Climbers confront their fears, push their limits, and gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their place within the world. These transformative journeys within Yosemite Valley contribute to climbers' construction of identities and their continued engagement with the climbing culture and community.

Chapter Summary

People travel internationally and spend weeks in the park, testing themselves on the "classic" climbing problems in the Valley, and only occasionally creating new lines. Many attribute this draw to a form of connectedness with the rock and the landscape. Based on my experience, it was in part seeking a sense of feeling "small," or that there was something bigger than themselves in the world. Yosemite, as a deep-cut Valley, does a great job in creating that sense. There is a fine line between pilgrimage and tourism, one that climbers have walked since they began travelling to Yosemite Valley. However, "...touristic travel in search of authenticity or self-renewal falls under the rubric of the sacred, collapsing the distinction between secular voyaging and pilgrimage" (Badone et al 2004). This takes a deeper look at how the sacredness of this site leads to a larger religious assumption through pilgrimage. In this chapter, I have explored the interconnected concepts of placemaking, ties to landscape, climbing as heritage, anthropology of sport, and secular pilgrimage within the context of Yosemite Valley as a significant climbing destination. By

incorporating the works of Basso, Ness, Smith, Harrison, Donnelly and Young, as well as Badone and Roseman, insights can be made into the cultural, social, and personal dynamics that shape climbers' experiences and identities in this notable landscape.

Through the lens of placemaking, I have examined climbers' role as active participants as not just spectators but as contributors to the construction of meaningful spaces within Yosemite Valley. The investigation of ties to landscape has revealed the deep emotional connections and embodied experiences that climbers develop with the natural environment. This engagement underscores the climber's narrative as an inseparable part of the landscape itself. Within the discourse of heritage practice, I have discerned the interplay of the history of Yosemite Valley's heritage within the park to the ongoing processes that continue to form its place as a heritage sport.

Considering the anthropology of sport, we have recognized the importance of community dynamics, rituals, and shared practices in shaping the climbing culture unique to Yosemite Valley. The spirit of collaboration and competition within climbing communities is pivotal to the climbers' sense of belonging and their individual and collective identities. Within the concept of secular pilgrimage, we have seen how climbers' travels to Yosemite Valley embody transformative and journey-oriented characteristics of traditional pilgrimages. The combination of individual quests with collective rituals highlights the significance of the effort to climb in this unique space.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, we have established a comprehensive framework for analyzing climbers' experiences and identities within Yosemite Valley. This framework will guide my ethnographic study, allowing us to explore the nuances of climbers' practices, social dynamics, and connections to the landscape. By understanding

the multifaceted nature of climbers' engagement with this historic climbing destination, I aim to contribute to a deeper appreciation of the cultural, social, and personal dimensions of climbing experiences in Yosemite Valley.

Chapter Four: Research Design

This chapter outlines the research design and methodology employed in this thesis, focusing on the selection of Yosemite Valley as the research site and the development of research questions. The thesis represents the culmination of background research, immersive fieldwork, and comprehensive analysis, with a particular emphasis on understanding the significance of Yosemite Valley to climbers. The research questions guiding this study were intentionally designed to be open-ended, allowing for the input of the participants and their expertise to shape the research scope and explore their connections to Yosemite Valley.

Research Questions

While developing this project I formulated a few questions that I believed would summarize much of the experience climbing in Yosemite Valley. Due to my own personal time spent in Yosemite, I went in with a few base assumptions. These presuppositions informed both my research and my survey questions. Through the course of my research, I realized the assumptions I had made were somewhat inaccurate. In my analysis section, I further explain what the implications of my biases meant, and what I learned from them.

The research questions were formulated with an open-ended and adaptive approach to accommodate the dynamic nature of the research setting and the perspectives of the participants. The overarching aim was to explore the sacredness of Yosemite Valley as perceived by climbers and their identification with this space. The questions are:

1) *Is Yosemite Valley a sacred site for climbers, and how do they identify with this space?* This question seeks to understand if climbers perceive Yosemite Valley as a sacred site and how their personal identification with the space influences their experiences, practices, and rituals within it.
2) *If it is considered a sacred site, could Yosemite be conceptualized as a pilgrimage destination for climbers?* This question explores the notion of pilgrimage within the context of Yosemite Valley. It investigates whether climbers conceptualize their journeys to Yosemite as pilgrimages, examining the motivations, transformative experiences, and spiritual connections that may be associated with such visits.
3) *How is spirituality or sacredness manifested by climbers in this space through their interactions with it?* This question delves into the ways in which climbers express spirituality or sacredness within Yosemite Valley. It explores the rituals, practices, and symbolic interactions through which climbers forge a deeper connection with the landscape and imbue it with spiritual significance.
4) *As climbers claim space in the Valley, do they allow for sharing and collaboration in their use? Or is there competition as they stake their claims on the spaces?* This question addresses the dynamics of space and territoriality within Yosemite Valley. It investigates whether climbers foster a sense of sharing, collaboration, and communal engagement in their use of the space, or if competition and individual claims dominate their interactions.

The flexibility of these research questions allowed for the participants to guide the research process, emphasizing their expertise, priorities, and perspectives. This approach ensures

that the research remains responsive to the climbers' own narratives, values, and connections to Yosemite Valley.

Some scholars have attested that the “climbing community...argue(s) that climbing is their form of religious experience” (Trim 2011). Based on my own experience in the Valley, and the experience of climbers I am close with, it seemed people came to Yosemite to feel something they didn’t get in their day-to-day lives. Climbers I have encountered seem to be linked to this place specifically and tie their climbing past, present, and future to their success on these granite boulders and cliff faces. Through interviews and survey, I had hoped to determine if they did indeed consider this space sacred, and in what ways climbers tie their identity into the performance of the sport within Yosemite Valley. Through participant observation, I aimed to determine how people connect to these spaces and which sites are potentially considered more sacred than others. I was also hoping to discover whether this identifier as a ‘Yosemite climber’ provides some form of authenticity within the climbing community.

Through the method of counter-mapping (Willow 2013), I tried to identify which spaces climbers claim as potentially sacred. With alternative mapping from Indigenous descendants of the Valley, found through historical archives or Environmental Impact Reports done by the National Park Service (National Park Service 2000), I had hoped to discover overlapping ties. Through naming practices, found in guidebooks and by speaking with various stakeholders, I attempted to ascertain how climbers attribute their spirituality practices to these spaces.

Since the early days of climbing in Yosemite, it has been a relatively exclusive sport, with even ‘dirtbag’ climbers making claims to traditionally open/shared spaces. As

access to the sport has grown in the last few decades, as well as awareness through its popularity and inclusion in the Olympic lineup, more people have been drawn to the sport, and subsequently to the 'birthplace' in America of Yosemite Valley. With this increase in practitioners of the sport, I wanted to look at how the Yosemite climbing community is sharing space, or in the converse, gatekeeping certain areas of the park. This is especially relevant as being able to 'dirtbag' in the park is becoming increasingly difficult, and more climbers have built out vans and access is seemingly granted to those with the money and easy opportunity to utilize it.

Through interviews with climbers, I tried to ascertain who different groups feel are allowed access to certain places within Yosemite. I tried to determine if new areas are being discovered and developed that are kept secretive, or whether this information was being disseminated. With the publication of the new Yosemite Bouldering guidebook in 2020, new climbing areas were opened to the public. Along with doing participant observation, I hoped to see who is allowed where, and if people are turned away or not told of new and exclusive spots.

Research Methods and Strategy

My strategy going into this work was to apply ethnographic field methodology (Bernard 2018) to my data collecting process. My research methods consisted of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, autoethnography, and countermapping. Together, these methods encompassed the broad scope of climbing experience within Yosemite Valley. My methods, layered on top of one another, told the story of each person's

participation with the landscape, within this counterculture, and their place within the larger story of climbing in this historic space.

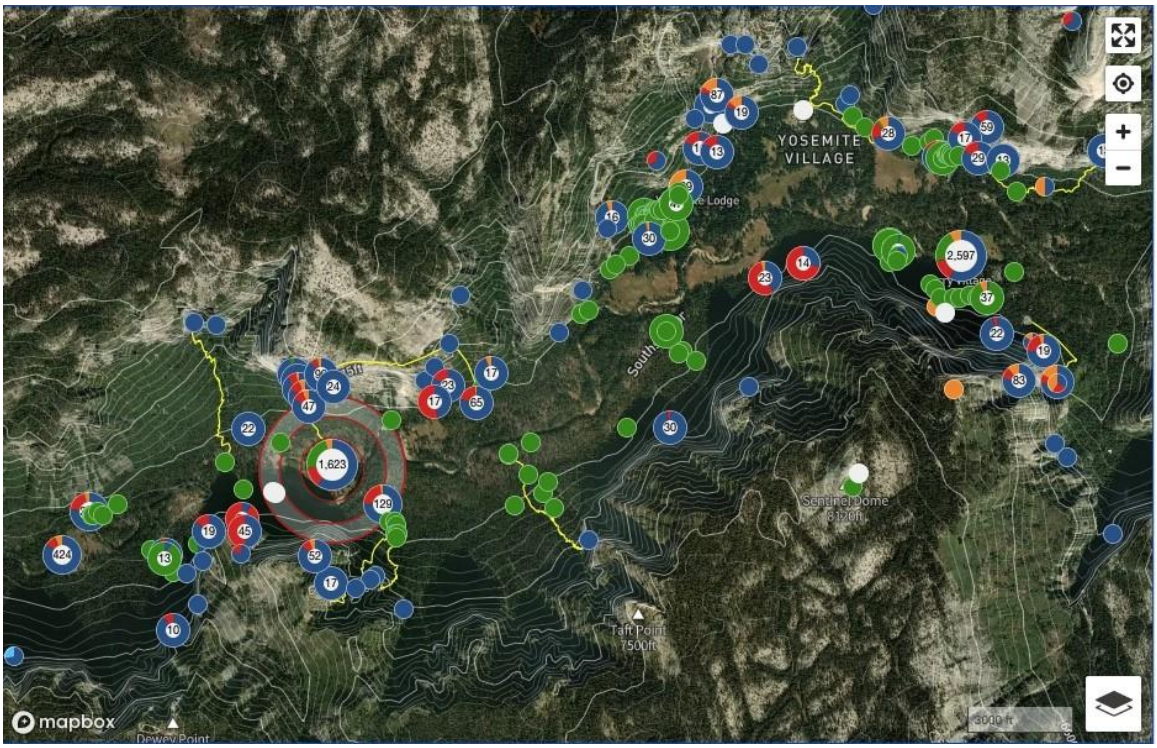

FIGURE 8: CLIMBING MAP OF YOSEMITE; SOURCE: HTTPS://WWW.MOUNTAINPROJECT.COM/MAP/105833388/YOSEMITE-VALLEY.

Participant Observation: Immersion in the Climbing Culture

The method of participant observation, defined by Bernard in *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approache*s as a qualitative research method in anthropology and sociology where the researcher immerses themselves within a social or cultural group to gain a deep understanding of their behaviors, practices, and perspective (Bernard 2018:272), comprised the base of my fieldwork. Performed in November 2021, this enabled me to immerse myself within the climbing culture of Yosemite Valley. By actively participating in climbing activities, attending community gatherings, and

observing climbers' behaviors and interactions, valuable firsthand insights were gained into the climbers' experiences, rituals, and social dynamics within the space. This allowed me to uncover nuances and complexities that may not have been apparent through other research methods.

This took place within the 6 square mile loop that makes up Yosemite Valley in Yosemite National Park. The first phase of this research was relatively unobtrusive and mainly consisted of wandering around the more well-known climbing areas, sometimes outfitted to climb myself, sometimes just like any other tourist, and resulted in the observation of the space, various groups and individuals, and their dynamics with others. During the two weeks I was in the Valley, between November 20, 2022 – December 3, 2022, I spent almost every day moving between the various climbing spaces and observing the variety of individuals and groups that collected here. Some days I would join in the climbing, both to establish myself as a "credible" individual and to consider my own experiences. Sometimes I would refrain and just chat with them or wander by and observe. In the style of Pryce (1979), who defines it as the ability to "...explore firsthand the wide variety of adaptive responses he [sic] encounters" (Cater 2007), I allowed myself to be guided by what was happening around me, without undue interference.

Semi-Structured Interviews: Capturing Climbers' Perspectives

Semi-structured interviews, a qualitative research method that combines predetermined questions or topics with the flexibility to explore participants' responses more deeply (Warren 2001) provided a means to engage in-depth conversations with climbers, allowing them to share their perspectives and personal narratives. These

interviews explored climbers' perceptions of Yosemite Valley as a sacred site, their identification with the space, spiritual manifestations, and dynamics of space use. The interviews were conducted in a flexible and open manner, allowing participants to shape the conversation and share their experiences freely. In Appendix A, I list my guiding interview questions.

The goal of these interviews was to glean more in-depth information about individual feelings associated with climbing in Yosemite, which in turn would help me to understand a larger theme of climbing connection to this landscape. These interviews took place at times and places that were convenient for climbers and employees of the park. Many happened at the 'crag,' while others were in offices or on benches. Instead of adhering to a rigid interview structure, I allowed the conversation to flow naturally. While I had a few directional questions, I would think of new ones based upon what a participant would identify as important or of consequence, and discard questions that did not make sense in the scope of each conversation I was having. For each interview, I gained consent to record, and I took notes of anything that I felt stood out during each conversation. During my two weeks of fieldwork in Yosemite in November 2021, I interviewed 14 people. The length of these interviews ranged from fifteen minutes to approximately an hour and a half.

Autoethnography: Personal Reflections on Climbing in Yosemite

Most academic writing that I have come across up to this point in my academic career has been concerned with the 'absent self' (Brigg and Bleiker 2010, Dauphinee 2010, and Lowenheim 2010), and keeping one's personal accounts separate from their academic writing. Doty argues in *Autoethnography – Making Human Connections* (2010) that the

self is always present in academic writing, though usually only present by virtue of its absence. According to Doty, however, autoethnography is necessary in that it is impossible to connect with the people at the center of one's study without having a presence of oneself in their writing (2010). It played a crucial role in this study, as I utilized personal reflections and experiences as a climbing participant in Yosemite Valley. By integrating my own observations, bodily sensations and felt experience into the research, I was able to provide a subjective and insider's perspective, contributing to a deeper understanding of climbers' connections to the landscape. Doty notes that incorporating these, while affecting our choice of words and the way we put these words to paper (2010) is a positive change in academic writing.

As a climber whose early introduction to the sport took place in Yosemite Valley, I have a strong tie to this landscape. As a researcher, I entered this project with the intent to remain as objective as possible in my interactions with other climbers and staff of Yosemite National Park, while also recognizing that my own biases would undoubtedly affect my interpretation. My place in this research is a complex one, as I claim myself to be a climber as well as a researcher, and I attempted to explore the effects this may have had on my work (Limon 1991). Utilizing my voice as a climber, this thesis is interspersed with terminology and language that I access as a climber myself. I have chosen to both write in an academic style while still retaining the truth of my personal voice in its essence.

Countermapping: Challenging Dominant Spatial Narratives

Countermapping, as defined by Willow in *Doing Sovereignty in Native North America: Anishinaabe Counter-Mapping and the Struggle for Land-Based Self-*

Determination, refers to the process through which marginalized or disempowered communities use mapping as a tool for challenging dominant power structures and narratives (2013). Countermapping allows a variety of representations of space through various communities' perspectives, histories, and interests, often in contrast to official or mainstream maps that may perpetuate inequalities or exclude certain voices (2013). I intended to use this method, used during my observation and interviewing, was employed as a method to challenge dominant spatial narratives, and offer alternative perspectives. Through mapping exercises and collaborative discussions with climbers, I had hoped to uncover hidden stories, marginalized voices, and spatial contestations within Yosemite Valley. This approach aimed to shed light on power dynamics, territoriality, and the negotiation of space among climbers.

This method is useful for identifying whether the significant places climbers mapped also overlapped significant places as identified by the National Park Service. This helps to create a narrative of how these places came to be found, why they hold so much significance, and where they are accessed by those other than climbers. This is most evidently seen in the work of the new Yosemite Bouldering Guidebook, created by Shannon Joslin, Kimbrough Moore, and James Lucas. It comes up in the way in which the creators lay out maps and areas known to be significant to the climbing community. It is also noticeable in the way in which the guidebook calls attention areas significant to the local Indigenous community and asking climbers to be respectful of them.

Though climbing has only recently been included in the park's informational brochures and on their website, it has been a part of Yosemite's landscape for almost as

long as it has been recognized as a National Park. Many of the spaces accessed by climbers are inaccessible to the public, such as on the great walls of Half Dome and El Capitan but are recognized by both parties to be of great importance to their visits. Other sites are crossed by day hikers and tourists but not utilized in the same way, while a handful of climbing areas may never be seen by the everyday tourist due to lack of general knowledge about the whereabouts of these spaces. In this way, I wanted to determine how these landscapes overlap and/or are significant to only a small percentage of overall visitors to the park. Utilizing aspects of geography in tandem with ethnography as a framework for this research allows us to understand the lived experiences of the climbing community as defined by its members. To understand this, a geographically inspired ethnographic approach to allows for flexibility in the research and understand the meaning of the sport as performed by viewing the landscape they are utilizing.

