

Flirting with Boulders: Changing Configurations of Landscape in Yosemite National Park

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Abstract: Yosemite Valley draws visitors from around the world employing a wide range of seductive techniques. These techniques, it is here argued, are best understood as potentially general in their semeiotic influence, although not necessarily actualized in all (or even in most) individual experience. Their reality, in this regard, tends to be represented, often vaguely so, in symbolic conventions rather than in visitor narratives. The lure of Yosemite's granite massifs, and the narratives of conquest they engender, animate a potent global economy of touristic passion and desire. In addition to the predominantly phallogocentric climactic scenarios of traditional landscape encounter, however, a new variation of visitor practice, oriented around boulders in Yosemite Valley, has recently gained popularity and visibility. Boulders in this practice are starting to assume the characters of enticing, though often humiliating, partners, whose gendering remains perpetually ambiguous. The techniques of seduction evident in boulder climbing do not appear to enhance or increase demand for a recreational economy designed to feed off promises of (pseudo-)sexual gratification as an end in itself. Instead, they support the sport's capacity to construct liminal spaces--spaces that use eroticizable objects as a means to culturally transformative ends. In this regard, the techniques of seduction orienting the performance of boulder climbing illuminate the sport's character as providing an alternative to the more standard symbolic potentialities associated with the site.

Keywords: symbolism, landscape, Yosemite, bouldering

Introduction

We choose to believe that granite is alive. If life is movement, then rock—with its atoms flying around like stars in the cosmos—is alive. It's a harmless concept that adds a lot of enjoyment and respect and responsibility to our lives.

-- Yvon Chouinard, Yosemite climber and creator of the company, Patagonia (Kauk 2003:9)

The landscape of Yosemite National Park holds meaning of many kinds for its diverse visitor population. More than four million people a year now visit the park, and the number is currently on the increase. The park is recognized internationally as a “must see” destination, one of America’s most admirable natural landscapes. Visitors come to explore the park from all over the United States and Canada, as well as from a variety of nations in Europe and Asia, in particular from Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Japan, Korea, and India. If its century-and-a-half record of visitation is any indicator of its attractive power, the lure of Yosemite’s enormous waterfalls, and its spectacular granite cliffs and domes, is second to none on the continent of North America.

Visitors are drawn to the park in different ways for a variety of purposes. In its varying appeal, the Yosemite landscape may be considered a monumental example of a “multi-stable object” as phenomenological anthropologist, Greg Downey, has employed this concept (Downey 2005). It is a landscape that, like Wittgenstein’s famous duck-rabbit image, has the formal capability to sustain simultaneously a number of different, sometimes completely unrelated, symbolic associations, each of them attractive in different ways, to varying degrees, and for different reasons to different Visitor groups. Many of Yosemite’s Visitors come mainly to gaze in wonder upon the park’s most famous attractions and, then, snap a few photos of themselves and their loved ones in front of them. Others come to move within the landscape in a variety of officially sanctioned and carefully managed ways. They may be drawn to riding on horseback, or exploring by bicycle, or to sitting atop a ranger-guided, open-air touring tram. They may float by river raft, or ascend with the aid of climbing ropes and harnesses. A few may even bring parachutes so they can fly, “base jumping” off the Valley’s cliffs and walls. In most cases, however, Visitors come to progress on foot along some of the hundreds of miles of hiking

trails that traverse the seven-mile Valley walls and the much larger wilderness area in which it is situated.

In addition to what they may actually do in the park, Visitors are also drawn to Yosemite for what its landscape allows them to simply dream of doing, or for what it inspires them to feel like imagining, even if such imaginings do not crystallize with any great degree of clarity. The relatively imaginative, inchoate, and oneiric forms of significance the landscape holds for Visitors contain noteworthy powers of attraction in their own right, as this essay seeks, in part, to illustrate.

The diversity of Visitors' relations of attraction to the park notwithstanding, the landscape of Yosemite Valley, particularly during peak season, is typically animated intensely and vividly by the movements Visitors perform as they collectively participate in the realization of these relations. One might even say—indeed it often has been said—that the Valley “is crawling” with its own admirers, each intently focused on the fulfillment of his or her own touristic desires. In what follows, I attempt to isolate and illustrate one distinct configuration of Yosemite's attractive variability by reflecting on a practice that is itself engaged with the landscape in an intimately physical way, a type of rock climbing known as bouldering. Bouldering evidences one of the innumerably many ways in which Yosemite's multi-stable landscape is configured as a desirable, symbolically potent environment, yet one whose definition is often only tentatively, not completely coherently, but nonetheless creatively being formed.

In developing this interpretation, I take the work of cultural geographer, David Crouch, as my point of departure. In his recent book, *Flirting with Space* (2010a),¹ Crouch identifies as his guiding concept the quintessentially seductive notion of “flirtation” in his effort to better understand the ways in which human intellect and emotion interact creatively in landscape practices. In creative experiences of landscape encounter, Crouch illuminates how the possible as well as the actual, the unconventional as well as the conventional, and—perhaps most important for the analysis at hand--the amorphous and incipiently vague, as well as the articulate, fully formed aspects of landscape symbolism, become increasingly significant in travelers' experience. Crouch's foregrounding of the relatively embryonic stages of symbolic development that creative engagement with landscapes can

¹ See also Crouch, 2010b.

inspire provides a theoretical lens through which to begin an investigation of Yosemite Visitor practices that relate to the specific landscape feature of boulders.

The interpretive framework developed in *Flirting with Space* grows out of a definition of flirtation developed by the Czech poet and novelist, Milan Kundera, who, in his masterwork, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, writes of flirtation in the following terms:

One might say that it is behaviour leading another to believe that sexual intimacy is possible, while preventing that possibility from becoming a certainty. In other words, flirting is a promise of sexual intercourse without a guarantee. (Kundera 1984:174; cited in Crouch 2010a:1).

Kundera's definition stresses flirtation's future-oriented, progressive yet uncertain character. Yet, it also identifies a (mis)leading, promissory quality in the activity as well. Flirtation is by definition unclear, lacking in fully explicit, reliable information. At the same time, it is not without some suggestive specificity. Flirtation is not completely chaotic. However, its clarity is always partial, leaving room for alternative interpretation, although less and less so as time passes. Above all, flirtation is creative, and in an originitive sense. It is an activity that brings a relationship that is just beginning into being, and it moves that relationship through initial phases, enabling a connection whose future is largely still to be determined. It is this creative aspect of Kundera's definition that Crouch exploits in his project of landscape interpretation, and it remains the guiding insight in this examination of Yosemite bouldering.

Extending—and in a certain way, challenging--Crouch's application of Kundera's theory to landscape interpretation, my present objective is to demonstrate how boulders in the Yosemite Valley landscape recently have acquired a new symbolic character, adding a particularly imaginative and innovative variant to their already complex multi-stable objectivity. Boulders, in the past few years, have come to be conceivable, perceivable, and even vaguely experience-able as flirtatious figures, in relation to one growing segment of the park's Visitor population. However, the very status of boulders as figures of this kind is itself plausibly deniable and not generally enacted or invoked. Boulders, in other words, while they have become attractive and desire-inspiring in the production of certain non-traditional contemporary human-environment relations remain only potentially, not actually flirtative objects, although that potential is real and persistent.

In this essay, I will try to foreground what Crouch's theoretical approach, with its focus on the creative, the inchoate, and the uncertain may be seen to contribute to the ethnographic analysis of tourism and of constructions of place more generally. Crouch's theory brings out an often neglected dimension of landscape symbolism—a realm of possibility that holds within it all that a certain landscape might come to mean, even if it does not actually or necessarily or generally instill such meaning in tourists' experiences of it, or if it instills it only in an undeveloped, largely pre-articulate way.² However, Crouch's theory also has its limitations, as I will seek to illustrate, insofar as doing justice to the diversity of desire and inchoate significance that actually manifests in relation to Yosemite's boulders is concerned. That desire cannot be accurately characterized according to Kundera's relatively narrow, sexually specific, already-too-articulated concept of flirtation.

Potential meanings, while they are by definition close to impossible to document via traditional empirical ethnographic methodologies, are nonetheless identifiable in the distinctive and definitive, iconically relatable, characteristics of landscape formations and practices. They inhere as general potentials of the landscape's symbolizable character. They have a real presence in the landscape, even while they do not automatically determine any laws of meaning-making in actual tourist practices. They may be of critical importance in understanding the lure, or attractive "charge," as I will call it, that various destinations may hold for touristic subjects—in this case Yosemite Visitor subjects. Their identification is thus ethnographically relevant, despite their essentially vague and emergent character. They should not be considered instances of fully formed but repressed or subconscious symbolism, as might be posited in a psychoanalytic approach. Rather, the general potential of a landscape's symbolism is composed of tentative, not yet clearly discernable relations of human/environment connection, relations that are just beginning to take on the status of being representationally active or operative. They are relations whose meaning, in sum, is largely pending, although it is by no means insignificant. They are the early signs of an experiential, interactive, semeiotic work in progress, still in the initial phases of symbolic formulation.³

² Wittgenstein's famous phrase, "Light dawns gradually over the whole," is particularly apt in relation to the ethnographic study of this aspect of landscape and tourism practice (Wittgenstein 1969:21).

³ The processual theory of sign emergence advanced here is drawn from the pragmatic semeiotic theory of Charles S. Peirce. Peirce's triadic model of sign relations includes recognition of emergent phases of sign production, conceived as processes of representation that tend to undergo

Touristic conduct in general and the tourist industry that supports it tend to rely upon conceptions, understandings, and representations that are vague or only partially formed, and which are inspired by “charged” possibilities that may never be named or clearly imagined. The operations of the industry and its participants cannot be fully understood without some exploration of such fundamentally creative, incipient symbolic capabilities. Without them, touristic practice has no hope of being fresh and alive with the promise of unique and new adventure. With them, touristic activities are endowed with vitality, mystery, and even, on occasion, magic. Flirtation, as a trope, provides one means of conceptualizing such symbolic capabilities and the creative processes relating to them. However, it cannot itself encompass the full spectrum of meaning-making possibilities that landscapes can afford.

In concluding, I will speculate briefly on what the touristic work in progress on Yosemite’s boulders may be seen to indicate about more general and fundamental changes now occurring in the cultural symbolism of Western-American wilderness landscapes. The contemporary “flirtative” potential of boulders, in this regard, may itself suggest a fundamental cultural shift in Euro-American landscape practice.

Traditional significations of boulders in the Yosemite landscape

The identification of Yosemite’s boulders as being even potentially or vaguely seductive, flirtatious, or sexually charged objects, may well seem untenable, even perverse, to those familiar with Euro-American practices of landscape encounter. Certainly, it is by no means a traditional perspective on the symbolism these rock formations have been recognized as conventionally inspiring in Yosemite. Since the time of John Muir, the Scottish naturalist whose inspirational writings about the Yosemite landscape have been used as a template for park discourse from the park’s origins in the late 19th century, a very different understanding of boulders has been predominant.⁴ Boulders are more often recognized,

gradual transitions from vagueness to clarity, chaos to order, and potentiality to generality, among others. See Hoopes 1991, Liszka 1996, and the Peirce Edition Project, eds. 1998 for overviews of Peirce’s processual semeiotic theory.

⁴ For examples of Muir’s writing on Yosemite see John Muir, 1962 and Edwin Way Teale, ed., 2001. Muir’s ongoing influence on the representation of Yosemite is exemplified most prominently in the 2009 documentary series by Ken Burns, *America’s Best Idea*. However, virtually every tourist-oriented publication representing Yosemite includes quotations from Muir as well. Peter Loewenberg (2000) has argued that Muir’s writings present an erotically charged understanding of the Sierra Nevada landscape, of which Yosemite National Park is a part. Loewenberg’s

with a naturalist's empiricist eye, as objects in nature that lack sentience of any kind. They are obviously made of stone--granite to be specific. In Muir's spiritualist view, they were eternally, immortally inorganic.⁵ They do not lure, they rest--although Muir was always careful to remind his audiences that, in the temporal scales of earth history, their resting places were not permanent. Their presence in specific locations in the Sierra Nevada landscape was for Muir an index of magnificent geological movements: rock falls, earthquakes, glacial invasions and the consequences thereof. Nonetheless, boulders signified in 19th century naturalist configurations as, in truth, lifeless forms in nature, as bodies without organs, and therefore, as sexless.

The conventional cultural significance of Yosemite boulders, in this regard, was, and to this day remains, one that is far more often likened to that of the objects of Zen gardens, and to the practices of meditation and detachment they inspire, than to objects of sexual seduction. The role of boulders in Visitor experience would appear to be one leading to the transcendence of the Visitor self, rather than to a sexual or pseudo-sexual experience.

interpretation, however, is debatable. Muir's writings unambiguously "spiritualize" the landscape, describing experiences in which bodily pleasures of all kinds (although sexual pleasures are never recognized explicitly among them) are understood as the preliminary means to soul-oriented, supernatural, disembodied ecstasies.

⁵ For example, in Muir's 1911, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, he writes of the environment in terms that stress its immortality as it brings out that same quality in its human visitors: "Our flesh-and-bone tabernacle seems transparent as glass to the beauty about us, as if truly an inseparable part of it, thrilling with the air and trees, streams and rocks, in the waves of the sun—a part of all nature, neither old nor young, sick nor well, but immortal" (Muir 1911:15-16, my emphasis).

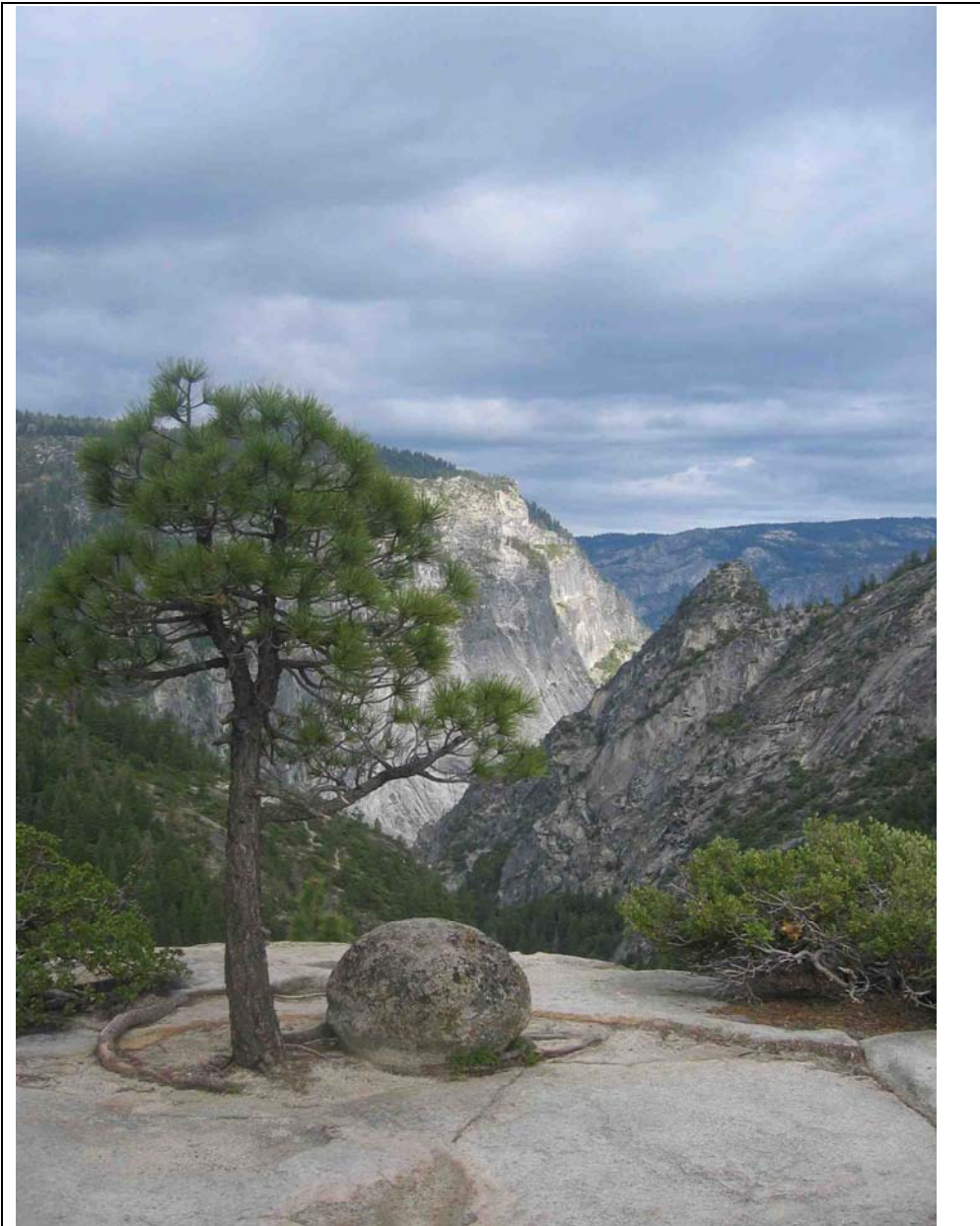


Figure 1. Boulder and pine tree near the top of Nevada Fall looking toward Yosemite Valley, May 2009. Photography by Sally Ann Ness.

