

## El Capitan as a Site for Male Healing from Trauma in Jeff Long's *The Wall* and Tommy Caldwell's *The Push*

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### Abstract

Nature and mountains are often represented as places of healing in literature and the media, especially for white, healthy, and middleclass men. However, discussions on nature and gender in relation to trauma are rare, and a specific discussion on the representation of male mountain climbers' traumas is missing. In this article, we are interested in how nature, particularly the famous mountain El Capitan, is represented in Jeff Long's novel *The Wall* (2006) and Tommy Caldwell's memoir *The Push* (2017) as a specific spatial location of healing for male rock climbers, who at the same time are both victims of traumatic events and partially responsible for the development of those events. More specifically, this article places ecofeminist and ecological masculinities scholarship in dialog with trauma studies and analyzes these texts with the aim of showing how representations of trauma relate to those of nature and masculinity. In this analysis, questions of how certain aspects of ecological and hegemonic masculinities relate to representing trauma, nature, and masculinity are central, as are issues of perpetrator trauma and the non-generic character of traumatic experience. Ultimately, we show how representations of nature, trauma, and masculinities in the primary texts converge and reflect a plurality of gendered responses to trauma and healing in nature.

**Keywords:** El Capitan, nature, trauma, masculinity, Jeff Long, Tommy Caldwell.

### Resumen

La naturaleza y las montañas se presentan a menudo como lugares de curación en la literatura y en los medios de comunicación, especialmente para los hombres blancos, sanos y de clase media. Sin embargo, las discusiones sobre la naturaleza y el género en relación con el trauma son escasas, y falta una discusión específica sobre la representación de los traumas masculinos de los montañistas. En este artículo, estamos interesados en cómo la naturaleza, particularmente la famosa montaña El Capitán, está representada en la novela *The Wall* (2006) de Jeff Long y en la memoria *The Push* (2017) de Tommy Caldwell como una ubicación espacial específica de curación para escaladores masculinos, quienes son simultáneamente víctimas de eventos traumáticos y parcialmente responsables del desarrollo de esos eventos. Más específicamente, este artículo coloca en un diálogo el ecofeminismo y las masculinidades ecológicas con estudios de trauma, y analiza estos textos mostrando cómo las representaciones del trauma se relacionan con las de la naturaleza y la masculinidad. En este análisis, las preguntas sobre cómo ciertos aspectos de las masculinidades ecológicas y hegemónicas se relacionan con la representación del trauma, la naturaleza y la masculinidad son fundamentales, como lo son las cuestiones del trauma del perpetrador y el carácter no genérico de la experiencia traumática. En última instancia, mostramos cómo las representaciones de la naturaleza, el trauma y las masculinidades en los textos primarios convergen y reflejan una pluralidad de respuestas de género al trauma y la curación en la naturaleza.

*Palabras clave:* El Capitán, naturaleza, trauma, masculinidad, Jeff Long, Tommy Caldwell.

Nature is often imagined and represented as a place of healing where people can 'get away from it all' and enhance their psychological wellbeing. These representations are also widely present in climbing and wilderness narratives that show people healing from their troubled pasts in nature. Examples of this include climbing novels such as Clinton McKinzie's *The Edge of Justice* and James Salter's *Solo Faces*, and nonfiction like Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*. In popular media imaginings, nature even has the power to heal people suffering from trauma by exposing them to evocative landscapes and empowering them through physical stress to a sense of accomplishment (Brandon). Those for whom this healing is available and who benefit from it in these representations, however, do not represent just any generic segment of the population, but are strikingly often white, athletic, relatively affluent and implicitly heterosexual males. As Stacy Alaimo in *Bodily Natures* notes, posing "nature as a place to escape to, as a place of psychic healing or transcendent moments," objectifies that nature as well as the "working-class bodies" whose labor enables that healing (34). Mei Mei Evans, for her part, has shown that "constructions of nature" only really "empower [...] heterosexual white men" (181, 191), the implication here being that the epistemic questions of environmental justice, including race, class, and gender and even subjectivity, are significant in this context.