Survey: Collecting Quantitative Data

To supplement the qualitative data gathered through participant observation, interviews, and countermapping, a survey was conducted (see Appendix B for survey questions and results), vetted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process. This is defined as a research method that involves collecting data from a selected group of individuals or respondents through standardized questionnaires or interviews (Bernard 2018:195). The survey was designed using the Qualtrics platform, allowing for a combination of qualitative and quantitative questions, which in turn provided a broader perspective on climbers' demographic characteristics, motivations, and perceptions. The

survey welcomed any climber who associated themselves with Yosemite Valley, capturing a snapshot of their experiences and attitudes during the research period.

The questions were carefully crafted to explore various aspects, including climbers' first encounters, motivations, identities, interactions with Indigenous communities, attitudes toward conservation, and more. The survey included a mix of question formats. Some questions required participants to select predefined options, such as "yes" or "no," while others allowed for write-in responses. This combination of question types facilitated a comprehensive understanding of climbers' views and provided space for additional insights beyond predefined choices.

This survey was sent out via social media, with information explaining its purpose and encouraging climbers to participate. This initial post was shared by both friends and climbing-related institutions, extending the survey's reach to a larger audience. I also shared the link in-person with individuals who wished to take the survey. It added 91 responses to my overall data, giving me a more comprehensive view of climbers' experiences in Yosemite Valley. Because the survey was wider reaching than the on-site interviews, I was able to gain greater insight from people who tend to live farther away from the park or only visit occasionally.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring their voluntary participation and protection of their privacy. Steps were taken to ensure confidentiality, data anonymization, and the ethical handling of sensitive information. The research design and methods were

reviewed and approved by the relevant institutional ethics committee, ensuring compliance with ethical guidelines and regulations.

I anticipated that the risks of this research would be minimal, but instituted plans for addressing any that arose. Bearing in mind that there were various stakeholders involved in my thesis project, I had a range of ethical concerns to acknowledge. I adhered to a collaborative approach regarding the development and revision of my questions and the trajectory of my work. I also tried to communicate my goals from the outset, as well as keep all stakeholders informed with what my research brought up and offered to provide copies, if requested, of my finalized work. While being mindful of the "do no harm" ethic in the American Anthropological Association's Code of Ethics, I tried to ensure that my research goals fell in line with community ethical guidelines.

As a member of the climbing community, I attempted to recognize how my own biases affected my research, as noted above. The information I was able to access as a climber could potentially have differed from that of an outside researcher, participants may have revealed information they did not mean to, and I was aiming to not take advantage of that insider connection. One of the ways I planned to mitigate the potential risks from this was to make sure all components of this research were known to be voluntary. Participants were offered the option to end their participation at any time and did not have to answer all questions posed, as well as have me scrub the data I had gathered from them if they changed their minds. Participants also had the option to participate either anonymously or to have their answers generalized. These mitigation measures allowed each participant to control their level of participation and the format.

I also considered how the information I gathered could have posed a risk to any of the participants or groups I worked with. While acknowledging my positionality within the community, I attempted to ensure that I did not break trust with those belonging to these groups as I advanced in my research. I was taking into consideration the privatization of the identities of climbers I interviewed and tried to be sure not to include identifying information if it was requested of me. As the communities I had hoped to include in my research potentially had some overlapping or opposing goals in this space, I also needed to take into consideration the AAA Code of Ethic's guideline to weigh competing ethical obligations that are due to collaborators and affected parties. I aimed to ensure that none of the stakeholder groups felt that their space had been imposed upon through my research process. Through countermapping (explained further in Methods section), there was a potential for sites designated as 'sacred' to be identified in way stakeholders would prefer them not to be. A way to mitigate this was to keep all locations identified confidential if asked, to be only used for research purposes and removed after relevant data was collected.

Limitations

This project had two primary limitations; the effects of COVID-19, and the inability to gather a large enough sample size to be representative of the population I was studying. The research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which posed challenges in terms of access, participant availability, and potential biases in data collection. Additionally, the sample size for interviews was contingent upon the climbers present in the Valley during the research period, potentially limiting the diversity of perspectives. I would say that my access to Parks staff was hindered by COVID-19 regulations, and so we

could only meet for short periods of time, and generally outside in the elements which added to the time constraints. And though I was able to climb and spend time with climbers while there, I also met some potential participants who were less comfortable sharing close proximity due to the pandemic effect, and so moving on from a climbing area I would be at sooner than they may have otherwise done. Because my data collection was done primarily outside, it was not as large of an issue as it could have been, but it was a limitation that I encountered during my fieldwork.

My primary goal during the two weeks I was in the Valley was to attempt to collect as many interviews as possible. My sampling was probability based, involving a random (and therefore I felt representative) selection of participants from the climbing population, along *with* non-probability, in that I had reached out to some participants in a non-randomized way due to the specific perspective I had wanted to get from them. I was limited, however, by how many people were at the climbing areas at any given time, not repeating interviews with the same people I happened to see at different climbing areas. There was also the concern that the data would be skewed toward a certain demographic, i.e., those with enough money to go to Yosemite at any given time. With these limitations considered, I did mitigate the impacts to the best degree possible by seeking out a wide variety of participants (both via interview and survey) and going to Yosemite during one of the high points of the climbing season. I believe that despite these limitations my study still provides value to the overall understanding of the significance of Yosemite Valley to climbers.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the research methods employed in investigating climbers' experiences within Yosemite Valley. The combination of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, autoethnography, countermapping, and a survey provided a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach to exploring climbers' interactions with the landscape. The limitations of the study, such as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the constraints of interviewing climbers present in the Valley, were acknowledged. Ethical considerations were carefully addressed to protect the well-being and privacy of participants. The data collected through these methods will be analyzed and interpreted in the following chapters, contributing to a deeper understanding of climbers' connections to Yosemite Valley and the dynamics of their experiences within this significant climbing destination.

Chapter Five: Findings, Analysis and Discussion

Introduction

Chapter Six presents the analysis and discussion of the data gathered throughout the thesis, offering a comprehensive exploration of climbers' connections to Yosemite Valley. Drawing upon the theoretical framework, fieldwork interviews, survey responses, and other relevant sources, this chapter aims to further explain the themes, patterns, and insights derived from the research. By analyzing the data through multiple lenses, I show the multifaceted nature of climbers' experiences, their relationships with the landscape, and the broader implications of their connections to Yosemite Valley.

The research questions I used to frame my line of inquiry for this project revolved around public interpretation of Yosemite Valley as a monumental site for the climbing community, as well as ownership over this place and its history. Through my various methods of research and data collection, I was able to identify both the positive and negative associations with this connection to the park, as well as gain an understanding of climber's perceptions of other stakeholder use of the space. In addition, the field notes and the semi-structured interviews I conducted during the weeks I was physically in the Valley helped to supplement my participant observation and the survey data within this chapter.

Throughout this chapter, I will present and summarize the results of my research and analysis of said research. Semi-formal interviews with both residents of the area and

travelers to Yosemite introduced me to several themes within the climbing community there. Through my investigation, I discovered at least four major themes encompassing individuals' connection to the space, issues of access, preservation, overcrowding, gatekeeping, how the history of the sport has affected their perceptions of climbing there, and how all of this affects their identities. Several interviewees affiliated with the park expressed the belief that the area's demographics were changing as the Valley has continued to be inundated with tourism and families. Part of this is in direct correlation with the increase in social media and physical access to the park. I will discuss each of the themes, using data collected to inform my analyses, and summarizing the overall findings in my research.

Findings and Analysis: Themes and Patterns in Climbers' Experiences

Climber's Perceptions of the Historical Significance of the Valley and its Influence on The Sport of Climbing

As noted in previous chapters, Yosemite Valley holds a special place in the annals of climbing history, having served as a testing ground for generations of climbers. In the 1950s, a group of visionary climbers, including luminaries such as Royal Robbins, Warren Harding, and Yvon Chouinard, pushed the boundaries of the sport by embarking on daring ascents of the Valley's formidable granite walls. Their audacious climbs, such as the first ascent of El Capitan's Nose route, captured the imagination of climbers worldwide and established Yosemite Valley as a symbol of adventure and exploration. Many of my interviewees could note these early 'daredevils' as significant influences for their travel to

the Valley and attempts to summit these large walls. Kevin, a climber I met during fieldwork in Camp 4, had spent the previous 30 days climbing in Yosemite. He told me:

> It's crazy to see what was done in the past, you know, and now we come along and like, what it took to be a climber then…Like now…it's so easy to be a climber. I mean, we have the gear and everything and there's so much safety and there's so much, you know, information about how to be safe and how to do things. You know…nowadays, anyone can be a climber and I think that's a good thing. But back then, you had to be kind of bold and crazy to be a climber.

Aside from their risk-taking antics, other interviewees recognized these early climbers for their other noteworthy contributions, such as innovations in gear and climbing techniques.

FIGURE 9: INNOVATION DISPLAY IN YOSEMITE MUSEUM. PHOTOGRAPHED BY VANESSA TAYLOR, 07/07/2022.

By tracing its roots as a premier climbing location from the 1950s to the present day, we can see the profound influence of Yosemite Valley on climbing and its evolution over time, and just how significant the history of the development of the sport is on the perceptions people have of the Valley. Its history is one of the greatest draws to the park for many climbers and visitors. Many of my interviewees discussed the importance of the history of climbing in Yosemite Valley, and how that history has in large part made the destination what it is today. Shannon Joslin, one of the creators of the recent Yosemite guidebook, and a climber and biologist in the park, said:

> There just aren't Fred Beckys and Warren Hardings anymore, you know? There's just not, I mean, there are, but they're not pushing the limits in the same way because the limits are different. The limits are now how hard can you climb instead of how innovative you can be. And someone who's just like sitting around in camp 4 thinking of ways to like, allow them to get up the mountain is way different than having to climb V15[8], or 5.15[9], or 5.14. So, it's just different, because it has to be.

The golden era of climbing in Yosemite Valley during the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a surge of innovative techniques and a spirit of camaraderie among climbers. The Valley became a nexus for climbers seeking to test their skills and push the limits of what was thought possible. The development of clean climbing techniques, such as the use of removable protection, marked a pivotal shift in climbing ethics and environmental consciousness. This radical change in equipment use banded together the climbers who wished to leave less of an impact on the walls of the Valley. Yosemite Valley's significance as a climbing destination transcended its athletic challenges. It became a cultural and social hub, attracting a diverse community of climbers who formed tight-knit bonds and shared a passion for the vertical world. Climbing became more than a mere pursuit of physical achievement; it became a way of life, fostering a sense of identity and belonging among climbers. Not everyone agrees with this historic ethic, however. Shannon admitted:

[8] The V or Vermin Scale is named after a famous Hueco Tanks climber, John Vermin Sherman. It is a rating system that grades boulder problems on a difficulty of 0-17.

[9] The Yosemite Decimal System grades climbs by level of difficulty, from 5.1-5.15

> In a way, I respect the people that were being innovative at the time in some instances. I also love the stories. I just also think that we have this weird attachment to some [stuff] that white guys thought back in the 60s. And that part to me is like, I hate.

In part, she is referring to this 'clean climbing' ethic. She goes on to explain:

> They're, like, chopping bolts. You know, I think that's interesting and really, it's okay. Well, I guess Royal Robins just won that one. Warren Harding [said], I'm just gonna put in bolts because it'll protect me, you know, and Royal [said], no, we have to appreciate the features of the rock, which I agree with, but also, when you don't protect something for humans, (I'm not talking about like, protecting the features) when you don't protect something that humans are climbing on, that actually just could create more problems…you'll have more rescues. Yeah, just more issues around it, and I just think it's like this weird idolization of some bros that defected from society, you know?

Her comment brings up a shared sentiment amongst some climbers that, even though the early climbers in the Valley were trailblazers, they should not always be idolized. Phil, another interviewee I met in the Valley, stated: "…there's some things that, um, like there's some leftover personalities and egos from the 70s here that I'm not the biggest fan of."

The interviews conducted with climbers, particularly Lonnie Kauk, unveil an intriguing interplay between the historical and cultural dimensions of Yosemite Valley. Kauk's Native American heritage, embodied through his grandmother's traditional basket weaving (displayed at the Yosemite Visitor's Center Museum), subtly underscores the valley's deep-rooted cultural tapestry. His perspective, while not explicitly articulated,

hints at a potential harmonization between his cultural lineage and climbing experiences. When trying to project[10] the un-repeated rock-climbing route *Magic Line*, originally set by his father in 1996, and getting shut down, he said:

> Yeah, and then what we did is, I went back and thought, well, I'm half Native, so what do the Natives do when it's weird somewhere? You go smudge it down and talk to it and let it know why you're here. So, I did that, and I went up there on the warm-up. I had the sage in my pocket, and when I came down, I lit it. Like, you know why I'm here. You know what I'm gonna do after. Please let me through. Set, next try, boom. Even my friend was like, I'm a believer. I believe now, man, I believe.

[10] Projecting a rock-climbing route or problem involves pouring time and energy into the process of climbing something that is at or above one's physical limit. It might take days, weeks, months, or even years to complete.

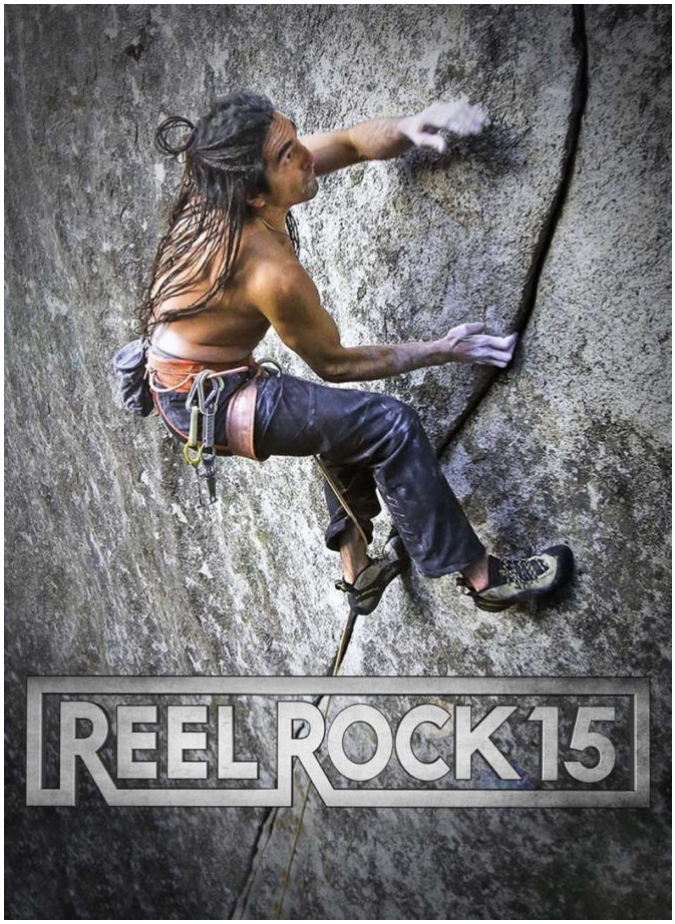

FIGURE 10: LONNIE KAUK CLIMBING MAGIC LINE, ON THE COVER OF REEL ROCK 15, A CLIMBING THEMED FILM FESTIVAL, IMAGE SOURCED FROM: HTTPS://WATCH.REELROCKTOUR.COM/REEL-ROCK-15/VIDEOS/DEEP-ROOTS.

In this way, Lonnie incorporated his Indigenous heritage with his love for the sport of climbing. It was important for him to ascend this specific route due to his father's history with it, and its place in climbing legend. Until Lonnie did the climb in 2016, almost 20 years to the day his father first completed it, no other climber had successfully finished it. Being able to climb the routes and problems his famous father had done in the past seemed important to Lonnie. When asked about his start in climbing, he said he began in:

> …probably like the early 2000s maybe. Well, when I started and finally got into it and then I was like, I gotta do midnight lightning, was the first thing. I don't even

> know if I did like V5 or V6. I was just, like, Midnight Lightning. Gotta do that one. The key to everything…Yeah. That was the first one. And then it was just on after that. I was just like, we got to do all my dad's raps. Like every single one. Do all of them. And then I was like, I gotta do Peace up there in Tuolumne, because I always remember the poster. And then when I was a young kid, I would always be at his house, and then I'd always see that poster, and I didn't even climb, but I was like, I wanna do it. I know I'm gonna do it. It wasn't like he was trying to prove anything. It was just kind of just like, I wanna do that. Just like Magic Line, even, when I watched the old Masters of Stone video, where he was filmed in it back in the day, a long time ago. I was watching the shot of him lie backing up. And I was like, I want to be really good at lie backing.

Midnight Lightning is another crucial climb in Yosemite, first ascended by Ron Kauk and John Bachar. It is considered to be the most famous boulder problem in the world and is emblematic of climbing in Yosemite Valley. Lonnie is not alone in this desire to replicate the feats of the Stonemasters and being inspired to climb because of what they were able to accomplish. Many come to the Valley just to complete this one specific climb, set in the heart of historic Camp 4.

FIGURE 11: THE COLUMBIA BOULDER IN CAMP 4, FEATURING THE ICONIC PROBLEM, MIDNIGHT LIGHTNING. PHOTOGRAPHED BY VANESSA TAYLOR, 11/27/2021.

