

Kent's Design Spine: Final

Preliminary Title:

Rock Climbing and the Art of Governance: Subjectivity in the 'Crisis' of Access

Research Question:

How do rock climbing access organizations feature in the construction of rock climber subjectivity and what does the process of this construction tell us about the deployment of contemporary modes of power and governance in relation to natural spaces?

Why is this Interesting?

Rock climbing as a sport has experienced extraordinary growth in recent years, triggering a 'crisis' of capacity exemplified by the intensification of challenges climbers face in gaining access to natural areas.

It is within this 'crisis' that access organizations have increasingly played a role in mediating between climbers, land managers, and other interest groups in order to maintain access. As such, these groups have grown to exert considerable influence over the construction of rock climber identity, particularly in regards to how someone who climbs becomes a 'real' climber: a steward of the rock and natural environment in which it resides.

This relationship between the rock and climber has often been regarded as one of liberatory practice in which the material experience of climbing is itself a transgression against constraining norms of gender, ability, and desire (Chrisholm 2008). As the construction of rock climber identity shifts in response to the 'crisis' of access, how has this relationship and the liberatory practice it encourages been subsequently altered? It is clear climbing is no longer (and possibly never was) an apolitical practice, and so what political potential might it have?

Contributions/ Why is this Important?

With this project I aim to contribute and support the discussion surrounding rock climbing as a transgressive, liberatory practice as described by Diana Chrisholm and others (2008). In a similar vein, on a theoretical level I hope to contribute to the analysis of contemporary forms of power and governance, expanding the space in which we locate and discuss political action, taking up the methodology laid out by Foucault and others without resorting to the use of 'ready-made' concepts. On a practical level, and directed towards the climbing community, it is my aim that this work challenge the problematic reification of power relations within rock climber subjectivity, while also marking out the spaces in which the climbing community has successfully co-opted techniques of power in the interest of liberatory practice, environmental protection, and social solidarity. In short I wish to explore the ways in which a better understanding of how climbers come to 'be' can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between bodies, environment, and power.

Theoretical and Methodological Basis

Governmentality studies locate the expression of power in diversion practices, techniques, and logics as opposed to the central figure of the state. In the flows of power through practices and techniques there is no clear-cut repression/liberation dichotomy as there is no power without resistance and no resistance that does not draw on power. Foucault's account of governance, in which the 'conduct of conduct' occurs within the every-day, as well as the seemingly transgressive and liberatory, renders the production of rock climber subjectivity an intriguing site of inquiry made all the more interesting by its connection to natural, 'wild' places, often considered outside of the political and governmental.

Actor Network Theory has been considered by some as providing an empirical element beneficial to governmentality studies (Law 2009), and here will be useful in the tracing of linkages between the climber, the rock, conservation groups, park staff and experts, and state agencies, exemplified in the topological guide which combines knowledges and techniques from all parties into a novel and practical material.

The 'how' of self-subjectification is found to not only reside in practices and techniques, but in the material relations built addressing concerns of access, conservation, and management of natural spaces. ANT further allows for an engagement with the processes through which an apolitical object (such as rock) becomes the site of politicization and is in fact, an actant.

Phenomenology further grounds these concerns of governance in the experiences of the individual climber as they engage with the material world. The highlighting of experience balances out the focus of governmentality on practices, and that of ANT on networks of actants, with a consideration of the human element in the construction of rock climber identity. As so much of this identity relies upon a relationship of affect between climbers and their environment, it is necessary to approach the questions posed here not only through analysis of texts, discourses, practices, and networks, but in the narratives of climbers themselves.

Cases/Sites

Halfway Log Dump, Bruce Peninsula National Park, Ontario
Hueco Tanks State Park and Historic Site, El Paso, Texas

Method

This project will consist of two interrelated and largely simultaneous methods with the aim of providing a detailed empirical representation of the production of rock climber subjectivity and the relation of this identity to natural spaces.

One aspect of the project will consist of a discourse analysis of texts, media, literature, and particularly topological guides produced by and in cooperation with access organizations. This analysis will give insight into the logics, practices, and techniques through which the subjectivity of the climber is constructed, as well as the translation of forms of knowledge, claims of legitimacy, and shared problematics throughout the network of those concerned with access.

The second methodological aspect of this research will draw upon phenomenological perspectives in order to establish the experiential and material quality of rock climber subjectivity. Through participant observation as well as unstructured interviews and discussion alongside climbers at climbing areas I aim to gather a variety of perspectives on the relationship between climbers and natural spaces. These perspectives will be accentuated by my shared experience of 'being' a climber within these spaces and relations. Further, interviews with climbers and those involved with access negotiations will allow for the identification of emergent concepts and themes, focusing the direction of my questioning and analysis towards those aspects of climber identity and access which are most salient to climbers themselves.

The topological guide will be particularly central to the linking of governmentality, ANT, and phenomenology. These guides frame climbing areas in a certain way, constructing the space in which the climber (potentially) becomes a self-governing subject. While the material world is not reducible to texts, the combination of this textual analysis, the mapping of networks, and experiential accounts will allow for a nuanced representation of the subject as constituted through the material and semiotic. Engaging with climbers as they utilise these guides to make sense of the space, as well as discussion with those affiliated with access organizations which are involved in the creation of guides will expose the practices, techniques, and logics which are embedded within the text.

Throughout the process of data production and analysis reflexive practice such as note-keeping and exposing my interpretations to comments from the academic as well as climbing community will be useful in checking my representations of climbers and access challenges. It will also be important to consider the extent to which my self-identification and physical presence as a (male) climber might alter participants' accounts. While the community is generally an open and relaxed one, broader relations of power remain in play which might influence the narratives produced.

Ongoing Challenges and Concerns/ What's Next?

Continue to address the ontological challenges of drawing upon governmentality, ANT, and particularly phenomenological accounts to analyze the same phenomenon.

How can I better direct this project towards practically benefiting the climbing community as well as communities based in similar practices which engage with the natural environment?

Determine the practicality and challenges of researching in Hueco Tanks, Texas.

Committee

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Optimistic Timeline

Proposal and Ethics Approval: July 31, 2015

Primary data collection by: October 31, 2015

Data Analysis by: January 31, 2016

First Draft by: February 28, 2016

Final Draft by: April 30, 2016