Paradoxically, however, while risky activities in nature such as climbing may be empowering after traumatic experiences, they also have another close relationship to trauma as they expose the participant to potentially traumatizing circumstances. The definition of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) by the American Psychiatric Association in their *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edition (DSM-5), reads "Exposure to actual or threatened death" or "serious injury" in terms of "experiencing the traumatic event(s)" or "[w]itnessing, in person, the event(s) as it occurred to others" (271). Yet, as psychologist Laura Brown indicates, it is not always automatically apparent what represents a threatened death or serious injury: neither adventure sport participants themselves nor the audiences witnessing these events experience them as traumatic. Instead, while risking their lives practitioners describe their experiences as "exhilarating" (*Cultural* 96). Indeed, anthropologists Alan Abramson and Robert Fletcher say about rock climbers that "their practice routinely embodies ... the sense that death as well as pleasure is a standard possible outcome of each and every move" of climbing (4) and view the practice as a form of "deep eco-play." "Deep play," originally a concept of utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham, in anthropologist Clifford Geertz's usage refers to playing a game "in which the stakes are so high that it is [...] irrational for men to engage in it at all" (87). Further, as psychologist Erik Monasterio has shown, the reason that adventure sports participants find their activity so "rewarding" often relates to a feeling of "connectedness to nature and respect for the natural environment" ("The Risks"). Therefore, overly simplistic interpretations of what constitutes a traumatic event and the participants' underlying motivations, or, indeed, the

narrative representations of said events and motivations, inevitably fail in addressing this complex issue.

The convergence of (some, binary) masculinities with healing and empowerment in nature through adventure sports, on the one hand, and the intrinsic relationship between such activities and PTSD, on the other, is a fruitful starting-point for asking how nature, masculinity, and trauma together influence how each in turn is represented. In this article, we take two popular American books on trauma and mountain climbing, Jeff Long's horror novel *The Wall* (2006) and Tommy Caldwell's memoir *The Push* (2017) as our primary texts, and aim to show how going out in nature and climbing mountains is represented as a gendered practice of healing, and how one specific mountain, El Capitan (Tutocanula in Miwok), is framed both as a site of male empowerment from traumatic experiences as well as a site for reliving perpetrator trauma (meaning, the trauma that perpetrators of pernicious acts may experience). In examining how hegemonic and ecological masculinities relate to these representations, we refer to R.W. Connell's definition of hegemonic masculinity as a an idealized and unrealistic, politically oppressive notion of what it means to be a man, and complement that with recent work by Martin Hultman and Paul Pulé, and Sherilyn MacGregor and Nicole Seymour on ecological masculinities. In our analysis, we combine this recently emerging ecological masculinities scholarship with ecofeminist research and contemporary literary trauma studies. Representations exist in our primary texts of both hegemonic hypermasculinities (mainly in *The Wall*) and attempts to at least partially deconstruct them (mainly in *The Push*). Although the rocky wall of El Capitan in Long's novel is often depicted in ecophobic terms, Simon Estok's appellation for "irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world" (208), *The Push* manages to contrast that viewpoint with one of *geophilic* affection that "recognizes matter's promiscuous desire to affiliate with other forms of matter" (Cohen 27), in this case a rock climber's affection for the rocks he climbs. We argue that in *The Wall* and *The Push* representations of nature, trauma, and masculinities converge and reflect a plurality of gendered, at times hegemonic and at other times more ecological, masculine responses to trauma and healing in nature. Our argument thus challenges monolithic conceptions of trauma and masculinities, and so contributes to a refiguring of nature and masculinities in mountain climbing narratives.

### **"If I Fell to My Death, at Least the Pain Would Be Gone": Trauma, Place, and Gender**

*The Wall* and *The Push* are part of the mountaineering and climbing book genre but represent different literary categories, the former being a novel and the latter a memoir. We chose these two works in large parts because they both have at their center the issues of unresolved trauma, masculinity, and the same spatial location, El Capitan. In other words, they address the same concerns and consequently not only welcome an examination across genres, but can therefore also inform a discussion that entails all three issues at once.

*The Wall* and *The Push* are trauma narratives in that they deal with traumatic events and responses to such experiences. True to the middlebrow mountaineering and