For some, just being in the Valley itself holds a special connotation. Louie, a visitor from England, said:

> …then there's also, like, walking around and…Knowing all the history, not all the history, but, knowing some of the history and seeing like, oh, okay, this is Midnight Lightning, obviously, but then also all of these other climbs…but that's…everywhere you go, all of those people have been as well, so there's history everywhere.

The knowledge of this history allows climbers to actively participate with the Valley's heritage through the sport of climbing itself. Another interviewee, Zach, said:

> I feel like I'm partaking in some kind of a historical activity because it's…it's shaped climbing as a whole because of what happened here before. So, you feel like you're kind of part of the history to a degree, especially being a native of the area…cause

as a kid you're like, oh, this is Yosemite. It's right in the backyard and you're like, oh, whoa, climbing started here. And then all these light bulbs pop on and you feel a bit more, I don't know, it feels a bit…

This feeling is reflected in my survey responses. For many, the history of the sport was a primary draw for their visit to Yosemite Valley, with 61 percent (see Appendix B) of respondents claiming such, as reflected in the chart in Figure 12.

Q5: What draws you to Yosemite Valley?	Physical Challenge	History (of the Sport)	Self-Discovery	Beauty or Ambiance	Spiritual Fulfillment	Other:
Responses (44)	32	27	17	36	21	12
Total Percentages	73%	61%	39%	82%	48%	27%

FIGURE 12: CHART, WHAT DRAWS YOU TO YOSEMITE VALLEY, FROM SURVEY DATA.

When asked to describe a particularly impactful experience or memory from their time climbing in Yosemite, some of the responses I received included: Projecting Midnight Lightning for the first time and being able to pull a few moves. Also, just the whole camp 4 ambiance and community around while trying that climb; Sending Midnight Lightening in Camp 4; My 1st time climbing in the valley was in the 80s. My mentor had climbed many big walls including 1st ascents and knew many of the Hardmen of the day. I got to meet some of the legends of the valley and climbed some of the classic cracks; and Sitting in the parking lot of the Tuolumne store during climber coffee and realizing I was

a baby climber surrounded by legends, who all were just having a pleasant morning. One respondent wrote:

> ...I think part of the draw and awe of being and climbing in Yosemite is the history of how climbing was and came to be there, the allure and romanticizing of another time when climbers were true adventurers, the sport was pure and climbers dedicated their lives to venturing into the unknown, and to becoming pioneers of the sport and the climbing world, and the dirtbag culture/lifestyle. It's hard to see that in the media and not feel nostalgic for that era. It always makes me think for a moment I could drop everything and move to Yosemite and give my life to that space, to the big walls which can't be compared to anything else.

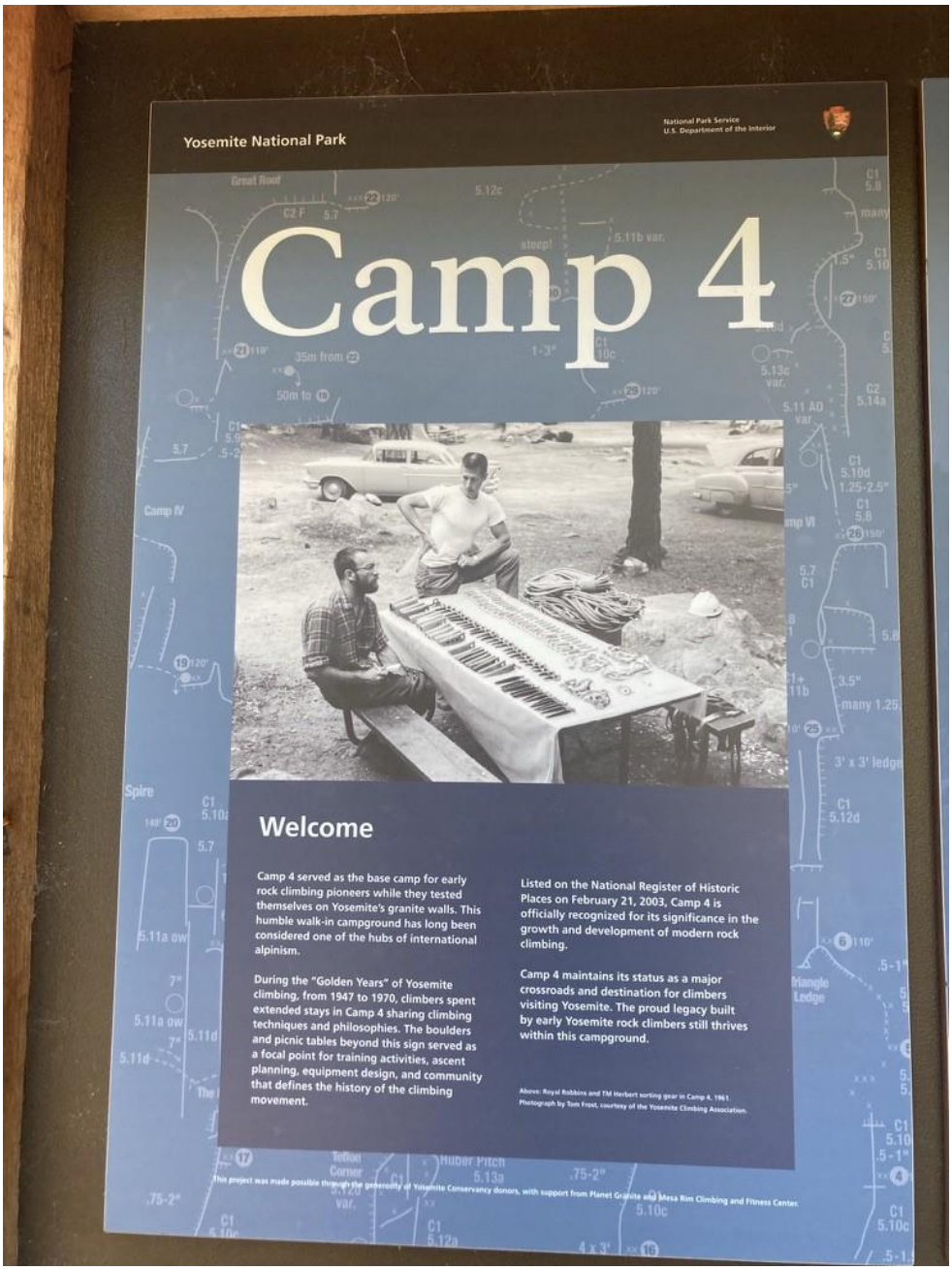

FIGURE 13: INFORMATIONAL CAMP 4 POSTER. PHOTOGRAPHED BY VANESSA TAYLOR, 11/23/2021.

FIGURE 14: EVOLUTION OF CLIMBING DISPLAY, INCLUDING INFORMATION ON THE CAMP 4 LIFESTYLE. PHOTOGRAPHED BY VANESSA TAYLOR, 07/07/2022.

The influence of Yosemite Valley on the sport of climbing reverberates beyond its granite cliffs. The Valley's rich history and iconic landmarks, such as Half Dome and El

Capitan, have become symbols of inspiration and aspiration for climbers worldwide. Yosemite's rich climbing history, shared with a larger public through films like 'Valley Uprising,' still significantly shape how climbers experience and perceive the park. While the sport has evolved, and climbers have pushed the boundaries of what was once thought impossible, the spirit of adventure and reverence for Yosemite Valley's majestic landscape remains unchanged. Climbers express a desire to connect with the adventurous spirit early climbers displayed and engage in experiences reminiscent of the past. Even with this desire, many contemporary climbers cannot seem to bring themselves to fully label themselves with the climbing identity held by many of those historic climbers.

Identity Politics: The Formation of a Climbing Identity and What It Means to be a "Yosemite Climber"

While Yosemite's climbing legacy holds deep historical significance, my research has revealed intriguing identity inconsistencies among modern climbers. The crux of these inconsistencies lies in the personal criteria climbers employ to assert this distinctive identity. Some accentuate the need to seek out both mental and physical climbing challenges, with the need to mirror the achievements of historic Yosemite climbers. One climber cogently noted, "To be a Yosemite Climber, I must seek out challenge in climbing that is both mental and physical because that is what historic Yosemite climbers did."

Among these climbers, I encountered individuals like Phil, drawn to Yosemite for its status as a "world destination" and a defining "rite of passage." And yet, many refrain from claiming the identity of a "Yosemite Climber" in the traditional sense, opening the debate on what precisely constitutes a Yosemite climber. As one respondent articulated, "I

would not consider myself a Yosemite climber because my pursuit of climbing in Yosemite is not close enough to the pursuit of climbing of historic figures such as Royal Robbins, the Stone Masters, etc." This identity issue seemingly cannot be divorced from the historical backdrop and the potent influence of climbers from the 1970s and 1980s who indelibly shaped the sport and made Yosemite Valley famous. Some climbers, however, feel detached from this historical legacy, as one participant expressed: "A 'Yosemite climber' is not something I identify with because I haven't dirtbagged long enough in the valley to earn the title."

In my survey, people had a variety of definitions to attribute to the moniker. Some of the responses I received included:

> I think that to be a Yosemite Climber I must seek out challenge in climbing that is both mental and physical because that is what historic Yosemite climbers did. In addition, I would need to have to put in some effort and have some success repeating accomplishments of historic Yosemite climbers. Although I have climbed boulders in Yosemite that are physically hard, scary, and historic I have not done any traditional climbing that is hard or scary. Thus, I would not consider myself a Yosemite climber because my pursuit of climbing in Yosemite is not close enough to the pursuit of climbing of historic figures such as Royal Robbins, the stone masters, etc. (Survey, December 2022);

> Competent mainly. Also ambitious. The walls are so huge and the amount of challenges endless. Its a very inspiring place. You need to embody competency and be a dreamer to succeed there (Survey, December 2022);

> Yosemite climbers are the old school dirtbags who would camp out there for the season to push the limits of the sport- I don't claim this (Survey, December 2022);

> In spite of the fact that I have been climbing in the valley every season since 2017, I have a hard time claiming an identity as a "real Yosemite climber", I think part of that stems from the fact that there has been such a big history of climbing in Yosemite and it is home to so many exceptionally skilled climbers, being a "Yosemite climber" means filling big shoes that sometimes feel too big for me (Survey, December 2022);

> I would say that I can probably claim that identity more than 75% of folks out there visiting Yosemite each day, but when you look at the other 25% of people that live that lifestyle it puts it into perspective. In addition, I can look at the things that I really did pour my heart and soul and bodily harm into and they didn't compare to those climbers that lived and breathed Yosemite (Survey, December 2022);

Joshua, a climber I met while doing some climbing of my own in the Valley, has climbed here on and off for years. When asked if he considered himself a 'Yosemite Climber,' he summed up this shared sentiment, noting:

> I personally think…I kind of attained that to like, the 1970s, you know? Yeah, like, I don't have the balls to do that…it sounds romantic, but, yeah, I still do have a day job. So, I would say I like to come to the valley, but I'm not a Yosemite climber.

Some romanticize this era of early climbing, even if they do not distinctly identify with it. Louie and Jack were two climbers I met who were visiting from the United Kingdom. Both had big dreams of climbing in Yosemite, in part because of this history. Louie told me:

> I think we'd be pretty happy if we could, I don't know, [do] the full adventure of cycling in or something, or getting a bus, and then chilling out in Camp 4, and doing the version of it that everyone had in the 60s…Eating out of cans of cat food, like a bunch of, you know, people like that. But then, being from London and not being that good at wilderness, it's also quite nice going, oh yeah, we can just sleep in the van, come and climb some boulders during the day, nice and easy.

While others think this romanticization is a negative attribute to the modern identity of climbing in the Valley. Nate, a climber I met in front of Midnight Lightning, has been coming to Yosemite often since 2008. He said:

> Camp four's bad because you have every wannabe…stone monkey out there with their guitar and bongo in five different groups, whether they know how to play a bongo or a guitar. And so, you're in one camp, and you can hear three different, like, [freaking] bongo fests going on, where you're like, either get together or go out in the woods…So everyone wants it to be this thing, I think especially after Valley Uprising. They want it to be this thing that it once was, but it's not.

As shown, motivations for identifying or not identifying as Yosemite climbers are diverse, and often revolves around perceived contributions to the sport and the landscape. Vikas, a longtime friend of mine as well as a climber who has visited the Valley numerous times, stressed that more must be done to claim this identity. He told me:

> I have to do so much more to be a Yosemite Climber…there's so many classics I have to do before I think I can…No, there's a long way to go. I think I've done some of them, but like, we walked by one today, Diesel Power. To be a Yosemite Climber, you gotta do that.

While Kevin noted the grandeur of performance that must be done here. He said:

> This is the stadium, you know? I feel like I need to, and I want to, to a degree …perform on that stage, or like, you know, measure myself along the same ruler that all these other people have measured themselves, you know?

Some, like Jesse McGahey, a climbing ranger in the park, are concerned about this push for accomplishment. During our interview he told me:

> And there's a lot more of a drive to perform and to achieve objectives, and I find that although that's awesome and that it's great to push yourself, sometimes setting those goals and just wanting that above all else and that, you know, succeeding on a certain route takes away from a lot of the other more spiritual, more experiential aspects of climbing, and then it also changes other people's experience.

Yet, the climber's identity is not static; it's an ever-evolving process shaped by the experiences encountered in Yosemite Valley. As individuals continue to navigate their climbing journey, their self-identities shift and transform. Some claim the identity occasionally, but not always. From my survey, a few respondents wrote:

> I don't claim that identity when I'm in the US, but when I'm abroad I tell people I live near Yosemite. It helps them understand that I have a deep background in trad climbing, even though right now I 'm here to sport climb (I usually travel to sport climb lol) (Survey, December 2022);

I've claimed this identity on and off over many years. To me it means being comfortable moving on granite and spending enough time there to know the intricacies and nuances of Yosemite rock. I like that being a Yosemite climber can mean bouldering, single pitch climbing, and big wall climbing all at once (Survey, December 2022);

This transformative journey is undoubtedly influenced by the perceptions and expectations of the climbing community. Climbers come together to both support and challenge one another, sharing stories, techniques, and knowledge that contribute to a collective sense of identity and belonging. Within the climbing community itself is a variety of approaches as to how they present that identity.

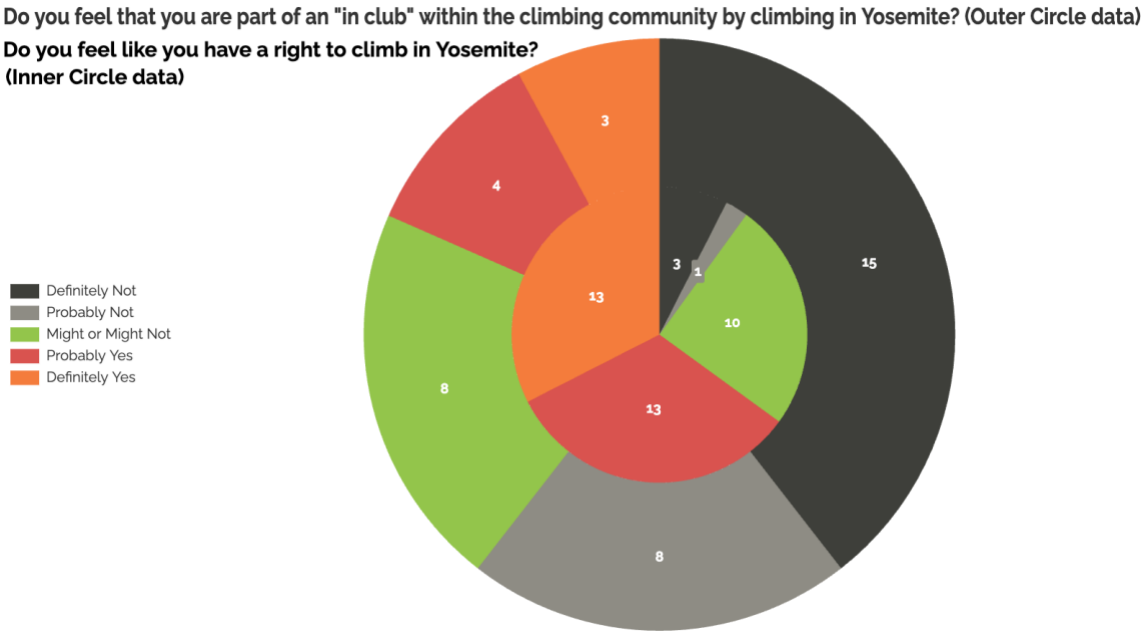

FIGURE 15: DOUBLE PIE CHART, SHOWING RESPONSES FROM TWO COMPLEMENTARY QUESTIONS, FROM SURVEY DATA.

The pie chart information, shown above, produced an interesting juxtaposition. Approximately the same number of individuals chose to answer the two questions, 'Do you feel that you are part of an "in club" within the climbing community by climbing in Yosemite?' and 'Do you feel like you have the right to climb in Yosemite?' though the responses were in direct contradiction. I had assumed that if climbers felt they had the right to climb in the Valley, they would also claim some ownership over being part of an "in club" by participating in the sport there. As it turns out, while most respondents felt that yes, they did have a right to climb in Yosemite (with 66 percent of respondents claiming either Definitely Yes or Probably Yes), a similarly large percentage of respondents felt that they did not feel like part of an "in club" just by climbing in Yosemite (60 percent claiming Definitely Not or Probably Not). Part of this may be due to the history of the sport, as described above, or even the influence of the next generation of innovation pushers to enter the Valley's arena.

