

Lessons From Older Brother

Chloe' Gobel
Anthropology
The University of North Carolina Asheville
One University Heights Asheville,
North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Kelley & Dr. Wood

Abstract

I have observed two approaches which showcase how communities view land, how their time is spent in and with the land as well as how these perspectives and actions coincide. In my fieldwork I have worked with two different groups of people who value their connection to land, the outdoors and their community. I spent time with two men in Cherokee N.C. from The Ikü Indigenous community in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of Columbia, whom I refer to, in the Ikü Nations terms, as Older Brother and a group of local rock climbers from Asheville, whom I call Younger Brother. These two groups helped create this essay. My interest in how different communities honor, respect, and connect to land developed when I spent time with Older Brother and listened to their desire to learn about Younger Brother's relationship with land. From Older Brother's perspective, this way of learning from each other is an essential role in establishing balance in nature. I have intertwined carefully selected theories along with my observations and experiences in the field to create this thesis. These findings help deliver a message of how Younger Brother is currently respecting, preserving, acknowledging land, and taking action, how they can become more responsible in doing so, and how this connects to Older Brother. All of these *systems* that I mention in the thesis are inspired by Gregory Bateson's work. We all live within the *total system* and in this system there is need for restorative balance. The work below is a combination of Ethnographic reports, interviews, and storytelling.

1. Two Ethnographic Field Groups

The rock climbing informants who I have worked with all reside in Asheville, NC. There are 10 informants in total, however I interviewed only 5 of them. They range from the ages of 26-33, they are white and cisgender folk. Their years of climbing experience range from 3 to 13 years. I met the majority of the climbers when I moved to Asheville. I myself have been interested in rock climbing on and off for many years now. I was blessed to already have a connection with this group and have climbed with them many times before. Prior to selecting this community for my field study, I collected years of photos and some video footage. Knowing that I had so much material already, I decided to utilize it and choose this group to write about. I always felt that I was part observer and part rock climber, even before tapping into the world of Anthropology. All photos below are copyrighted @chloecagphotography @cagphotos. The Mamo asked to have no photographs shown to anyone but friends and family. The photos I have of Cherokee show the Dr. of Physics. I felt drawn to include a day spent in the town of Cherokee, N.C.. What I experienced that day influenced parts of my writing and helped me to establish a greater understanding of one Indigenous perspective. This perspective highlighted a specific set of relations to land, nature, the elements, and beings as well as opened up an avenue towards other Indigenous literature outside of the Ikü community. The University of North Carolina Asheville hosted a documentary viewing and Q+A featuring *Naboba*, a film by *Amado Villafañá and Yosokwi Productions*. The film was created by a collection of Indigenous photographers and creators from the Ikü/Arhuaco Nation, located in the Sierra Nevada Santa Marta mountains of Colombia. The Ikü people are accompanied by the Wiwa, Kogi, and Kankuamo Indigenous communities in the surrounding mountains. The film showed the viewer the relationship that the Ikü people had with water and the land. The Ikü people and surrounding

communities view water, interact with water, show gratitude towards water, as well as pray for and to water in ways that are unconventional in Western culture. It was a new story to absorb and learn from.

A section of this thesis features a Mamo (elder) and his traveling partner who has acquired a Doctorate in Physics. Two men of Science. These two men from the Ikü Nation were invited by a UNCA professor who had previous relations with them in Columbia. I have chosen to keep all participants in this section anonymous.

The two men represented the story of Naboba. They brought with them the documentary to share. The film takes the viewer on a journey of prayer, the creation process of offerings, and the unfolding connection between many of the communities in the surrounding areas, ultimately leading to the arrival of Naboba. The journey depicted in the film is not an isolated one. Naboba is a sacred lagoon in the Sierra Nevada mountains and is considered by the local community to be their mother. It is believed that the mother of all existence lives within the lake. The rough terrain and roaring river streams did not divert the men and their horses from their sacred journey. They did not fight against these elements, they worked together with them.

The Mamo (elder) and his partner stated that their mission for sharing this documentary with us was to instill a purpose for reflection in the audience's day-to-day life. Traditionally speaking, and still in practice today in the Ikü community, is the held belief that we all have something to share with each other. This was displayed when the Mamo kindly asked students and faculty to look inward and reflect on our past actions in regards to how we respect land and the elements that surround us. They came to us with inquiry rather than harsh direction or shame. They presented their message in an open manner. They wanted to learn from us, not reprimand or lecture us. They were non-judgmental and filled with compassion and drive for balance restoration.

A trip to *The Mound*, a well-known sacred landmark to local Cherokee natives and culture, in Cherokee, N.C. was planned. I happened to be in the right place at the right time, and I was invited to join the traveling groups. Below you will read about certain observations made that day that influenced my writing, my research into Indigenous belief and practice surrounding nature, and the overall heart of this thesis.

The practices that I cite in the thesis are ones of interest to me because I believe there is a dire need for altered perspectives, especially in Western culture. As my perspective has shifted, I hope yours is encouraged to shift as well. The Mamos of the Ikü Nation use Native Science by observation, creativity, and connection with community in order to preserve and respect the land being that they apart of it and it is a part of them. It is important to note that as I utilize Indigenous knowledge in this writing, I do not encourage cultural appropriation practices, nor is it my opinion that it is proper to adapt other's cultural practices as one's own.

2. Leave No Trace

"If the creature destroys its environment, it destroys itself." Gregory Bateson.

Preservation and respect of land take place in the rock climbing field through the use of the model "Leave No Trace".. From what I have observed, this is done out of respect for the environment and others who visit the land. The L.N.T. model of principles which I will expand on below, is just one framework or system of thinking of many that hold themes of preservation, taking care of the environment while connecting to communities that surround it. After meeting two representatives of The Ikü nation, I learned about some of their systems of thought in regards to the topics above. I was in the field of Cherokee at the time that I learned about some of these systems. This was done through observation and later researched in depth. I have found that there is much to learn from other practices and systems of thought, that the climbers might not have considered before. **How are these two cultures not leaving traces? How are they leaving their mark? In what ways does this make an impact on their community? What are they experiencing or practicing in order to better connect to the land and their community?**

It was lunch time at the rock climbing crag for some of us. We began to dig into our packs in search of premade lunches we prepared that morning at the Air BNB. My sandwich, peanut butter and jelly, was squished flat in the foil I wrapped it in, but it was still very edible. I looked around trying to find a comfortable place to sit. This isn't always the easiest goal to achieve at the crag, especially if you are at the edge of a cliff line. The steepness seems to limit social hangout spaces. I settled and bit into my sandwich, as I finished my sandwich I didn't particularly want the last bite so I tossed it into the woods. Jeremy, an informant, centered his focus on the move I had just made, "Leave no trace", he said. "What?" I responded. "You threw your sandwich in the woods. That's not LNT. Leave no trace is something I learned in wilderness guiding." Jeremy said. He explained to me that we as climbers have the responsibility of keeping the areas that we climb on clean and how they were prior to entry. Jeremy continued by tending to my question that I

hadn't yet voiced, he said though the food breaks down, it is still our duty to leave nothing behind. In this way, there is no chance that we are disturbing the ecosystems around us.

I reflected upon the fact that I had cast aside biodegradable items outdoors for as long as I could remember. Now that I was aware of the idea of Leave No Trace, I began to hear it said more often amongst informants. I had heard "LNT" before but I wasn't sure what they were talking about. Now that I understood the meaning I also understood that these informant we're doing their best to keep themselves and each other accountable regarding this topic. The majority of the informant's that were educated about LNT were the informants who worked in the wilderness guiding field. They were required to take the course and receive a certification in order to guide the clients outside. These informants brought this idea to the majority of the climbing group. I am not sure how aware the majority of rock climbers are to LNT and the principles that lie behind it. But I do know that in general crags are left in manageable conditions. It is uncommon to walk up to a boulder field or a cliff line and see large amounts of litter lying around. I have never experienced that. However, oftentimes there are small pieces of climbing tape, banana peels, sometimes even beer cans left by other climbers or hikers at the crag.

L.N.T. is an acronym for Leave No Trace, *Center for Outdoor Ethics*, which is based on 7 principles. Leave No Trace is an organization designed to help encourage sustainable development and practice in the outdoors. The 7 principles that they have established over years of educational research provide outdoor enthusiasts with an easily understandable framework with a goal of preserving the outdoors. The 7 principles are copyrighted by L.N.T. and these are as follows;

1. Plan Ahead & Prepare
2. Travel & Camp on Durable Surfaces
3. Dispose of Waste Properly
4. Leave What You Find
5. Minimize Campfire Impacts
6. Respect Wildlife
7. Be Considerate of Other Visitors

Each principle takes practice and is shaped and molded over time by the individual. But as we know, it takes more than one person to create and establish change. I asked Jeremy, the informant who initially introduced me to LNT, to talk a little bit more about it and its relation to the rock climbing field. His experience differed from mine in regards to amounts of litter I have seen.

Jeremy: *"In my experience, it is clear to see that LNT at the crag is not always followed. You find trash around the crag all of the time. Whether that be micro trash, food scraps, or large pieces of trash such as toilet paper. It's something people need to work on."*

Another informant, Kyle expanded upon this...