climbing book genre, however, they do not exhibit the experimental literary techniques, postmodernist aesthetics, and political dimensions of paradigmatic trauma narratives such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*. Nevertheless, in *The Trauma Question*, trauma scholar Roger Luckhurst has recognized also popular fiction as a significant place for representing trauma. Moreover, as Hubert Zapf notes in *Literature as Cultural Ecology*, trauma is not only "central to the human experience," but literature, being capable of a "self-reflexive staging of complex dynamical life processes," also "has a special sensitivity and affinity to trauma" (207). Although Zapf focuses on fictional literature, he also acknowledges that "autobiographical narratives of trauma victims" can become important sources of "literary treatments" (210). Although we must be cognizant of the genre differences in analyzing a work of fictional literature, together with a memoir, the two books provide a rare synchronicity of different types of trauma in relation to gender and nature. As Zapf asserts, trauma narratives can serve as the locus for investigating how the human and the nonhuman are intertwined, both as agents and victims of trauma and therefore sharing an "agency" in a "continuity of trauma and victimization" (34). Indeed, in both *The Wall* and *The Push*, the roles of human and nonhuman actors as "victims" and "perpetrators" of trauma are volatile. In addition, says Michelle Balaev in *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels*, "the protagonist's culture, social class, nation, gender, ethnicity, family, and relation to a particular place" (38) are all contingent on their subjective experiences of potentially traumatic events. Therefore, the protagonists' gender, race, and class as well as the physical location are important here.

In both *The Wall* and *The Push* the male protagonists and their relation to trauma are ambivalent; they are white, successful males who willingly have put themselves in positions to experience traumatic events, yet those very characteristics expose them to a different type of experience of trauma than individuals from less privileged groups. As Brown has shown, "[p]ressure on men to be manly [...] can create high risks for behaviors that lead to trauma exposure, such as [...] reckless sporting activities" (*Cultural* 133). Although traumatic events themselves may not be gendered, "scripts and schemata about gender roles" (132) are inevitably part of the response to trauma. As Judith Butler has discussed, such scripts can work as "reiteration[s]" of norms that regulate gendered practices and "binarisms" (Butler, *Bodies* 42) and thus function as a "regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality" (Butler, *Gender* 42). Because men, in order to conform to the heteronormative ideals of hegemonic masculinity (Connell), are expected to be tough and not show weakness, this trauma of the privileged undoubtedly has different characteristics than trauma experienced by those less privileged. Further, the protagonists are implicated in the etiology of their own trauma when they put themselves in harm's way. They are also implicitly involved in causing damage to the natural environment through a practice of altering the rock they climb on and all the associated damage that an excessively consumerist and affluent Western lifestyle produces. Long and Caldwell's narratives also represent similar masculine responses to trauma in that the protagonists do not actively seek help from the psychiatric profession for their trauma but instead turn to the

mountain El Capitan for their “counseling.” Brown notes that masculine norms informed by misogyny may not only aggravate men’s difficulties but also hinder their ability to seek help (*Cultural* 133), and in our primary texts the avoidance of professional help can be read to both express a traditional Western masculinity and an implicit critique of the psychiatric profession.

*The Wall* is a horror novel that has male friendship, rock climbing, and the famous 3000-ft granite “big wall” formation of El Capitan in Yosemite National Park at its center. As a genre, horror fiction is essentially a “representation of what terrifies and disgusts” (Wisker 5). Significantly for our discussion, “[f]eminist critiques of horror” may reveal the “cultural constructions” that contribute to women’s “constricted roles” and thus support their dismantling (Wisker 32). Aside from its horror elements, it is only incrementally revealed in *The Wall* that trauma will also play a major role in the development of the events. Trauma and horror also feature as topics of climbing novels elsewhere. *The Ice Soldier* by Paul Watkins, for example, recounts a traumatic experience in the mountains in WWII and traces a war veteran’s attempt to cope with that trauma through a journey back into the mountains. Michelle Paver’s *Thin Air*, on the other hand, is a mountaineering ghost story set in the post-WWI Himalayas where a group of mountaineers slowly unravel the traumatic past of the previous expedition to the area, and conjure past ghosts to the present.

*The Wall* narrates a story of two late middleage affluent white males, Hugh Glass and Lewis Cole who, “like old warriors [...] were returning to their battleground” (38) in an attempt to relive past glory on the walls of El Capitan. They frame this attempt in masculinist terms as a “little Viagra for the soul” (57). Hugh, the main character of the novel, is a geologist at British Petroleum, unknown at the writing of the novel for the 2010 catastrophic Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Hugh is also the namesake of the nineteenth century frontiersman and later eponymous hero of the 2015 film *The Revenant*, and his last name, “Glass,” can be read as Long’s signaling Hugh’s about-to-be-unraveling, fragile masculinity. His partner Lewis is described as “the Great Ape” (34) who, in preparation for their climb, has resorted to “testosterone shots” to gain muscle (39). As the novel progresses, they are joined by Augustine, a SAR (search and rescue) climber employed by Yosemite National Park (Ahwahne in Miwok) and referred to as “Tarzan” (44). They are to attempt to rescue a group of female climbers. As Hugh asserts, these “Trojan Women” (102) have attempted to climb a new route on the wall and consequently “reached too far” (103), or, “flown too close to the sun” (113). Gradually, it is revealed that both Hugh and Augustine suffer from a past of perpetrator trauma where they have abandoned their partners to die (Hugh his wife in the desert and Augustine his climbing partners in the mountains).