Returning to Kundera's definition of flirtation, it is more than easy to see how boulders in Yosemite might provide no guarantee of sexual intercourse. What is difficult to see is how they might lead to the belief that sexual intimacy or anything even vaguely symbolic of it is even conceivable in relation to boulders in the first place, given the Murian spiritualist-naturalist orientation that prevails.



Figure 2. Boulder in Mirror Lake, Yosemite Valley, May 2010. Photography by Derick Fay.

Crouch encounters a similar difficulty in his application of Kundera's definition to landscape interpretation. Landscapes may not always present the general potential for seductive or romanticizable symbolism to emerge out of their inherent features. Crouch's strategy, in this regard, is to emphasize the relatively abstract and incipient characteristics of flirtation, those that are not necessarily oriented by sexual attraction explicitly. Flirting with space for Crouch entails first and foremost "the pregnancy of possibility" as well as "agonizing playfulness" (2010a:1). It combines "contingent enjoyment, uncertainty, frustration, anxiety and hope" in a manner that Crouch posits is applicable to virtually any kind of lived experience of a landscape (2010a:1). Flirting, for Crouch, "offers a means through which to explore the character of living spacetime through a number of threads that connect everyday living and our feeling and thinking" (2010a:1). The practice of flirting can thus be extended to the experience of inhabitation in spaces, places, and landscapes of all kinds. In Crouch's view, flirtative conduct "serves as a means to articulate life in its negotiation, adjustment, disorientation and becoming" (2010a:1,2). This articulation is not limited to sexually identified experiences. The relation to sexual processes is left vague. Yet, this vague possibility of flirtative significance leads specifically, if it leads anywhere, toward

relations that are eventually, and over time more and more unambiguously sexually defined.



Figure 3. Boulder in Mirror Lake, July 2005. Photography by Katie Manduca.

Employing Crouch's more abstract, vague conceptualization, the seductive potential of Yosemite's boulders becomes more tenable. Indeed, as sites of articulating experiences of becoming, possibility, hope, frustration, and playfulness, boulders have a long-established, popular identity in Yosemite that has been cultivated continuously in the park for generations. Children, in particular, find them practically irresistible.

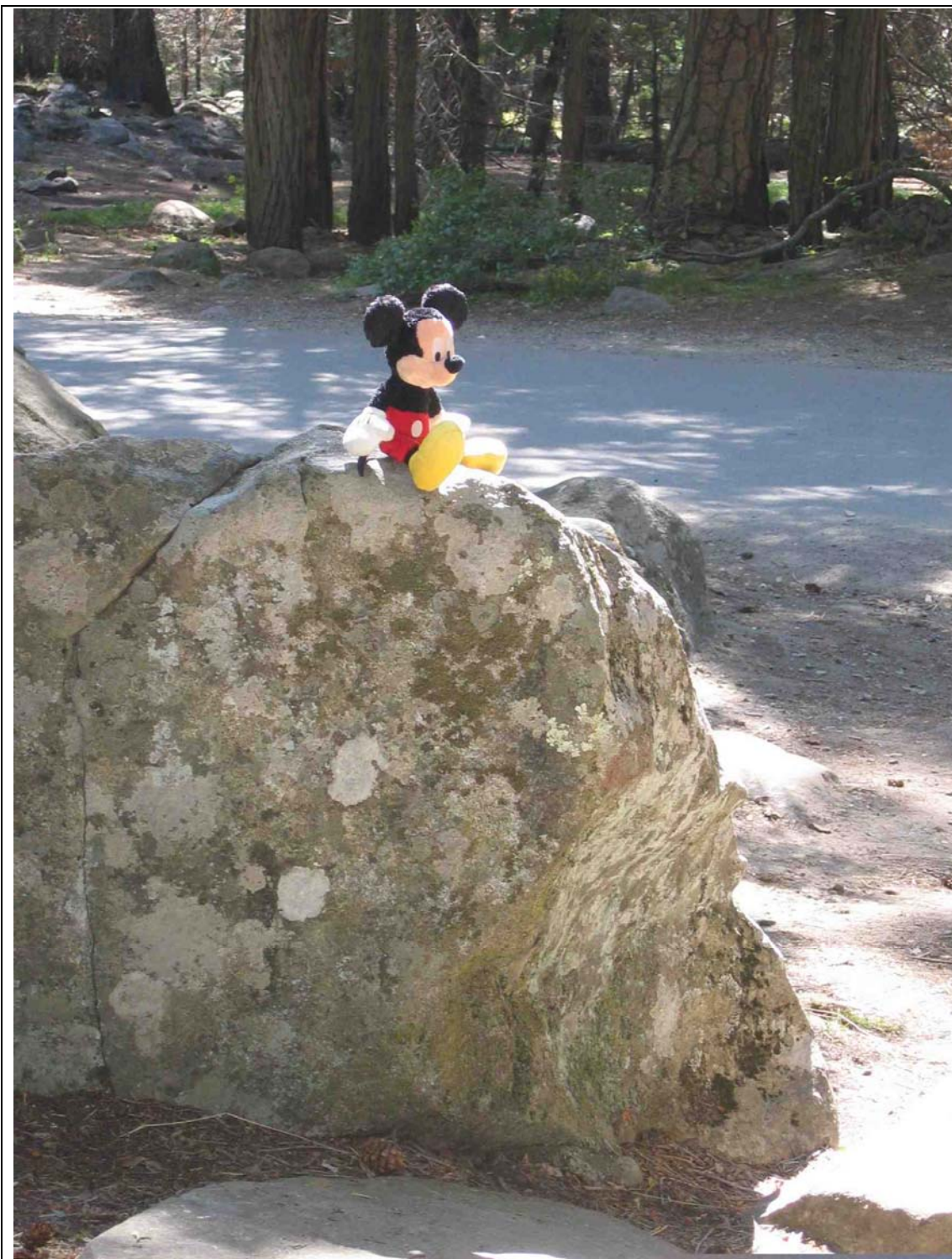


Figure 4. Mickey Mouse toy on boulder by the path to Bridalveil Fall, Yosemite Valley, July 2005. Photography by Sally Ann Ness.

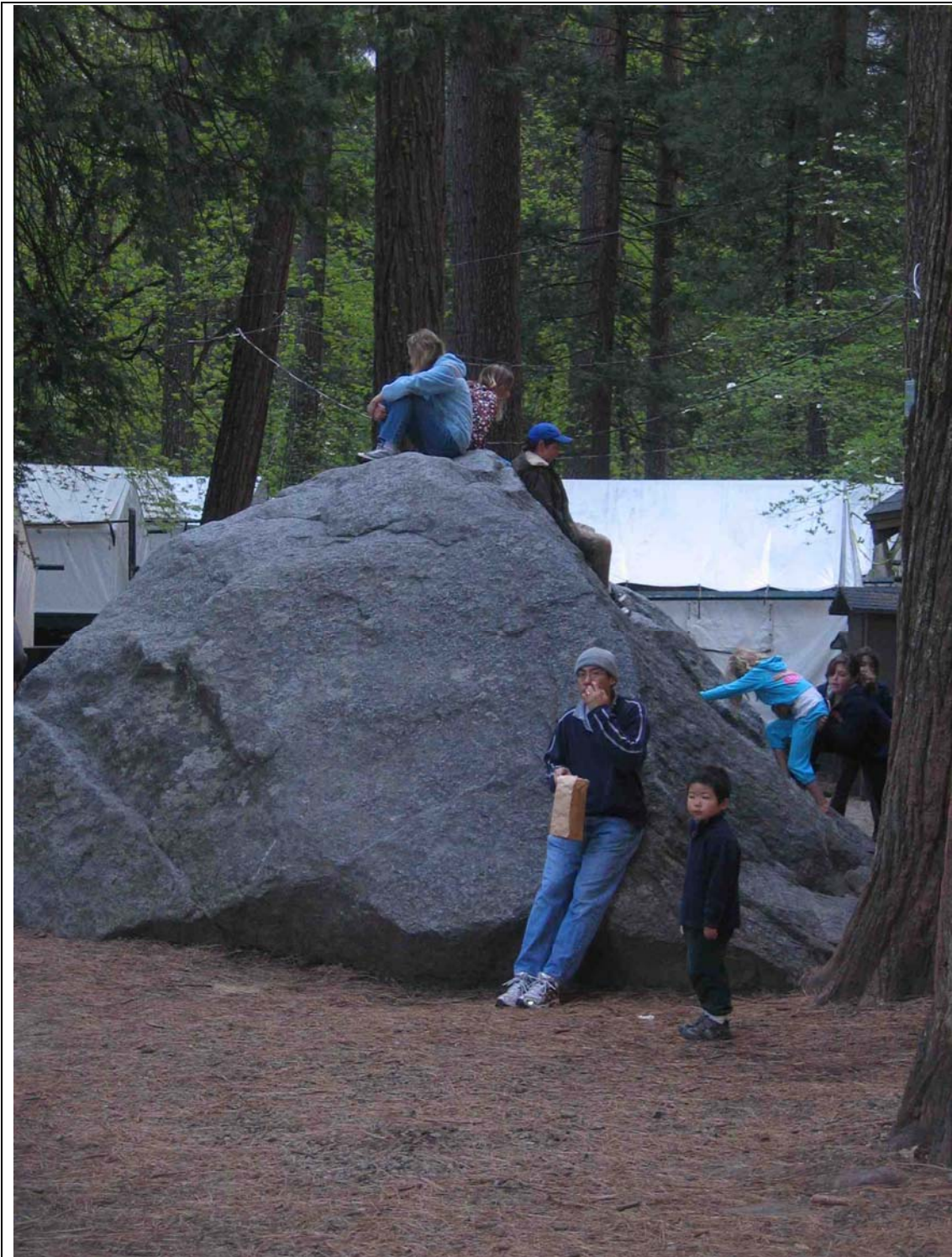


Figure 5. Children on boulder in Curry Village, Yosemite Valley, May 2010. Photography by Sally Ann Ness.

For example, the boulders located in the Valley's most affordable, family-friendly, and largest accommodation facility, Curry Village, (see Figure 5 above), have been a magnet for children for many generations. In six years of observing these boulders during research visits to the park, I have rarely seen them unoccupied by children during the daytime, unless the weather conditions forbid it. There is, in this regard, a tradition of experiencing boulders as "pregnant with possibility" in Yosemite, and it is one that will occasionally draw adults as well as children into its playful realm.

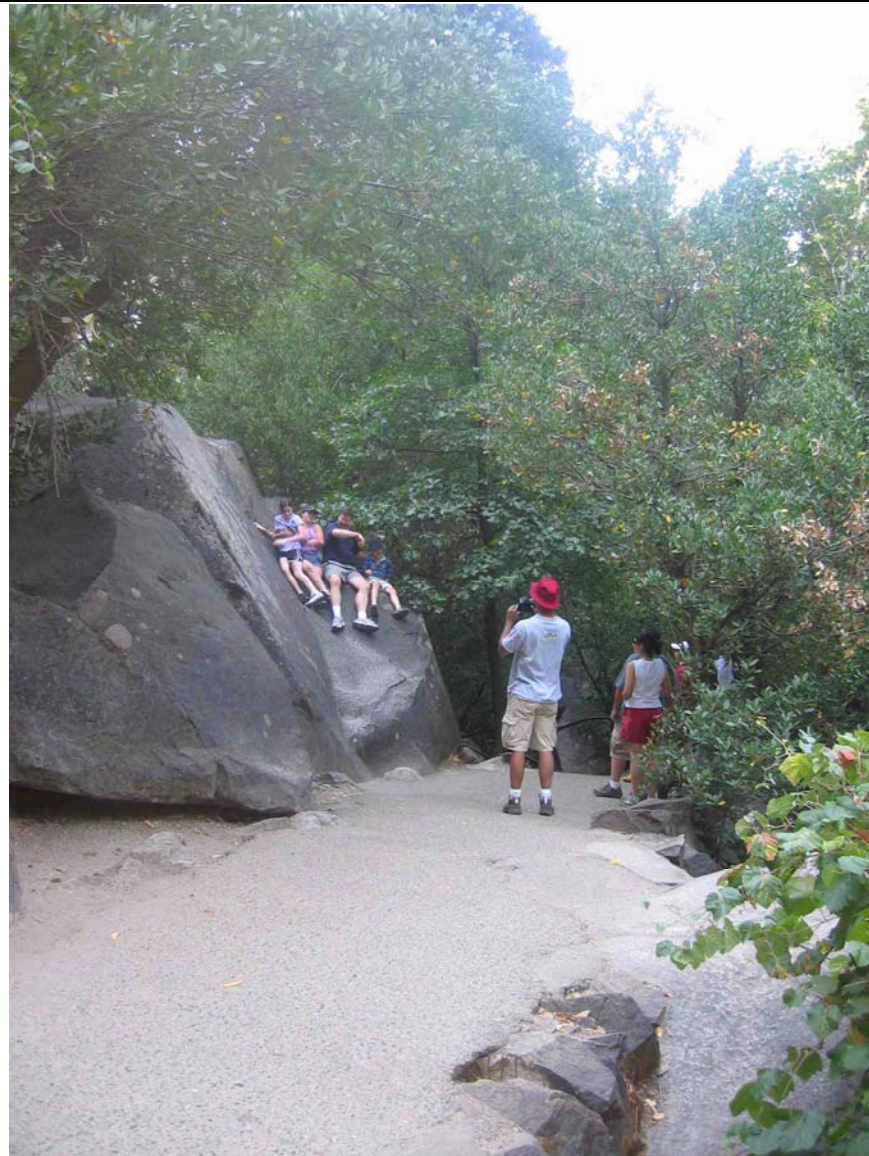


Figure 6. Visitors posing for a photo on a boulder near the base of Bridalveil Fall, August 2007. Photography by Sally Ann Ness.

This Yosemite tradition of playing on boulders, however, is child-focused. The human figure central to its narrative is a pre-pubescent, pre-gendered human subject. The desires that are gratified in relation to these features of the landscape are those of childhood.