Kyle: *Some of the areas of heavy use like the Orange Oswald wall at Summersville Lake is a prime example. Or, the Roadside Crag at the Red River Gorge. It can be sort of like a showcasing of irresponsible climber behavior, and it's not malicious. It's mostly new climbers who are coming out of the gym and haven't had an opportunity to be educated on the ethics of what is acceptable outdoor climbing behavior. And so you know, setting up hammocks and blasting loud music and walking off trail and creating social trails that trample vegetation and other things can cause harm to the ecology of the area. Also things like micro trash where people are using climbing tape and just sort of inadvertently leaving it. It all starts to add up."*

This led me to think that education is really what brings about awareness in this case. Could these marks that were left, trash in this case, be a representation of mind? Mind meaning, a greater system of thinking within a community. It seems that there is negligence at play when litter is cast to the ground. I wonder what influences this action. It seems that there is a lack of consideration, knowledge, awareness, or more accurately a lack of mindfulness. When a society puts emphasis on observation and consideration of all elements that create a total world, a total system, alternate approaches arise. In this case, the creation and principles of LNT. These concepts, however, are not new. The concepts take on a specific language that meet the outdoor adventurer's culture, while including a narrative of the wholeness of humanity, inclusion within a specific cultural system. So who does this exclude? Was it the rock climber or outdoor enthusiast that had less experience in the field, like me? It is hard to say. It seems that it comes down to whether or not a climber is aware of LNT or not. Are they introduced to this system of thought? If they are, if it is practiced, it isn't to

say that that practice is always perfect, there is a great chance that some action or inaction is missing. The only way to change that is experience, making mistakes and gaining of awareness.

3. Leaving A Mark

“The survival of our society depends on people who have a good connecting with the spiritual.” Bear Heart

The spiritual meaning, the connection to all that is around us. Just as nature includes all of the universe, this idea of spirituality is a connection between community, land, the elements and so on.

I have connected to nature myself through creatively leaving my mark. I have done this quite often by rock balancing or making art with leaves and sticks by rearranging them on the ground. I have noticed ways that people make their marks on land throughout my time spent outside. This picture is one example of a person or persons leaving their mark. The leaves are drawn on with climbing chalk (Figure 1). Other examples of this can be found all over the outdoors, not just in the climbing field. Famous artists like Andy Goldsworthy, who is well known for his arrangements of colorful leaves captured through photographs, show creative displays of interaction with nature.



Figure 1. Leaf drawing with chalk

One day at the crag I came across an epic example of leaving a creative mark in nature. We were in the middle of Tennessee, deep in the woods at a climbing location named Y-12. An area which consists of pretty advanced Sport Climbing. It was a simple hike down, until we came upon the rope and ladder. Evan, Jeremy and I carefully held onto the rope and made our way down the steep path, and onto the ladder that descended into the crag. The day was hot, the sun was beaming, and the birds were floating through the blue sky as if they were flying in slow motion. I took on the role of an observer that day. The project lines were set way too far out of my climbing ability. I was at peace with simply being present and taking all that I could in. I noticed a curious part of the rock. It looked like the rock had been naturally transformed into an ancient and holy shrine or worshipping site. It was gorgeous! It appeared that the rock had fallen out of the wall in ways that were strategic. The seepage of water, the geological term, being; *pore fluid pressure*, is what most likely caused the rock breakage. Damage may have been done, but it was beautiful. It reached around 30 feet in height and 15 or so in width. The sounds of water dripping from the roof drew me in. Once I looked closer, I noticed that someone left their mark by placing small rocks on top of each other and leaving them there, my guess was that it was another climber, due to the fact that it is rare to see anyone but climbers in this section of the crag. This practice is called **rock balancing**, (Figure 2) and it has recently been reported to be harmful to the rivers and ecosystems that surround it. This is not a body of water, however I wonder if this can cause a similar disturbance.



Figure 2. Rock Balancing

I was not aware of this ecological intrusion at the time, I interpreted this balancing of rocks as an offering that was given to the *rock shrine*, not as a disturbance. My guess, my hope, is that the creator was unaware of the possible disturbance. The offering interpretation came to me because of the pure awe that I felt while witnessing the natural rock formation. It felt as though the creator or creators felt, thought, and experienced a similar sense of reverence and appreciation for the rock that I did. Nature influenced a system of mind. Within this influenced mind, it seems that it possibly prompted gratitude which resulted in the creation of something, an *offering*.

I carried this idea of creating in the land, with nature, into my next moves. I found myself picking up leaves that had fallen on the ground and placing them strategically along the *shrine*, as if this was my personal offering. The majority of my informants, being that their focus is on climbing and not observing in the ways that I do, do not tend to notice elements and moments like these, at least not in an obvious way. In this sense, I am not influenced by their action but of those who have left something behind as well as what I observe in the moment. But I wanted to experience this together, I wanted Evan and Jeremy to be a part of this specific system at play. So, I intentionally asked Evan and Jeremy to take a look at how inspiring this *altar* was. They were seemingly appreciative that attention was brought to this natural structure and too shared in the awe of it.

Gregory Bateson, a novice of systems theory, talks about the value of each individual system's perspective and that it isn't as individualistic or as separate as we tend to think it is in society.

"Cybernetically speaking, "my" relation to any larger system around me and including other things and persons will be different from "your" relation to some similar system around you. The relation "part of" must necessarily and logically always be complementary. But the meaning of the phrase "part of" will be different for every person. This difference will be especially important in systems containing more than one person. The system or power must necessarily appear different from where each person sits. Moreover it is expectable that such systems when they encounter each other, will recognize each other as systems in this sense. The beauty of the woods through which I walk is my recognition both of the individual trees and of the total Ecology of the woods as a system a similar aesthetic recognition is still more striking when I talk with another person." (Bateson p.332, 1999)

This shared experience of life is powerful. We have the power of influencing each other and with this power comes responsibility. If we come across new knowledge that alters the comfortable narrative we should correct or change our behavior, *self-correction*. As I mentioned before I learned about ways in which rock balancing can disturb an ecosystem. Here is a local example of this in Cherokee, NC.

“It seems that as tourism increases in late spring and summer, a practice increases... ‘...people purposefully move rocks in the waterways, to create dams, channels, and rock piles, these changes can harm the sensitive species that live there, especially while they are nesting, said Neeley...Therefore, we ask the public to be gentle while they play and leave rocks where they lay!” (McKie B.P., 2020)

Though there is no direct research found using the terms “leave no trace” in the Ikü Nation there is a system that the Ikü people live by in regards to preservation.

“Our policy based on the cultural concept, has been the recovery of the territory, represented not only in the physical occupation of space, in the conservation of all the elements and natural events that exist as well such as water, forest, animals, rivers, creeks, lagoons, wetlands, wells, mountains, hills, clouds, hills, Gwiachunu, Murundwa, A’tinkunu, Jwikunowma, Chukinma and also other elements, to give the management according to the own view on nature and the world is what we have been developing and have the commitment to preserve, encourage by their feedback and thus ensure not only our future but the life of future generations and other societies.” (Cabildo, Torres & Cuadro, 2017)

This left me to wonder in what ways are the climbers in the group and outside of it leaving a mark? What about the Mamo’s and the communities in Sierra Nevada? It has been observed in many studies and cultures that throughout history humans have left physical traces, symbols, marks, etc. There appears to be an inevitable mark that is left by humans and their contact with earth. It is interesting to investigate what these marks might mean for communities. What is the purpose? Is there one? This ever changing element within systems theory may or may not tell us. I interviewed some of the climbers about two topics that are, in actuality, intertwined: the act of readying oneself for the climb and how and if the climber greets the rock. This interested me for many reasons. One being that not everyone who starts a climb finishes a climb. However, anyone who has climbed can relate to the experience of beginning a climb and making first contact with the rock. It is more relatable in this way.

I asked an informant, Lauren, in what ways do climbers in our community leave a mark. She mentioned the chalk that is left behind on the holds.

Lauren: When you're climbing a route that thousands of other people have climbed, people will complain that the holds are like, glossy, or that they've been like, smooth down from the chalk but I think it's the coolest thing because so many people have claimed that before me, and then I can like kind of tap into their potential struggles or their potential, you know, like victories or defeats or shut downs or anything. So it's kind of like this mini ancestral process every time I get on a route, and I love that about the rock, like the rock, forever remembers each climber who's been on it before.

Not only did Lauren express the physical marks but the connection to community that these marks create. This is one perspective amongst many about chalk that is left behind, as we see above.

4. The Hart of the World

In the Ikü Nation there is a story that has provided the people with a sense of purpose for as long as it has been passed down. This story is what a person could consider a creation story. A beginning, a reason for living, and a message to pass along. The Ikü community located in the mountains of Columbia have termed themselves “Older Brother” and “Younger Brother” are the people of the Western World. The Nation and surrounding communities believe that they are the guardians of the earth, beginning with their surrounding land. The ecological crisis that has unfolded in their mountains and bodies of water has brought them to the point of engaging with “Younger Brother”. The Elders have decided to tell their creation story and bring awareness to the current environmental crisis in their community. When I use the words myth or story I do not take the meaning of these terms lightly. Stories and myths are ancient truths that inform the listener or reader of what has occurred and what is to come. These stories help build the present and aid in learning ourselves, other beings, and what is around us.

