

THE CLIMBING LIFE

The Body of Climbing

ON SERRANO AND WESTERN SHOSHONE land, there are boulders that I drive the length of California to climb. The stone is old, and impressively still. When I lay my hand against its rough surface, my body shakes, and it does not. But the earth is a trickster, it only pretends never to move, and this is what I love about it. At one time, it moved catastrophically: a basalt fist slammed with blunt force into meat of magma, skin of quartz, skeleton of granite. Its layers seemed to fold and crumple; it became a hot and beaten pulp. More years passed—then centuries, and then millennia—and water seeped through cracks, turning stone to soil. The soil eroded, and boulders were revealed from within the earth's insides, stark as actual bones.

I look for the clearest path upward: chalk smeared from other climbers who have played with this same puzzle; finger-sized dapples in the rock that make my hips twitch. *Easy*, I think. *Obvious*. I lock my fingers over a small edge at chest height and place my toe against a smooth bulge of rock below. I pull hard with my left hand, push on the tight edge of one shoe, and shoot my right hand for the smear of white chalk above my head. One finger catches against a greasy indent that looked so much bigger from the ground. My body tilts and levers out over space. For a moment, I imagine that I might only be pausing. And then I am falling into a bright wing of wind, hard and flat and dry as the palm of earth that reaches up to grab my feet and tips me down.

The earth tricks me. This is what I love about climbing: the climb is never what you think it is; the rock is not what you think it is. While climbing, I am not who I think I am, either.

I LEARNED TO CLIMB when I was a first-year law student, and I wanted to take my mind off studying for a few hours each week. I signed up for an introductory class. Everyone in the course was white, except for me. The instructor, a grad student who climbed so elegantly he looked as if he were dancing, taught us how to tie into our harnesses safely; how to check and double-check a belay; what to call the different climbing holds (jug! crimp! sloper! sidepull!). He gave us all the information he thought we would need in order to climb. He did not talk

universal, or not political. As though the sensations of climbing are somehow categorically different than the sensations of politics, which are also something that we experience with our bodies. What are the impacts of white supremacy, after all, but tension, joy, relief, tightness, heat, migraine, warmth, hunger, hypertension, diabetes, rage, depression, elation, and grief, all chronically or acutely or devastatingly and designedly, deliberately, either present or absent in (I should say “inflicted on” and “granted to”) certain bodies and not others?



about how everyone in the course, except for me, was white. He did not talk about how when we climbed outside in the United States, it would be on stolen land. He did say, “Climbing is simple, and efficient, and pure, and hard. That’s all.”

I have come across this sentiment so much in mainstream climbing: that climbing is a simple thing that we do with our bodies, which are simpler than our minds. And sometimes the word used is not *simple*, but *neutral*, or

Climbing is something we do with our bodies, and nothing we do with our bodies is simple.

AND YET. On this land, the rock feels still, and it feels hard to the touch, and it feels cold, and it seems likely never to change. When I try the climb again, I climb with my arms, my ribs, my breath, my nails. As I lift off onto the boulder, I am joyful and inefficient and strong. I focus

on getting my body to perform a series of hard and beautiful moves. My attention is so narrow. Nothing exists except arms, ribs, breath, nails, rock and the particular roughness of its skin on the particular roughness of my skin; the particular shape of the rock and the responding particular shape of my body fills me, wraps me, with joy. I feel as if I'm dancing. What could be missing from this experience? This experience is whole, and full, and yes, simple.

I fall, and I hit the ground, and I laugh, and I stand up. And now, I am still, also, in my body, and in the desert, and surrounded by other people. I notice that around me and my friends, in joyful and serious play, all I see are white people. But we are on land that is still stewarded by Indigenous people, that was stewarded and labored by enslaved Black and Indigenous people (even in California, a "free" state). My cheeks flush at how *loud* these groups of white climbers are amongst themselves, and how silent they are when they pass me and my friends. No "hellos" or "how are yous." No awareness, it seems, of sharing the space with other people and beings, or of what a bit of friendliness might do to make other climbers feel welcomed in this space. My head throbs with annoyance. My fingers clench, my breath quickens.

I think again about being taught that climbing should be something that is simple, not political, not about anything other than the literal, physical movements of the body as it climbs. I think about how my body feels when I climb, and I think: yes, *joyful*. But I also think this state is a form of dissociation, one that feels simple, but isn't, really. It is pleasurable, maybe necessary when moving through a hard problem, but not meant to be sustained through all the other movements that make up most of our climbing lives: when we are talking to other climbers, when we are simply standing around at the crag, when we are on community discussion boards, when we are hiking to the climb.