*The Push*, classified by its publisher as the memoir of professional mountain and rock climber Tommy Caldwell, has many characteristics of a classic autobiography. It follows the author’s journey through childhood to later adversity and eventual triumph and fame in a rather conventional way, but it also makes use of certain literary devices such as occasional unchronological narration, and focuses on the intimate emotions of its

protagonist.<sup>1</sup> Because of the inherently close relationship between trauma and adventure sports, it is not surprising that *The Push* is not an outlier in the genre of real-life mountain climbing narratives. Exposure to and suffering from trauma have been frequently and famously brought to the limelight, from such bestsellers as Joe Simpson's book *Touching the Void* that describes Simpson's arduous and traumatic self rescue and his climbing partner's perpetrator status in the event, to Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* that relates the events and aftershock of the infamous 1996 Everest disaster that led to the demise of eight mountaineers. Male mountaineers' trauma narratives have also been successfully commodified by professional male climbers. A recent example of this is Cory Richards who was featured in Devon O'Neil's *Outside Online* article "To Get to the Summit Cory Richards Had to Lose It All." The article reiterates the clichéd conception of a "tough-guy mountaineering culture" that is "hypermasculine" and intolerant of acknowledging any effect of being exposed to traumatic events and being "macho—chest pounding and high fiving and fist bumping" (O'Neil).

The storyline in *The Push* is one of a socially awkward and frail boy growing into adulthood and athletic prowess in the shadow of a hypermasculine bodybuilder and outdoorsman father. The narrative arc goes through three traumatic events. The first, and arguably most significant, traumatic event is when Tommy, along with his then-fiancee, Beth Rodden, and two other climbers are kidnapped and taken hostage by Islamic militants on a climbing trip to Kyrgyzstan. Tommy and his companions experience several trying days and witness violence, but in the end manage to escape when Tommy pushes one of the captors off a cliff, thinking they are leaving him for dead. Years pass before he discovers that their abductor survived the fall, but the traumatic experience has already affected his psychological wellbeing. The second trauma he experiences in the book is losing his left index finger, a crucial "tool" for a professional rock climber, in a table saw accident. These traumatic incidents, especially the kidnapping, leave seemingly permanent scars on the relationship between Tommy and Beth: Although they marry after the traumatic Kyrgyzstan incident, they later divorce. The divorce, the third traumatic event in *The Push*, leaves Tommy reeling, and seeking to self-medicate on the wall:

If I allowed myself to venture onto those walls unroped, I would enter a utopia, ultimate absorption in the thing I loved most, total commitment in a world devoid of heartbreak. And if I fell to my death, at least the pain would be gone, too [...] Climbing was my life. It had helped me through hard times [...] I also knew that hard physical labor always seemed to be my best therapy. (Caldwell 178-179)

Whereas in *The Push*, the protagonist heals from his trauma, gaining both spiritual happiness and material wellbeing as a result of his long-term and close connection with El Capitan, in *The Wall* the protagonists' masculine hubris (re)victimizes them.

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<sup>1</sup> We refer to Caldwell by his surname when we draw attention to him as author of the memoir and by his given name, Tommy, when explaining his position within the book.