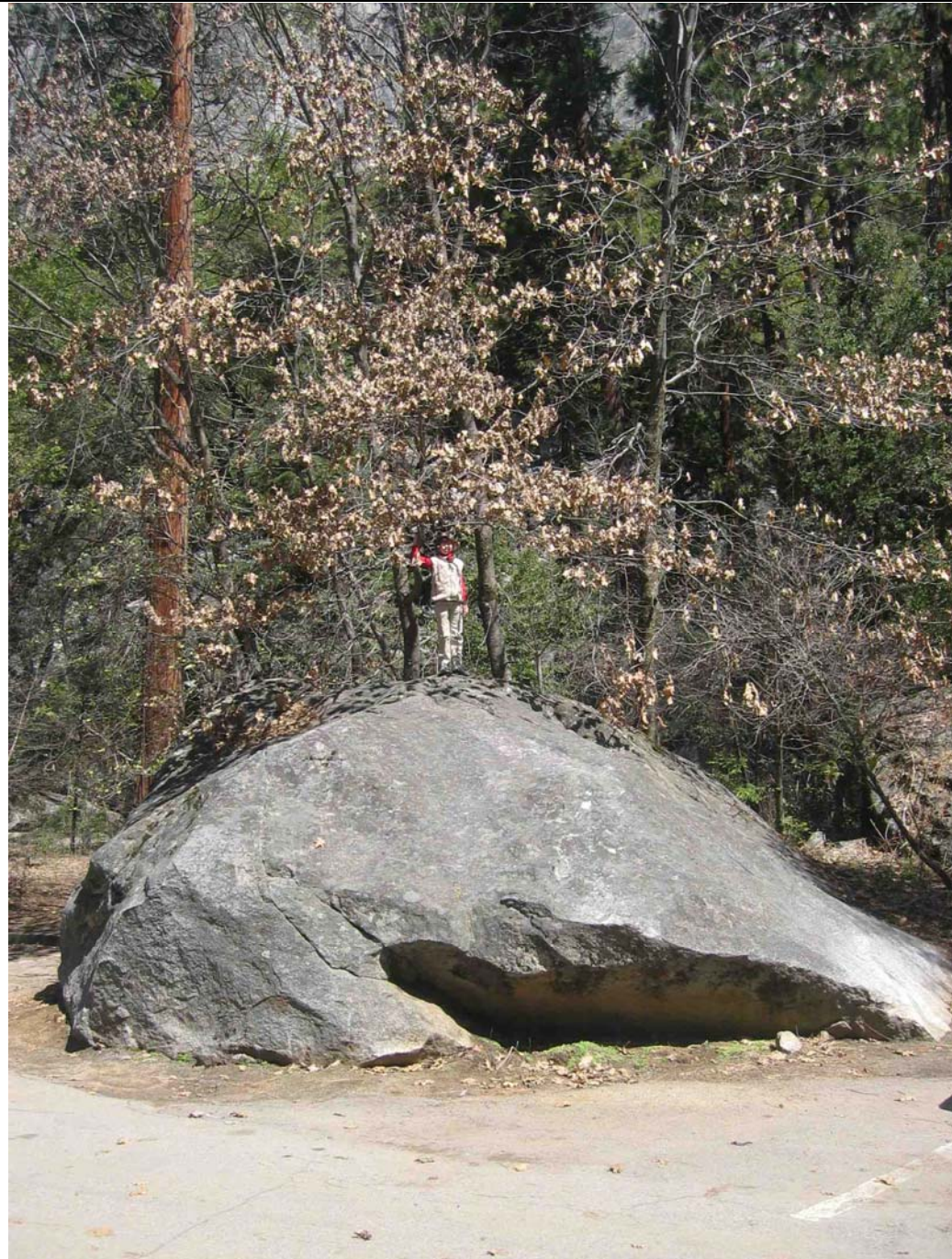


Figure 7. Anna Reck, eight years old, atop a boulder near the Ahwahnee Hotel, Yosemite Valley, April 2010. Photography by Sally Ann Ness.

To adopt the structuralist method of symbolic analysis for a moment,⁶ this child-centered configuration of boulders can be observed to acquire predominance in Yosemite's normative traditions of landscape encounter within a systematic relation of opposition that boulders maintain vis à vis the monumental formations that compose the Yosemite Valley landscape in its entirety. In this larger symbolic complex, they signify as miniature replicants of Yosemite's sublime, colossal topographical features. They are configured as minutia, and, thus, they have developed an identity over the generations as the "small time" features of the landscape--its "kid-stuff." Boulders, in this oppositional regard, define the far end of the spectrum that likewise characterizes the vastness of the Valley's massive granite walls.⁷

⁶ I refer here, of course, to the anthropological application of Ferdinand de Saussure's sign theory in the tradition initiated by Claude Levi-Strauss (1963). While I employ Levi-Strauss' method of identifying relations of opposition in this discussion, I reject his theory that such relations are necessarily representative of an unconscious deep structure, itself defined in more abstract terms, that governs cultural understanding. Crouch's framework, with its emphasis on potential, as opposed to necessary, relations in landscape symbolism, provides an alternative to structuralist determinism, in this regard.

⁷ Keith S. Walklet, for example, one of the park's most well known photographers, includes a photograph of boulders near the end of his popular souvenir text, *Yosemite; an enduring treasure* (2001, 51). In the caption, Walklet emphasizes the relatively small-scale nature of the boulder scene, writing, "The Yosemite experience includes smaller, quieter moments when the park's immense scale is momentarily forgotten . . ." (2001, 50).



Figure 8. View of Yosemite Valley from Wawona Tunnel Viewpoint, April 2009.
Photography by Sally Ann Ness.

In this particular, already elaborately articulated, landscape configuration, boulders have become significant as a training ground for Yosemite's younger Visitor population. They are places of initial practice that eventually may be abandoned in favor of the relatively "real" monumental topographical features that draw mature human Visitors to the park. Boulders, in other words, have traditionally prefigured for children a possible, eventual symbolic relation to the formations that tower over the adults. They make possible the conception, perception and experience of such formations as possessing the power to induce "summit fever" or "epic desire," and to lure otherwise rational, level-headed individuals into activities conceptualized in terms of lust, passion, obsession and affliction—activities designed to lead to peak experiences, sometimes even mortal experiences, of landscape encounter.⁸

⁸ On "summit fever" as the concept has been developed specifically in relation to Yosemite National Park, see Andy Padlo's account of backcountry backpacking (2011). On "epic desire" see Majka Burhardt's narrative on climbing Sentinel Rock in Yosemite (2011). See also Richard Lerversee and

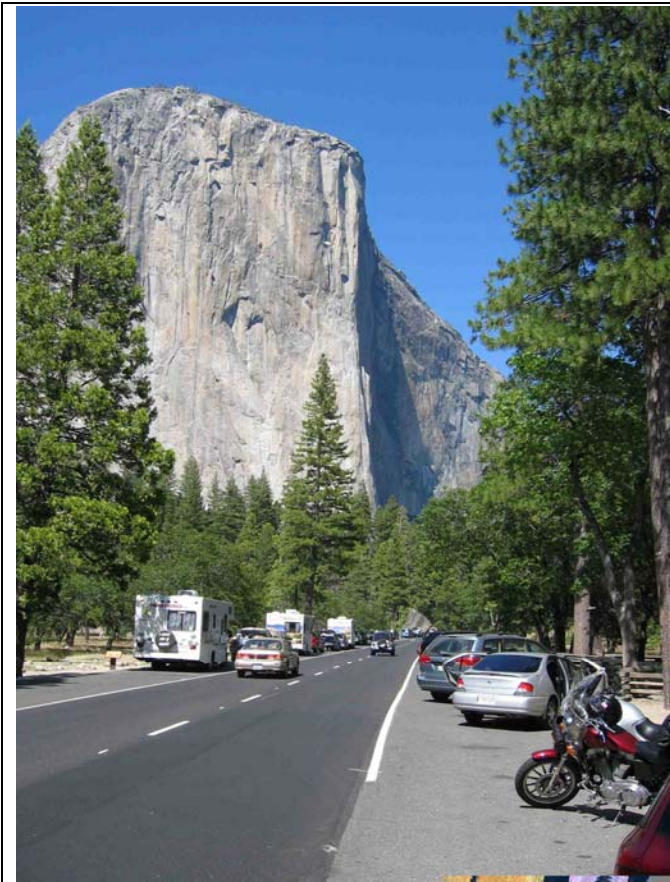


Figure 9. El Capitan, Yosemite Valley, July 2005; Yosemite's most alluring feature for elite climbers, "El Cap" draws more than 3000 climbers every year.⁹ Photography by Sally Ann Ness.

It is not boulders, in this structuralist regard, that have been the main focus of symbolic attraction in Yosemite National Park, but their opposites. It is in relation to the monumental granitic formations of Yosemite Valley that mature conceptions, narratives, and experiences of touristic seduction have traditionally developed. Here, the romantic naturalism of both European and Euro-American 19th and 20th century art and literature have combined with modernism to produce an elaborately articulated, extraordinarily

John Wason (2011) and Scott Cosgrove (2011) for personal narratives of landscape encounter in Yosemite conceptualized in terms of lust, passion, obsession and affliction.

⁹ See, for example, champion climber Doug Englekirk's narrative on climbing El Capitan (2011).

popular discourse, not only of desire, but of conquest, a discourse that millions of hiking, back-packing, mountaineering, and rock climbing visitors have enacted.¹⁰ The degree to which individual Visitors have intentionally invested themselves in this discourse is impossible to document with any certainty. Nonetheless, the performance of conquering the peaks and domes of the park landscape—however vaguely or explicitly undertaken—is actualized in thousands of ascents of various kinds each year.¹¹



Figure 10. Glacier Point Apron (on right), rising above Yosemite Valley, October 2009; the Apron is one of the more attractive formations for novice rock climbers, despite the fact that chronic rock slides make it a relatively dangerous landscape feature. Photography by Sally Ann Ness.

¹⁰ For studies of Yosemite's romantic naturalist tradition in art and literature, see especially David Robertson, 1984 and Amy Scott, ed., 2006. For examples of conquest narratives relating specifically to the Yosemite landscape, see Johanson, 2011.

¹¹ For sociological and anthropological studies that have analyzed the employment of gendered conquest narratives in nature-based landscape practices see especially Sherri Ortner, 1999 and Victoria Robinson, 2008.

In this specific romantic-naturalist configuration of the Yosemite landscape, the relatively abstract strategy Crouch has developed for interpreting the flirtatious character of landscape formations, with its diminishing of the sexual element in flirtation, might actually seem unnecessary. Judging by the demographics of Visitors traditionally participating in conquest-oriented activities--and the discourses and representations associated with them--the allure of the landscape could appear to be sexually charged, perhaps in some repressed or otherwise unconscious manner. For Visitors who are gendered masculine, actively oriented as heterosexual, and intent on practicing with/in the landscape as subjects defined along such lines, the charge would appear to hold most potential. Traditionally, it typically has been heterosexual, Euro-identified, masculine Visitors, who are most passionately drawn to Yosemite's longest, steepest, most pointed, seemingly phallic figures, sometimes dying in the attempt to achieve the ecstatic experience of being in, and laying claim to, their most unattainable places.¹²

¹² Search and rescue climber Scott Cosgrove's narrative of the way in which Yosemite's Higher Cathedral Rock exemplified a feeling that was, in his perspective, typical of all climbers--"when a climb gets under their skin and they really want to do it"--is a particularly clear example of this charged human/landscape relationship; Cosgrove narrates that he and his climbing partner "had it so bad that we just weren't right for this planet" (2011, 105).

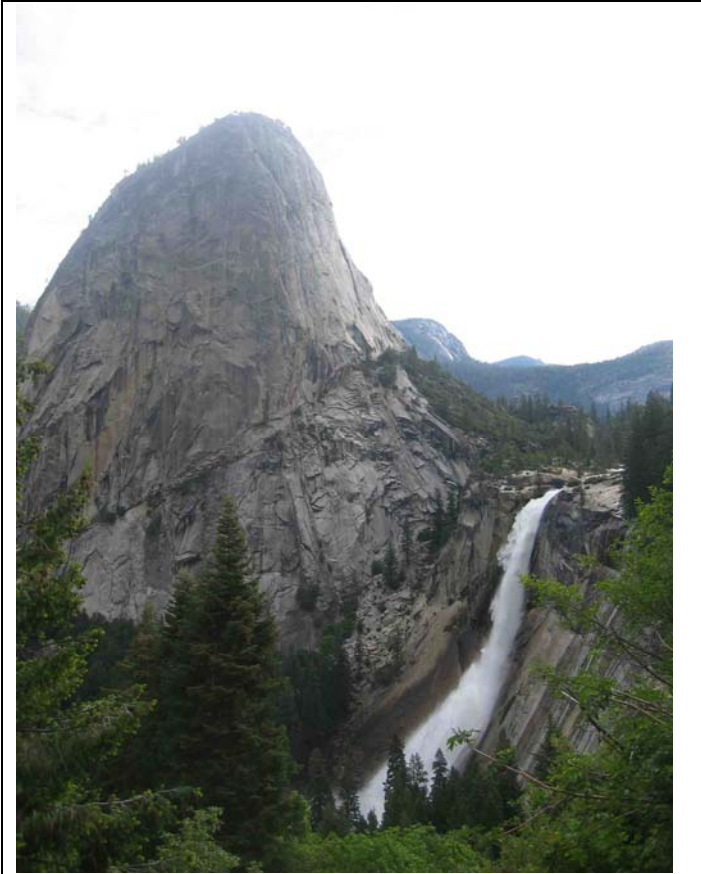


Figure 11. Liberty Cap overlooking Nevada Fall, Yosemite, September 2009. Photography by Sally Ann Ness.

To elaborate briefly on this traditional Euro-American symbolic work in progress, Yosemite's largest dome, Half Dome, provides, perhaps, the park's most potent, attractively charged example at present—at least if Visitor statistics are any indicator. In the words of one landscape painter, whom I interviewed in 2009 about his extensive experiences visiting and painting in the park, “every time you see Half Dome, after having climbed it, it will beckon you to climb it again.” This individual had hiked to the top of Half Dome well over a dozen times over the course of several decades. His words have been born out by hikers and climbers numbering in the hundreds of thousands. Likewise, Jim Zellers, a snowboarder with an international record of first ascents that spans several continents, has written in a similar vein,

Whenever I see Half Dome, it always blows me away. After thousands of times, I still can't enter Yosemite Valley without really being taken aback. It's a powerful

place and Half Dome resides over the top of everything. Half Dome seems to just draw you in from every angle (2011, 145).

The monumental topographical feature of Half Dome motivates a normative myth of landscape encounter. It animates one way in which Visitors ought to “flirt” with the Yosemite landscape, from popular, official, and commercial points of view.



Figure 12. Half Dome, seen from one of its most common vantage points, Curry Village parking lot, in Yosemite Valley, July 2005. Photography by Erich Reck.



Figure 13. Half Dome scene from one of the most popular vantage points, Glacier Point Lookout, July 2005. Photography by Katie Manduca.

Half Dome rises 1443 meters from Valley floor to an altitude of 2,695 meters. It is the sheerest cliff in North America, only 2 degrees off absolute vertical. Its north face, first climbed in a five-day ascent by a team led by American alpinist, Royal Robbins, in 1957, attracts rock climbers from all over the world. The north face was first climbed “free solo” (without ropes or protection of any kind) in September 2008 by Alex Honnold, a 23-year-old climber from Northern California. Honnold climbed the north face in two hours and fifty minutes, making himself the undisputed champion of the free soloist climbing community worldwide in so doing.¹³ Even park rangers I met who, generally speaking, had a

¹³ For details of Honnold’s climb, see Jenkins 2011. See also the video documentary, *Alone on the Wall* (<http://poormansheli.com/2011/04/20/video-alex-honnold-free-soloing-half-dome/>). Honnold repeatedly makes connections in the video between his life with climbing and his sexual activities (or lack thereof). This commentary is meant to be ironic and humorous, however. The fact that Honnold and his interlocutors in the documentary make such a link specifically between climbing and the sexual dimension of Honnold’s personal life might seem to be significant for the purposes at hand. The connection pointedly identifies a vague overlap in relation to emotions of strong desire,

somewhat negative view of climbers and their activities in the park, expressed unqualified admiration for Honnold's Half Dome ascent.¹⁴ Honnold's way of relating to the feature was by all accounts heroic, or "sick" in the discourse of his fellow climbers.