The contemporary era has brought its own set of influences and rockstars, with social media platforms and climbers like Alex Honnold, Chris Sharma, and even famous actor Jason Momoa playing pivotal roles in reshaping the Yosemite Climber identity. These modern day rockstars and celebrities of the climbing world are prevalent even outside of the niche climbing community itself, with movies like *Free Solo,* featuring rock climber Alex Honnold, being the first movie of its kind to win an Academy Award. Ben Cunningham-Summerfield, a park interpretive ranger, told me during an interview:

> And you know, Alex Honnold made it super, super glam…by doing things like, his big free solo. Matt Watkins, El Cap and Half Dome in 24 Hours. You know, free solo. Dawn Wall. You know…a lot of these things here, didn't start to happen until

it happened. You know, Instagram, Snapchat, Vimeo, TikTok…but once social media really started to take off, then everything started taking off.

Even Lonnie, being the son of famous 70s rock climbing icon Ron Kauk and having spent many of his formative years living in the Valley, has a hard time accepting the identity of 'Yosemite Climber,' arguing he "still has work to do." During our interview, he told me he did, however, consider Honnold to be a Yosemite Climber. When I asked him why Honnold was more of a Yosemite climber than him, he responded with "[I've just] gotta do some more."

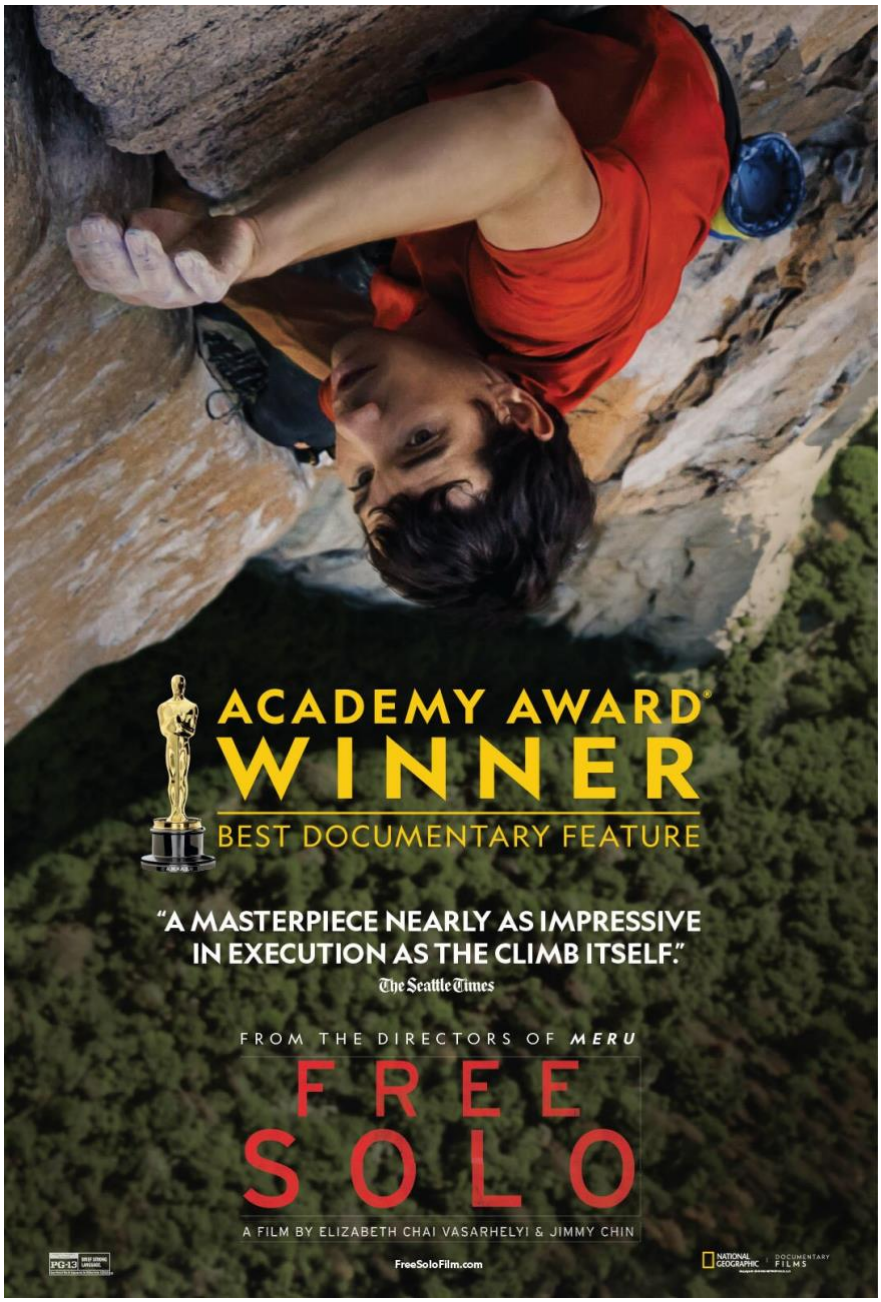

FIGURE 16: MOVIE POSTER FOR FREE SOLO, IMAGE FROM NATIONALGEOGRAPHIC.COM

When asked in my survey, "Was your first encounter with climbing in Yosemite through some form of media? (i.e., saw it depicted in a film, a magazine, or through social media) fifty-six percent of respondents replied that yes, that was how they had been

introduced to Yosemite, sixteen percent being unsure, and twenty-nine percent saying that no, media was not their first encounter with Yosemite.

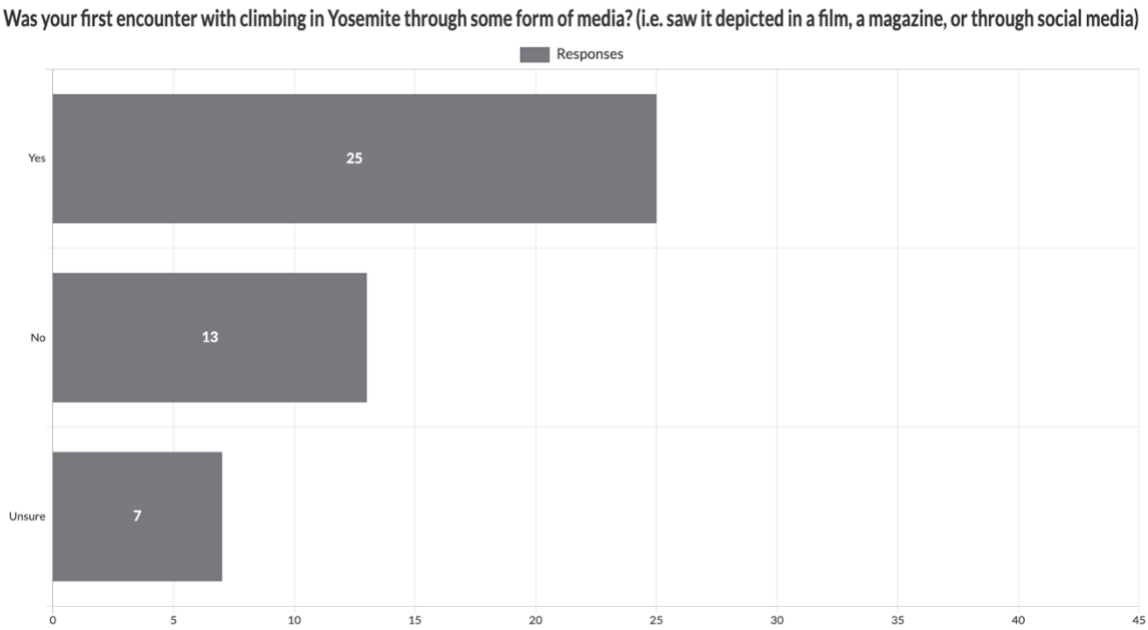

FIGURE 17: BAR CHART ASKING ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE ON INTRODUCTION TO YOSEMITE, FROM SURVEY DATA.

However, the present-day climbing landscape, with its amplified representation, brings its share of challenges, including increased tourism and the rise of 'van life,' which sometimes irk the local population. Greg Cox, Curator of Collections at the Yosemite Museum and climber in Yosemite since 2003, mentioned:

> The other component of it, from a local perspective, that can be really annoying is the increase of the van people. I mean, basically they're parking everywhere, taking over large sections of pullouts down in El Portal in front of people's houses and defecating in the river, which is of course our water source, and I mean just all sorts of things that are going to be, just annoying to locals. And there's also some van

> stuff I can get, but then there's other parts of it too, where I'm like, you know, you're riding in an 80, 000 van. You could just get a hotel room. This is completely unnecessary, you know.

A seasoned climber, Jesse, reflects on some of these changes, saying:

> Yes, it is a kind of mind-blowing thing. Climbers have a lot more money than me. And I don't know how much of that is just a result of lifestyle choices, like people don't pay rent and they do seasonal jobs and so they can put more money into their cars. Because they're living out of their vans and how much of it is just like white privilege…The 80, 000 dollar vans you're talking about now and the rock stars of climbing, right? And so that those guys [the climbers from 70s and 80s] were like in the magazines back then and stuff. But, you know, sponsorship was like, yeah, here's a few shoes, right?

Though there is no obvious clash between the van-lifers and the more traditional dirtbag climbers, this shift in accessibility to the park, where campers must fight general visitor traffic for a spot in Camp 4 and van-lifers can essentially park anywhere, speaks to a larger shift in the commercialization of the sport. While some may argue there is a lack of shared culture and endured experiences between the two groups, they both come to participate in the same shared climbing heritage in the park, linking their motivations if not their means of access.

Navigating through these various perceptions, motivations, and influences reveals that the identity of a "Yosemite Climber" isn't a one-size-fits-all label. Instead, it is a dynamic and evolving concept, profoundly shaped by individual experiences and the bonds formed within the climbing community. As Shannon notes, "I think that a lot of people

come to Yosemite, and they don't stick. You know? I think it takes a particular kind of person to keep coming back." The intricate dynamics of how these climbers navigate their identities on the rock faces of Yosemite Valley, where collaboration and competition often intermingle, impact not only individual journeys but also the broader climbing community.

Collaboration and Competition: Investigating the dynamics of space-sharing and collaboration among climbers in Yosemite Valley, exploring whether there is a sense of community or competition in staking claims to climbing spaces.

With limited resources and an increasing number of climbers visiting the Valley, the issue of space-sharing has become paramount. Through my research, I have discovered that while climbers might stake claims to specific climbing sites, there is a remarkable sense of collaboration and a spirit of sharing within the climbing community. Contrary to initial expectations, a significant theme that emerged from my survey was the overwhelming agreement among climbers regarding their willingness to share space with other stakeholders in Yosemite Valley. This finding challenges the assumption that climbers would prioritize their own privilege and exclusivity. Instead, a large percentage of climbers (85% from my survey) expressed a desire to share the landscape, recognizing the value of visibility for the sport and fostering a friendly atmosphere. When asked how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement 'I care about sharing this landscape,' 71 percent of respondents Strongly Agreed, 14 percent Somewhat Agreed, 12 percent Neither Agreed or Disagreed, only 2 percent Somewhat Disagreeing, and 0 percent Strongly Disagreeing.

FIGURE 18: SHARING THE LANDSCAPE BAR CHART, FROM SURVEY DATA.

In fact, many of the respondents to my survey noted that they were initially brought to Yosemite by someone else. From the survey data, out of 44 responses, 59 percent said they had been introduced to Yosemite by someone else, while 41 percent discovered it on their own.

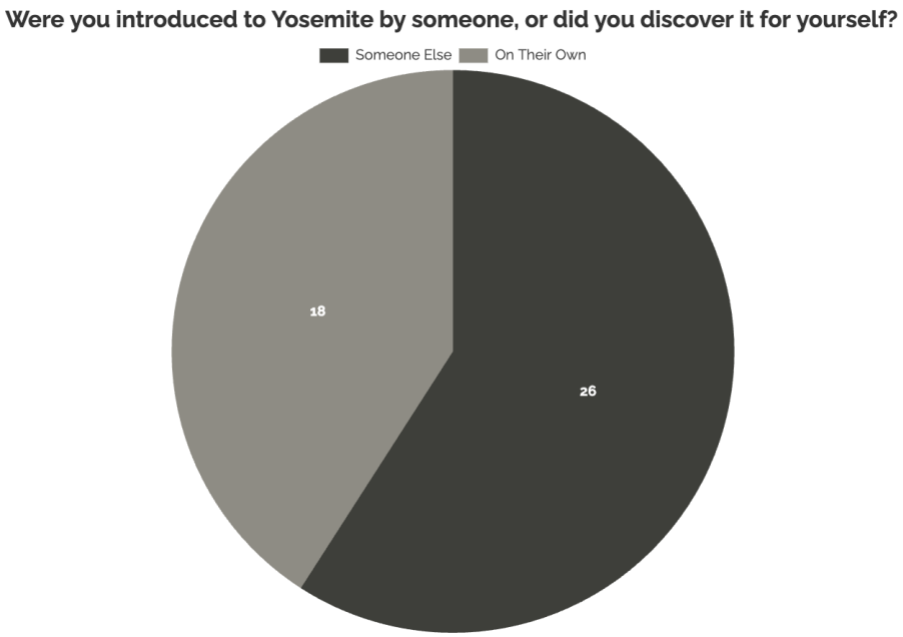

FIGURE 19: INTRODUCTION TO YOSEMITE PIE CHART, FROM SURVEY DATA.

Climbers recognize the value of cooperation and mutual support, understanding that everyone benefits from an encouraging and inclusive climbing environment. This is demonstrated by their engagement in informal agreements and unwritten rules to ensure fair access and minimize conflicts. This collaboration is also evident in the willingness to share information about routes, provide guidance to less experienced climbers, and offer encouragement and support to fellow climbers on the wall. They establish a sense of camaraderie and respect, which allows for a harmonious coexistence among climbers. Even newcomers to the Valley can look forward to this sense of openness. Louie, visiting from the UK, told me he just:

> Showed up and hoped. Showed up and hoped, and yeah, found these really nice people, hung out with them, did a load of climbs, got on Bachar Cracker, and then

we went to try Midnight Lightning, and it was lovely. And then they lent us their pads, we camped with them, chilled out…Easy to make friends here, it's nice.

FIGURE 20: CLIMBING GROUP AT MIDNIGHT LIGHTNING. PHOTOGRAPHED BY VANESSA TAYLOR, 11/22/2021.

Zach has dedicated five or six visits specifically to climbing in Yosemite, though has been climbing both in an outdoors for years. He felt that Yosemite was unique in that sense, and told me:

> Like, usually when people meet climbers, the climbers are chill, they're so nice, no one steals anything that they have laid out, they're always encouraging, but like, out of the six and a half years of indoor and outdoor [climbing], and that's like hundreds of sessions, hundreds of hours, so it's a pretty good percentage, that's the one thing I think, especially Yosemite has…I think they're, cream of the crop, everyone's super nice here, and I think because the valley just makes everybody feel good.

While there is a strong sense of collaboration, it is not without its challenges. As the popularity of climbing in Yosemite Valley continues to grow, climbers encounter moments of tension and competition. Some climbers strive to push the limits of their abilities, seeking to establish new routes or achieve notable climbing feats. This drive for personal achievement can occasionally create a competitive atmosphere, where climbers vie for recognition and status within the climbing community. Even I had heard stories of downgrading[11] climbs due to a woman having completed it. Greg Cox, curator of the Yosemite Museum, noted that:

> But, because, you know, they didn't want to be…failing where a woman had succeeded. So, then they did go and try it after, you know, Beth and Tommy, freed it [the Nose] …cause then it's like, all right, well, Tommy's done it. So, we wouldn't

[11] To 'downgrade' a climb is to reduce its level of difficulty to a lower grade, rank, or level of importance.

> be like losing, you know, where only a woman had succeeded…so, I mean, just kind of absurd stuff like that.

Some of this comes from the influx of climbers arriving from gyms across the country, as it has become more popularized as a sport. Shannon, also one of the writers of the new Yosemite Bouldering Guidebook, was frustrated by the implication of her involvement, telling me:

> Yeah, I'm pissed off about the fact that people think that my guidebook makes Yosemite more popular when it's actually just there are more climbers. So, I have very strong thoughts where…I don't understand why the managers of climbing gyms are mad at me for making a guidebook when they're the ones generating climbers.

However, despite these moments of competition, climbers in Yosemite Valley generally recognize the importance of balance and cooperation. They understand the need to preserve the sense of community and stewardship that has characterized the climbing culture in the Valley for decades. Climbers actively engage in discussions about ethics, responsible climbing practices, and conservation efforts to ensure the sustainable enjoyment of the landscape for future generations. The dynamics of collaboration and competition in Yosemite Valley reflect the delicate balance between individual aspirations and the collective well-being of the climbing community. The spirit of collaboration allows climbers to forge connections, learn from one another, and collectively contribute to the preservation and enjoyment of the climbing resources in the valley. Jesse told me:

> Yes, there's the friendly competition in Yosemite Valley and in Camp 4 and of course that's always going to be there, but, it's just a different thing when you don't have the same level of commercialization or materialism that we have just fallen into and it's trying to figure out how climbers can get past that again and be back to like, okay, what is the essence of why we like to do this?