The version of the story that I was able to access is told by a Mamo in an interview filmed in 2010 in Columbia. The Mamo begins, “There are four cardinal points and the center is The Sierra Nevada, like a big tree trunk that spreads its arms to all countries like a mango tree with a trunk which is the heart of the world. You must respect the traditional

customs of the Mamos and listen to our advice". The narrator proceeds to explain the ideology behind the metaphor of the land, "From the heart of the world an ancient Mamo fights to preserve his territory and survival of every living being. Every year he travels across the sacred points trying to repair the damage caused for centuries by the white man. Along this great circumference the four communities that share this territory have only one purpose: Protect mother earth". Along this circumference, the points that are connected form a heart shape on the map, hence the name The Heart of The World. The Mamos, "do their offerings in sacred places to preserve the harmony in the world. This magic circle contains the secrets of the universe and the spirit of every living being" the narrator explains. These offerings are a way of leaving a mark, a creative way of interacting with nature. "The Black Border line is the limit to enter the heart of the world. In the beginning, our territory was called Nivi Umuke and it is the space that corresponded to us the four tribes to live, grow and develop. Nivi Umuke is the space that our Celestial Fathers gave us to do our spiritual works", The Mamo informs the listener. He then proceeds to explain the importance of the Black Border line even more in depth. He passionately shares that this line is what protects the *spirit of life*, "It is where the balance of the earth begins and where the history of our culture and traditions begins, also it is like a corral that protects the energy points that supports the balance of nature, of men, of the animals, of everything".

I was not aware of the story above when The Mamo and his friend visited us on UNCA's campus. The film, *Naboba*, was very informative but the focus was not on the reasoning behind the Mamos cultural and environmental practices. The documentary came to an end. The students, faculty and staff who were in attendance were invited to join outside for an additional part of the event. We communed in a circle around the fire pit on campus.

We settled into our chosen seats and sat together in anticipation for what was to come. I watched The Mamos partner and the professor work diligently together to create a fire for all of us to be with. As the fire began to roar, we were instructed to sit quietly for a minute and reflect upon the documentary, *Naboba*. This time of silent reflection was brought to an end when we were given two small balled up pieces of cotton. We were instructed to hold it in our hand and we were asked to put an intention into the fibers.

The concept of intention is one that is used and well known in many cultural and spiritual realms worldwide. The practice of intentional ritual varies depending on the culture one is in. The Mamo did not explain what his idea or concept of intention was but it seemed as though there was a sense of intersubjectivity around the concept that night. I held tightly onto the small ball of cotton. My hand began to sweat. I was nervous. All of the sudden I felt a great responsibility towards these pieces of fiber. I wasn't certain what would happen to the fiber after our intention was put into it but it felt important. I reflected upon the documentary and the community's desire for more consistent rainfall. I thought deeply through what I wanted to channel. In the end, I channeled a personal promise of the preservation of water in my day to day life. In the weeks prior to the event I began to note how much water waste I allowed in my life. This led me to act more mindfully and reflect upon my participation as a being in this world. What impact do I make? Does mindfulness make a difference? It takes more than just a single human's actions to help a positive movement grow. However, I wanted to be in the category of willing participant.

We transitioned into a moment of explanation from The Mamo and his partner. They shared that they would be collecting the pieces of cotton and taking them back to add to a collection of other bundles made by their community. These bundles would be placed by The Mamos in chosen sacred places as they journeyed to Naboba. Within this culture, this system, creating these offerings from earth's elements was a practice that has occurred for countless decades. **These offerings are marks left by the community for the betterment of their community and the world.** This practice paired well with the idea of the *metaphoric mind* system. This element or way of thinking, the *metaphoric mind*, was a part of a larger system that created elements of what we have learned to be Native Science. The *metaphoric mind* is the creative part of the mind, which tells stories and displays metaphors that are made of Natural observation. *"It is important that humans become aware that we are just another element of nature - we are not nature's masters. Nature is the master of our lives."* (Mejía - Ikü Nation 2019)

Joining in a circle, inclusion of *Younger Brother's* hearts and minds, as well as a material representation of our individual intentions was a sort of display of what it looks like to break cultural barriers. This resulted in a formation of unity in the name of connection to land and aid in the survival of it. It is important that I note that this sense of aid was not one that held a hero complex, just one of correcting behavior and taking responsibility.

This attention to intentional connection to be a theme that carried into the days ahead. As I previously mentioned my lack of awareness about the Black Border line and spiritual mapping that The Mamos practice. **I witnessed the Mamo stop and walk towards something that showed no particular significance to me or the others whom I was with**, and sit or stand with the space for a while. After observing this over the days period I finally approached the professor and asked him what the Mamo was doing. **He explained that it was a sort of map that the Mamo was making.** He shared with me the great dedication that being a Mamo takes and that he has been in practice since he was young. Having said this, he briefly explained that some of the work the Mamos do consists of protecting "The Heart of the World", Santa Marta. Through these global mappings, they are protecting the entire earth. The map shape

that wraps around the Sierra Nevada Mountains is a heart. This seems to be another way that this community leaves their mark, for their people as well as all of nature. The Mamo wanted to visit Cherokee, N.C. because the Ikü Nation holds ancestral relations with the Eastern Band of Cherokee. He brought with him his practice of mapping to Cherokee in order to bless the ancestors and lands spirit, this was his offering and the leaving of a mark.

I see Older Brother and those who represent this group as a system model for us to learn from, not to only observe and research. Their system is one of many that is a part of Bateson's idea of immanent mind. Their systems contribute to the systems that are established in the rock climbing field.

5. Stepping In & Outside of the Mind

I have walked you through some of the elements which contribute to the climbers system within the total system. What does the mind tell us about any chosen culture? Is there a shared way of thinking that lives within each culture? Does a specific type of shared perspective have the power to affect nature and land for positive and negative? Can this shared mind reach outside of its community and further connect with other cultures' minds?

The idea of a shared mind or set of mindsets within a culture has been termed *Public Mind* by many Anthropologists, one of which is Bradd Shore. Through the "environmental input", which he talks about in the quote above, comes a direct connection with the mind being a public place. This idea of the mind being public is, in my opinion, a helpful way of thinking that assists the navigation of field research. Gregory Bateson pairs well with Shore when he says, "*The individual mind is immanent but not only in the body. It is immanent also in pathways and messages outside the body; and there is a larger Mind of which the individual mind is only a subsystem...it is still immanent in the total interconnected social system and planetary ecology.*" (p.467) This quote reminds us of how influenced we are by each other. What can one field learn from another? What kind of influence is present or possible?

As my fieldwork unfolds in my thesis, I approach the public or shared minds of a culture as agents of influencing change, and setting forth a model of preservation. It is my belief that as a student in this field of study, I should not only report my observations but encourage change, action, and allyship in appropriate spaces, in turn creating a cycle of communal influence.

So, what does this have to do with climbers, you may ask? No matter the chosen group an Anthropologist studies, Bateson's theory of mind can be applied. And when done so ethically, carefully, and substantively, many things can be told of the community itself. Observation is one of our most powerful tools in this field of study. Observing the climbing informant's dialogue, behavior, action or inaction, facial expressions, gestures, and relation to surroundings are key elements in creating a full view of a total system within this community.

Gregory Bateson's theory of mind is a model of mind that has influenced my research. In his book, *Steps To An Ecology of Mind*, he brings in a larger conversation of systems theory. Within the systems theory framework he writes about *total systems* and *immanent mind*. Bateson establishes an example in his work which has resonated with me , "*The cybernetic epistemology which I have offered you would suggest a new approach. The individual mind is immanent but not only in the body. It is immanent also in pathways and messages outside the body; and there is a larger Mind of which the individual mind is only a subsystem. This larger Mind is comparable to God and is perhaps what some people mean by "God," but it is still immanent in the total interconnected social system and planetary ecology... In sum, what has been said amounts to this: that in addition to (and always in conformity with) the familiar physical determinism which characterizes our universe, there is a mental determinism. This mental determinism is in no sense supernatural. Rather it is of the very nature of the macroscopic* world that it exhibit mental characteristics. * The mental determinism is not transcendent but immanent and is especially complex and evident in those sections of the universe which are alive or which include living things.*" (*Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Bateson p.467)

Transcendence clashes with Immanence. Historically these two terms seem to have been debated over for millennia. It is more prevalently discussed in theological settings, referring to God. But Bateson reminds the reader that these terms are also applicable to the mind and that in the end the mind is a representation of a total system which he equates to what he says "...some would call 'God'". Though his focus is on mind, he gives us these transformative insights in the excerpt above which incorporate God as the entirety of mind. He does not approach this from a organized religious view but one that reminds me of some of the Indigenous views that I have researched. Bateson notes these oppositions of transcendence and immanence, "We now know with considerable certainty, that the ancient problem of where the mind is immanent or transcendent can be answered in favor of immanence and that this answer is more economical of explanatory entities than any transcendent answer". (Bateson, date P. 319)

Bateson looks into this idea of “**the self**”. Looking at this is vital for this research. He talks about the individual as only a very small part of the total system. He refers to Durkheim and his version of total system, “..the relationship between man and his community parallels the relationship between man and God.” (Bateson p. 333) Remember, Bateson’s idea of God is this of the *Larger Mind*, in other words, all of our developed systems as a whole. **The nature of a community is dependent on the individuals in it and how they interact with one another. This is a basic natural system.** It has been said that when a tree is dying in a forest the surrounding trees can feel the decrease in energy, they then grow and move their roots closer to the dying tree to help give it life and support. The trees set an impactful example of how we are interconnected and that our relationships with one another hold a great deal of power.

Bateson theorizes about living things, immanent mind, the universe and their relation to each other, but he is not the first to do so, of course. This is where it becomes exciting! These notions and ideas long preceded him. Bateson’s work pairs well with literature from the Arhuaco/Ikü Nation.