Half Dome does not possess an obviously phallic character from every angle, in particular not from the angle from which it is viewed in the Valley (as Figure 12 illustrates). However, it attracts more conquest-oriented Visitors than any other monumental figure in the Valley landscape. Its hiking trail, which progresses from the Valley floor from its western side to its southern "back" to its eastern side in a meandering upward spiral approximately seven miles in length, attracts tens of thousands of visitors every year.

The hike to the top of Half Dome traditionally was done most often as a two-day ascent, in which Visitors would hike up approximately half way on the first day to a campground known as Little Yosemite Valley that sits beneath and behind the dome. They would then climb up to the summit on the second day. However, in the last two decades, a one-day pattern of ascent has gained popularity with a younger, ethnically diverse, predominantly male, Visitor population. These Visitors have arrived in larger and larger numbers each year to "summit" the feature, as this population tends to characterize the activity. They generally start out early in the morning and complete the hike seven to ten hours later. The hike has grown to be so popular that "traffic" on the dome, as National Park Service management has come to characterize it, has become a serious hazard. Overuse has led to a series of accidental deaths on the final stages of the hike (two have occurred in 2011 alone, four previously, in 2006, 2007, and 2009 according to Bly, 2011 and Boster, 2011).

but one that leaves room for markedly different experiences occurring in relation to each domain. In non-humorous comments, Honnold specifies that the relation he finds it absolutely vital to maintain with the landscape while he is in the act of climbing is one in which he is totally focused on the moves he is making on the rock face *such as they are*, without any extraneous significance interfering with his concentration. This indicates that there is no psychological room (conscious or unconscious) in Honnold's experience of the landscape for any additional, sexually oriented meaning-making to develop, either metaphoric or literal in character.

¹⁴ Tensions between climbers and rangers in Yosemite are documented in Jenkins 2011. They have existed since at least the 1970s and do not appear to be lessening despite the fact that the climbing community has gained stature over the years as its popularity and numbers have increased and as a small elite faction of its members have been integrated into the staff of the National Park Service, in particular its Search and Rescue division. In my own observation, rangers and others associated with park management tend to stereotype climbers as immature, arrogant, and disrespectful (one ranger reported that the climber jargon for "ranger" was "tool"), while climbers tend to stereotype rangers as authoritarian, and of inferior character, both physically and mentally. However, a considerable diversity of opinion is evident on both sides with regard to climber-ranger identities and relations.

In response, the National Park Service began to require permits to summit Half Dome starting in May 2010. This new strategy has limited the Visitor population to around 450 “summiters” a day (it had risen to over 1200 a day in 2009 during peak visitation periods). Permits have sold out within minutes of becoming available on the internet (I myself tried and failed to obtain one in 2011) and have become the objects of “scalping” re-sales that increased their original value many times over. The controversial permit program brought the critical attention of the national media to the hike and to the park management more generally. Half Dome’s attractiveness thus appears to be on the increase, despite, or, perhaps, in part, because of the new limitations imposed by the National Park Service.

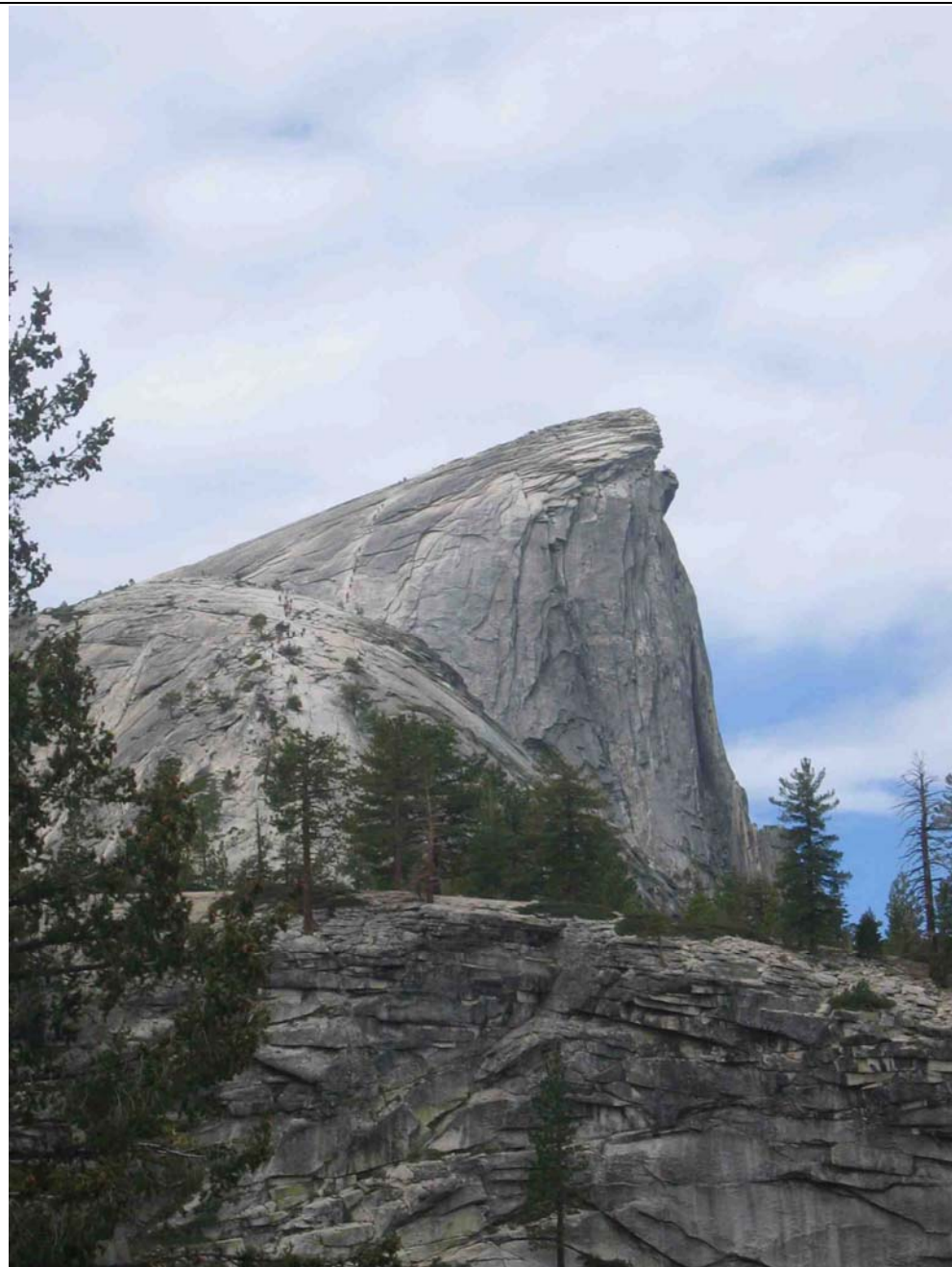


Figure 14. Hikers ascending the “sub-dome” and the top of Half Dome, May 2009. The final sections of the trail consist of a series of several hundred steps hewn into the granite followed by a final “ladder” of wooden rails nailed into the stone face and lined on each side by steel cables suspended on metal posts. Photography by Sally Ann Ness.

The conquest symbolism of the Yosemite Valley landscape as motivated by the specific feature of Half Dome was made evident to me personally in May 2009, when my 7-year-old daughter, Anna, drew a picture for me while I was away on a field research visit to Yosemite. My visit included the participant-observation activity of hiking the Half Dome trail. Her drawing was done without any prompting on my part. She delivered it to me as a surprise present upon my return home. It depicts me in a stereotypically masculine, victorious pose atop the dome (see Figure 15.). As it happened, I did not, in fact, hike the final mile of the trail and, so, did not “summit” as depicted. The conquest trope, nonetheless, had clearly articulated itself already in her imagination.



Figure 15. Drawing of Half Dome by Anna Reck, May 2009. Photography by Sally Ann Ness.

Half Dome, in this regard, is one particularly definitive figure in a highly elaborated touristic configuration-- a configuration with both symbolic and experiential dimensions--that over the decades has drawn millions of Visitors to Yosemite National Park. Visitors have related

to Half Dome in a manner that articulates a traditionally Euro-American manner of playing with monumental features of a natural landscape, enacting one extremely popular possibility for becoming human in relation to a certain kind of found (non-built) and phallicly-identifiable environment.

Is the concept of flirtation truly the most apt in characterizing Yosemite's Visitor/landscape play? Even in this case, where metaphoric conceptualizations might seem to justify the employment of this trope, the notion of flirtation still tends to obscure both the diversity and the sometimes inchoate nature of the desire that Half Dome's Visitors actually experience. Half Dome's magnetism regularly influences Visitors who do not yet know what, exactly, they desire—which does not mean that their desires are necessarily repressed. Rather, it indicates that they are only at the outset of their own creative process of cultivating a meaningful relationship with this feature's inherent and distinctive characteristics. Likewise, Half Dome's Visitors experience numerous kinds of desire: they desire to summit; they also desire to climb, they desire to be present and deeply immersed in the encounter with the landscape's natural elements; they desire an "epic" journey, an experience, in climber Majka Burhardt's words, in which they may want "to relish in . . . mistakes and then turn them into grand stories after . . . eventual success" (2011, 135). Most basically, perhaps, Visitors desire to move, often as if for the first time, in relation to Half Dome's extraordinary form. In sum, the general symbolic potential that is the source of Half Dome's touristic charge and attraction, requires interpretation in terms of a larger array of affect-driven meaning-making possibilities than the concept of flirtation can encompass, even when stretched to its most abstract, relatively inclusive definition.

Half Dome, in this way, exemplifies the manner in which Yosemite's landscape has been conceived, perceived, experienced and represented as desirable from the outset of its designation as a national park. The monumental characteristics of Yosemite's cliffs, domes, and massive walls, have inspired a symbolism of recreational conquest and conservation of virgin territory. This evolving, creative articulation has been refined progressively over the decades with remarkable consistency. It is currently represented with a clarity often achieving brilliance in Visitor practice, literature, visual art, and a variety of other media as well. Visitors drawn to Yosemite, by and large, come with expectations of enacting this symbolic configuration, one way or another, replicating in so doing the practices of millions upon millions who have visited previously. The landscape's general potential would seem to have been exhausted in this traditional modernist-romanticist attractively charged configuration.

Contemporary Yosemite bouldering



Figure 16. Climber Alan Moore with bouldering pad in front of Yosemite Valley's most famous climbing boulder, the Columbia Boulder, Camp 4, Yosemite Valley, April 2008. Photography by Sally Ann Ness.

A new generation of climbers, however, is now engaging with the Yosemite Valley landscape, in particular with its boulders. Bouldering has recently come into its own in Yosemite, as it has elsewhere in the climbing world. Although the practice, in the form here documented, has been active in Yosemite since at least the 1970s, in the past ten years, a sub-group of dedicated bouldering climbers has emerged who have taken its development to new levels of commitment and sophistication. They come expressly, sometimes exclusively, for the purpose of climbing Yosemite's boulders. In Crouch's terms, they have been seduced by boulders in a new, more serious, way. Boulders have won them over, demonstrating a capacity to draw these climbers into the Valley in a manner comparable to that which the Valley's monumental formations have done in relation to traditional alpinists. Boulders can be, and often are, the main attraction to Yosemite for this Visitor population.

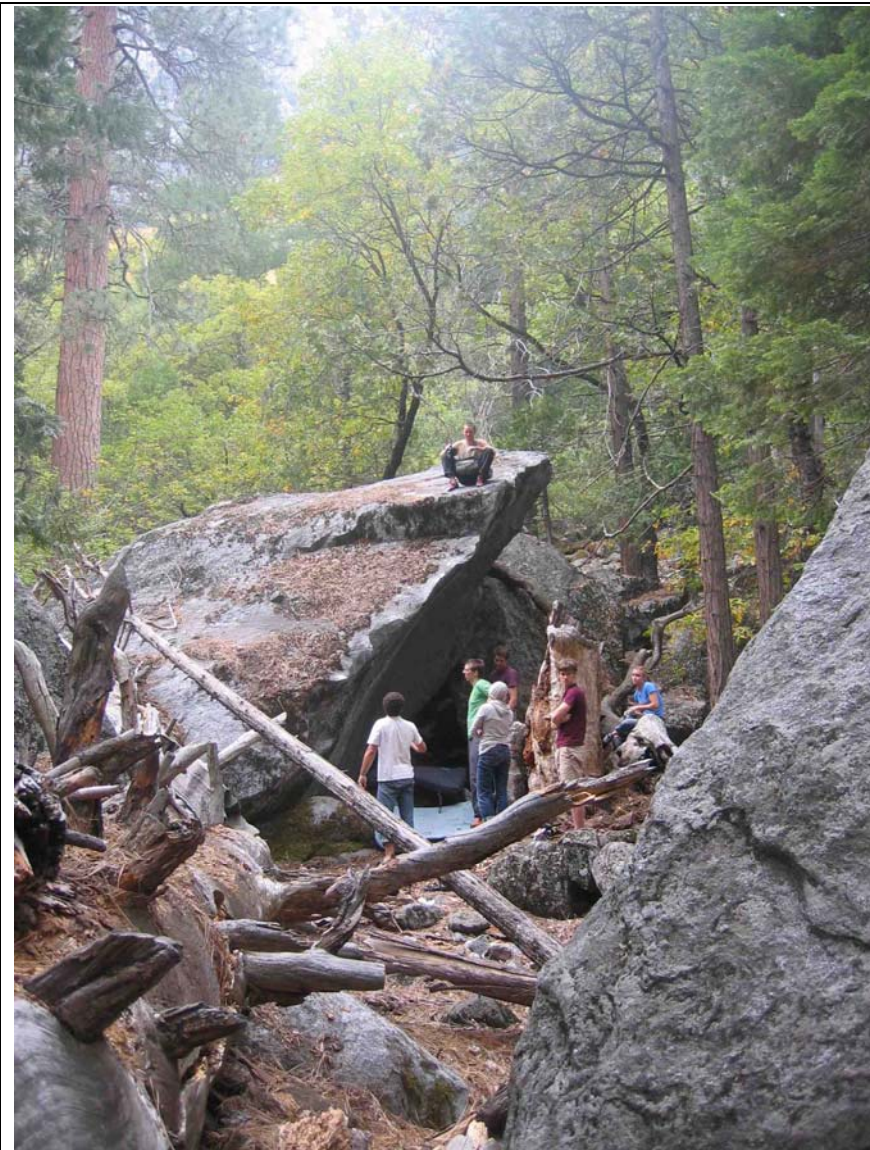


Figure 17. Boulderers in the area of the LeConte Memorial, Yosemite Valley, October 2008. Photography by Sally Ann Ness.

These contemporary boulder climbers generally range in age from teenage to middle-age. They may train in climbing gyms as well as climb in natural environments. In many cases, but not all, they have expertise in other kinds of climbing as well as bouldering. Their bouldering skill set and their ideals of athletic virtuosity in relation to bouldering are comparable in terms of technical sophistication to those of advanced traditional climbers, although they are distinctly different in many respects. Boulders are not kid-stuff to these Visitors. Boulder rock formations have no minor, preparatory status. They are the “real deal” for this Visitor population. Boulder climbers may visit Yosemite in all seasons. They

may camp outside, even in the winter months, in order to enjoy the experience of climbing on Yosemite's boulders.

Bouldering as a variant of climbing practice has been increasing rapidly in popularity within the larger climbing practitioner population over the course of the last two decades. It is now a highly competitive practice, with an international athletic elite leading its technical evolution and a media devoted specifically to its representation. Bouldering's growth is due to a number of developments. Climbing gyms, which are a main factor in the popularizing of the sport, typically provide boulder-like environments of high quality, comparable in terms of technical challenges to natural environments. Gym availability makes the development of expertise in this kind of climbing easily accessible. Bouldering also can be performed without a partner (unlike traditional rope climbing), although it is typically performed with one or more "spotters" participating beneath the climber who is in progress on a climb. This circumstance makes bouldering relatively easy to pursue independently. Bouldering also can be undertaken in a wider variety of environments than traditional climbing, since it can be performed on relatively ubiquitous kinds of environmental features and boulder-like objects. Finally, bouldering does not require the elaborate and expensive array of equipment employed in traditional climbing. All of these factors combine to make bouldering a relatively cheap, convenient, manageable pursuit that still offers the excitement, challenge, and creative engagement with rock formations typical of other kinds of climbing in Yosemite.