Climbers also have varying interactions with other visitors, and while some appreciate the curiosity of onlookers, others express concerns about tourists' impact on the environment. Phil mentioned:

> …there's so many examples of tourists especially to a place like Yosemite which draws people from all over the world who don't really care about the place. They just want to like come here, take some Instagram photos and like peace and so if that means like all these trash cans are full, but I have this trash, let me just set it next to the trash…you don't, at least in my experience, you don't see climbers doing anything like that.

While Lonnie just hoped for an overall respect for nature. He felt that:

> As long as people are just respectful. That's what I would just promote, you know, for anybody, whoever it is out there, who climbed in a, only climbed in a gym, and they came here, that's fine. As long as it's respectful, that's chill. It doesn't matter.

When asked how they felt about the interaction of climbing sites with hiking trails or other stakeholders' spaces, 8 percent of respondents claimed it was one of their least favorite things about climbing in Yosemite, while 58 percent of respondents said they did not think about it much, and the last 34 percent enjoying the interaction with hikers and other stakeholders while climbing (Q9).

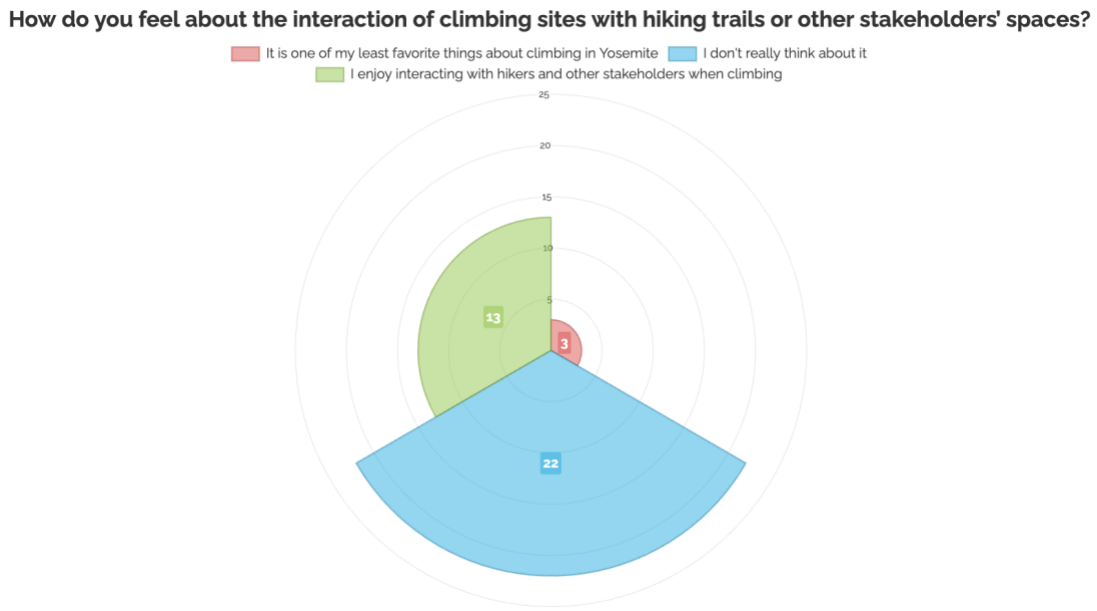

FIGURE 21: POLAR AREA CHART ABOUT STAKEHOLDER INTERACTION, FROM SURVEY DATA.

When asked in my interviews, most climbers had a positive experience in interacting with the non-climbing visitors to the park. In part, they seemed to enjoy sharing outdoor recreation with others. Shannon said:

> I really enjoy seeing people loving Yosemite…I want people to have that adventure for themselves, and I think that it is because it was a place where you couldn't look those things up…I feel like climbers come here and they think that they're not tourists. And we're all tourists…in the book we never refer to anyone as tourists, for one, we just refer to them as visitors and climbers are also visitors.

Vikas feels similarly, saying:

> Hmm, yeah, sometimes tourists will kind of gawk at you, like, watch. I don't know if you've ever had that experience where you're climbing something, and tourists will just sit and watch. I don't have a problem with it, I think they're just enjoying

> the space and I'm enjoying the space. I think especially with climbers, we should be careful to describe it because everyone else is kind of hiking or enjoying the space… I mean, it's a national park. We're here to share it, and everyone should be able to experience the same joy that any other person can experience.

For some climbers, part of the benefit in interacting with non-climbers comes through gratification of ego. Joshua told me:

> I mean, sometimes it's an ego boost. People think you're super cool when you're climbing on a V1. This is like a warm up, you know, I don't want to like, not be …yeah, I don't mind and sometimes that does get annoying, but like, I mean, I have no right to be annoyed, because we all come here, you know, this isn't my land, like, public land and everyone should come here and get the fair share, so yeah, I don't want that to be a pet peeve.

Nate echoed that sentiment, saying:

> Because a lot of times you look at climbers like you're this different breed and they're kind of scared and like you're, you know, grunting or your shirt's off or you scream or you're like, you look like a gorilla. But, uh, when you open it up to them and they start asking questions, one, it's really interesting the things they say. They also always say something that makes you feel good because they're like, oh my God, I can't, like, this is impressive… You're entertaining them for a little bit and you're inspiring them.

While other climbers walk the line between wanting the ego boost of being recognized as an elite athlete and maintaining their own personal space. Kevin told me:

> There's certainly like a lot of tourist interaction and most of the time it has to be, I feel like I have to be a little short with people because it's like lots of people want to talk about climbing and I got like [stuff] going on. I got places I need to be, you know, like day burning daylight and all that…but sometimes I'll be in a more patient mood, and I'll talk to people for a while, but then you bump into the next group of tourists and then they want to talk to you about everything, and then it's like, you could spend an entire day doing that…but I don't particularly mind. Usually, they tell me how amazing I am, and they don't even know anything about me or what I've done or what I'm doing. They're just like, oh, you have a rope. You're basically Alex Honnold. And you're therefore amazing. And I'm like, yeah, yeah, you're right… I think it's kind of cool that people can see what it's all about and up close.

The dynamics of collaboration and competition in Yosemite Valley reflect the delicate balance between individual aspirations and the collective well-being of the community. Climbers navigate these dynamics by fostering a culture of inclusivity, respect, and shared responsibility. In speaking of inclusivity, it is important to note, however, that many of the survey respondents, as well as my interviewees, fell into a specific category. With an estimated 25,000 to 50,000 climber-days annually[12], I was only able to interview and get survey responses from approximately 100 people. Of those that chose to self-identify, many fell within the categories of white male & female ages 25-44 (See Appendix B), with a variety of mixed identities as well, including Indigenous-identifying climbers. While these responses give some insight into the behaviors and attitudes of Yosemite

[12] Data retrieved from https://www.nps.gov/yose/planyourvisit/climbing_safety.htm, Last updated: January 30, 2023

climbers, they may not be representative of the general Yosemite population, or those that fall outside of the primary survey demographic. When discussing how climbers want to tie into the history of climbing in Yosemite with Vikas, for instance, he recognized:

> Yeah, that's a thing. I think something about…maybe I don't identify with those people. None of them are dark skinned dudes with beards.

Jesse recognizes the need for more diversity and inclusion. He told me:

> I really think that I'm just hearing from some people that one of the things about Yosemite is…if you are not a white male or secondary to that white female, like, you're not one of those…stereotypical climbers…it's already intimidating.

Though he has noted that the Park is taking a more active role in including Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion events, especially when showcasing climbing in the park.

Regardless of the need for more diverse access to the park, the community does have a tendency of coming together to support and enrich one another's experiences while climbing. The spirit of collaboration allows climbers to contribute to the preservation of a vibrant and inclusive climbing community in Yosemite Valley. By embracing this ethic, climbers forge connections, learn from one another, and collectively share in the preservation and enjoyment of the climbing resources and landscape of the Valley.

Landscape and Experience: Examining the intricate relationship between climbers and the natural environment.

Many climbers describe feeling a profound sense of humility and awe as they confront the magnitude of the rock formations and the immensity of the landscape. It is in these moments of vulnerability and insignificance that climbers forge a deep connection

with the land, discovering a greater understanding of their place within the natural world. Through my research, I have uncovered the multifaceted ways in which climbers identify with Yosemite Valley and how their interactions with the landscape contribute to the formation and reinforcement of their identities. Climbers find solace, challenge, and inspiration in the sheer granite walls, breathtaking vistas, and the raw power of nature that permeates the valley.

Moreover, Yosemite Valley serves as a transformative space for climbers, offering an escape from the constraints and demands of their everyday lives and allowing them to become part of something bigger. It is a sanctuary where they can reconnect with their "true selves," away from the noise and distractions of modern society. The valley's serene beauty and rugged challenges create a space for self-reflection, personal growth, and the cultivation of a distinct climbing identity. Louie and Jack, two climbers visiting from the UK, noted:

> *Louie* – I guess just nice being out in the nature. We're both from London, so we don't get to see anything like this. It's yeah, and it's like nature made easy. There's all the trails and stuff. Nature made easy, I like it, yeah.
>
> *Jack* – Very accessible. And everything's so big.

Within the survey, when asked about impactful experiences or memories from their time climbing in Yosemite, respondents gave me a multitude of responses, including:

> So many! But the first time I climbed El Cap tops the list. It was a monumental personal achievement and made me feel so strong and independent. It's surreal to see the Valley from so high up and to connect with all the little details of the wall

> that you can't see from the ground: tiny plants, birds and bats. The feeling of being immersed in nature has never felt so strong (Survey, December 2022);
>
> I love the experience of climbing up an exposed rock face that I'm intimately familiar with, blue sky above and warm breeze blowing past. I feel at home and in a content peaceful place in my head and my heart (Survey, December 2022);
>
> I remember my first time going to Tuolumne, to boulder with friends, and being completely and utterly taken by the landscape. It seemed there was no place more perfect, more magical. Every week I waited for the weekend, to drive back there, no matter the commute, for a day and a half of pure bliss, worry-free, feeling completely natural and like there was happiness, community, beauty, nature to discover around every corner. I felt like a kid in an infinite, complex yet simple, beautiful world that I had hardly scratched the surface of. Being there in Tuolumne was a gift, and the thing I wanted to do most during that time of my life. Climbing was the medium through which I experienced it, and certainly that is magical in itself, but looking back it almost doesn't matter what brought me there or what I climbed. I was also taken by my first time doing multi-pitch, climbing domes. It was my first-time feeling exposure in that way. It felt humbling and mystifying, addicting and free (Survey, December 2022);

Along that same line, 82 percent of respondents noted 'Beauty or Ambiance' as a draw to Yosemite (see Figure 12 above).

Intrinsically linked with this deep connection to the landscape comes a distinct sense of responsibility for its care and preservation.

FIGURE 22: PRESERVATION BAR CHART, FROM SURVEY DATA

The importance of this landscape to the climbing community can be seen in the above Figure 22, with 81 percent of respondents strongly agreeing that they cared about the preservation of the landscape. Many of the individuals I interviewed recognized that they interacted with the landscape in a more intimate/immersive way than most visitors. Vikas agreed with this sentiment, saying:

> We are, in a way, almost altering the space. We're putting chalk on the holds, we're brushing things, right? You don't see tourists, you know, like trimming the trees, they don't do that, right? We're manipulating the space…So, climbers, I think, often manipulate the environment a little bit more than general tourists so I've seen moments where tourists are watching me and they're like 'wow this person is really utilizing this recreational space, he's putting chalk on things, he's got tick marks on stuff, he's got a big brush, he's putting a rope on things, what is he doing' right and

> that I think is interesting and I think we have to be really respectful because everyone is watching us in those moments right and we should treat the place with a lot of respect because we're really using it.

Joshua affirmed the ethic that climbers are responsible, to some extent, for the preservation of the Valley. He said:

> I agree with that wholeheartedly. I have friends who always pick up trash when they leave. I respect that. Like, even if it's not their trash, they always find one thing to take back home. And then, even, I mean, each of these holes…little crystals that we see, we don't want to mess with that, you know, that's what makes the climb *climb* and then like that much more we are connected than more, typical people I would say to the park and because we're connected, and we care about it. Like yeah, definitely we want to do our job to preserve what we have.

In this vein, the Yosemite Climbing Association (YCA), located outside of the park in Mariposa, has taken on the responsibility of organizing a large cleaning effort in the Valley. Every year since 2003, the YCA organizes an event called Yosemite Facelift, in collaboration with YNP and sponsored by various outdoor brands. During this event, climbers dedicate their time and effort to removing trash, debris, and other forms of human waste from climbing areas, trails, and surrounding landscapes.

In 2023, it drew in over 1,300 volunteers, as well as garnered around 3,900 hours of volunteer work to collect 10, 432 pounds of trash[13]. Facelift has become a significant catalyst for climbers' engagement in environmental conservation. It fosters a sense of

[13] Data collected from https://www.yosemiteclimbing.org/yosemitefacelift2023

community, shared responsibility, and collective action among climbers, emphasizing the importance of taking care of the natural environment they rely on. By participating in Facelift, climbers actively contribute to the preservation and stewardship of Yosemite Valley, cultivating a culture of environmental consciousness within the climbing community.

FIGURE 23: CONSERVATION DISPLAY IN YOSEMITE MUSEUM. PHOTOGRAPHED BY VANESSA TAYLOR, 07/07/2022.

There are, however, challenges in maintaining the preservation of the Valley from a management perspective. Ben Cunningham-Summerfield, an Indigenous interpreter for the park on top of his ranger role, discussed some of the challenges of maintaining the landscape integrity with the increase in visitation. He noted:

> …employees could stop on their way home, take a few pictures, and keep on going. And now you gotta, we've tried so many different things. We had to close areas of the river off because we got so many people in one spot, they caused a bank collapse. They park everywhere. If there's not a rock or a stump to prohibit their travel into a forest, they will park wherever they can get their car. What went from a few people here and there to thousands of people every day. Walking in the road, strollers, the whole family, the dog. And it's caused such a huge amount of degradation to the environment.

Jesse, in his position as climbing ranger tries to bridge the gap between climbers and park regulations. He is responsible for climbing related outreach, including contacting climbers at the bases of big walls, facilitating the 'Ask a Climber' program, and hosting the 'Climber Coffee' programs. On top of this, he also participates in law enforcement, mountain rescues, trail work and restoration, and cleanups on the walls. This last role includes breaking down fire rings on top of El Capitan and cleaning up after climbers who stash gear on big walls or in crevices in rock faces. He told me:

> …a lot of people fail and come back year after year, and they leave their cache of stuff there for a year or two or longer. Until we come and grab it. We remove it, and if it's trash, we throw it away. If it's not trash, you know, we'll…Repurpose it

> for government use or give it to the barn for, you know, they need ropes for their stock and stuff like that and so that part I feel like saddens me a little bit that people are like, okay, they're seeing this as like a recreational entity or a gym instead of…these are sacred mountains and sacred cliffs that need to be respected.

Even with his position in policing the climbing community, he noted that, for the most part, "if there's violations, climbers in general will tell us about it because like they police themselves to some extent." Jesse's role underscores the vital position of climbing rangers in maintaining a balance between preserving natural spaces and facilitating climbing experiences. Our conversation acknowledged the challenges posed by the increasing number of climbers and other visitors, leading to crowded climbing areas and potential conflicts. Fortunately, climbers have also had a positive impact on the active conservation of the Valley. Jesse discussed a collaboration effort between the Parks Service, an outside entity, and climbers. He explained that:

> …climbers helped us with locating peregrines again for the first time after, after DDT in the 70s on the North America Wall. And they reported it to us and helped us gather eggs and for the Santa Cruz Raptor. I can't remember what the exact name of their…UC Santa Cruz has like a raptor study entity, and they incubated eggs and returned those chicks to the nest and now we have like one of the healthiest populations of peregrines in the world. There's like 13 pairs that are known in Yosemite and from zero, you know, that's cool.

Ultimately, my conversation with Jesse revealed the intricate relationship between climbers, climbing culture, the National Park Service, and the preservation of natural

spaces, emphasizing the complex interplay between adventure, recreation, spirituality, and responsible stewardship.