“We think in our culture that the human physiognomy is a copy or replica of the face of the Earth. The Mother Earth (Seynekun) is our benchmark and our guide for the development of the human activities. Our body and spirit come from it. Solid, liquid and gaseous substances that contains within it have specific vital functions and are the prototype of the internal order of our body. In so far, the water runs in its body, the blood will be circulating in our body. While the Earth can breathe the cosmic energy, our body can breathe; as long as a healthy energy maintains and spirituality of the trees, mountains, rivers and others, we can keep also a healthy body and spirit...In concordance with the Law of Origin, societies were located in different parts of the world with their respective spots, customs, languages and laws, whole these behaviors framed with nature. In the same way, the territory at the time of its creation was conceived with a few mandates that made possible the understanding and mutual human behavior. This is why there are some laws that precede over human and correlative duties, considering for that relationship the compliance of this mandates, both, the humans and territory are made possible through the union of the spiritual and physical space.” (Cabildo, Torres & Cuadro, 2017)

These are some of the base values in which the two men that I met from the Sierra Nevada Mountains live by. These words work very well with Bateson’s *systems theory*. The Ikü public mind and written rights are an example of a larger *total system*. This system, the effects that humans have on land, and what the land provides for humans pairs well with observations I made of the climbing community. On one hand, without the rock, the climbers cannot climb; on the other hand, it takes climbers’ diligence to respect, preserve and conserve the land and rock that they climb on in order to keep the rock climbable. Before understanding what the observations look like in detail, it is important to understand Bateson’s example of *total system*,

“Consider a man felling a tree with an axe. Each stroke of the axe is modified or corrected, according to the shape of the cut face of the tree left by the previous stroke. This self-corrective (i.e., mental) process is brought about by a total system, **tree-eyes-brain-muscles-axe-stroke-tree**; and it is this total system that has the characteristics of immanent mind.” Gregory Bateson p.



Figure 3. Total System Example

This is a very general example of a rock climber in the midst of a climb and what a total system **could** look like (Figure 3). But it is important to note that Bateson wanted to make clear of one thing specifically, **it is not simply a man cutting down a tree. This picture does not depict a man rock climbing.** It depicts all that goes into this man climbing up this rock. The rock, the hands and feet moving on the rock, the rope and bolts, each breath it takes in order to make the next move, the hawk flying overhead, the sun beaming down in the climber's line of sight, the holds differing hold to hold, these just some of the elements that go into this adventure, which create a total system. It is worth noting that each element or subsystem is ever changing during a climb. There are always some found consistencies but the ever evolving nature of the climb is what creates such fascinating systems within systems. Overtime, I became more interested in isolating small components or elements of the climbing process that contribute to the climbing culture and the total system. These elements are, leaving behind what is helpful and productive, discarding the harmful things, greeting the rock, readying oneself for the rock, and the communal relations that tie all of these together.

6. Younger Brother

Not everything began on the rock, although I did meet the majority of my informant's in the field. But it was the love of my life who brought me to the field itself. Jeremy is his name and rock climbing is his other love. The idea of being away from society's day to day activities immersed in the woods sounded exciting to me. So, I checked it out. Over the years, I dabbled in the sport of rock climbing. But it wasn't until I met the rest of my informants that it really began to stick. I found that community is what draws me into the activity itself. I have also discovered that everyone's intention for climbing is different within the group. However, I have observed that not one of my climbing informant's climbs alone. They seemingly enjoy being with other informants, climbing together in the outdoors. This is important to note because it isn't unheard of to come across a boulderer climbing in the field alone. It is not encouraged, for safety concerns, but it does occur.

Jeremy moved to Asheville a bit before I was able to join him. He met some wonderful men who had chosen a new refreshing way to live. They had recently transitioned from living a life that caused pain to themselves and sometimes others and began to practice a new way of loving their minds and bodies. Rock climbing was a part of their elixir. Jeremy too, decided to make big changes in his life. This desire to live a different way is what brought the climbers together. This new life bonds them together in camaraderie.

At the beginning, Kyle and Jeremy were the only two climbers of the group to have met each other. After time passed, Todd and Spencer befriended Kyle and Jeremy. Kyle then met Evan at the gym as they bonded over their love

for climbing. Three out of four of the listed informants ended up becoming wilderness guides for an addiction recovery program for young men. In the guiding field, the majority of the men worked together to bring young men from a hopeless place to one of beauty and life. Being outdoors and in the woods helped aid the clients and the guides themselves. They used the act of wilderness exploration as a teaching and learning tool to set a new example of how a person can live and connect to things or moments that were unfamiliar to them. This connection which they exposed the clients to have made lasting imprints on them and their clients.

Over time, these single men found themselves head over heels for beautiful ladies right around the same time period. It was one of the more unique things I've ever seen in regards to timing. Kyle met Danielle, Todd rekindled with Lauren, Spencer met Lauren H, and Evan met Liz. Paige, another informant, met Jamie later on in the story; although he is not a rock climber, he is a part of the special friendship bonds that have formed. As romantic love unfolded before our eyes, so did the love for rock climbing for these climbers.

The ladies have their own stories too of course. What brought them to the rock climbing field was love but what kept them all bonded together in this group, in my humble opinion was the values that they hold true and the ways in which they act upon these values. Lauren, Danielle, Liz, Paige, and Lauren H. all work in jobs that assist the public, those in need physically, mentally, need support, or just a fresh creative perspective. They are kind, caring, passionate, loving, selfless and hardworking. All of these attributes reflect in their rock climbing and their behavior at the crag. They contribute so much to the culture that this group has formed over time. The support and encouragement that they share with fellow climbers is one that is not always found.

7. Climbing Elements

Many of the climbers' first experiences climbing were inside the gym, but not all of them. Paige had a very different first exposure. She found herself ice climbing in Maine! When I first met her, this fact was not so well known to me, or the group. The second time I climbed with her, I noticed a tattoo on her forearm of two ice picks crossing each other amidst a mountainous landscape. I asked her about it knowing absolutely nothing about ice climbing, she responded, "Oh yeah, I've climbed before. I used to ice climb in Maine". This is such a Paige thing to say and do, casually mention this insanely difficult and scary sport in her sweet voice with no ego or sense of pride. She reported it and moved on. Amazing!

The rock climbing informants adventure in mainly two types of climbing; bouldering and sport climbing. Some of the rock climbers in the group prefer sport climbing over bouldering. However, there are others in this group who find equal enjoyment in both. Depending on the type of climbing you are participating in, the scene, the dialogue, and the gear change. Bouldering is done on a boulder, who would've thought?! All jokes aside, it is risky and some feel unsafe even attempting it. Bouldering (Figure 4) consists of the climber, their climbing shoes, chalked hands, a crash pad, the rock, and hopefully a spotter. No ropes or harnesses are involved in this type of climbing. The average height of the boulders are around 15 feet. However, this can vary depending on where you are. There is also a category of boulders called *High Balls*. These boulders can reach 35 feet in height, sometimes higher. For the average climber it is unlikely that they will climb a high ball, which is usually taken up by professionals.

Sport Climbing (Figure 5) asks that the climber utilizes a harness, an attached chalk bag, rope, belay device, belayer, and climbing shoes. Sport climbing requires that the wall or project line be previously bolted and the height of the climb ranges from 30 feet to 100 feet on average. As the climber makes their way up the wall they are required to attach a quick draw (Figure 6) to the bolt and clip in their rope. As they do this they are ensured more safety to the top, if there was no clipping in, no harness, no rope the climber would be *Free Soloing*, and as I look around the field Alex Honnald is nowhere to be found. Free Soloing is not common and is very dangerous. Top roping occurs once one climber has finished a sport climb, another climber is able to follow what they have already set up. The top roper is simply undoing all that has been done except the unclipping top two bolts. Top roping is essentially a style of climbing for beginners, or for a route that is out of a climbers grade range that they have the desire to attempt without factoring in the strength to also attach quick draws and rope. It is for *gumbies* as some climbers in this group would say.

From community relations such as friendship, romantic partnership, and belay partnership to the crags that the informants choose to visit, the category that they prefer to climb in, and the gear that they choose to use that day are just some of the many elements within a greater system that not only creates this in particular culture but is also influenced by a greater ever changing system. These can be thought of as Bateson refers to them, systems within systems.



Figure 4. Bouldering



Figure 5. Sport Climbing



Figure 6. Quick Draws

8. Community Land & Connection

I have chosen four willing participants to interview from the climbing group. These participants in the field are the most often out of the majority of the participants. I have introduced some informants casually already in this thesis, however I describe each one of them through poetry in the writing below.

Connection to community is naturally going to differ depending on the informant, however the climbers, like all of us in this world, are always influenced by what is around them. These altered perspectives are demonstrated through the interview process. This is an example of what Bateson refers to when he talks about systems informing one another. The poems describe elements that make up parts of each individual, these are elements that Bateson refers to in writing as well. The elements have influence on the greater system, being this rock climbing group and its community.