With regard to this contemporary climbing Visitor population, it is evident that Yosemite's boulders are capable of inspiring new forms of symbolic cultivation and that they have acquired new kinds of imaginative and oneiric potential. The practice is creating new, previously inconceivable relationships, in relation to which new experiences of the human-boulder connection are emerging. These appear to be fundamentally different from that motivated by the relatively traditional configurations of the Valley's monumental features. Among other differences, bouldering practice and the experiences of arousal, desire, and ecstatic gratification that its enactment can afford, appear to have the general potential (however vaguely apprehended, if apprehended at all, in individual experience) of carrying an incipient flirtative charge, in Crouch's terms, that is relatively "queer" with regard to how any actual formulations of it might progressively unfold. That is to say, it is a charge that is relatively ambiguous or flexibly gender-able with respect to the type of experimental interaction the practice generally stages between the climber and the landscape feature.

This symbolic capability contrasts markedly with the phallogentric, heteronormative potential that is iconically associable with monumental features in Yosemite Valley.

To identify a few of the alternative human/landscape relations that are emerging out of contemporary bouldering practices, the treatment of boulders as they are readied for climbing can serve as an initial example. In preparing boulders for climbing, climbers will scrape lichen, moss, and other organic matter off a boulder's surfaces. They will literally strip the boulder bare before climbing it, if it is not already in this condition (see Figure 18 below). This initial interaction with the boulder is deemed necessary in order to proceed with the activity of climbing the features of the boulder's rock surface itself. The interest in exposing a boulder's denuded surfaces evidences a sense of place that contrasts strongly with Yosemite's traditional naturalist sense of the pristine, naturally perfect condition of all of its wilderness elements, boulders included. The park's "virgin" features, as standard discourses conceptualize them, ideally are to be left totally untouched by human activity of any kind. Muirian spiritualist-naturalist adherents would find the stripping of lichen off of a boulder unimaginable as anything but a violation of that landscape feature's natural integrity.¹⁵ For boulderer's, however, stripping is a basic technical requirement that does not diminish or downgrade a boulder's admirable character. Rather, it makes that character more accessible. The general symbolic potential of boulders to support meaning-making processes that identify them eventually as either bodies that obviously should or should not be denuded exemplifies the multi-stable objectivity boulders in Yosemite currently sustain as it can lead to serious conflicts of opinion about landscape management.

In the case of bouldering, this preparatory boulder treatment can be, and on occasion actually has been, conceptualized in linguistic tropes that are explicitly erotic, though sexually ambiguous. After being stripped, boulders are "ticked" or covered at critical points with chalk so as to make their graspable features easier to hold onto. One climber once informed me that this ticking was sometimes referred to by climbers he knew as putting

¹⁵ For example, when the enormously popular traditional nightly practice, known as the Firefall, was discontinued in Yosemite in 1969—a practice that entailed pushing live embers of an enormous bonfire off one of the highest cliffs on the southern rim of the Valley—one of the rationales given for the decision was that the embers were killing the lichen that was growing on the rock surfaces of the Valley walls. Despite the fact that few visitors would ever see this "damage" to the rock surface, and that the affected area was confined to a relatively minute segment of the Valley wall surface, the impact of the practice was deemed highly undesirable and not in line with the conservationist ethics of the National Park Service. The rationale continues to be accepted as valid to this day.

“make-up” on a boulder. He reported that boulders were said to look “prettier” to some climbers when they were wearing their make-up (see Figure 19). Here, the general potential of boulders to inspire and sustain the cultivation of fully formed, conventional representations that convey with a high degree of clarity a flirtatious identity has been fully actualized. This is not to argue that Yosemite boulderers in general conceptualize boulders along these flirtatious lines or that, if they do not, it is because they are repressing subconsciously such a conceptualization that is necessarily or universally significant. It is only to document how the potential for such conceptualization has in one instance actually emerged, developing from a relatively inchoate to a relatively articulate, conventional symbolic representation. It is a representation that a traditional Muirian aesthetic would find unthinkable and impossible to apprehend experientially.

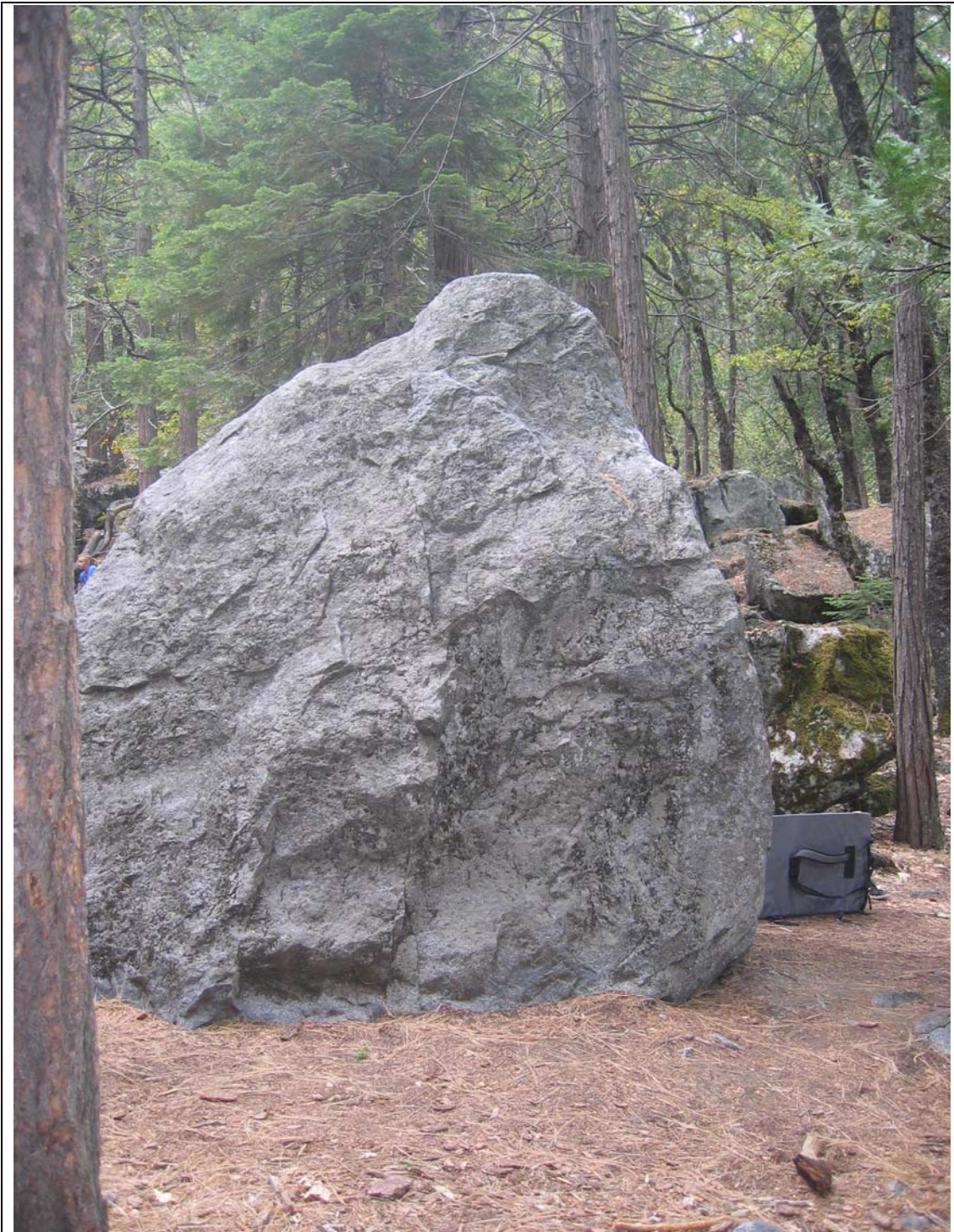


Figure 18. Boulder in a climable condition in the area of LeConte Memorial Yosemite Valley, October 2008. Photography by Sally Ann Ness.

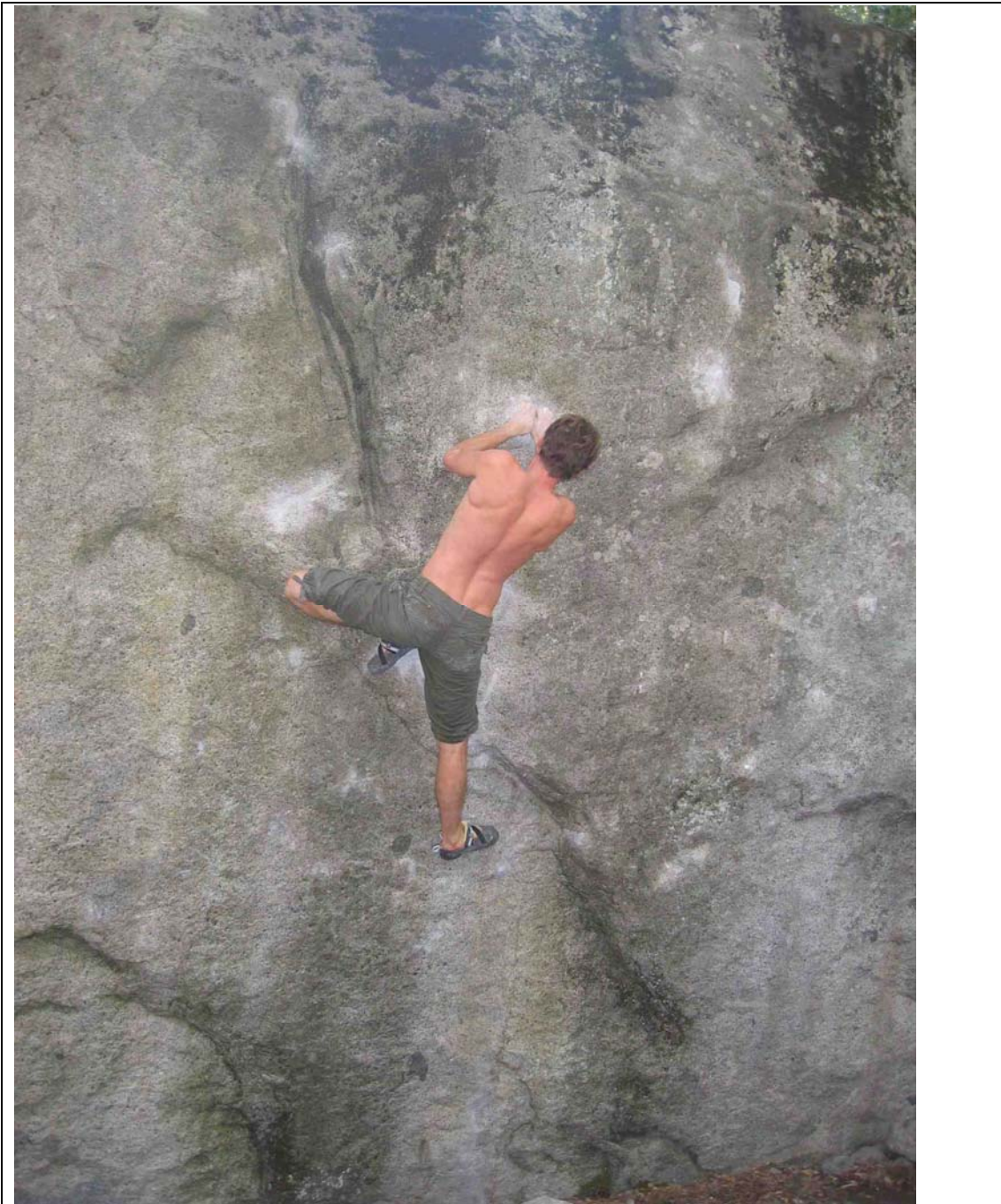


Figure 19. Alan Moore climbing a route ticked with chalk on the Columbia Boulder, Camp 4, Yosemite Valley, October 2008. Photography by Sally Ann Ness.

Returning, now, to the “queering” potential of Yosemite boulders, the reference to make-up made above might seem to suggest that boulders are charged as specifically feminizable bodies. It should be noted, however, that this reference also holds the potential to construe

boulders along trans-sexual lines as well, making conceivable the eventual emergence of a “drag queen” identity for them. This ambiguity of gender is supported by the very basic empirical fact that boulders, when viewed purely and simply as physical objects—as bodies of rock—are comparatively ambiguous and variable relative to the monumental landscape features in Yosemite. They are rarely phallic in appearance. Neither, however, are they typically shaped in ways that would carry any inherent iconic potential in relation to any forms that could be identified with female sexual organs or female-linked bodily features. Boulders’ typically amorphous forms, in this general regard, are among the vaguest forms of any perceivable in the Yosemite Valley landscape. They are also among the most potentially queer figures, in terms of the generally possible flirtative identifications that might be cultivated in relation to them. Boulder climbers, in this regard, are, by the very definition of their practice, human beings willing and able to “get up on” --as climbing jargon phrases it—and engage in intimate physical relations with rock bodies of virtually any potentially genderable kind. Again, the degree to which such incipient symbolic potential might ever be developed is not at issue at the moment. Whether or not individual climbers ever actually experience boulders as queer flirtatious objects in any clearly identifiable manner as they move in relation to them, the potential for them to do so is inherent in the basic compositional features of the rocks themselves. This vague, inchoate potential is real and persistent. In the experimental practices of climbing on boulders, climbers may recreate, transform, redirect, or clarify this incipient potential along any number of innovative meaning-making lines.

To develop this argument in somewhat more detail, the movements of boulder climbing, which regularly serve to produce passionate encounters between climbers and rock formations, further elaborate the queer flirtative potential of Yosemite boulders. Bouldering movements have the capability to generate vivid, vital, novel experiences of Crouch’s “agonizing play.” However, in the context of bouldering, these movements are, again, ambiguous in terms of their capacity to enable the emergence of clearly gendered or sexualized desire-oriented forms of experiential significance.

Actions of whole body hugging, clinging, enfolding, pinching, and grasping are constitutive of boulder climbing, as the series of Figures 20-23 illustrates. In most instances, a climber attempts to keep his/her pelvis pressed into the boulder’s surface so as to minimize the pull of gravity and the chance of coming off the boulder. Climbers want to “stick” to boulders, in climbing terms. This technical objective produces a relationship to the boulder that is oriented around the carriage and placement of the bodily region that includes the

genitalia, thus creating the iconic potential for sexually-oriented forms of symbolic association. However, it is not a markedly male- or female-identifiable movement practice in terms of the typical actions of the pelvic technique itself. Likewise, no linguistic representations of these movements--or any other symbolic formulations of them--have emerged that conceptualize them in gender-specific terms. The action vocabulary of boulder climbing, both in practice and in discourse, is largely, if not entirely, unmarked by the articulation of gendered symbolism.



Figure 20. Alan Moore performing an initial “heel hook” grasping movement on the route, Flatline, located on a boulder in the area of the LeConte Memorial, Yosemite Valley, October 2008. Photography by Sally Ann Ness.