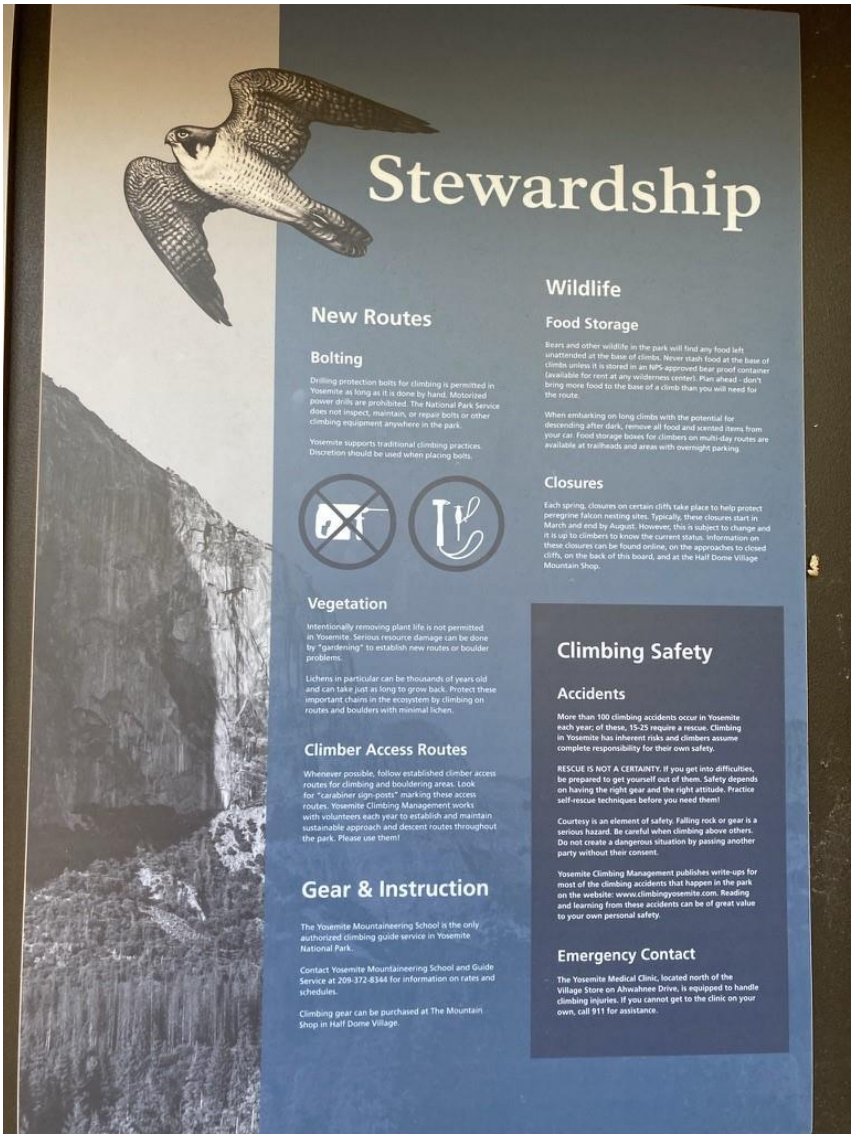

FIGURE 24: INFORMATIONAL STEWARDSHIP POSTER. PHOTOGRAPHED BY VANESSA TAYLOR, 11/23/2021.

The rock faces of Yosemite have witnessed countless stories of triumph, perseverance, and self-discovery. Climbers have left their mark on these walls, both literally and metaphorically, as they push their limits, conquer fears, and achieve new

heights. The memories and experiences forged in Yosemite become integral parts of climbers' identities, shaping their self-perception, aspirations, and narratives. It is worth noting that climbers' identities are not solely shaped by their individual experiences but are also influenced by the collective culture and history of climbing in Yosemite Valley. They inherit a rich legacy from the trailblazers and legends who came before them, whose bold exploits and groundbreaking achievements have elevated Yosemite to its revered status within the climbing community. Climbers feel a deep sense of respect, reverence, and responsibility to honor and uphold this legacy, while also seeking to contribute their own unique stories to the tapestry of Yosemite's climbing history.

The intricate relationship between climbers and the natural environment of Yosemite Valley plays a pivotal role in shaping and reinforcing their identities. Through their experiences in this remarkable landscape, climbers find not only physical challenges and adventure but also a profound sense of connection, purpose, and personal growth. Yosemite Valley becomes a canvas on which climbers paint their stories, leaving an indelible mark on their identities and forging an enduring bond between themselves and this space. Their stewardship and conservation efforts help to preserve a space which many consider almost sacred.

Spiritual Connection and Sacredness: Unpacking the manifestations of spirituality and sacredness among climbers in their interactions with the landscape, highlighting the significance of Yosemite Valley as a potentially sacred site.

There is a profound spiritual connection that climbers experience in their interactions with the landscape of Yosemite Valley, as I will show in this section. Climbers

manifest their spirituality and perceive the potential sacredness of this remarkable natural setting in a variety of ways. For many, it is more than just a physical playground; it is a space where the boundaries between the material and the spiritual blur, and a sense of transcendence can be found. In Figure 12 (above) we can see that 48 percent of respondents claimed 'Spiritual Fulfillment' for one of their draws to Yosemite Valley. When asked what adjectives respondents would use to describe their experience climbing in Yosemite, some of the responses I received were 'Spiritual,' 'Sacred,' 'Magical,' and 'Awe-Inspiring.'

FIGURE 25: WORD FREQUENCY DIAGRAM TO EXPRESS ADJECTIVES USED TO CHARACTERIZE EXPERIENCES IN YOSEMITE, FROM SURVEY.

Through my research, I have uncovered a range of expressions of spirituality among climbers in Yosemite Valley. Some climbers claim an overtly sacred connection in their visits to Yosemite. Vikas described his experience driving into the Valley:

> So, when I drive into Yosemite, it is such…it's a really…it feels like sacred, I think is the right way to put it, because it's so powerful, right? There's amazing places all over the world, but the grandeur of driving in and there's these huge walls on the side, and you're in this valley. It's such a magical place…the stakes feel higher, everything feels way more majestic, I'm super inspired to do things. I don't feel that way everywhere.

Thusly, the act of traveling to Yosemite can be seen as a pilgrimage, though some may need an excuse to make the trek. Kevin, a visiting climber, used a wedding, saying:

> The wedding was an excuse to finally make, you know, the pilgrimage, because it's a very intimidating place as a climber people and I have a hard time getting my friends here because they think they need to be ready to do all the biggest things and set the Nose speed record and stuff.

Others describe their experiences on the rock as a form of meditation, where they achieve a state of deep focus and mindfulness. Jesse feels that connection, saying:

> And, it's almost like you're going to…church, you know, and you go there and you feel this, like, immediate change in your, emotions and your physical presence and it's easy to, like, just fall into being in the moment and, you know, having the meditation of the climbing and, the fear of climbing, when you have that practice.

The act of climbing becomes a spiritual practice, allowing him to be fully present in the moment, immersed in the rhythm of movement and the tactile connection with the rock.

Even more find spiritual meaning in the natural beauty and grandeur of the valley. They perceive Yosemite as a cathedral of nature, where they can witness the immense power and harmony of the Earth's elements. The vastness of the landscape and the sheer magnitude of the rock formations evoke feelings of awe, veneration, and a connection to something greater than themselves, even if they don't explicitly describe it as a spiritual experience. Jesse connected the two ideas, telling me:

> So, but what that means is you can go to places in the Sierras and even in Yosemite and not see anybody and have and have that experience of solitude, which for a lot of us, as climbers, that's where you really get to contemplate the sacred nature of, wilderness and of these places by not having those other human distractions. And wilderness also has the added benefit of not having cell service. Put away your connectivity to the rest of the world, which is also really healthy.

Climbers describe moments of feeling small amid the grandeur of the landscape, experiencing reverence, and finding solace in the vastness of Yosemite Valley. Phil, a climber I ran into while doing research, told me:

> Yeah, definitely. Every time I'm here, the vastness of it makes you feel small, I guess, and the difficulty of the climbing here just like crushes your ego and all those things like I think are really good.

Shannon echoed that sentiment, saying:

> In the boulders I feel really small and kind of like tucked in and cozy. I like the feeling of feeling small. It helps me like contextualize like how unimportant things are, which like helps my mental health…I think it's also like a subtlety of being intimate with very specific part of a rock…these rocks that…they're like ancient. Your life doesn't actually exist in their life. Like that you feel like they're your friend… they do start to feel like your old friend. I got on this climb the other day and it was like limit when I was trying it and I l got on it again and it was just like, ah, like we're here… Yeah. I think it's kind of the same thing of I feel like it's, yeah, like we're old friends.

This notion that the rocks themselves have a story and feeling a connection to that is carried through by Joshua. He said:

> When I climb out and like, I have a lot of fun climbing elsewhere too but Yosemite is special because there's so much story behind each rock, and I think that's why I like to come out here a lot more…Yeah, it's, there's stories. That plays a bigger part than just pure kinesthetic movements…I think, just being here, and like, just being ingrained in nature. Like the valley is such a, like, small place, right? But you're surrounded with such big rocks, and it just opens up something within me l that I don't get elsewhere.

The notion of Yosemite Valley as a potentially sacred site emerges from the profound impact it has had on climbers throughout history. The valley has been a crucible for personal transformation, a place where individuals face their fears, push their limits, and experience moments of transcendence. These transformative experiences can be seen

as spiritual in nature, as climbers connect with their inner selves, overcome challenges, and forge a deep bond with the natural world.

It is important to note that while many climbers recognize the spiritual dimensions of their experiences in Yosemite Valley, not all explicitly label it as "sacred." The term "sacred" carries cultural and religious connotations that may not fully capture the diverse range of spiritual experiences and interpretations among climbers. However, the significance and reverence attached to the valley and its role in climbers' personal growth and connection to something larger than themselves suggest the potential for it to be considered a sacred space within the global climbing community. It is also worth stating that the Indigenous communities with connections to the Valley do, in fact, consider it a sacred site. Though the resident population from the Valley were displaced generations ago, many of the descendants of the Ahwahnechee still inhabit park space and live nearby, engaging with the park in a variety of ways (including climbing). While in the Valley in 2022, I saw an interpretive sign that was engaging and educational about this connection, shown below.

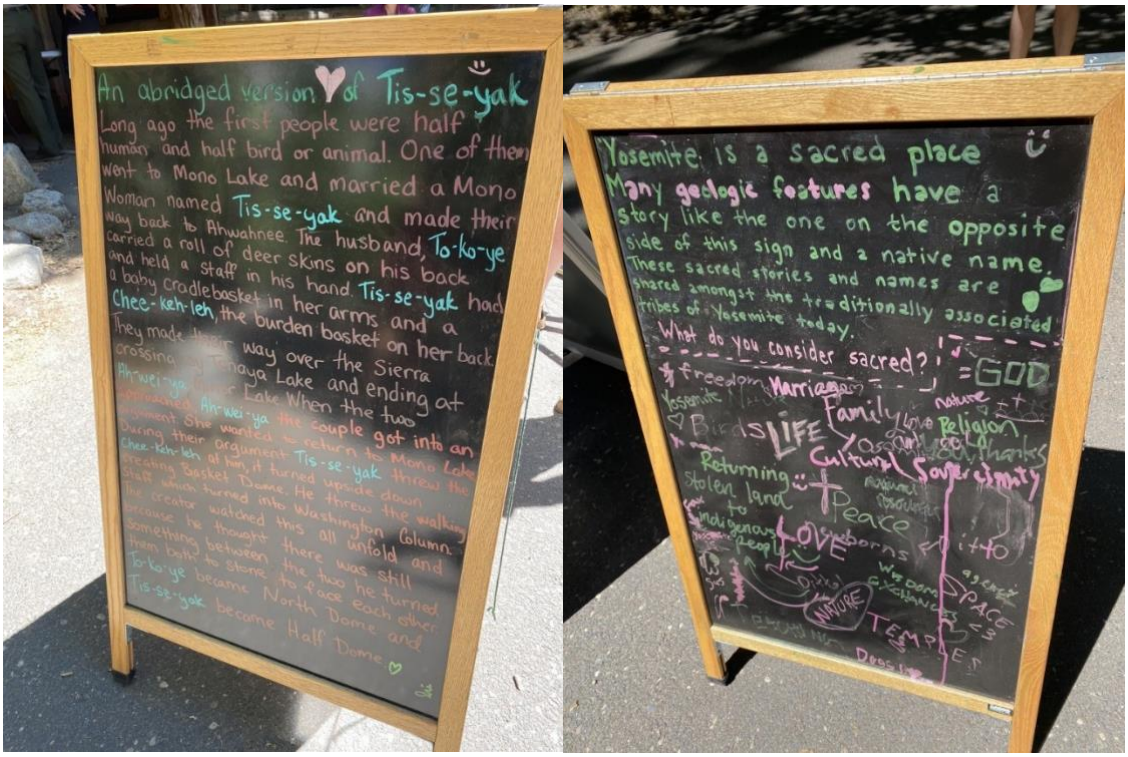

FIGURE 26: INTERPRETATIVE SIGN IN YOSEMITE. PHOTOGRAPHED BY VANESSA TAYLOR, 7/7/202.

The exploration of spirituality and sacredness in Yosemite Valley adds a layer of depth and meaning to climbers' experiences. It highlights the transformative power of the natural environment and the profound impact it has on their sense of self, purpose, and connection to the world around them. By engaging with the landscape in a spiritual way, climbers not only find solace and inspiration but also cultivate a deeper understanding of their place in life.

Indigenous Acknowledgment: Discussing the historical context of Indigenous displacement in Yosemite Valley and addressing the importance of Indigenous connections to the land.

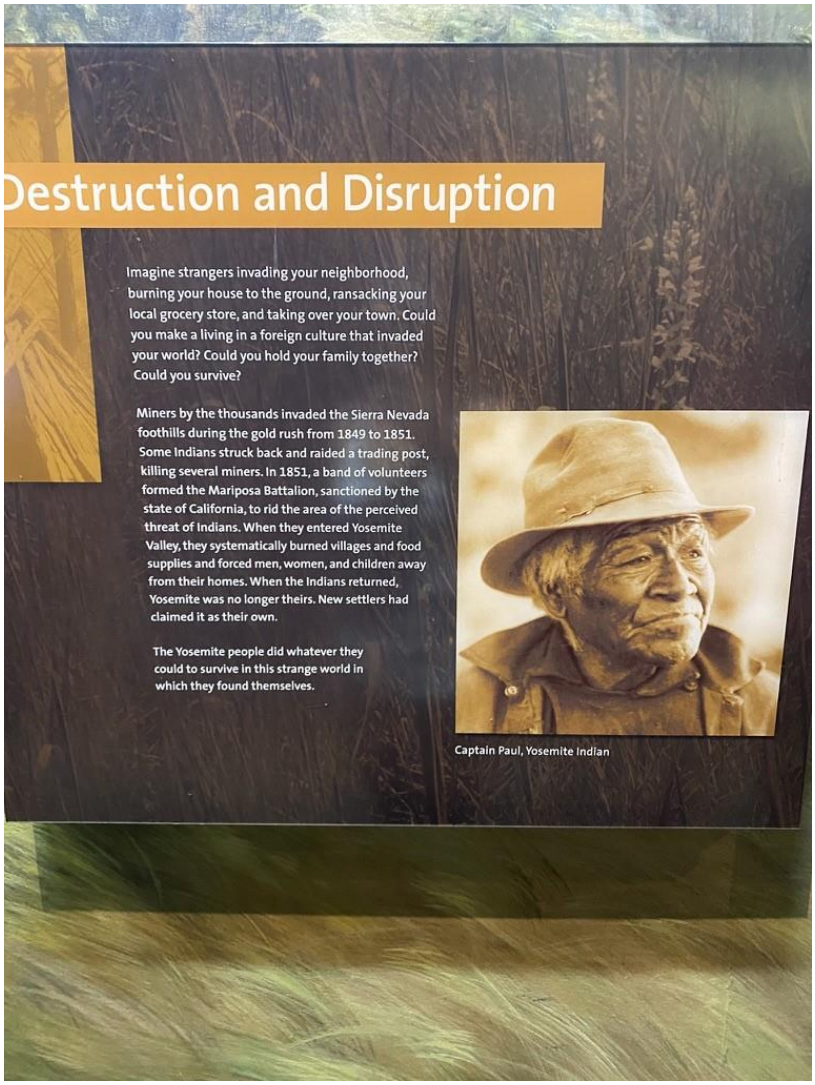

FIGURE 27: INTERPRETATIVE SIGN IN YOSEMITE VALLEY MUSEUM. PHOTOGRAPHED BY VANESSA TAYLOR, 7/7/2022.

Yosemite Valley's landscape holds a deep historical significance as the ancestral homeland of Indigenous communities, including the Ahwahneechee people. However, the history of Yosemite Valley also includes a painful chapter of Indigenous displacement and marginalization. The forced removal of Indigenous communities from their lands during the establishment of national parks like Yosemite has had lasting impacts on their cultural

heritage and connection to the landscape. I discussed this in greater depth in my Background, Chapter 2. Ben summarized the history to me:

> When we go back to the 1700s, when California was Spanish, in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, when Spain ceded California to the United States, the Indian people that lived here were counted as livestock, through chattel. And when the park was in the initial stages of being created, the initial eviction attempt was based on misinformation.
>
> So, the guy that owned the trading post, James Savage, had multiple Indian wives, which did not set well with some natives, and also did not sit well with a lot of the European miners who were in the area. And so, when he was off doing a trade, whatever, his training boats got shot up full of arrows and burned to the ground. And the arrows had all been taken from Indians on raids by white people on their camps. And then, they, everybody told Savage, yeah, we saw a bunch of Indians. They did this to you. So that's what began the mission to get to the Indians in Yosemite Valley, which he never had a problem with. But there were also stories that, well, the Indians saw all those Indians up there, so they didn't have to deal with them either.
>
> So, there's never, when it comes to his story, it's never her story, it's always his story. There's never a completeness to the information. There's always gaps that people fill in with whatever rubble they can find. In any event, Savage comes up here and attempts to, begins the removal attempt.