Danielle: *The community aspect of climbing is different in sport climbing. The community aspect is less for me, because my main climbing partner is Kyle. When I think about my relationship with sport climbing, it's more of a personal thing. But beyond that, it is the relationship with me, the rock, nature and my belayer. Because, to me, climbing is kind of serious. I would never describe climbing as just, like, a Wednesday. Oh, it's just fun. You know, sometimes I have fun, but it's a challenge that I really love. Yeah. And so to me, climbing is a little serious. And so I kind of have that mentality when I go climbing. Yes, people and community enhance it. And that is a big, I don't want to be out climbing with people I don't like. So, um, that does make a big difference. And just having people and community that are supportive, and just like welcoming and good belayers. But on the bouldering side, communities kind of everything. When I think about bouldering, I think about going out with all of your, all of my friends and enjoying our time together. And it's easier because one challenging thing of sport climbing is, if you climb a different grade than someone else it allows for a lot of separations because you have to be at one spot for a certain climb, and then another spot for another climb. So like finding partners that climb near your same grade. And then like people you actually like it's just like can be very difficult, I think, especially for females. But with bouldering it's more like the problems are quicker, and you can all hang out. And so the community to me in climbing when referring to bouldering is, is all about community and community as in your group of friends. Yeah. So it's kind of cool because it's different from sport climbing. Bouldering is all about being supportive and all having fun and hanging out. So that's really about friends and the interactions you have with people and like supporting the group supporting each other.*

I interviewed Lauren, another willing informant, about community and connection to the rock...

Lauren: *So I think when I first started climbing, it didn't really affect me, what kind of stone it was, or how long it's been there. I would just be in awe at these, massive climb lines. But only recently have I kind of become more*

appreciative of the hard work that all of the route setters that go out and create the routes, like the work that they've done.

Lauren previously spoke about the ways in which climbers leave a mark, I also interpreted this as a communal connection.

Chloe: So would you say you feel a sense of community even without those people being presently on the rock, obviously?

Lauren: *Yeah, absolutely. Whether it's because they left like a tick mark, there to grab that hold, or just like chalk residue left over, or blood, or tears, or whatever it is. There's always someone that came before you or at least for me, because I haven't set a route yet. But I think that it's a really cool sense of community, like kind of an image of that person's life and their experience climbing that. I'm now kind of tapping into it as well, I'm touching the same rock.*

Chloe: I haven't thought about that exactly in that way before. And I like that you touched on this cycle in a way of, not only is it this abstract, or conceptual meaning to you, it's very physical, you have talked about those marks being left.

I have touched on the idea of leaving marks in the *Leave No Trace* section above. However, Lauren inspired me to alter my perspectives and think on a larger scale. Naturally a climber will leave chalk on holds. Lauren looks at this from an angle that considers connection to community not disturbance or inconvenience. What do other climbers have to say about this? Are there different fields of thought concerning leaving marks with chalk?

In an interview, Kyle talks about considering other climbers at the crag in a very different way,

Kyle: *When it comes to routes themselves, I try to brush routes on my way down. Anytime that there's like noticeably cakey chalk on holds. Or if it's a hard route and my friend is about to climb it, you know, just having that common courtesy to, to brush the holds on the way down.*

These varying connections to community through the rock interested me greatly. But these perspectives all lived at the crag, systems within systems.

I asked Kyle what his connection to the community looked like for him.

Kyle: *I think that I view community as an opportunity for me to practice values, to see if I can put my money where my mouth is, so to speak, because it's so easy to just say it on paper. I believe in honesty, and generosity, and compassion and loyalty, and this and the other, but community is where the rubber hits the road, you know. And so I really cherish that I really cherish that, because without each other, we don't have the conflict and the negotiation and the alliances and all the complexities of human relationships that bring us that opportunity to examine our morality and our ethics, and to decide what we want to be about, you know, and so, I love when I make a mistake, or when my friend makes a mistake, and where we hurt, and then we communicate to one another and say, "Hey, I really didn't like that hurt me, you know, or whatever". And then we get to have a heart to heart and say, "Man, I really love you. I didn't mean to hurt you. I am so sorry. I can see from your perspective how that would have been offensive, you know, I'll be more mindful of that. I found that every time that you go through that with somebody, you're closer on the other side. You know? When things are so superficial, you can't get that deep, but then when you go through that together, it's like a shared trauma. You know the one person experiences the trauma of having hurt their friend, and then the other person experiences the trauma of being hurt by their friend. Yeah, and then together, you have the opportunity to make it right. And that's so beautiful. So, yeah, I don't have this ideal IQ or there's no like fantastical perspective on community. I think that it's a bunch of people together that can be really nasty and vicious sometimes and sometimes cruel, exclusive and condescending. Then I think that we're also just people and sometimes we can be so kind, and, you know, deeply thoughtful and considerate of one another, and generous. And it's so cool the way that memory informs that because I think so much of what drives our empathy towards one another, is having that even if it's a subconscious memory of a time that we were hurt in the same way, as them. And we don't want them to suffer like we suffered. Yeah, you know what I mean? I think that's, that's powerful. But yeah, so all the things, you know, so many things to say about the community, but, but I love intimacy. And I think it's one of the things that brings color to*

my life. And so I really, like, I really yearn for that deep connection that is a hard one. You have to spend a lot of time with someone and then you also have to have certain catalysts. And sometimes you can drive those intentionally and other times you just have to be patient. And then seize the opportunity when it comes. You know, when that friend asks you if you can help them move next weekend, you know, and you show up, say, Hey, I'm not just your friend, ostensibly. I'm your friend right here right now in practice. Let's do this. I have your back.

Kyle describes the ebbs and flows of communal relations. This concept of friendship and *having someone's back* in and outside of climbing can be early connected to an experience I had in the field a couple of summers ago.

All eleven of us went on a trip to the New River Gorge in West Virginia 2 summers ago. It was an unbelievably beautiful trip weather wise. It was the middle of July, it was hot but there was a perfect breeze amidst the heat. As the day neared the end we all gathered together under the climb called "skull in hole" (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Skull In Hole

The grade of the climb is 12.a sport climbing route. This reminds me of the topic, leaving a mark. It provokes a feel of sacrifice, ritual, and offering. I do not know where these skulls came from, how long they have been there, or the story behind them. I worked to track this information down but decided that I will leave that up to the Forensic Anthropologist! However, speculations are much encouraged.

This project was known amongst us all as a climb that informant Jeremy had been working on the previous year and had hopes to send that summer. Other informants, Evan and Kyle also were interested in revisiting this climb. Evan was the first to hop on. As he maneuvered his way up the line he screamed with excitement and joy as he made his final move. However, the crux is at the top and he was unable to finish and send climb. As the belayer gently let Evan down he dangled in the air sharing how difficult the last move. Kyle was the next person to engage in the climb. Kyle is a grade or two above Jeremy and Evan so the majority of us have an unspoken understanding that Kyle doesn't need as much encouragement and Climbing at this level. We supported him but quietly. And when he finished the climb we weren't super surprised but we were supportive.

Lastly, it was Jeremy's turn to climb. As he put his shoes on and readied himself he commented on how excited to try this climb again. He tide his knot checked, with his belayer that he was safely and securely attached and then it was time to begin. He breathes deeply, shakes his hands, releasing residual chalk and makes his first moves. The first sequence is done quickly and gracefully. He makes his way to the first quick draw and clips his rope into it for safety.

I took a moment to look around me. All of the informants were lying on the ground, heads against their pack or leaned up against a tree, focused on Jeremy. I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude that Jeremy had this type of support. . This was the first time I had experienced everyone sitting so peacefully with nothing but full concentration and encouragement for a climber, in this case Jeremy. It was a reflection of love and care.

At this point I refocused on Jeremy, he was at the crux, the hardest sequence of the climb (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Skull In Hole Crux

The picture above shows Jeremy making the first dyno move to the crux (a dyno is a move that requires the climber to jump and grasp onto the holds above them). We all screamed with excitement cheering Jeremy on. Kyle was the most audible encourager throughout Jeremy's entire climb. "Good job J! Now get established and blast up to that next hold." He said. As Jeremy neared the end, it was pretty clear that he was going to finish the climb! He made his final moves, clip into the double draws and screamed with excitement. We all joined together to yell words of enthusiasm and celebration.

As he was lowered to the ground, he shared with all of us how much he enjoyed it. He thanked Evan and Kyle, "You guys really inspired me to get on there and try hard".

In an interview with Jeremy he describes his connection with the community and how these intertwined systems have helped him grow as a person within the community as well as other roles in his life.

Jeremy explained to me the importance of rock climbing being a lifestyle for him. Along with this lifestyle came the impactful community that has helped him stay sober and continue climbing. I asked him to tell me some of his story during the interview and what the rock climbing community means to him.

***Jeremy:** Initially when I moved to Asheville, I moved here to be sober, to get sober from drugs and alcohol. And I found not only the community in which I work on my recovery, but I found this amazing community of rock climbers here in Asheville. And most everyone I met and talked to are super friendly, and they shared beta with me about different climbing areas and different access points. And, you know, if you're a climber in the southeast, and you're going to the local crags like rumbling bald or up to Boone, you're gonna see a lot of familiar faces. And most of the time, those familiar faces you see, there, they're in that lifestyle category of climbing. The people that I'll see maybe once a season or sometimes 2530 times a season and you form bonds with those people. The community here is really strong, and they are, you know, the ones that I'm referring to are all in with this, this lifestyle idea of rock climbing. And that coupled with my recovery, allowed me to establish connections which were positive and healthy connections in my life. So when I say that the lifestyle saved my life, that's what I mean when I say that. I think it's pretty cut and dry for me. You know, it's like, I entered this community because I was passionate about the sport and nature. I found this community and it became my lifestyle. Because I love the way that I feel when I'm doing it, and I love the people I am with.*

The connecting Jeremy describes sounds simple yet very profound. I found a similar response from Evan, another informant I had the opportunity to interview.