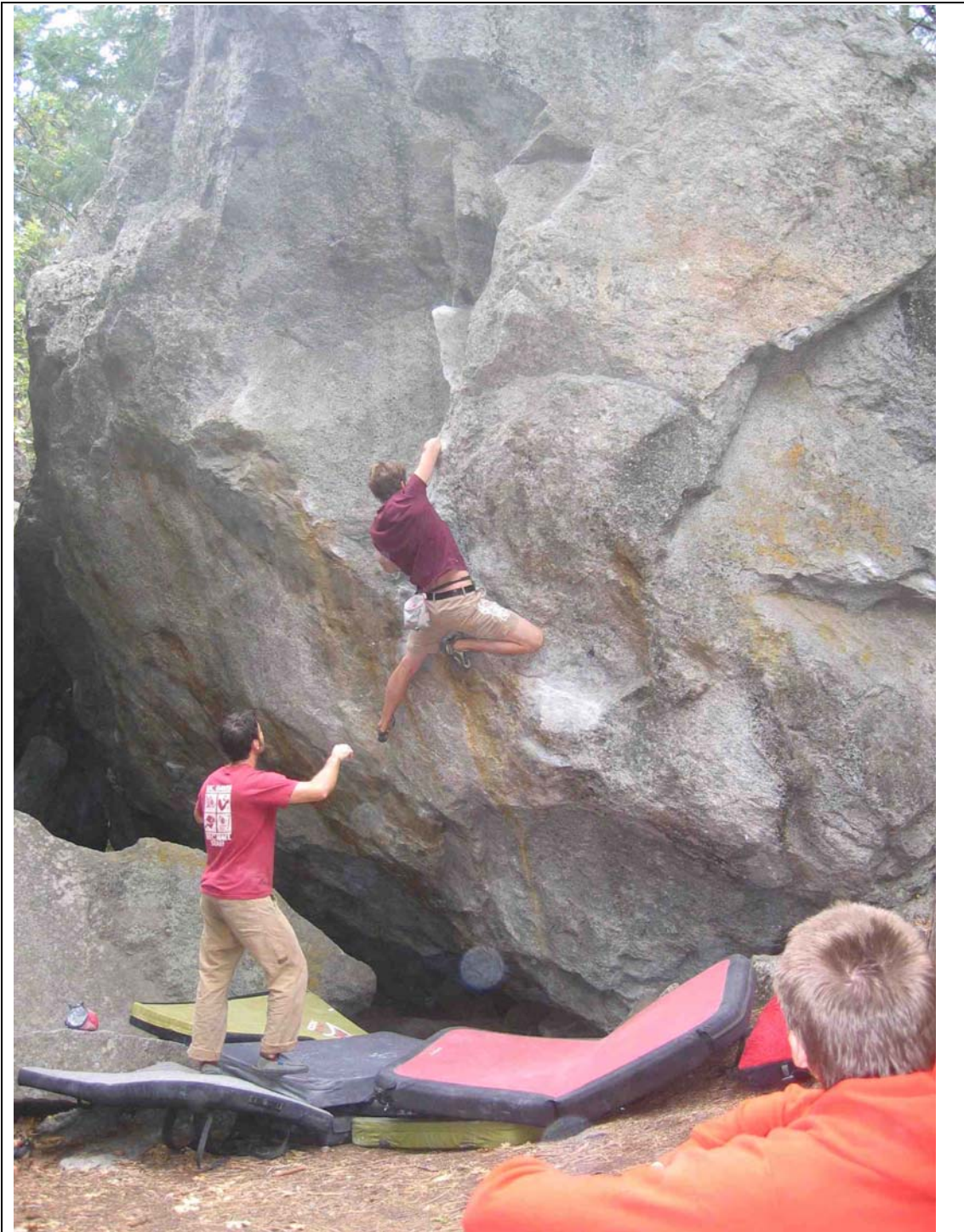


Figure 21. Moore using hugging movements in ascending further on the route, Flatline, October 2008. Note the position of Moore's pelvis in relation to the rock as it is being pushed inward while his right leg rotates outward. This coordination patterning exemplifies good climbing technique. Photography by Sally Ann Ness.

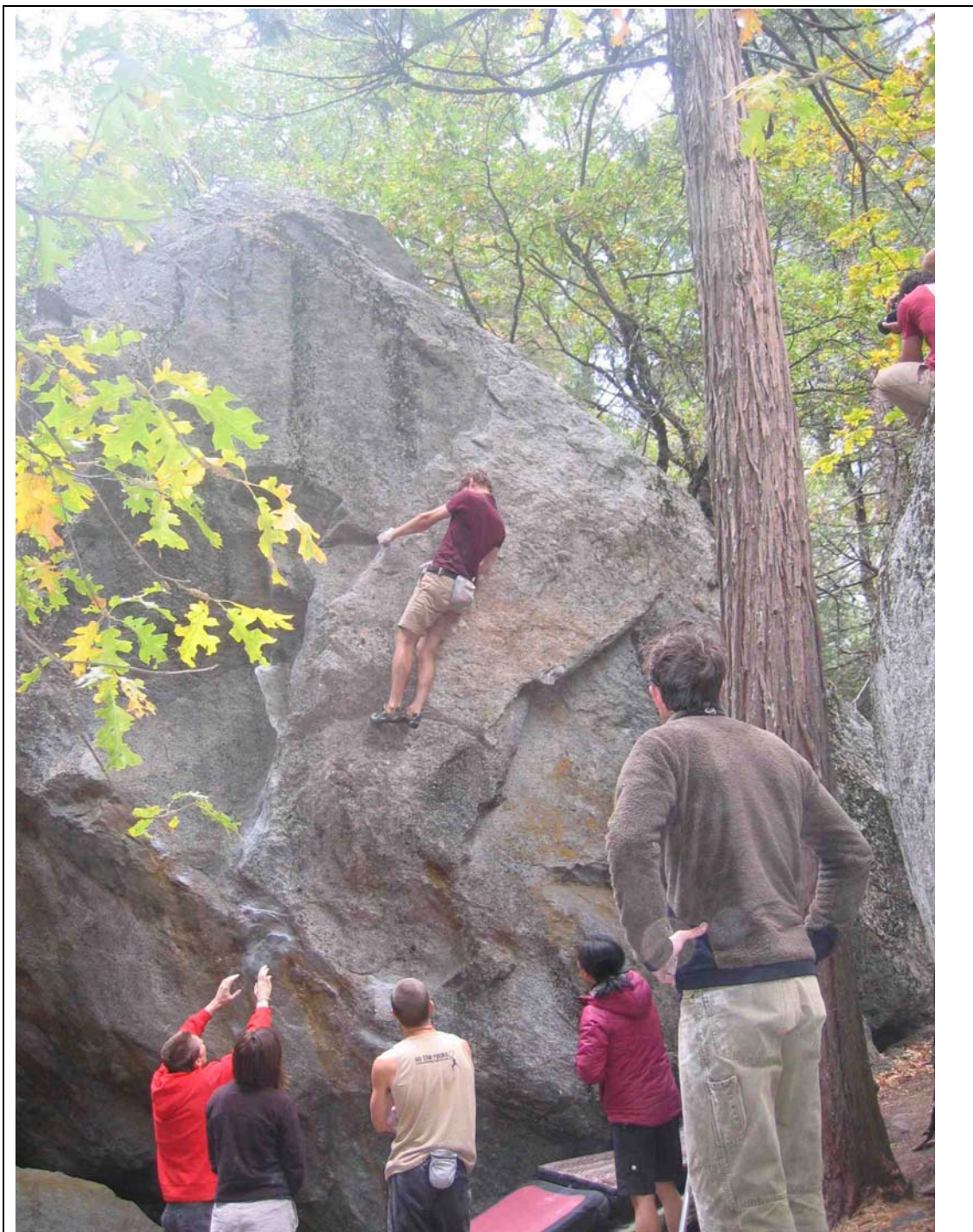


Figure 22. Moore using pinching movements in ascending toward the crux of the route, Flatline, October 2008. Photography by Sally Ann Ness.

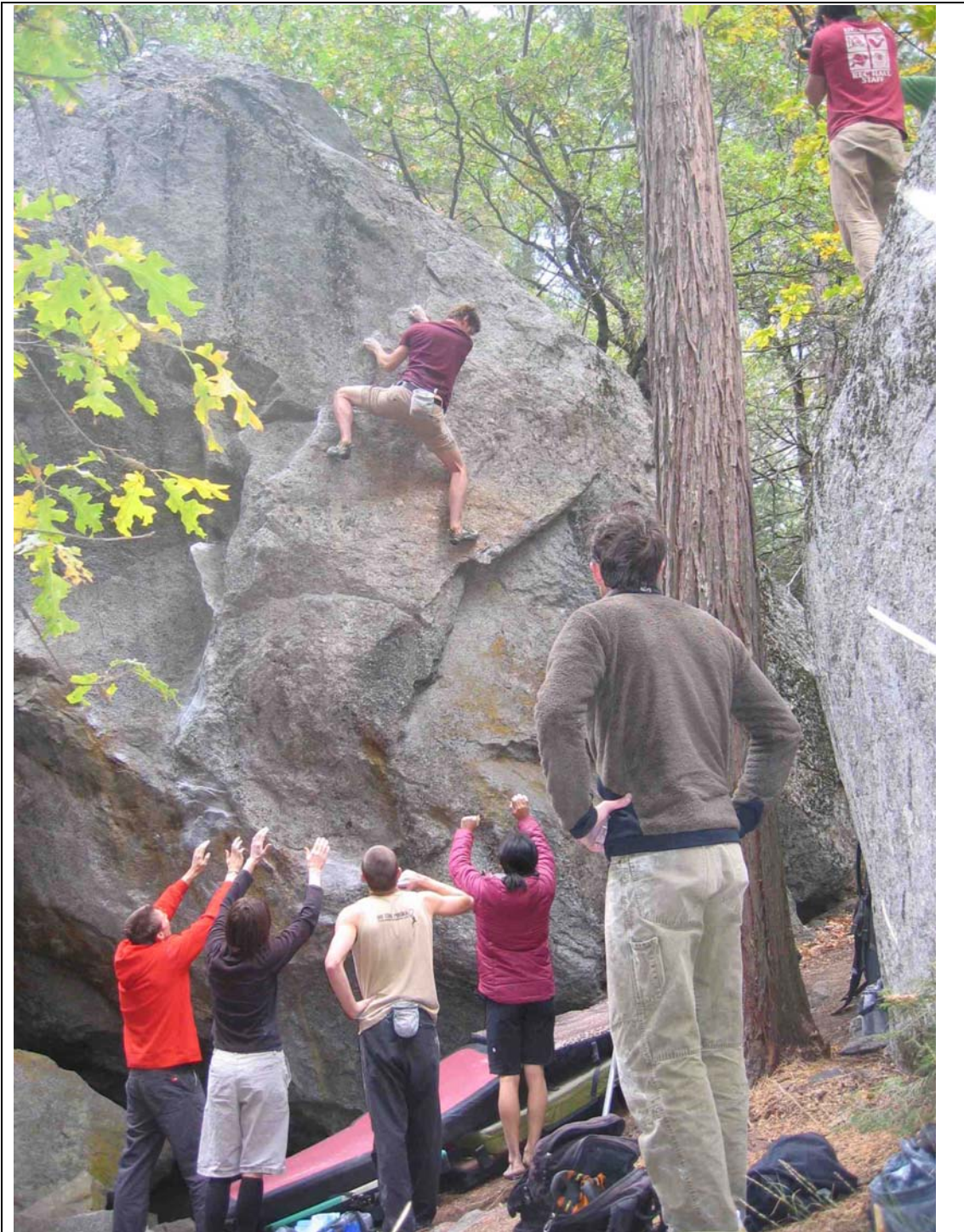


Figure 23. Moore using a combination of pressing and clinging movements near the crux of the route, Flatline, October 2008. Note how Moore uses his limbs to keep his center of gravity close to the rock surface. Photography by Sally Ann Ness.

Also contributing to the more flexible potential of bouldering practice is the fact that in boulder climbing, because no ropes are employed, there is nothing mediating the climber's body in relation to the rock. The climber and the boulder thus become bodies of a less differentiated kind than is the case in traditional climbing, or in most other forms of physically-oriented landscape encounter for that matter. In bouldering, there is no technology reinforcing any conceivably phallic extension of the climber's body, as is the case in rope climbing. In traditional rope climbing, climbers must insert pieces of equipment into the rock surfaces on which they climb. They attach their ropes to this equipment so as to protect themselves if they fall, and they refer to this climbing gear as "protection" or sometimes simply as "pro."



Figure 24. Rope climber (on right) placing protection into a crack on the climb, "Jamcrack," in the Sunnybench area of Yosemite Lower Fall, May 2010. Photography by Derick Fay.

Pieces of protection can be poked into the rock in order to secure their positioning; they can also be screwed in. Sometimes climbers drill them in, or pound them in, or even nail them in. This process of placing protection has been represented on occasion—although not regularly—in explicitly sexual terms, as "humping" the rock "with pro." Rope climbing's

action vocabulary, in other words, possesses the general potential to cohere a heterosexually-oriented climber-rock symbolism, with the climber configured clearly in the male role and the rock configured in the female role. In bouldering, however, no such symbolism lies incipient in the boulder-climber relationship. The climber's body and the rock's body are relatively unmarkable by the formulation of any sexually-oriented difference.

The experience of conquest at a single, ultimate location—and the formulation of any conventional discourse relating to such experience-- is also relatively muted or even absent in boulder climbing. Bouldering is not necessarily about getting to the top of the landscape feature. Rather, it is about moving through what are termed “cruxes” that are located along a climbing route or bouldering “problem” as climbers generally term them. Cruxes are moments of extreme vulnerability where the risks of failure, disgrace, injury, and humiliation (all variations of flirtative risk identified by Crouch) are highest.

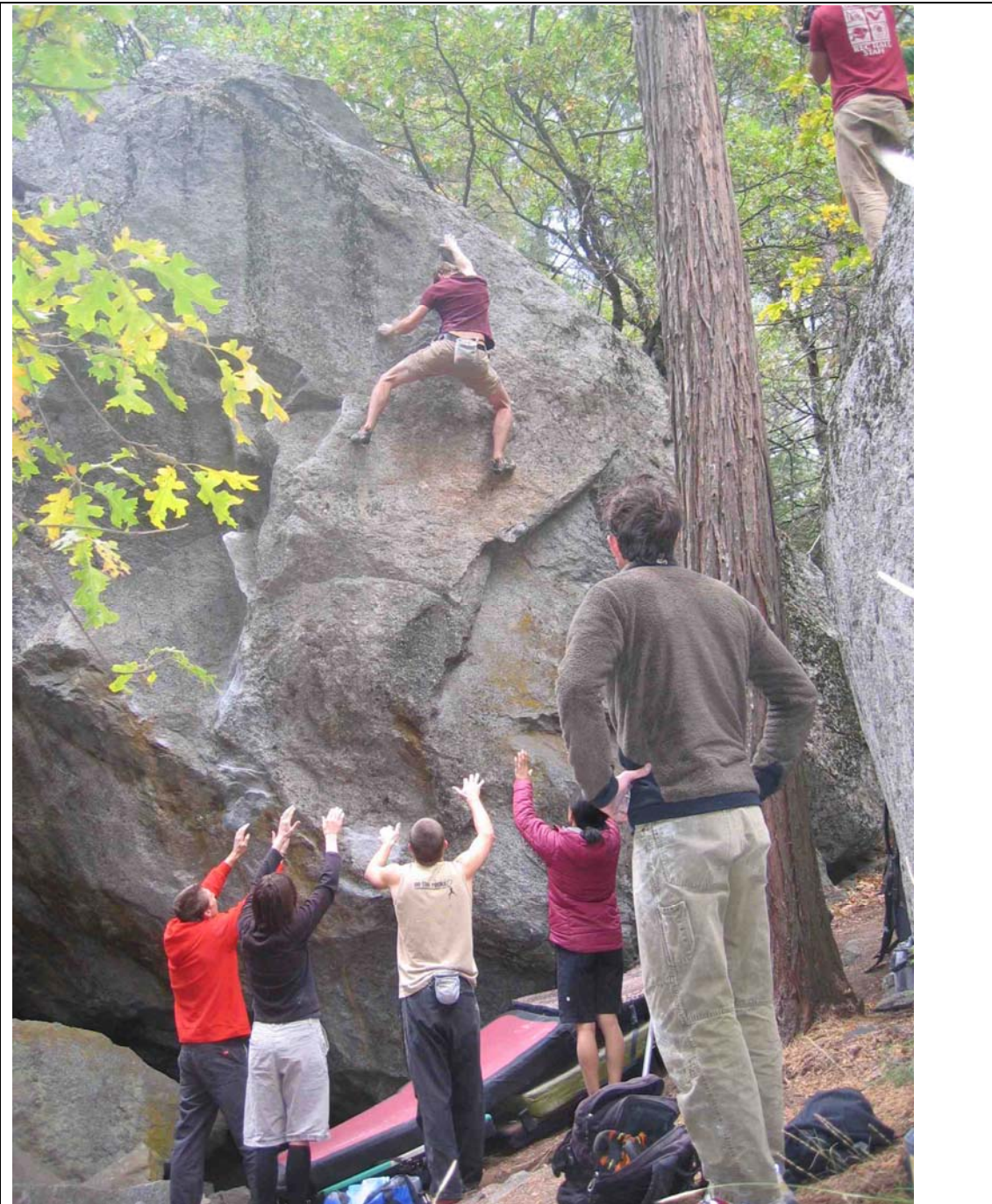


Figure 25. Moore performing a crux move on Flatline, October 2008. Photography by Sally Ann Ness.