## Pluralities of Traumas

Trauma is specific, not generic: It “does not happen to a generic human being” (Brown, *Cultural* 7), nor is it initiated by a generic being, human or otherwise. The main protagonists in *The Wall* and *The Push* are mountain climbers. This group, according to Monasterio, Yassar Alamri, and Omer Mei-Dan, exhibit “significant temperament and character differences” compared to “a normative population sample” (218). Trauma is both experienced and represented differently depending on the different identity groups involved in the process. In this, we draw on Michelle Balaev’s “pluralistic model” (31) of understanding trauma, that is, the notion that there are a variety of trauma responses instead of a single “official” one. Trauma is also not gender-neutral: as Brown points out, it “is a feminizing event; trauma renders its targets weak, helpless, confused, and emotional, all characteristics that are associated with the target group of femininity” (*Cultural* 44). The specificity and plurality of trauma is evident in how it is represented in *The Wall*. First, the very ontology of trauma is made light of by labeling it as something unserious. In the masculine climber jargon of the novel, trauma is described as merely another “epic,” as something that goes into climbing’s “hall of fame” despite of, or rather *because* of, “the death of partners, the loss of toes and fingers, madness, terrible privations, the whole nine yards” (190). Second, the novel also paints a picture of a world where reactions to a traumatic event are expected to be starkly different whether one identifies as male or female: when Cuba, one of the “Trojan women,” at the moment of her would-be-rescuers reaching her, first emits “the hoarse cry of a carrion bird” (261) and is moments later “screaming like a banshee” (265), Hugh understands her reaction. After all, she has just spent days clutching on to her friend Andie’s dead body whose eyes the “birds had taken” (265). However, when Augustine reacts violently and apparently irrationally to finding his ex-lover like this, Hugh first thinks he has “no excuse” (267) to act in such manner. Only grudgingly does Hugh acknowledge that “his shattered faith and the sight of his lover turned into that horror” perhaps after all “counted” (267) as a stressful enough event.

Among the diagnostic criteria for PTSD, the *DSM-V* lists, for example, “exposure to war,” “being kidnapped, being taken hostage, terrorist attack,” and “observing threatened or serious injury” or “unnatural death” (274). However, in *The Push*, the narrator implies that the memories of their kidnapping and witnessing of extreme violence “haunt” only his then-fiancee Beth. Caldwell writes that it is only because her “parents figured we needed professional help” that they eventually go see a psychologist (108). Tommy, however, is initially “startled and stunned” when they are compared to “rape victims” by the psychologist. Only later does he understand that the psychologist treated them as trauma victims (108). Indeed, *The Push* implies that only the third significant traumatic event of his life, namely his wife Beth leaving him, seems to “push” him over the edge, truly into the territory of trauma. Losing his finger, he admits to feelings of “psychological trauma” (124) but only after his divorce, when staying in Yosemite in the shadow of El Capitan, does he admit suffering “*from a tornado of depression*” and “*nightmares [...] of dying*” (160). Significantly, he himself makes the connection between his spatial location

and psychological state: “*What brings you to a place where you dream of your own death?*” (160). Caldwell constructs a narrative of healing: Tommy’s decision to battle his trauma by dedicating his athletic life to being the first to climb the “Dawn Wall”<sup>2</sup> of El Capitan can be seen as a symbolic act of rising (or, climbing) up from the psychological ashes of a dark, feminine, and earthy trauma into a light, masculine, and transcendent athletic achievement.

Aside from the effect that trauma victims’ gender has on their traumatic experience in *The Wall* and *The Push*, their dual positions as both perpetrators and victims of trauma are significant textual elements in the narratives. In *The Push*, Tommy is partially accountable for his divorce, and, albeit unwittingly, he certainly cuts off his finger himself. The most striking and narratively dramatic instance of traumatization, however, is undoubtedly when he, as a kidnapping victim, pushes one of their assailants off a cliff and for many years from that moment on thinks of himself as a killer. Just as with Hugh in *The Wall*, who suffers from perpetrator trauma because of his role in his wife’s death, the related symptoms, as mentioned by the *DSM-V*, of “[r]eckless or self-destructive behavior” (272), are acutely felt by the protagonist in *The Push*, as is evidenced by his anguished seeking of solace in dangerous climbing. Throughout *The Wall*, Augustine and Hugh suffer not only from traumatic experiences in the mountains, but also from their own roles as initiators of those events. While Augustine’s role in the past of leaving his friends to die in the mountains is that of an unintentional perpetrator, it is hinted throughout the novel and finally revealed at its end that Hugh in fact not only “lost” his wife Annie in the desert, but intentionally abandoned, that is, killed her. In the novel, Hugh’s dual role as victim and perpetrator reaches its apex as nature seemingly conflates the victims in his traumatized mind, when he first searches for and then finds his friend and climbing partner Lewis hanging from ropes on the wall:

It had been like this in the desert as he [Hugh] trekked out from Annie [...] step by step calculating his exit from madness [...] He didn’t like the wide-eyed surprise on Lewis’s face. It made him look foolish. And the snow packing his mouth brought back Hugh’s nightmare of Annie with the sand pouring from her throat. He put his back to the abyss. They were gone. (Long 352-353)