Evan: You know, when I got into recovery, I kind of was missing that piece, climbing, and feeling like I needed that. And so I joined the local rock climbing gym and sought it out again.

Chloe: And when in that process did you meet the boys?

Evan: I put out a post on Facebook, Asheville recovery group. And I was asking like, hey, are there any climbers in recovery, I'm looking to kind of link up. And I got a bunch of responses. And they mostly consisted of, I've never climbed before, but I'd love to. And as much as I love taking new climbers out, that's not exactly what I was looking for. And so I went to the gym later that day, and got a day pass. And I saw Kyle, so I went up and introduced myself. So it's funny that I kind of made that effort and then went to the gym and found it there. And Kyle was climbing there, I think with maybe Spencer and Todd. I didn't know any of them yet.

An awesome thing about climbing is like, you can kind of have this superficial level of connection, and then you go climbing and it **requires a tremendous amount of trust**. And it **requires a lot of vulnerability** to you know, me, you know, you might be experiencing fear and whatever that looks like. And so, after going climbing, you have this deeper connection. And, it's amazing, combining that with the being in recovery. **Like those two things compounded has just made for some really special connections**. It's interesting how the community has been, I've grown over time. The initial "base members" have gotten into relationships and stuff like that and our family has grown and it's just so cool. And you know, when I hear people talking about maybe moving or something it always like breaks my heart. The thought of me ever moving is so hard to even comprehend because I do have such a great community here and I don't want to try and have to rebuild that.

Marks, imprints seem to be left on each of the informants through communal gatherings around the rock, trust, support, encouragement, and being with the land, just to name a few. I thought back to ways that the Ikü Nation left marks.

9. Lessons by the River

"My people were told a long time ago that the rivers and streams are the veins of the universe. They're your lifeline take care of them." Bear Heart

"I'll be right back. I have to say hello to the river", the professor said to us. He quickly abandoned his sandals and made his way into the river. I expected him to simply dip his toes in the water, but just as quickly as his shoes were removed, so was his body in the river. I turned around to witness him knees deep in the river, splashing his face with water and looking upwards as if he was making contact with the sky. As I humbly and distantly viewed this scene, a sense of gratitude washed over me. I was witnessing something that was new to me. In social interactions that I have been a part of in the past I have never seen a person move away from the social scene and into a body of water, without diving in, swimming or participating in it with others who accompany them. The professor did not appear to view the river as a time for active play, or recreation. Reverence and gratitude seemed to be at play in this moment.

Later on, this same professor shared with me a quote that pieced together this scene very well. *"When you come upon Water in its natural state, you approach it with respect; you introduce yourself to this holy divine element. Take time to pay respect to it. For Water gives life..."* Mona Polacca, (lessons from her mother). Polacca is from Arizona. I wondered if this system of thought met with the Ikü Nation's I did some research and found this,

"The Black line or dividing line, are sacred geographical landmarks located in areas bordering the territory of the Sierra Nevada. Among these sites, there is a mutual connection with the water, the snowy peaks, other landforms, the sea, the glacial lakes and coastal lagoons, water births on the top of mountains and the mouths of the rivers; in such a way that all make up a network; the flow of permanent relationships is what gives life and essence to the Territory and our mission is to maintain active connections of that network. This natural order articulates and determines specifically various aspects of environmental, cultural, political, social and economic life of the Sierra Nevada and the world." (Cabildo p. 9)

I wondered if the climbers had any specific ways in which they greeted the rock. What did their connection to rock, land, and nature look like?

10. Greeting the Rock, Connecting to Land

I asked a few chosen informants questions about this topic.

Chloe: *What does land/nature mean to you? And how do you connect to them?*

Danielle: ***I think land and the earth is, it's life, and it's everything. It gives us life.***

She continued with a story...

Danielle: *Kyle and I went on a climbing trip to Arkansas. It was muggy and hot that day. I remember seeing a waterfall. And the rock was set back and the water was coming over the edge. So the water was suspended. Air on all sides. It was like the perfect place for a shower. After I saw it I thought about getting in the waterfall the rest of the day. Just letting Mother Nature wash you clean. So later that day I took off my clothes and I got under the falling water stream that was just a perfect shower. And I just remember standing there, and I felt free and just so connected to Mother Nature, it was really beautiful. And, it was cleansing. Yeah, outside. It feels really right. And yeah, and just like having that connection with the water and the rocks. That moment was very freeing. It's important to find the little joys and things in nature that we take for granted so often. It really gives us life.*

Chloe: *What does land mean to you?*

Lauren: *To me, land and nature, nature primarily, with land being, you know, the avenue with which we can connect to nature is life, it is everything. It is our roots, it is our past, it is how we survive and continue forward. Land being I think what we are familiar with the areas that we are familiar with, like there's lands that I've never seen before, but the ones that I know and connect with, are not mine. They are the lands of others that I am now gracious enough to be able to use and experience and enjoy. And again, to feel the presence of those who came before.*

I asked Lauren to take me through her process of what it looks like for her to ready herself for a climb.

Lauren: *So usually, I'm a very anxious person. So what's usually going through my head, whether I'm super excited, or kind of feeling a little bit, lackadaisical about a certain route, what usually goes through my head is a mixture of fear and excitement. Then I feel it more in my body. For a really long time, I thought only of fear. But I've been learning to see it more as a healthy stress/excitement at the preparation. So I'm trying to shy away from calling it fear and try to walk towards calling it excitement and preparation more, but because of that heightened level of stress response, you know, I get the tingly arms, my bowels moving around a little bit. I'm putting my shoes on and then before I stand up, I close my eyes and I take a couple deep breaths and kind of try to recenter, calm the vagus nerve a little bit, and, then look up, look up at the rock. And I say okay, and I get ready.*

Chloe: *Going through what's happening? Can you describe the feeling of touching those first holds?*

Lauren: *It's usually, depending on the difficulty of the opening section, it depends.*

It's usually a mixture of noticing how the rock feels under my skin. And looking ahead at where I'm going next on the route. So I'm trying to read the route. I set myself up to be able to just continue on with the climb, you know, I put my hands on the rock. I wish that, to be honest, I wish that I did something more right when I put my hands on the rock and thank the rock or something like that.

This mention of thanking the rock struck me.

I asked Kyle a similar question, to state his process of readying himself for the rock.

Kyle: *But in general, what all three of them have in common is, I start breathing regularly and deeply. Probably, I try at least five minutes before I think I'm going to start climbing. So while I'm still walking around, you know, gathering quickdraws, making sure I have enough chalk in my chalk bag, getting the right shoes for that particular*

climb. I try to begin rhythmic deep breathing and I do that because it brings me a sense of calmness and focus. And I believe that there's a power in ritual. I really enjoy putting my climbing shoes on. And I try to do that really deliberately and make that sort of like Zen like experience, where I'm not just mindlessly throwing shoes on, I'll pick up my shoe. And I'll blow inside of it to make sure that there's no dirt or debris, I'll brush my foot off to make sure that my foot is clean, I put it in the shoe. And then if it's a lace up, and I tie it really mindfully, making sure that the right amount of pressure is distributed and that the knot is tied well. It's all those little things that, you know, seem relatively insignificant that build a person's confidence as they're preparing to step on the rock. At least it does for me. And yeah, before I start climbing, I'll chalk my hands and then I'll usually slap them together or tap them on my shorts and blow off the excess chalk. Then I'll check my knot, show my belayer might not look at my belayer's belay device, make sure it's loaded properly and verbally confirm with them that they're ready to belay. And then I'll usually give a fist bump to my belayer, which is a nice ritual. I especially have that ritual with Sam.

I appreciated Kyle walking me through this process. It is easy to observe what's going on, however to understand the whys not just the what's is sometimes even more intriguing.

Chloe: What goes through your head while you are readying yourself to climb?

Kyle: *I mean, it would be inaccurate to say that I try because it's not really a process of trying, I will just say that usually I don't have much going through my head. And that's the point. If I do I find it disruptive, and it's anomalous. And I'll notice...hmm, I've got some mental clutter. That's odd. Because it's probably less than less than 5% of the time that that happens.*

Chloe: What do you think of when you hear the word land?

Kyle: *One is just the idea of space, three dimensional space in which organisms can occupy objects can occupy etc. I also have a connotation of land ownership, which is very difficult to grow up in almost any society and not develop the sensibility that if there is land, it belongs to someone or some entity, right? And I think that in recent years, it's been really important that the Climber Coalitions have developed in order to acquire and to protect land, especially in the southeast where a lot of our climbing venues are on private property or used to be and were acquired through purchase from organizations like the Access Fund, Carolina Climbers, Southeastern Climbers, etc. But yeah, I think that as climbers, we have a responsibility to stewardship, because if we trash our climbing areas, there can be consequences. So yeah, lands important. Because without land, we don't have crags, and we don't have anything to climb on.*

Chloe: When do you feel the most connected to land?

Kyle: *Yeah, I would say the land that I feel most connected to as a climber is the Obed, which is just about an hour northwest of Knoxville. And I feel connected to that land because it's the climbing area that I've visited the most, over my five years in Asheville, because of the major sport climbing destinations. You know, The New or Red River Gorge, and the Chattanooga area. And the way I feel connected is when I'm hiking out to the crag, and I feel like I've hiked those same hikes so many times that my feet just know every step. And it becomes this almost trance-like meditation of really joyful purpose, you know, because I'm usually with good friends that I love and care about. And we're on the way to do this thing that we love in this place that we adore, that is just so beautiful.*

This spoke towards the power of place and space. Familiarity is important to communities. Territory is important as well, an example in the field of this is the Ikü people's connection to their land. The climbers are visitors when they climb, no matter how many times they visit. However, it seems very apparent that they have formed a special bond with these areas that the climb at.