A crux move may be encountered anywhere on the boulder figure and a problem may contain several cruxes.¹⁶ Figure 24 gives an example of a crux move on the boulder problem, Flatline, being performed by climber, Alan Moore, in October 2008. Notice the alert postures of the spotters located directly beneath Moore and the photographer in action in the top right corner of the picture. Attention was intensely focused on Moore as he performed this move.

The final moves of a boulder problem, consequently, may be performed without any sense of climax whatsoever. In the series of Figures 25-27, for example, notice how Moore's movements gradually decrease in significance for the spotters and, eventually, are disregarded entirely by both the spotters and photographer.

¹⁶ In this regard, the boulder figure has the symbolic potential to be alternatively configured in the tropes of pilgrimage as a micro-scale *via cruces* or journey-in-miniature through stations of crosses. I am indebted to the comments of Michael Di Giovine at the 2010 conference, Tourism and Seductions of Difference, held in Lisbon, Portugal, for bringing this trope to my attention. Di Giovine noted that such *via cruces* routes, even when set in mountainous environments may also place no significance on the attainment of an ultimate peak or summit.

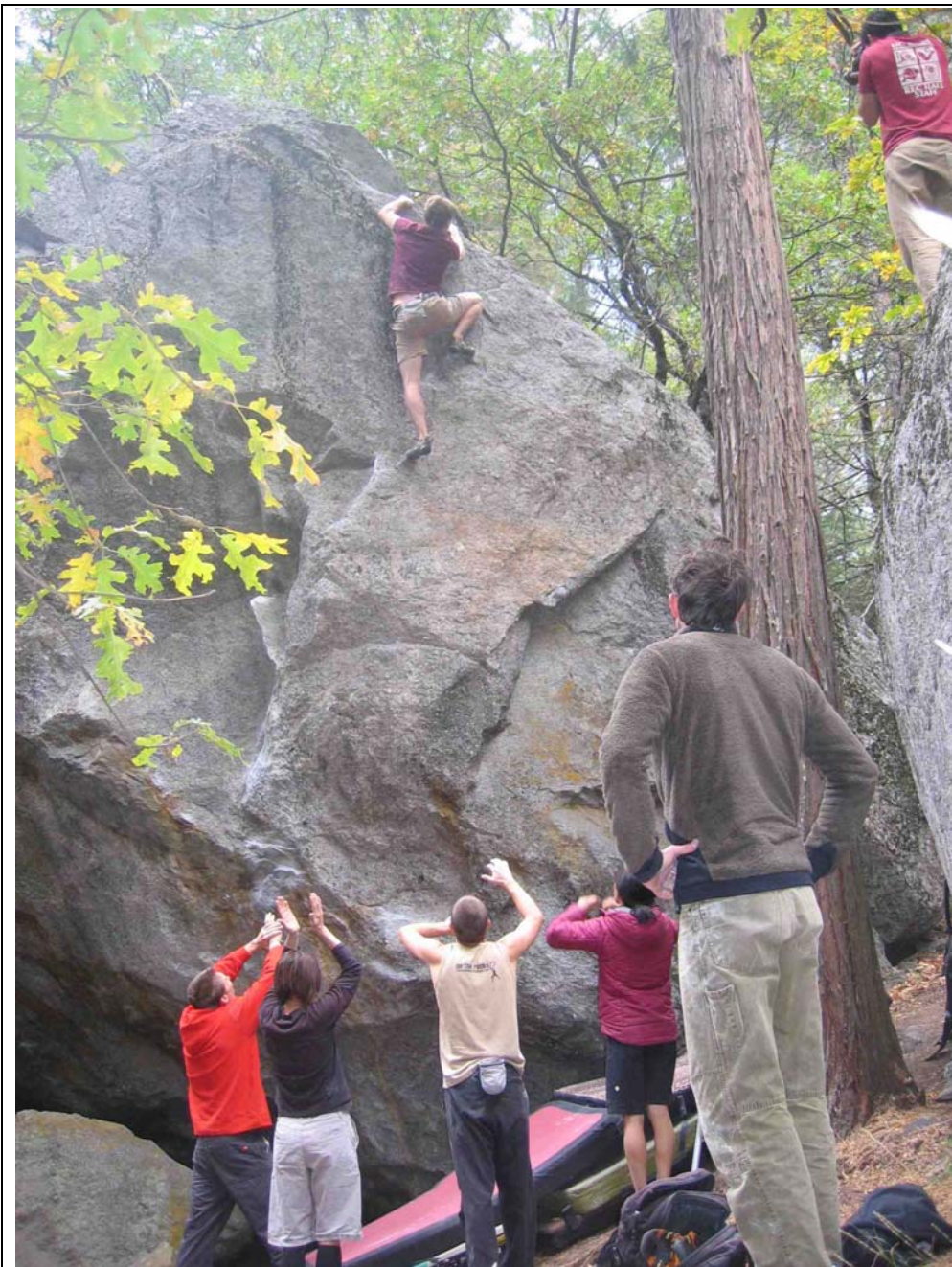


Figure 26. Moore performing the final, post-crux moves of Flatline, October, 2008. Photography by Sally Ann Ness.

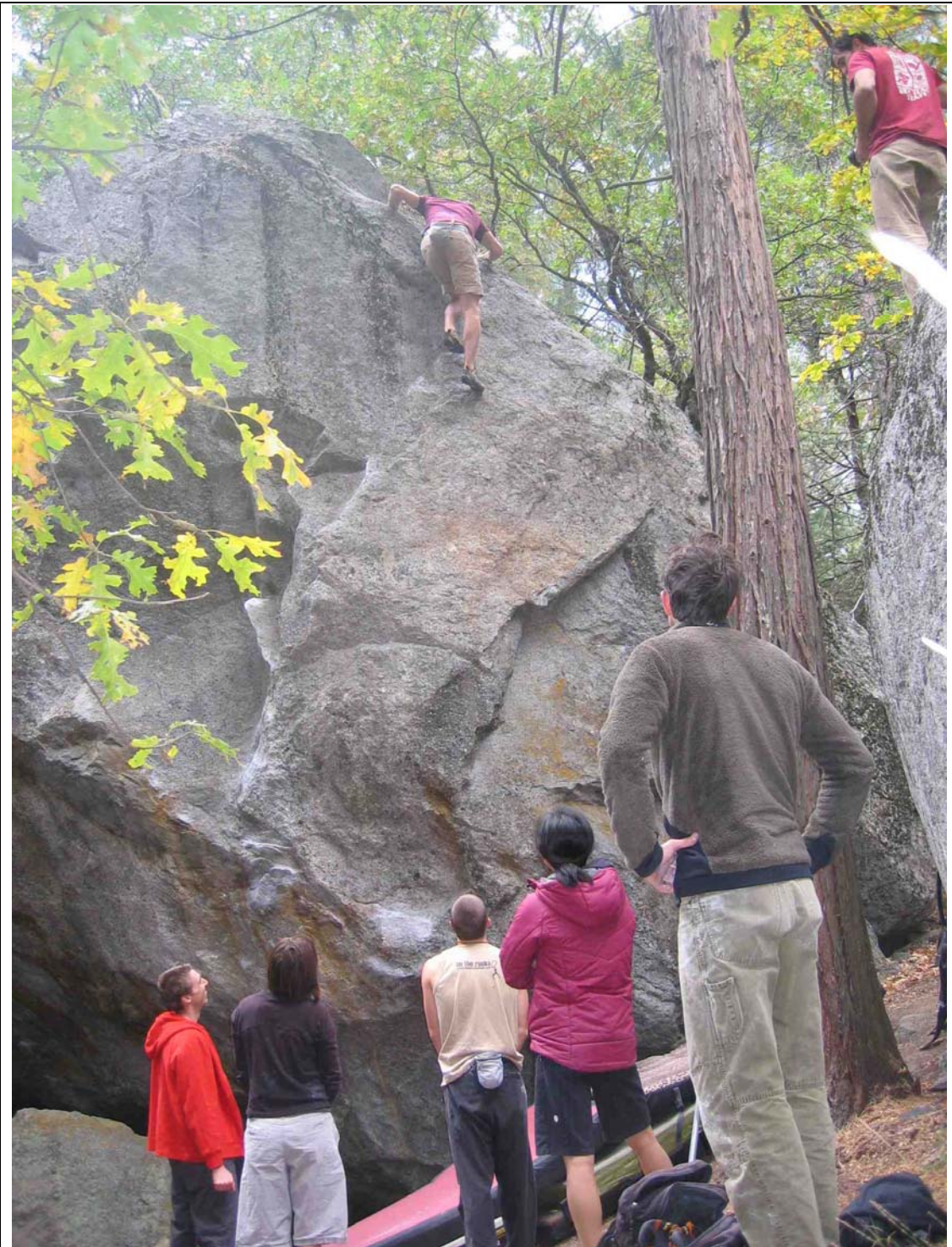


Figure 27. Spotters with diminished energy watching Moore finishing the route, Flatline, October 2008. Photography by Sally Ann Ness.

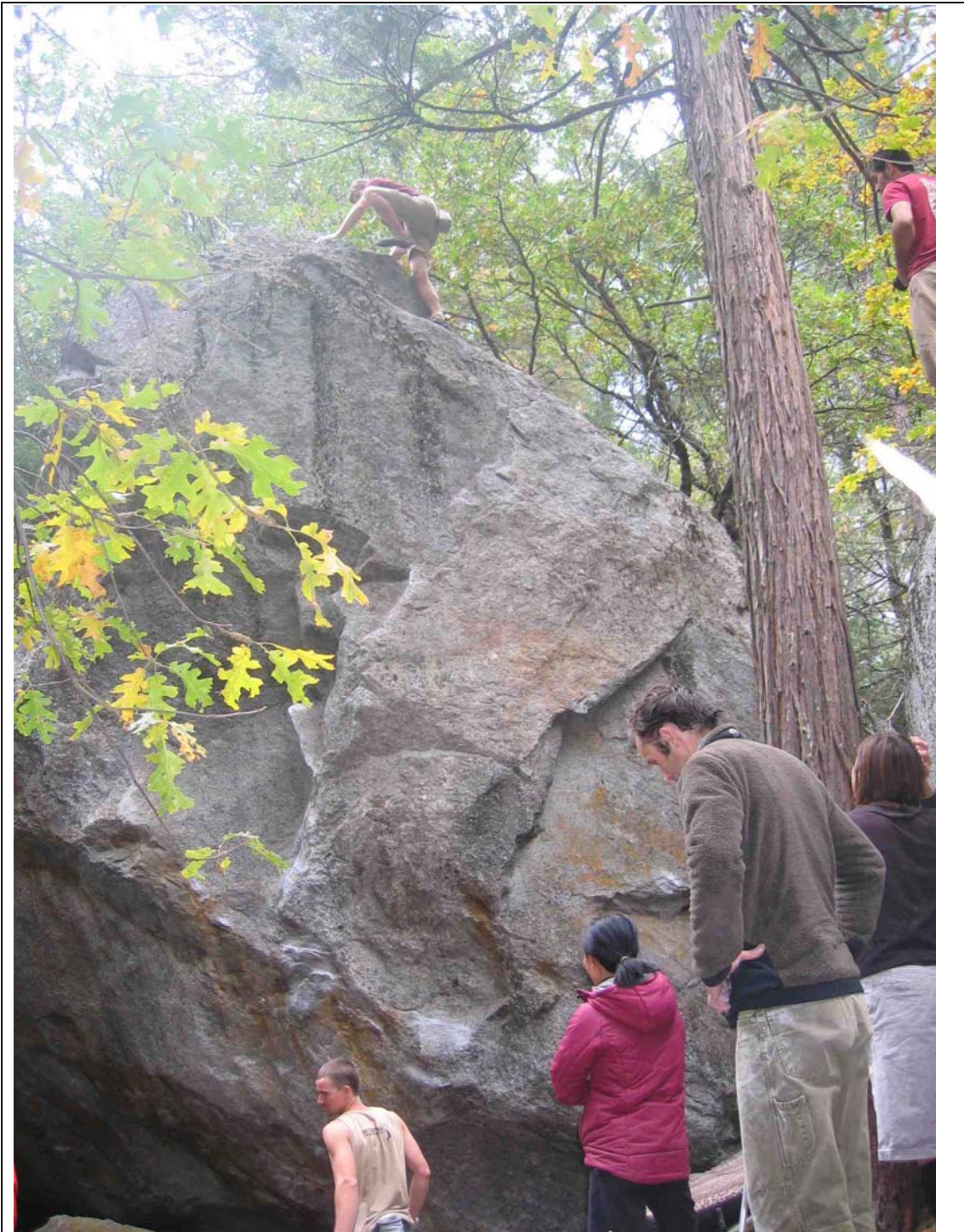


Figure 28. Moore “topping off” Flatline as other participants shift attention elsewhere, October 2008. Photography by Sally Ann Ness.

When I watched Moore perform this climb, I, as well, did not feel inclined to document the final movement of Moore's "topping off" the boulder, despite the fact that he was one of only two climbers I observed reaching the top of the Flatline boulder route on this particular day. The crux of the climb was already several movements in the past, and there seemed no particular reason to continue to take photographs.

With bouldering, in sum, the main interest is to play, often agonizingly, upon a boulder's surfaces, not necessarily to obtain some highest point or summit-in-miniature. This unpeaked, intermittently loaded experience has the general potential to cohere iconically as a representation of foreplay—the stage of sexual activity that is also relatively unmarked by gender. Contemporary bouldering thus may be interpreted as exhibiting the capability to be conceived, perceived, experienced, and represented as a kind of perpetual arousal process, one in which enactments of sexual difference remain continuously, indefinitely vague. The very high frequency of failed attempts in bouldering also reinforces this general symbolic potential. Boulderers typically spend as much, or even more time "projecting" climbs—practicing various parts of them repeatedly--than they do "sending" them—climbing them successfully from beginning to end. As one highly skilled, veteran boulderer, who visited Yosemite Valley many times a year for the express purpose of boulder climbing, once remarked to me in an interview, she was always relieved after she fell off of a new boulder problem for the first time. Thereafter, she reported, she was no longer so afraid to fall off of it again. Her comment implied that numerous falls and incomplete attempts were expected and anticipated in the practice of learning to perform any given problem, no matter what the skill level of the climber. The "do or die" mentality of traditional monumental climbing and mountaineering, where a single attempt on a given formation may be the only opportunity ever afforded to the climber or the mountaineer, is not as prevalent in bouldering, although the quality of committed engagement may be no less intense.¹⁷ Boulders are available for multiple attempts, the majority of these typically leading to temporary failure rather than success. This general circumstance prefigures the cultivation of symbolic phenomena that celebrate the relatively incipient, inchoate phases of sexual relations, but it does not by any means necessitate that meaning-making will occur along such sexually-oriented lines.