Throughout the years, Native people remain in hiding around the valley as more and more settlers are pouring in. And of course, there's always some of the empathetic people taking on the plight of the less than fortunate. So, Indians began working as hunters and fishers, providing food for hotels, as guides for creating trails up and down the mountains.

As laundresses, seamstresses, housekeepers, childcare providers, Indians became employees. But that's all they ever were. A lot of people were sent to day schools outside the park. A lot of Indian children were just completely removed from their families and sent hundreds of miles away to boarding schools.

And then, as the park continued to expand, Visitors wanted to know more about the Indians. The park didn't want to see the Indians living in their huts with their floors or clothes. So, in 1916, they started the Indian Field Days. And started paying the Indians a modest sum to dress up as Indians from other places because that's what visitors at the time expected to see.

And they had Indian baby pageants. It's basketry contest, horse riding. Uh, the potato game. We had long sharps sticks and you had to skew a potato outta one fire pit and then race on horseback to the other fire pit. It was a pretty rough game. Cowboys against the Indians, right? In the thirties, a lot of the remaining Indian families were moved to a central housing area and a common shower house, and a common parking garage, but they all had their own little shack.

> If it was a larger family, they might have two shacks pushed together. And so, the Indian people lived that way for a long time. And as the park continued to expand, we have now a roads department, a forestry department, whatever. The Indians would gain employment by the federal government. And the federal government would put them on the road crew and move them to Wawona.
>
> And the family didn't want to be without dad, so the whole family would pack up and move to Wawona. And then the government would come in, drag their house off, repurpose it, tear it down, burn it down, and then say, oh, you guys left your house, you have no more claim to the valley. And so that process was a slow process until 1969, when the superintendent at the time evicted the few remaining families in there, burned their homes down in front of them, and incorporated them into the main community.

Despite the historical significance of Indigenous displacement in Yosemite Valley, my research findings indicate that most climbers were not aware of the rebuilding of Wahhoga Village, located adjacent to Camp 4. This lack of awareness underscores the need for greater education and acknowledgment of Indigenous history and presence in the valley. By understanding the context of displacement and acknowledging the Indigenous connections to the land, climbers can develop a more nuanced appreciation of the landscape they enjoy.

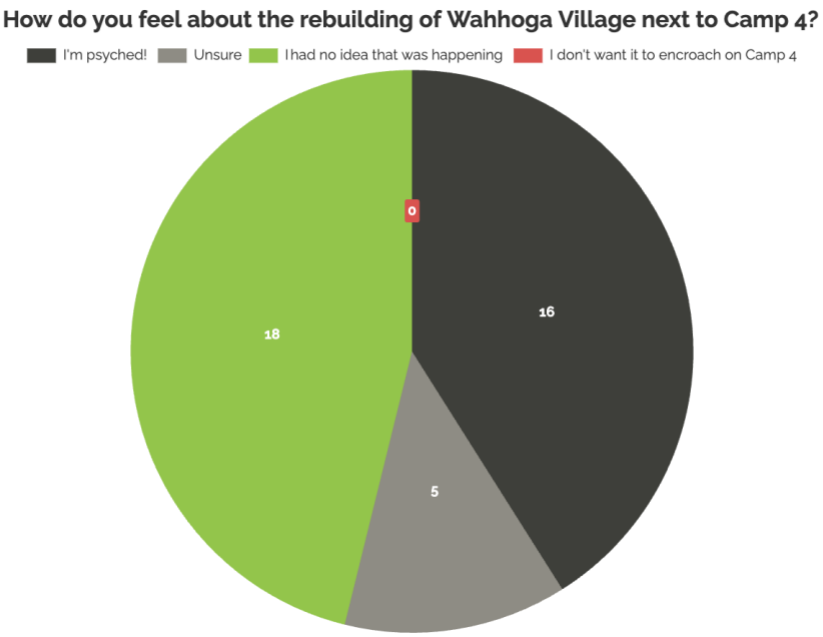

FIGURE 28: WAHHOGA VILLAGE PIE CHART, FROM SURVEY DATA.

Lonnie, as a direct descendant of these communities and one of the last few individuals to have been born, raised, and educated within the Valley, summarized the history of ancestral Wahhoga Village:

> Yeah, you know, that, that, uh, that particular village is where my grandma, and my grandpa, and my mom, and all her brothers, and, and her sister, they all grew up in a little cabin down there, was the, like the native housing or whatever. And then, ten years later, the government basically was like, come on, you gotta move. They're like, you have to move now, grab your stuff. I mean, maybe they didn't even get to grab everything. My grandma was so connected to that place, you know, it was like her home. So, it like, took care of all her kids and stuff, and took care of

everybody. And then, you know, one day they just tell you gotta leave, kinda, not so respectfully, and then they burn down the houses for a fire drill.

During interviews and surveys, it became evident that many climbers do contemplate the original stewards of the land when visiting Yosemite Valley.

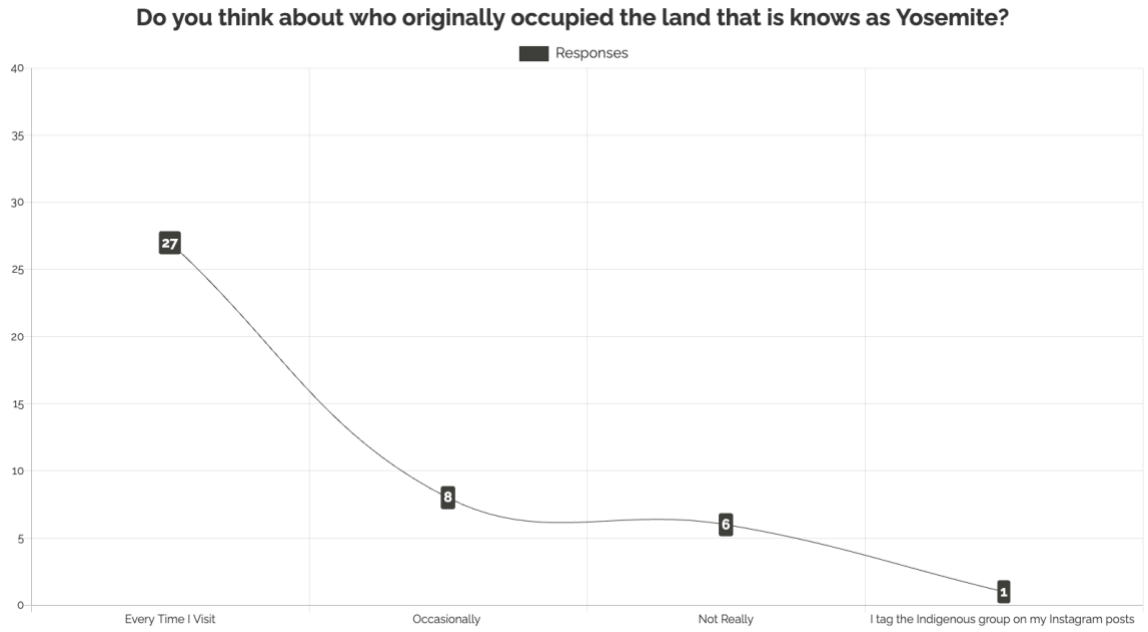

FIGURE 29: INDIGENOUS RECOGNITION BAR CHART, FROM SURVEY DATA.

However, their knowledge about the specific Indigenous groups who originally occupied the area, and their current legal status, was often limited or vague.

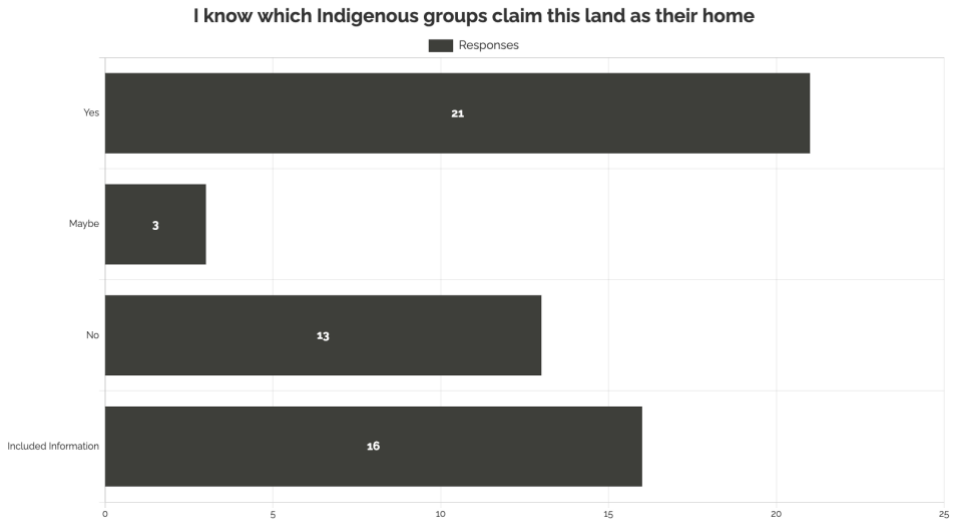

FIGURE 30: INDIGENOUS CLAIM BAR CHART, FROM SURVEY DATA.

Though many respondents who claimed that they did know which Indigenous groups claimed Yosemite Valley as their home included information, it was generally focused on one community, the Miwok, as they feature in most of the literature about the displaced populations. This can be seen in the word frequency diagram that I compiled with the information provided in the survey, seen below.

FIGURE 31: INDIGENOUS GROUP IDENTIFICATION WORD FREQUENCY DIAGRAM, FROM SURVEY DATA.

The Miwok are just one of the seven associated tribes, as described in Chapter Two. This highlights the importance of providing climbers with accurate and accessible information about the Indigenous history and ongoing presence in the valley.

In recent years, the rise of social media platforms has facilitated the dissemination of information and increased awareness among climbers. The #landback movement and other initiatives have brought attention to the call for Indigenous sovereignty and the return of ancestral lands. My survey results and interviews indicated that climbers, particularly younger generations, are increasingly aware of these movements and express a desire to

participate in efforts towards Indigenous land reclamation. Some respondents did express a slight concern that the building of Wahhoga would be turned into something more "Disneyland-esque," as so much of the park becomes during the high visit summer months.

To foster a more inclusive and respectful climbing community, it is crucial for climbers to actively engage in learning about the Indigenous history and culture of Yosemite Valley. This can be achieved through educational programs hosted by the park, interpretive signage placed in popular climbing areas, and collaborations with local Indigenous communities. One example of this is in the new Yosemite Bouldering Guidebook, in which Shannon told me:

> …we shut down climbs in the book. We worked with the anthropologists in the park to see which ones were sensitive.

By amplifying Indigenous voices and incorporating their perspectives, climbers can deepen their understanding of the land they climb on and develop a more respectful and meaningful relationship with the valley.

FIGURE 32: SWEATHOUSE, IN THE INDIAN VILLAGE INTERPRETIVE EXHIBIT. PHOTOGRAPHED BY VANESSA TAYLOR, 11/24/2021.

FIGURE 33: SWEATHOUSE SIGN, IN THE INDIAN VILLAGE INTERPRETIVE EXHIBIT. PHOTOGRAPHED BY VANESSA TAYLOR, 11/24/202.

Acknowledgment and understanding of Indigenous connections to the land not only enrich climbers' experiences but also contribute to the broader movement for reconciliation and justice. As individuals who utilize the landscape in a more intimate way than most visitors, it is important for the climbing community to be actively aware of the various connections to that landscape. By recognizing the history of Indigenous displacement and actively supporting Indigenous-led initiatives, climbers can play a role in promoting justice, decolonization, and the restoration of Indigenous rights.

Discussion

The interviews conducted with climbers unveiled an intriguing interplay between the historical and cultural dimensions of Yosemite Valley. In the Golden Era of the 1960s and 1970s, pioneering climbers such as Royal Robbins, Warren Harding, and Yvon Chouinard embarked on daring ascents of Yosemite's formidable granite walls. Their audacious climbs, like the first ascent of El Capitan's Nose Route, transcended the realm of athletic endeavor and seared Yosemite into the collective psyche of climbers worldwide. Yosemite Valley, once a remote and rugged wilderness, now stood as a symbol of adventure and exploration. It was an age characterized not only by groundbreaking ascents but also by the spirit of camaraderie and a sense of collective adventure. They pushed the boundaries of what was possible, developing innovative techniques like clean climbing, which embraced removable protection. This pivotal shift in climbing ethics went hand in hand with a heightened environmental consciousness. Yosemite Valley was no longer just a climbing destination; it had become a cultural and social hub. It also transformed the identity of climbers as dirtbags, so inherently tied into the vision of Yosemite climbing, into that of icons and legends of rock.

The influence of Yosemite Valley on climbing did not end with the physical ascent of its granite walls. Its history, natural beauty, and formidable challenges permeated climbing literature, films, and media, captivating climbers worldwide. Half Dome and El Capitan, Yosemite's iconic landmarks, symbolized inspiration and aspiration. Climbers from all corners of the globe were drawn to Yosemite Valley, seeking to test their mettle on these storied walls. The climbing legacy of Yosemite Valley echo through time,

perpetuated by the mystique and allure of this extraordinary place. Today, climbers continue to flock to Yosemite Valley. Its walls bear witness to a never-ending quest for new routes and personal achievements. Although the sport has evolved, the spirit of adventure and reverence for Yosemite Valley's landscape remains undiminished. Beyond inspiration, climbers express a fervent desire to connect with the adventurous spirit of their predecessors and relive experiences reminiscent of the past. Yosemite's history adds a layer of significance and authenticity to climbers' experiences, enhancing their connection to the landscape. Yosemite's rich climbing history significantly shapes how climbers experience and perceive the park.

The inclusion of identity inconsistencies adds a compelling layer to the analysis of climbers' connections to Yosemite Valley. The findings challenge the traditional notion of a "Yosemite Climber" and highlight the complexity of identity formation within the climbing community. By exploring climbers' perceptions of their contributions and the shifting nature of identity, this chapter deepens our understanding of how climbers relate to the historical significance of Yosemite and the ongoing narratives surrounding the landscape. These identity inconsistencies reveal the need for a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of climbers' connections to Yosemite Valley. By recognizing the diversity of experiences, motivations, and self-perceptions among climbers, we gain valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of their relationships with their identities.

The narratives gathered from multiple interviews illuminate the intricate balance between collaboration and competition within Yosemite Valley's climbing community. Instances of camaraderie and shared experiences, coupled with anecdotes of rivalry, mirror

the broader climbing culture's tapestry. This dynamic interplay thrives within the valley's confined climbing spaces, thereby shaping climbers' relationships not only with the landscape but also with their peers. It also addresses the complexities of negotiating access to climbing sites and the importance of environmental stewardship in preserving the natural environment. This phenomenon extends the climbing act beyond a mere athletic pursuit, portraying it as a canvas for self-expression and identity formation. The interviews collectively reflect this intersection between self and sport, with Yosemite Valley's grandeur serving as a catalytic backdrop to this process.

I chose to examine how climbers actively contribute to the creation of place in Yosemite Valley and the ways in which their sense of belonging is formed and maintained. I explored climbers' perspectives on balancing access to climbing sites with the preservation of the natural environment, exploring their role in environmental stewardship. We examined how climbers actively contribute to the creation of place in Yosemite Valley and the ways in which their sense of belonging is formed and maintained. We analyzed climbers' perspectives on balancing access to climbing sites with the preservation of the natural environment, exploring their role in environmental stewardship.

Furthermore, the chapter critically engaged with the historical context of Indigenous displacement and the need for acknowledging and understanding Indigenous connections to the land. Discussed the historical context of Indigenous displacement in Yosemite Valley and the implications for climbers' experiences, addressing the importance of acknowledgment and understanding of Indigenous connections to the land.

In sum, the interviews with climbers weave a rich tapestry of perspectives, subtly echoing the historical, cultural, personal, and communal dimensions inherent to climbing within Yosemite Valley. While certain themes emerge more prominently than others, these interviews collectively reflect the profound and multifaceted connections that climbers establish with this recognizable landscape. This chapter's exploration serves as a platform for future research, inviting a more in-depth analysis of the intricate relationships that climbers forge with this cherished natural setting. My survey data and interviews with climbers provided a vivid glimpse into the enduring influence of Yosemite Valley's climbing legacy.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have presented a comprehensive analysis and discussion of climbers' connections to Yosemite Valley, drawing upon the wealth of data gathered throughout the thesis. By examining historical significance, landscape dynamics, spiritual connections, and climbers' identities, this chapter shed light on the complex interplay between climbers and the unique environment of the Valley. By analyzing the data through multiple lenses, it worked to uncover the multifaceted nature of climbers' experiences, their relationships with the landscape, and the broader implications of their connections to Yosemite Valley.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

In the heart of Yosemite Valley, climbers from across the world converge to explore a granite wonderland that has captured the imagination of generations. They come seeking more than just vertical challenges but to partake in a tradition that has, for generations, linked the past and the present, seamlessly blending stories etched in stone with narratives formed by chalked hands and iron wills. Yosemite Valley stands as a symbol of resilience, endurance, and transformation for those who have, and continue to, call themselves "Yosemite Climbers." This thesis has investigated the multifaceted world of Yosemite climbing culture, dissecting the intricacies of identity formation, community dynamics, and the ever-changing relationship between climbers and their environment. I set out in this thesis to “heritage-ize” climbing and show its importance to the contribution of heritage practice and anthropology. I believe that throughout this thesis I have only scratched the surface of what that means by identifying shared practices, rituals, places of importance, and language used. There is much more work to be done in heritage-izing this sport through its embodied practice and individuals carrying the importance of this historical identity through their ties to the landscape.