Chloe: What does it feel like to touch those first two holds on the wall when you approach the climb?

Kyle: *It's like saying, "Hello old friend".*

I asked another informant similar questions.

I then asked Danielle how she connects to the rock when she first approaches the holds.

Danielle: *It's emotional. Mm hmm. So like, when you touch the rock, these emotions arise. The nerves, the excitement, the challenge.*

11. Weather

Community interactions can be exemplified through the topic of weather. Beyond the height and the gear needed for climbing that I have mentioned in *Climbing Basics*, there are important differentiations to make between bouldering and sport climbing and weather. The **space or physical area** is different and **social interactions alter depending** on which type of climbing one chooses. The weather determines whether a day of climbing will occur or not. At the end of the day, the weather chooses what type of category of climbing a climber will embark upon. For instance, in this area Rumbling Bald near Lake Lure is the closest bouldering location. It is as easily climbable when the temperature is warmer than 55-60 °F. The tiny gnats come out to play and swarm around your nose and eyeballs and the rock becomes extremely slippery due to the humidity. It is not safe. The prime time to climb Rumbling Bald is in the crisp seasons of late fall and winter. On the other hand it would be a torturous, if not dangerous event to sport climb in temperatures that are suitable for bouldering at Rumbling Bald. It is also important to note where you are and what the environment, ecosystems and spaces provide. For instance, the summer is a wonderful time to Sport Climb, but there are times it has been sunny and beautiful but it was too humid to stick to the rock.

An example of climbing destinations and how weather affects a day at the crag is told through Grandmother. Grandmother Mountain, is a climbing spot that is loved by those who know it well. It does not have a published guide book and because of this it isn't as well-known as other boulder fields in NC. Grandmother Mountain is right next to Grandfather Mountain. The elder mountains reside near Blowing Rock, NC. If a visitor is coming from Asheville, the traveler has the delight of seeing Grandfather's profile from the valley below on the drive up to Grandmother. There is a sweet song written by Railroad Earth titled *Grandfather Mountain*. Jeremy seems to always throw this song on the playlist for the ride up. I find that there is a communal understanding of how pure and special this song is, an inter subjectivity. The passengers always sit in reverence and awe. Some of the lyrics are,

While you're here and have a minute, Take the view and glory in it Year by year floating by Grandfather Mountain, Tell me old man, what are you dreamin', Tell me old man, how are you today?

Though Grandmother may not have a song written about her, or even a face to recognize on the drive up, she is very much on our minds. She is seen by fewer visitors. But the ones who do visit connect with her in a different way than tourists on the bridge at Grandfather. The view from the bridge is exciting, but connection in the fairy forest of Grandmother is quite a different experience.

The morning was crisp and the air was fresh. It was our first taste of seasonal change and we were ready to hit the boulder field. Danielle, Jeremy, and I traveled two hours to the climbing destination. We passed the entrance to Grandfather Mountain where locals and tourists explore the hanging bridge and beautiful views. Weather was the topic of conversation as we made our way closer and closer to our turn. Jeremy noted that the condensation in the air was growing thicker and he feared how wet the rock might be. Specific weather conditions are essential for safe and successful bouldering. A burst of sun shone through the glass windows and beamed onto my face. We were excited, there might be hope for dry rock. We made our turn and began to ascend up the bumpy gravel road. *Bump, slosh, swish*, the car made contact with the road making all of the comforting sounds that indicate to a climber that they are almost to their destination. Curve after curve, the thickening of condensation made it very clear that the rock would not be climbable.

We arrived at the lower section of the boulder field, parked, and readied our investigative glasses. Danielle had never climbed at this particular spot before and was excited to check it out. The boulder off to the side of the road was the first spot that Jeremy decided to feel out. He carefully maneuvered through a miniature cave and around the boulder hoping for some sign of dry surface but he found that this particular boulder was too wet to climb. Jeremy and I offered Danielle the idea of a walkaround in the boulder field. She was disappointed but intrigued and ready for adventure.

We drove to the very top and parked right before the trail head. We were excited to show Danielle all of the different remarkably set routes at Grandmother. Given that there isn't a guide book, a climber needs to know the area pretty well in order to guide another climber around. Sure, anyone can come out and hop on a climb. Why not? A beginners mentality is a beautiful thing. But there is also beauty in connecting to a certain boulder problem time and time again and then later on sharing these insights, experiences and in climbing lingo *beta* with other climbers. An Important

thing to note about the climbing in the area is that it is very challenging, that being said, it is usually a grade above its level. Boone is known for this.

Over the years I have found myself in and out of climbing. I ebb and flow with my dedication to rock climbing. But I never stray away from wanting to go exploring. The day was beautiful, not necessarily for climbing, but for observation and connection to the outside world. The sun shined down through the wet blanket of condensation, creating stripes of light and shadow through the trees that resulted in a heavenly scene which I was lucky enough to capture on camera (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Heavenly Scene

The scene that I was captivated by was very different from the one that grabbed Danielle and Jeremy. They blew past the fern field and quickly squished through the muddy trail to find the boulders. This sense of urgency is not new. It is a normal part of the intrigue of climbing. The buildup of excitement, the anticipation of a new adventure. A childlike innocence and sense of wonder came over the two climbers.

Jeremy began to unveil each line one by one. He made sure that first, Danielle was aware of the boulder name before he talked about individual climbs. Awareness of which boulder a climber is on is helpful for many reasons. In this case, working out beta with other climbers in conversations in the future. "This one is called Mighty Mouse. It was my biggest send here a couple of years ago. They call it that because there is a tiny mouse who lives in that hole right there" Jeremy points at the hole that rests in the boulder. "Woah that's rad" Danielle shouted. She shared that she thought it might be out of her climbing grade. However, she showed interest in wanting to give it a try in the future.

Mighty Mouse begins with a fracture through the rock with what most climbers would agree are perfect hand holds. As the climber begins their next move, the hold can be found to their right, this hold allows the climber to grasp it with about four fingers. Following that move the climber will need to slap onto the slabby hold where their left hand and arm will be strategically placed above their body in order to remain on the boulder. This act of gravity and body placement is important when placing a hand on a slabby hold, it keeps the climber *on the wall*, climber jargon. As your eye navigates its way up the line it is easy to see where the mouse just might be hiding, right below the next right hand hold. I have witnessed this little friend pop out on one of the climbing informants, Todd, while he was climbing the boulder! He screamed and flung off the rock. He began laughing in disbelief. He was unable to finish the climb, however if he were to make his next move, his hands would remain on the same hold, matched while he puts his right foot up high and maneuvers his way into the crack with his toes, this is known as a *toe hook*. At this point the body is hanging to the left while the feet are to the right. The left foot isn't especially important at this point, it can either be pasted or simply hang from the rock. A hand match comes next on what was the previous right hold. The body then lifts up and pastes the left foot onto the slabby hold that was just utilized for the left hand. A couple more moves are made, depending on the beta a climber is using, then the top out. The top out is steep and heady but insists that it is done quickly so that the climber doesn't fall from the top.

I have described the weather, the way to climb a specific boulder and ways that informants share conversation and goals. These are all systems of connection, community, and seeing what has been left behind, such as chalk.

12. History of Land & Addressing Privilege in Climbing

We are all living in a strange time. Mother Nature is showing us signs of renewal, destruction, and transformation. The world of politics is sneaky, powerful, and at times toxic. The current administration of the US has put civilians at risk of their lives in more ways than one. Those who are here to *defend and protect* are killing vulnerable communities with little to no consequence. Our global community is at war with a virus, while many debate whether it is real or not. Science is being discounted while people die and forests burn. This current reality is startling. People want to escape and find some kind of peace of mind. In terms of the climbing world, rock climbers have the ability to escape. They can go outside to a deserted crag and be in tune with nature. What a relief. But there lies a certain kind of privilege in this simple act of tuning out—which some climbers acknowledge and others do not. **With this privilege comes responsibility.** As I work in the field observing my chosen climbing informants, I bring about ways to encourage participation with the greater world and rich history that is at times forgotten or purposefully erased. We have discussed ways in which we as climbers can restore balance to the environment, respect land that is not ours, acknowledge those who have come before us and all that they experienced, those people who are here today, and preserve the land that we visit, occupy, live on for many generations who lie ahead.

The topic of land inevitably has political, cultural, environmental, social, and personal implications. Colonialism has rewritten many meanings and relations that humans have cultivated with the land, resulting in the damage of entire systems. **These systems include ecosystems, cultural systems, political systems, family systems, spiritual systems, religious systems, and many others.** These harsh realities have led to years of historical erasure. The erasing of Indigenous people and their cultures has grown prominent in modern society and is used as a tool for manipulation of the full story.

Our government and society have worked hard to forget where our country's roots came from, and who is still present and alive today. We see this in education, politics, voting, housing, and so many more aspects of day to day living.