¹⁷ The extreme intensity of energy investment possible in boulder climbing is documented in Ness 2011.

On one occasion during a research visit to Yosemite, a boulder climber narrated to me a personal incident that seemed to resonate strongly with a sexually-oriented interpretive framework. The climber was recounting an incident in which another climber had invited him to engage in a sexual relationship. He was in a committed relationship with another person at the time and responded that he wasn't interested. The climber, undeterred, had attempted physically to persuade him to accept her as a partner. His description of the interaction was, "She was all over me, man." The phrase struck me as exceptionally apt in characterizing a boulderer's general relationship to a rock feature. Unlike the more monumental figures in the Yosemite landscape, it is possible for boulderers to be "all over" their chosen objects in physically intimate ways. They may never conquer them, despite countless attempts. They may simply attempt to explore their cruxes and move on, as was the case as well in this climber's interpersonal experience.

This narrative brings the focus back to the subject of actual, individual experiences of boulder climbing, and the problematically specific interpretive character of a flirtative theory of landscape relations. The preceding discussion may leave the reader with the sense that the general potential for developing sexually queered symbolic configurations of the human/environment relation established in bouldering has a commanding presence in these features of the landscape, prefiguring in some necessary or unavoidable way the emergence of certain forms sexually-associated meaning-making activity and sexually-identified desire. However, participant/observation research of Yosemite bouldering has not confirmed this to be the case and in fact, observations made over the course of the last three years during intermittent visits to Yosemite lead to a different, more complex, conclusion.

The featured climber in this essay, Alan Moore, personally denied being aware of, or in any way being influenced by, any identifiably sexual meaning, literal or figurative, relating to his experiences climbing on rock formations of any kind, including boulders, in Yosemite Valley or elsewhere. I spoke with Moore about this possibility during a volunteer clean-up day and climbing trip in Southern California, in which we both participated in 2011.¹⁸ Moore responded in part to my question about his own experience by jokingly caressing a rock surface near where he was standing during the conversation, moaning suggestively as he

¹⁸ The clean-up day was held at Joshua Tree National Monument, April 1, 2011. Ironically, the work the volunteers were assigned to do was washing the chalk off of boulders that had recently been climbed.

did so, and, then, laconically beating the rock with a climbing rope he happened to have in hand. His act of mockery made clearly evident how far his own experience of climbing was from anything the question may have represented to him. There was little at this point in Moore's climbing practice that was vague or inchoate or ambiguous in relational character. He rarely, if ever, encountered boulders whose features were anything but clearly familiar to him, having climbed at bouldering locations all over the world. "Flirtation," in this regard, was an inappropriate concept in relation to Moore's elaborate track record of climbing experience, although his practice remained experimental and innovative in many respects. The same might well be said for elite climbers generally speaking.¹⁹ Moore's exceptionally high level of technical expertise and his more than twenty years of climbing experience together had evolved an extraordinarily clearly formulated vocabulary of thought and action that he continued to refine and clarify in his bouldering practice. What had cohered and emerged from his years of meaning-making in the context of climbing, was a symbolism, not of sexually-specific desire, but of the motile desires of climbing technique itself. His desire, generally speaking, was to embody with absolute mastery the technical repertoire of the sport, a repertoire whose incipient character did not lie in iconic associations with organic, sexually dimorphous bodies, but rather in the general dynamics of the human/rock relationships that defined the performative parameters of the sport. Moore, in this regard, was literally a living definition of the general rules and codes of climbing conduct, nothing more, nothing less.²⁰

Other boulder climbers I spoke with, both on that day and on numerous other occasions, responded in markedly different ways to the question of actually experiencing anything clearly related to sexually-identified behavior in their climbing practice. One climber, also with many years of climbing experience (although not as technically advanced as Moore) immediately and emphatically confirmed on several occasions that climbing in general had strong sexual associations for her and that she was no exception in this regard. In her

¹⁹ The renowned Yosemite free soloist, John Bachar, in an interview given shortly before his death in a climbing accident, commented that climbing in his experience was a practice in which "100 percent" of his consciousness was focused on the movements he performed (2011: 61). His practice, like Moore's, was completely committed to articulating the significance of climbing movements in direct, literal relations to themselves alone. In this regard, it would seem that the sport necessitates that, the greater the degree of risk and technical expertise involved in a practitioner's experience, the less likely they are to cultivate significance that is metaphoric or broadly figurative in character.

²⁰ See Ness 2011 for a detailed account of Moore's climbing practice.

experience, the similarity between climbing actions and those of sexual activity was clearly evident. This awareness enriched the meaning the sport held for her, although it was by no means the only or the main source of its significance. Still another climber burst into loud, spontaneous laughter when she was presented with the idea of “dating boulders” (a title of an earlier version of this essay). The idea of a flirtative significance generally at play in the sport obviously struck a chord with her. She expressed enthusiasm for reading the essay but remained vague about her own personal experience in relation to the idea. Her response gave me the impression that in her (also relatively extensive) practice of climbing, the general potential for the human/rock relation to develop sexually-identified significance seemed less untenable than it had to Moore. However, it was nonetheless still undeveloped in her own experience. Her response contrasted strongly with yet another that came from a relatively inexperienced climber of mid-range ability, who found the whole idea of flirting with boulders to be of highly dubious value. This climber was already invested in cultivating forms of meaning-making in her climbing practice that were entirely unrelated to this general potential. Her perspective resembled to some extent the same technique-focused perspective that Moore had taken.

In sum, even in this minute sample, a range of individual meaning-making processes with regard to a diversity of general symbolic potentials inherent in the sport of bouldering are clearly evident. The specific connection of bouldering to sexually charged forms of flirtation and desire is not one that is necessarily activated intentionally or experienced unambiguously or clarified and elaborated progressively by individual boulderers with any great regularity—quite the contrary. It is evident, however, that, if the potential for such a relation to emerge and gain definition were to be realized, it is a potential that, given the inherent qualities in the bouldering landscape and practice, would cohere as queerly gendered. The sport of bouldering, in other words, possesses the general symbolic potential to configure a landscape encounter in which ultimate experiences of ecstatic gratification are continuously deferred and the identity of the climber’s partner is never definable in unambiguous terms—either those of gender or of sex.

In this way, bouldering practice potentially queers the normative practice of landscape encounter as it can be created, experienced, and represented in Yosemite National Park. However, it does so in a manner that remains vague for the most part and more potential than actual. The meanings that climbers actually make out of bouldering are far more diverse with regard to the kinds of desire experienced, and the degree of articulateness with which the experience is apprehended.

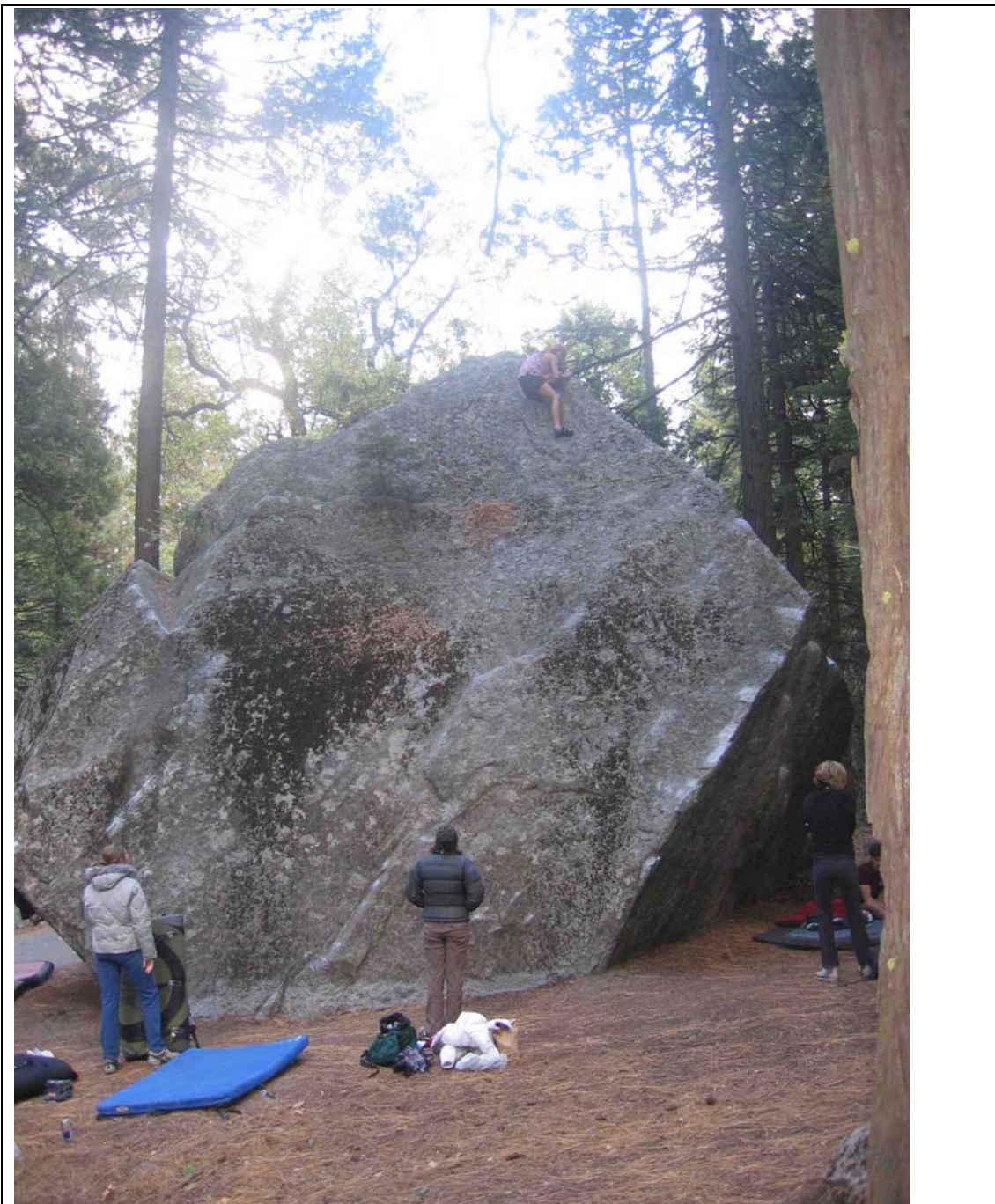


Figure 29. Climber, Amna Shiekh, atop an elaborately ticked boulder in the vicinity of LeConte Memorial, October 2008. Photography by Sally Ann Ness.

Conclusion

It is far too soon, and beyond the scope of this essay, to tell with any kind of specificity, what Yosemite bouldering's symbolic work in progress may be representing about the larger cultural contexts, both touristic and non-touristic in which it exists. However, if we are to accept the idea that has been standard in anthropological inquiry that sexuality is one of the most basic, symbolically generative cultural constructs, then the introduction of a basically new sexual orientation—even one configured largely inchoately via the potential aspects of landscape figures--would seem to be an important indicator of fundamental changes taking place.

The changes in orientation manifesting in Yosemite bouldering would seem to be moving away from those of Euro-American imperialist modernity—the very orientation that motivated the institution of Yosemite National Park and the entire American national park system in the first place. They are de-emphasizing scenarios of conquest. They are reversing the value of the large over the small in scale. They are re-orienting frames of experience around process rather than progress, and they are intervening in modernity's foundational work-leisure dichotomy by constructing high-risk performance events of “deep” or serious play. However, what the incipiently queerable re-configurations of bouldering may be moving toward—or, perhaps, emerging into--is difficult, if not impossible, to identify. This larger cultural formulation is itself still in a nascent, largely inchoate state.

Research on non-Western, non-modern forms of ritual has at times observed that sex acts can serve as the means to spiritual ends, particularly in the liminal phases of initiation rites.²¹ The possibility arises, in this regard, that, in the absence of modern Western individualism as the guiding episteme, the eroticizable aspects of bouldering might not be construed as sexually charged in relation to either individual or recreational forms of desire. Boulders, in other words, may not be the potential means to specifically flirtative ends. The practice of bouldering may, in fact, be understood as working the other way around. Flirtation may itself be the means to an environmentally-oriented ultimate experience. Bouldering, instead of using rocks to get climbers (queerly) aroused—

²¹ The classic work on this phenomenon is, of course, Victor Turner 1967.

however vaguely--may rather (or also) be using flirtative relations to engage human beings in certain kinds of extraordinary connecting with the landscape itself.

Bouldering, in this regard may be re-inventing the spiritualist Muirian myth of immersive landscape encounter as a point of entry into trans-natural, meta-humanist ecstasies constructed along post-imperial and post-conservationist lines, themselves just coming into being as emergent, creative human-environmental relations. One of the superstars of Yosemite climbing, Ron Kauk, has cultivated an approach to climbing that exemplifies such a spiritually/environmentally-focused practice. It may, perhaps, be considered as an example of this trend. Drawing inspiration from Native American traditions,²² Kauk conceptualizes rock formations in a variety of animate configurations-- as friends, teachers, and, in the case of at least one feature, El Capitan, as a family member ("grandfather"). "Boulders," Kauk writes, "are like old friends," identifying an affective relationship to boulders that might be construed as post-flirtative—intimate but having matured beyond any initial attractions and uncertainties (2003:22). Kauk also, however, has described his climbing process as "allowing my heart to find the love for the move and lead me to the core of my own truth," a characterization that is more ambiguous in terms of the rock-human partnerships his practice seeks to cultivate (2003:53). Kauk's general experience of the consequences of climbing all of Yosemite's features, boulders included, is spiritual in character. He refers to Yosemite's rock formations as "sacred granite" and has stated that his climbing practice has resulted in a heightened sense of the sacredness of other natural elements as well and a vision of a way of living in harmony and peace with the entire planet (2003:71-74). He contrasts this cultural vision specifically with those of capitalist America that he learned "in school" (2003:71). The emotional, creative, and inter-connected relations Kauk has maintained with Yosemite's rock formations have served spiritual, as opposed to individual or recreational ends, aligning, in so doing, with indigenous traditions as well as anti-capitalist visions of landscape practice. While Kauk's vision of bouldering is by no means normative within the bouldering practitioner population—indeed, several climbers I met treated Kauk's vision with eye-rolling incredulosity—it is one example of how far the emerging conceptualizations,

²² Local Native American traditions of landscape representation did, in some instances, cultivate the general potential of various features of the Yosemite landscape so as to signify in sexually-oriented formulations. The monumental feature known in the Euro-American tradition as "Three Brothers," for example, was named "Kom-po-pai-zes or "couple copulating" (Harteveldt 1955; Browning 2005, 210; Kaiser 2011, 152).

experiences, and representations of bouldering may be moving away from those of the park's traditionally Euro-American capitalist mainstream.

Such speculations aside, however, it would seem evident at this point that the practices of bouldering enable configurations of landscape that are innovative, changeable, and impermanent. They may be more committed to experiences of possible rather than actual gratification and fulfillment. They would seem, in other words, to be more about the creative energies out of which flirtation per se emerges, rather than about the experience of that which it promises.

Acknowledgments

This research was made possible in part by grants from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation and from the University of California, Riverside. Many thanks to Ken Little, Simone Abram, Jackie Feldman, Anya Peleikis, Jess Ponting, Katherine Spilde and the participants of the Seducing Wilderness session at the Tourism and Seductions of Difference Conference in Lisbon, Portugal, September 2010, who provided helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this essay. Thanks also to Alan Tonnies Moore, Charlotte Tonnies Moore, Darrell Logan, Doug and Sarah Jo Dickens, Lyn Verinsky, Amna Shiekh, and Derick Fay for contributing their climbing expertise to the research process as well.

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