Transferring victim status onto perpetrators of violence has historically been in the interest of institutions (such as the US military) that rely on their members to perform acts of violence (Gibbs 161), and the study of perpetrator trauma has therefore understandably been “a neglected area of literary trauma studies” (Rodi-Risberg, “Problems” 118). Alan Gibbs has stressed the importance of a critical study of perpetrator trauma. He has emphasized that although “the projection of sufferer or victim status” to those who themselves have caused trauma has often implied an attempt at “the minimising of responsibility for one’s actions” (161), just acknowledging and studying the phenomenon does not absolve perpetrators of guilt (168). As Marinella Rodi-Risberg stresses, there are “ethical as well as political implications” when analyzing representations of trauma (“Problems” 110), and in analyzing the portrayals of white

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<sup>2</sup> A feature film documenting the climb, *The Dawn Wall*, directed by Josh Lowell and produced by the Red Bull Media House in association with Sender Films, was released in 2017.

athletic males and their perpetrator trauma it is crucial to consider them in relation to Gibbs's assertion that women and men suffer differently from perpetrator trauma because women are already "doubly victimized" (191) on account of their oppressed position in society.

In *The Wall*, the focalization is throughout from Hugh's point of view, and the reader is initially led to feel sympathy for him. Like Gibbs and Rodi-Risberg above, Hubert Zapf has problematized the "ethical relevance" (209) of literary trauma narratives, especially when they are concerned with focalization from the perpetrator's viewpoint: discussing Torquato Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* and the scene where the male protagonist Tancred cuts a wound in a tree (who is in fact his lover Clorinda whom he has accidentally killed), Zapf notes that what "appears ethically relevant in this scene is that even though the perspective is that of the agent of traumatization, the crusading [male] knight, the narrative attention and the reader's empathy are drawn to the fate and voice of the [female] victim" (214). Rodi-Risberg indicates that this scene adds a material element to trauma and is suggestive of male violence against women and nature ("Writing" 31, 188). Trauma is caused simultaneously to the natural world which "becomes a metamorphic other of the female heroine" and to Clorinda (Zapf 214). As Alaimo reminds us, material nature "is never merely an external place but always the very substance of our selves and others" (158), and the confluence of trauma, gender, and nature described here is also evident in *The Wall*. Although Hugh's perspective is prioritized and his power often made to seem somehow "natural," the novel implies that this has dire consequences. From the beginning of the novel Hugh and Lewis are introduced to the reader in ways designed to make them feel sympathetic. As the narrative evolves, however, and the reader is led through Hugh's interior soliloquy of his deteriorating marriage and his extreme reaction to it, the reader's sympathy shifts to his wife, and Hugh is made responsible for his actions.

In the climax of the novel, while Hugh has been able to lead Augustine and Cuba up and off the wall, he is left face to face with Cuba, who is throughout the novel described by Augustine as a "witch." The reader is led to believe that this is perhaps only a sign of a misogynistic attitude towards a non-white, possibly non-heterosexual, and capable woman. However, problematically, at the novel's end, the narrator suggests that Cuba indeed may be a "witch." Throughout the novel, she has been described as an "other" with the skin color of either "smoked meat" or "dark tea" (Long 257) as compared to the white, athletic males all around her. In the end, she symbolically assumes the role of the magical and vengeful female out for her "pound of flesh" (286), a strangely Shakespearean "weird sister" (336), and simultaneously a personification of "Mother Nature", who in the end slaps down the hubristic male from off her. The novel ends with Hugh in free fall down the wall after Cuba has cut through his rope. Although horror fiction often aims to (re)establish order, when that order is inherently unethical, a "radical horror writer" may eschew tradition (Wisker 10). Even though Long may not be a politically radical author, this "harmony without restoration of the status quo" (Wisker 36) can be read as an implicitly feminist critique of misogyny. Like the ghost of Colonel Chabert, the eponymous character in Balzac's 1832 novel, as discussed by Cathy Caruth, "does not return [...]"

precisely as a human being claiming his rights but as a cry for humanity emanating from someone not yet recognized as human” (Caruth 25), Annie emanates as a spectre in the form of Cuba and claims, finally, to be heard as a victim. It should be noted that the trope of the ghost was also used in Paver’s mountaineering novel *Thin Air*, where the character of Arthur Ward, though male, functions in a similar role as Cuba. The ghost trope has been traced to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Gibbs notes how her usage of the “trauma as haunting [...] has been excessively and sometimes inappropriately borrowed by later trauma writers seeking similar effects” (76). In this sense, *The Wall* (and *Thin Air*) tread waters familiar from other trauma narratives, although the political function of the ghost is different in *The Wall* in that the ghost represents a female victim of male violence.