We are forgetting stories, we are rewriting stories to fit an agenda and *chosen* narrative. When the full picture isn't told, we are divided. With this division stereotypes will continue and we will not understand or attempt to tap into ways in which other cultures live, their values, and their stories. Stories are invaluable to humans and how they relate to the world around them. There are different stories that cultures tell about land, the connection with it and to it. The stories we tell and hold tightly culture to culture result in held beliefs. These beliefs hold great power. The ways in which people perceive, treat, and view land can be very telling of the culture and the community itself. These held beliefs and structures of thought pave the way for action or inaction.

In the outdoor rock climbing world we climb on land that, commonly, we know very little about. It is easy for climbers to get into the swing of arriving at the crag, gearing up, and simply climbing without thinking about the land's stories. Stories which have taken place in these, now occupied spaces.

There are ways that communities are trying to bring about reparations. One way this is being practiced is through land acknowledgements. In recent years applications for smartphones were created for identifying native land that a person is standing on or searching for. In this way, colonial set boundaries are not the focus. Native territory is able to be accessed and known.

It is common to see historical signage all across the US that acknowledges people, land, and history. The signs are typically cast aluminum/bronze, brown or black and dusted with golden font. This idea is similar to what is now termed *Land Acknowledgement*, except it is rarely in the form of a physical sign. This type of acknowledgment is one way to reverse a mindset that was established by colonial settlers, firsting and lasting Native Americans. This idea also goes along the lines of erasure, which I have already touched on. The land that we climb on has a history that is very real and is still very much so connected to those Native peoples who are living today. Access Fund published an article titled *Climbing and Respect for Indigenous Lands*, which suggests the following:

"Every time we go out to the crag, we are on indigenous land, and sometimes sacred land. But what does it mean to acknowledge the indigenous history of the land, and why should it matter to climbers? A land acknowledgement is a publicly stated recognition of the current and historic presence of an indigenous tribe or tribes on a landscape. Through land acknowledgements, climbers and others can respect and reflect upon the deep connection of tribes to their ancestral, and in some cases contemporary homes. Land acknowledgments also work to reverse the slow erasure of the indigenous link to the land, a trend that is perpetuated by both intentional policies (like forced removals) and by the process of resettlement, where the passage of time and the presence of new communities have given the false impression that the land was unoccupied in the past. Land acknowledgement is not a new concept. Several nations, including Canada and New Zealand, have official policies at various levels of government for the recognition of indigenous lands. The US has been slower to adopt this practice, but it has been gaining momentum in recent

years...Land acknowledgements are intended to be a gesture of respect and recognition, a statement by an organization or individual that they understand the history of the land and the people who have been traditionally connected to it. They demonstrate an allyship with indigenous peoples and a desire to meaningfully engage with tribal communities." (Ahmad, 2019)

This demonstration of allyship is beginning to become more actively practiced and examples of this can be seen on social media. Climbers often post pictures of their progress on the rock. Now, it is becoming more common that climbers are tagging or addressing what Native land they are climbing on in the textual part of the post. I believe that this public recognition is important in order to bring about awareness to other climbers, outdoor enthusiasts, adventurers, and tourists. However, I also think it has been insightful to explore, through the interview process, if this type of honor is occurring in the private minds and hearts of the climbers when they arrive at the crag.

When I touch the earth I know that it is me and I am it. Unity and oneness with land and nature is not just conceptual; it is a very real and tangible relationship. This relation reaches far across cultural, social, and political barriers. WE as a people, all of the world and its inhabitants, share many similarities amongst our differences--here lies *Psychic Unity*. *Psychic Unity* is an anthropological term associated most famously with people like, that refers to the idea that all of humankind share a core mental framework that crosses cultural barriers. Here lies inclusion and diversity. It is our time to work together within our common spaces, as well as unfamiliar spaces, to help restore balance to this planet while respecting the ancestors who have come before us and also paving the way for those who are to come. These ideas have Indigenous origin; they are not my own. I am inspired by them, and the more that I learn, the more I understand my responsibility in this world. Respect, responsibility, acknowledgment, and preservation are all terms that need to be put to action in order to create cohesiveness for the greater picture. Creating unity amongst topics like land does not come easily; however, we are not as separate as those in history have insisted that we are. Separate are the concepts that we sustain and hold as valuable from culture to culture. These concepts and held beliefs are vital for cultures to sustain what has come before them and to honor what is to come. But along with this sustainability it is vital that we cross cultural barriers to work together in a goal of preservation. My intention in saying this is not to negate and grossly erase all of the hurt and pain that has come before us, such as genocide, the confiscation of land, slavery, and so many other inhumane and selfish acts, but to alter the perspective just a bit in order to revive hope and - more importantly--create revived ways of acting towards justice. The only way I see this working is if we restructure and reinvent the stories and concepts that we have lived by for so long now by listening to stories that we have not heard before while considering the message that they have to tell.

Mona Polacca, a Hopi/Havasupai/Tewa is a Native American elder and spiritual healer from Arizona. She honored some of the grandmothers from her community by hosting a talk about the sacred elements, our connection to other communities and cyclical all of these themes are, "Part of the work of the grandmothers is to promote this concept, this idea of our similarities as human beings, that we are all one, we are all related" (Polacca, 2017). She presented a message to the masses which suggested the need for revived ways of living and even more importantly thinking about our connection to each other and the land. This restructuring is one that she believes it vital for preserving and protecting what is and what is to come.

Native Science and spirituality are misunderstood in the west. Many remove the legitimacy of Native Science and replace it with romanticism or pure mysticism, which results in retracting the meaning and concrete evidence that make up Native Science. Native Science is based on pure observation.

"Discoveries like the use of fire, coming to know key ecological relationships and responsibilities to the natural world, having a sense of how things began and how things are in the natural order, the domestication of animals and plants through agriculture, the innate affliction humans have with nature and understanding the order and cycles of nature are among the first elements of science."

*"The word **science** is derived from the Greek word for **knowledge** ... 'Native science' is used as a metaphor for Native knowledge and creative participation with the natural world in both theory and practice...The essence of Native spirituality is not religion in the Western sense of the word, but rather a set of core beliefs in the sanctity of personal and community relationships to the natural world, which are creatively acted upon and expressed at both the personal and communal levels...Native Science is a reflection of the metaphoric mind and is embedded in creative participation with nature. It reflects the sensual capacities of humans. It is tied to spirit and is both ecological and integrative."* (Cajete & Bear, p.13, 2000)

I have discussed ways of creatively interacting with nature, ways that some people, including myself, may need to rethink. What are ways rock climbers creatively interact with nature? What stories are being told by the rock climbers? A story of adventure perhaps? One of connection. As the rock climbers explore other stories that exist or existed within

the same areas where they climb, I am curious to explore how this may influence or rewrite their story. How does one story of a culture reflect, influence or form relations with another?

An excerpt from an interview I had with an informant, Evan, reflected these themes of storytelling, creative interactionism with nature, and interconnectedness very well. Instead of cut and dry interview questions, and in order to build rapport in the interview, I treated it more like a conversation. I inquired,

Chloe: “*...so part of that is the lack of telling people's full stories. We haven't put out there, in the history books, all that has happened in the past. So there's this disconnect between communities. Right? We can't really truly know each other if we don't know these stories that need to be told. And so when we go into this future of preserving the preservation of taking care of what is around us, and as we see this topic resurfacing in society, how are we telling this new story? And are we using these elements of the past to help us move forward? So what I mean by that is, it is important that we understand Indigenous knowledge in relation to nature. Then we can better understand why it is important to make land acknowledgments. Someone used to live here, someone still lives here. Yeah, um, and this land has a history. And people are connected to it differently than we might think. Then we come in, and we climb on it, right? Are we thinking about that when we're entering this space? Are we remembering these stories? What kind of stories do you think were telling? How does your personal story connect with this whole community and climbing and, what's being told here?"*

Evan: “***I think the stories that we're telling are this other way of interacting with nature. You know, the stories that we're telling are that we cherish this land, you know, and we want to fight for this land, and we don't want it to be destroyed, we don't want it to be privatized, we want it to be available for people to use and to enjoy and to use in such a way that is sustainable. You know, there's been battles, and it's awesome to see how the climbing community in general has rallied to protect land. From drilling. And I think that's one of the big stories is, this land can provide, without you taking from it.***”

I found many perspectives in regards to land throughout my time in the field. Some of these were that the land itself is life, that it is here to be used for adventure and activity, that it is a part of us, that we need to respect it and take care of it and that it is here for enjoyment and recreation.

13. Conclusion

“Everything that we have – what we live in, what we wear, eat, and drive – came from the Earth...” Bear Heart

The earth is in danger

And it will take more than you and I

Together we need to learn how to love While looking Mother Earth in the eye

Learning from ancient knowledge is where we need to start

Filling our souls with Nature's vital lessons, creative stories, works of art

WE are Nature: flora, fauna, humans and earth

Together let's strive to revive what life is really worth

The key is in unity

This we need to learn

Respecting all of creation Is how we'll take the turn

This is a poem I wrote while reflecting on all that I have learned in each field site I visited, each community I met, and each piece of literature I read. The different natures of systems that Bateson writes becomes a collaboration of all beings of this universe, this total system. The stories that are told above, the stories that my informants tell me, the stories that the informants are hoping to tell are a part of the total system. Other systems that contribute to the communities are preservation, respect, acknowledgment, and action which are being practiced in the field sites that I have mentioned above through other systems like, leaving no trace, leaving a mark, as well as connecting to land and community. I have learned a tremendous amount from both groups and I am grateful to be able to pass Older Brother's lessons along to the next reader, listener, and climber.

Thank you for embarking on this journey with me,

Chloe Gobel

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