Its storied past is deeply intertwined with the history of rock climbing, where legendary figures like Royal Robbins and the Stonemasters etched their indelible marks on the granite walls. The echoes of their adventures reverberate through time, shaping the

community's identity and setting a precedent for Yosemite climbers. However, the shadow of history casts both reverence and apprehension. As I ventured into the Yosemite climbing community, I discovered a complex web of perceptions. For some, to be deemed a "Yosemite Climber" meant upholding the legacy of the sport's innovators, pursuing mental and physical challenges in the spirit of their predecessors. For others, it's a bridge too far, an identity they don't lay claim to due to perceived inadequacies or the enduring influence of the old guard's tradition. The interplay of climbers' identities with the towering giants of the past reveals the profound impact of the valley's history. In their introspection and comparison, they mirror the evolution of a legacy as it is interpreted by a new generation.

This variation in defining a "Yosemite Climber" underscores the subtleties of how history shapes an identity, with individuals internalizing their connections to the past in diverse ways. It invites climbers to consider their role in carrying forward the legacy, echoing a blend of respect, nostalgia, and aspiration. When confronted with this legacy, climbers navigate the fine line between ambition and self-identity. They contemplate the distinction between those who have come before and those who walk the trails and climb the routes today. The interviews conducted during the research shed light on the complexities of this intergenerational comparison. While some strive to carry the torch, many others acknowledge that they're still on their journey, that the title of "Yosemite Climber" isn't something easily claimed.

This complex relationship with the past raises questions about self-acceptance and the realistic expectations placed upon oneself within this storied community. As individuals reflect on their achievements and their personal narratives, the interplay

between history and self-concept comes into sharp focus. "I have to do so much more to be a Yosemite Climber…" is a sentiment that resonated across interviews. The prospect of completing specific climbs or mastering Yosemite's granite challenges becomes a marker of one's connection to this place. The community looks towards fulfilling these personal milestones as steps towards assuming the title, be it completing a significant route in the annuls of climbing history or embracing a specific style of climbing. These rites of passage show the internalized values shared amongst climbers to become an “insider” of the sport. Completing these markers agreed upon by the community define the rites of passage needed to claim this identity. Yet, it's essential to recognize that being a "Yosemite Climber" isn't solely about conquering granite. It's a sentiment that encapsulates not just one's climbing prowess, but the profound connection formed with the environment. Climbers grapple with defining their contribution, whether through notable ascents, environmental stewardship, or sharing knowledge and camaraderie. They ponder what it means to add to the sport and landscape, considering their own impacts.

One fundamental discovery of this research is that identities within the Yosemite climbing community are in perpetual motion. They evolve, grow, and transform, mirroring the fluidity of the Valley's granite walls. Climbers’ self-concept is not static; it matures with each ascent, each shared belay, and every personal and collective achievement. This dynamic aspect of identity challenges the notion of a one-size-fits-all label. Climbers find themselves at different stages in this evolving narrative. They revisit their identities as Yosemite climbers, continually reassessing their connection to the Valley's legacy. Trying to consistently live up to this idea of a Yosemite Climber aligns well with Laurajane

Smith's notion of heritage as process (2006). It seems clear that the emerging heritage of the climbing community helps shape these identities, with stories, techniques, and knowledge forming a collective narrative and identity.

As climbers engage with Yosemite's walls, the Valley's climbing ethics and etiquette present a duality: collaboration and competition. This thesis has probed the dynamics of climbers in shared spaces. While the ethos of cooperation remains strong, an undercurrent of competition, particularly on crowded routes, is palpable. Balancing these competing forces shapes climbers' experiences and the overall climbing culture within Yosemite. One of the significant challenges in Yosemite climbing culture is the influx of climbers and other visitors, and the tensions arising from space-sharing. It reflects the changes in the climbing landscape, but it also underscores the importance of preserving the ethos of shared experiences that has long defined Yosemite climbing culture. The stakeholder groups intersect and overlap, and the shared identities create both the collaboration and competition as shown throughout this thesis. The places that are significant, the ways in which individuals preserve the landscape, and ideas of sacredness all play into the identities claimed here.

It's crucial to acknowledge that Yosemite Valley, for all its challenges and complexities, offers climbers something beyond a mere athletic endeavor. The landscape itself becomes a sacred space, a realm where climbers often report experiencing something larger than themselves. Some might describe it as spiritual. For many, the Valley represents not just a destination but a pilgrimage to a place where one can connect with nature on an almost transcendental level. Through my research, I have shown that the importance of

visiting Yosemite at least once is a paramount objective for most climbers. This goal, and the effort put in to attaining it, fit the definition as described earlier of a secular pilgrimage destination. The spiritual connection weaves into the climbers' narratives, emphasizing the significance of this place in their lives, and proving that while many don't use the word "sacred" to identify their experience, many still treat this space as a sacred site.

As we navigate this dialogue, it's essential to acknowledge the profound history that predates even the climbing legacy. The Ahwahneechee, the original stewards of this land, were dispossessed. As climbers form spiritual connections and foster their identities on this sacred landscape, it is imperative that they also acknowledge the Indigenous history of dispossession. Understanding that the land they revere is, in fact, unceded territory is a step towards a more conscientious and meaningful relationship with Yosemite.

The culmination of these insights extends beyond the confines of Yosemite Valley. It speaks to the essence of identity, community, and space-sharing within subcultures. The dynamic nature of identity formation, with its deep ties to history and evolving landscapes, offers a compelling narrative for understanding how individuals perceive themselves in the broader context of their passion. Yosemite Valley remains an enduring testament to the resilience and evolution of human connection with nature. Its towering cliffs, shaded forests, and glistening waterfalls inspire and humble those who venture there. For climbers, this connection is a spiritual pilgrimage, a journey beyond the vertical challenges, where they glimpse something larger than themselves.

For Yosemite climbers, it's not merely about conquering mountains; it's about self-discovery, shared connections, and stewardship of a unique environment. They have shown

resilience in the face of changes and have carved their narratives in the granite walls. Climbers are not just conquerors of rock; they are the stewards of a unique heritage. Their experiences serve as a reminder that nature is not merely a playground; it is a repository of human histories, and its preservation is a shared responsibility. This is what continues to draw climbers to this landscape and shows the significance of this place as a heritage climbing destination.

Future Work and Recommendations

I believe this research is significant enough to warrant future work, for a variety of reasons. The National Park Service, or another outside interested party, can take this data, and see if the patterns discovered throughout my research hold. The easiest way I believe this can be accomplished is via visitor surveys. This can be done in a variety of ways, though the simplest way to capture this information would be as visitors are entering or leaving the park and offering an optional survey. This could also be sent electronically to anyone who must make a reservation in the park, whether for big wall climbing, camping, or to visit during the high traffic summer months.

The information gleaned from further research could further clarify the identities of stakeholder groups in the park. This is significant in showing the overlap of ties to a variety of stakeholder communities, as well as which groups are single-use visitors or those who are repeat visitors. This data can help inform the National Park Service in management opportunities and facilitate conversations between those who are utilizing the park most frequently and wish to have a voice. As a World Heritage Site, there is potential to see if

this designation is at least part of the reasoning for international visitors to come to Yosemite and looking at overlapping motivations.

Another vital research point for the park could be looking at the role of commercialization and its long-term impact on the maintenance and visitor appreciation of the park. Part of this commercialization, especially within the climbing community, is looking at how many van-lifers are coming into the park. If a survey were possible to see how many climbers are camping versus staying it their vans, it could be significant to see if that does impact the heritage process of being a 'climber' in the Valley. This type of information could prove valuable in management practices in the park with regard to what visitor facilities are needed to best preserve this iconic destination.

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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

- How many times have you been to Yosemite?
- Have all those visits been for climbing?
- Did you come here on your own the first time, or with a friend?
- How do you identify with Yosemite Valley/Do you identify yourself with Yosemite Valley?
- What are your motivations in coming to Yosemite Valley?
- Do you know about the rebuilding of Wahhoga Village?
- Does that mean anything to you or your experience here?
- Is the idea/process of traveling to Yosemite to climb meaningful for you?
- Have you had any interaction with any Indigenous person or space in the park?
- How do you feel about the interaction of climbing spaces/sites with hiking trails and campgrounds?
- What does it mean for you to climb/be here in the Valley?

Appendix B: Survey Questions and Responses

The questions I asked in the survey included:

Q1: Was your first encounter with climbing in Yosemite through some form of media? (i.e., saw it depicted in a film, a magazine, or through social media)	Yes	No	Unsure
Responses (45)	25	13	7
Total Percentages	56%	29%	16%

Q2: Were you introduced to Yosemite by someone, or did you discover it for yourself?	Someone Else	On Their Own
Responses (44)	26	18
Total Percentages	59%	41%

Q3: How many years have you been going to Yosemite?	0-1	2-3	3-5	5-10	10-19	20 or more	sporadically
Responses (44)	10	3	1	9	9	6	6
Total Percentages	23%	7%	2%	20%	20%	14%	14%

Q4: What percentage of your time in Yosemite has been to climb?	Only a couple of times	25-50%	50-75%	I only go to climb (send)	I have never been to Yosemite
Responses (45)	8	4	14	9	10
Total Percentages	18%	9%	31%	20%	22%

Q5: What draws you to Yosemite Valley?	Physical Challenge	History (of the Sport)	Self-Discovery	Beauty or Ambiance	Spiritual Fulfillment	Other:
Responses (44)	32	27	17	36	21	12
Total Percentages	73%	61%	39%	82%	48%	27%

Q6 – What are three adjectives you would use to characterize your experience climbing in Yosemite?
I received 35 responses to this question.

Q7 – Can you describe a particularly impactful experience or memory from your time climbing in Yosemite?
I received 33 responses to this question.

Q8 – What does it mean to be a Yosemite Climber, and is this an identity that you claim? Why or why not?
I received 35 responses to this question.

Q9: How do you feel about the interaction of climbing sites with hiking trails or other stakeholders' spaces?	It is one of my least favorite things about climbing in Yosemite	I don't really think about it	I enjoy interacting with hikers and other stakeholders when climbing
Responses (38)	3	22	13
Total Percentages	8%	58%	34%

Q10: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I care about sharing this landscape.	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Responses (42)	30	6	5	1	0
Total Percentages	71%	14%	12%	2%	0%

Q11: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I care about the preservation of this landscape.	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Responses (42)	34	5	2	1	0
Total Percentages	81%	12%	5%	2%	0%

Q12: Do you think about who originally occupied the land that is knows as Yosemite?	Not Really	Occasionally	Every Time I Visit	I tag the Indigenous group on my Instagram posts
Responses (42)	6	8	27	1
Total Percentages	14%	19%	64%	2%

Q13: I know which Indigenous groups claim this land as their home.	Yes	Maybe	No	Included Information
Responses (40)	21	3	13	16
Total Percentages	53%	8%	33%	40%

Q14: How do you feel about the rebuilding of Wahhoga Village next to Camp 4?	I'm psyched!	Unsure	I had no idea that was happening	I don't want it to encroach on Camp 4
Responses (39)	16	5	18	0

Total Percentages	41%	13%	46%	0%

At the end of the question, I also included a link which led to an article about more information (https://bit.ly/3qHoYIy)

Q15: What is your relationship with Yosemite Parks Staff?	I haven't had much interaction with them	I have a friendly relationship with them	Thumbs Down
Responses (35)	15	16	4
Total Percentages	43%	46%	11%

Q16: Do you feel that you are part of an "in club" within the climbing community by climbing in Yosemite?	Definitely Not	Probably Not	Might or Might Not	Probably Yes	Definitely Yes
Responses (38)	15	8	8	4	3
Total Percentages	39%	21%	21%	11%	8%

Q17: Do you feel like you have a right to climb in Yosemite?	Definitely Not	Probably Not	Might or Might Not	Probably Yes	Definitely Yes
Responses (40)	3	1	10	13	13
Total Percentages	8%	3%	25%	33%	33%

Q18: Do you climb in the gym or outdoors for the most part?	Mostly Gym	Primarily Outdoor	I do an even amount of both
Responses (40)	8	17	15
Total Percentages	20%	43%	38%

Q19: What is your age group?	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64
Responses (40)	6	18	13	2	1
Total Percentages	15%	45%	33%	5%	3%

I did ask within the age group question whether there were any participants between the ages of: 65-74, 75-84, or older than 85, but received no responses in those categories.

Q20: What is your gender identity?	Male	Female	Non-binary / Third gender	Prefer not to say
Responses (40)	19	17	2	2
Total Percentages	48%	43%	5%	5%

Q21 – Ethnic Background

Caucasian x24; Caucasian/Middle Eastern; Asian – Filipino; Puerto Rican/Chinese; Jewish; Latinx; Black/Malaysian; Taiwanese American; Southeast Asian/Cambodian/Khmer; Korean American; Korean/Taiwanese; Mapuche Indigenous

Q22 – If there was any additional information you don't feel was covered but is relevant to your experience climbing in Yosemite Valley

Appendix C: Climbing Terms and Glossary

Belay: The act of belaying includes fixing a rope around anchors in a rock to secure it to both a climber (on the rock) and their belayer (on the ground).

Big Wall Climbing: A form of rock climbing that takes place on long multi-pitch routes that normally require a full day, if not several days, to ascend. Done on large rock faces.

Bouldering: Climbing on large boulders, either for practice or as a sport in its own right.

Camp 4: A tent-only campground in Yosemite National Park in the United States. It became notable after World War II as "a birthplace of rock climbing's modern age." Originally called Sunnyside Walk-In Campground, it used to only be on a first-come, first-served basis. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Classics: A "classic" rock climb is noted for its excellent climbing, striking appearance, and significant climbing history. Most are sought out to be checked off a list.

Crag: A crag is a small rock-climbing area usually containing numerous climbing routes or problems.

Crash Pad: A bouldering mat or crash pad is a foam pad used for protection when bouldering. The primary purpose of a crash pad is to add a foam layer between the climber and the ground, to lessen the impact of a bouldering fall.

Dirtbag: A dirtbag is a person who dedicates their entire existence to the pursuit of climbing, making ends meet using creative means. A dirtbag will get their food out of a dumpster, clothes from a thrift store, and live in a tent or vehicle to save money.

El Capitan: A vertical rock formation in Yosemite National Park, on the north side of Yosemite Valley, near its western end. The granite monolith is about 3,000 feet (914 m) from base to summit along its tallest face and is a world-famous location for big wall climbing, including the disciplines of aid climbing, free climbing, and more recently for free solo climbing. 'The Nose' is one of the most notable routes on the face.

Free Solo: Aka free soloing, is a form of rock climbing where the climbers (or free soloists) climb solo (or alone) without ropes or other protective equipment, using only their climbing shoes and their climbing chalk. It is the most dangerous form of rock climbing but made famous by 2018 Oscar-winning film *Free Solo* starring climber Alex Honnold.

Midnight Lightning: Developed in the 1970s by three historic climbers – Ron Kauk, John Bachar, and John "Yabo" Yablonski, and solved by Kauk in May 1978, its ascent is considered an important moment in the history and the development of bouldering as a sport in its own right. It was named after the Jimi Hendrix song of the same name due to the perceived impossibility of completing it, as high a chance as chance as a lightning bolt could strike at midnight. The chalk bolt was drawn on and has been there ever since.

Problem: A short route (aka problem), is generally 10 - 25 feet tall, often on short cliffs and boulders that aren't large enough to justify roped climbing, most often used when describing bouldering.

Route: A climbing route is a path by which a climber reaches the top of a mountain, or cliff face, most often used when describing a roped climb.

Stonemasters: A group of young climbers in the 1970s who played a large role in developing climbing and climbing gear in Yosemite National Park. Noted for their first ascent of El Capitan, Midnight Lightning, and other such historical routes.

Tick (Mark): Climbers often mark important or hard to see holds with chalk, resulting in what we call a 'tick' mark.

Traditional Climbing: Aka trad climbing, is a type of free climbing where the lead climber places the protection equipment while ascending the route; when the lead climber has completed the route, the second climber (or belayer) then removes the protection equipment as they climb the route.

V-Scale: The V or Vermin Scale is named after a famous Hueco Tanks climber, John Vermin Sherman. It is a rating system that grades boulder problems on a difficulty of 0-17.

Valley Uprising: A 2014 feature-length documentary covering the rise of rock climbing in Yosemite National Park. Produced by Sender Films.

Yosemite Decimal System: The Yosemite Decimal System is a set of numeric ratings describing the difficulty of climbs by level, from 5.1-5.15, developed independently by climbers at Tahquitz Peak who adapted the class 5 rating of Sierra Club Class 1–5 system in the 1950s.