In these moments, I need something else, a different language to explain what climbing is.

IN MANY BLACK AMERICAN FOLKTALES, the trickster knows that things are rarely as simple as they seem, and that nothing gets a person tricked more quickly than yearning for things to be simpler than they are. I am searching for a way to talk about climbing that incorporates what I know as a Black and Malay queer, femme climber: what I love about climbing is

that it feels as joyful as dancing. And, just as a boulder is never merely a boulder, dancing is never just dancing, and joy is not simple. To be a climber, I realize, is not to feel less of anything, but more of everything: to feel the joy of dancing on the rock, and to feel the rage of the exclusion of Black, Indigenous, Asian and Latinx people from the outdoors. In order to talk about climbing, I need a language that is as un-simple as the body.

I LEARNED HOW TO meditate from Black and Asian teachers at East Bay Meditation Center and Spirit Rock: Spring Washam, and Lama Rod Owens, and Larry Yang. When I meditate regularly, what I notice first are the spaces between words. I begin to pay more attention to the cadence of my heartbeat and breath in my chest, to the tension of my chronic migraines nestled behind one eye. The language that I use to sort and organize my experiences becomes less foregrounded. And this is a relief. I speak English, and English is a language through which European settlers enacted the murder and displacement of Indigenous peoples in North America, and the enslavement, torture and murder of African people in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade; it is a language of extracting resources from the natural world and turning land, plants, animals and minerals into commodities.

When I meditate, as when I climb, my ability to perceive sensations as they arise, unfiltered and unjudged by the English language and all its history, increases. I expand my ability to listen for my West African, Malaysian, Chinese and North American Indigenous ancestors, as they are expressed inside of my body. I open myself to the sensory data captured by the intricate networks of nerve fibers, blood vessels, small bones, and cells that make up my skin, eyes, ears, tongue, and nose. I feel what it means to exist in this body that connects me, through my great, great, great (and so on) grandparents, to a time before enslavement and colonization. I cannot speak, or write, or even think the right words to capture what it feels like to be in this body, but when I am meditating, I can *experience* what it feels like to be in this body. I guess the language I am searching for is the language of the body: sensation, feeling, movement.

CLIMBING IS A LANGUAGE that the body understands, too. I move with my body over rocks, and sometimes this means I focus only on my breath, my arms, my nail, the rock, and

sometimes it means I focus on my body, and the landscape, and the people, and history. The murder and displacement of Indigenous and Black people over geography and over time, such that white people have come to predominate on Native land, was as violent as the forces that changed earth to magma to stone to boulders. I feel the absence of my siblings in my body: my heart races, my palms sweat, my eyes narrow. This, too, is the immediate present; this, too is embodiment; this too, is climbing. To *not* feel the absence of many Indigenous and Black people from the deserts, the gorges, the mountains, and the gyms in the city is also to be in a *type of body*—a numb body, a closed body, a body that is being tricked by its yearning for things to be simple.

Climbing teaches us how to be in our bodies through the joy of movement, and it also teaches us how to tolerate and learn from discomfort and pain. If I keep falling from a climb, it means I do not understand it yet: I haven't learned to read it correctly; I haven't learned how to be in relationship with it. Maybe I don't have the skills with which to climb it, or maybe I'm not strong enough. I can feel anger, irritation, frustration, and annoyance in response. But if I want to climb, it's my body and my approach that will need to change. The rock itself is not the problem. Indigenous and Black people, and other people of color, who are calling for change in the climbing community and in the country, are not the problem.

ON THIS BOULDER in Serrano and Shoshone land, I empty my mind of any *pures* and *simples* and *efficients* and *hards*. I feel playful and afraid and vulnerable, which is to say that I allow my body to feel the complexity of being in a place from which people who look like me have been removed. I look at the rock. The indent I saw earlier is small. I will try to hold it, but I don't assume that I can. I learn to read what's there, not what I want to be there.

My body and my ancestors' bodies have broken along the fault lines of intergenerational trauma, have carried grief and survived seismic shifts in the world. Me and my people, like the earth, are tricksters, saying, "I am not who you see; I am who I am." This is what I love about climbing. It is about the body, which is political, which is joyful, and challenging, and rageful, and so soft, and so tricky. I begin to dance.

—Endria Richardson,
Ohlone land, Oakland, California