Significantly, while the *DSM-V* lists “[p]ersistent, distorted cognitions about the cause or consequences of the traumatic event(s) that lead the individual to blame himself/herself or others” and related feelings of “guilt, or shame” (272) as symptoms of PTSD, only Hugh’s cognitions have been distorted, as he has until the end not been able to face what he did to his wife. Although Hugh had sought to heal himself from his perpetrator trauma on the wall, it is only Augustine, the younger and (more) innocent of the two who in the end receives any healing from nature: only he “looked cleansed. Reborn” (373) near the end of their ordeal, while Hugh was still incapable of either remorse or redemption.

### Pluralities of Natures

We have so far mainly addressed the representation of the human element of trauma. Nature, or “the wall” and its multispecies community, is depicted in our primary texts not only as a victim of arguably traumatic human actions, but also as both an agent of healing and a source of traumatization. El Capitan is the spatial location of events, and in both books additionally reflects white masculine viewpoints of nature as at times benevolent and at other times malevolent. As Balaev has shown, representations of nature in American trauma fiction rely on the construction of an “environmental ethos” that “forms a geographically specific contextual factor of place,” and this construction extends to “the representational contingencies of trauma, memory, and the self” (xii). In this light, the “wall” of El Capitan produces in the protagonists of Long’s and Caldwell’s books, in Balaev’s terms, “a physical arena where the individual engages the self and the past” (63), and where physical “interactions with the landscape” allow the protagonists to work through their respective traumas (28). As Thom van Dooren, Eben Kirksey, and Ursula Münster point out, “human lives and ways of life cannot take place and be described in isolation” (2), but we must consider them as contingent upon each other. As with the pluralities of trauma, there are also various modes of representing nature in Caldwell and Long’s books, for instance, in terms of the multispecies natural “entanglements” (van Dooren et al. 2), that is, the coeval agencies of human and nonhuman actors, involved. In *The Push*, the existence of nonhuman agents, apart from the wall itself, is curiously neglected, even though Yosemite Valley is rich in fauna. In *The Wall*, however, there are a rich variety of nonhuman agents that act on the novel’s human protagonists: frogs and

mice chew the climbers' ropes, and later, as there is a forest fire raging beneath the wall, Hugh and Lewis behold a "whole food chain" that "unfolded" beneath them as "bats," "swallows, swifts, jays, and nutcrackers flocked upward" (173) in an attempt to escape the flames.

The forest fire, which functions as the dramatic culmination of the novel's midpoint, is started by a traumatized Vietnam war veteran, Joshua. He is accused by Hugh and Lewis of stealing the dead body of one of the fallen women, "the sick bastard" (Long 87). Joshua is a thoroughly "other" man likened to an animal "living in caves and animal dens, eating tourist leftovers and downed game, foraging for nuts and berries" (49). He is thus the antithesis of the hypermasculine big wall climber protagonists. As the forest fire develops, more and more animals escape it up the wall onto the same rocky ledge where the climbers are. As they do, they constitute a tacitly acknowledged multispecies community.

It was a miserable day. The brown pall obscured the sun. More animals climbed onto the ledge. The species now included lizards, mice, and a scorched squirrel. They tried to give the squirrel some water, but the thing acted rabid. The fire had driven it insane. When it tried to bite them, Lewis kicked it over the edge, and then anguished about killing a fellow survivor. (Long 177)

The squirrel is both an acute foreshadowing of the fate awaiting Hugh as well as a poignant reference to the now seemingly chronic and worsening forest fire situation in California. This section of Long's novel apparently anticipates the dire effects to the multispecies community that unmitigated climate change causes.

In *The Wall*, Nature, and "the wall," especially, while sometimes represented in terms of affection, is at other times seen to take on an agency of its own. It is cast in the role of a willful, malevolent actor intent on causing traumatic events. The killing of the squirrel notwithstanding, nonhuman animals are generally depicted sympathetically, especially as compared to the looming presence of the wall of El Capitan. El Capitan is both the "arena" where the male climbers attempt to actualize their masculinity and heal from their traumas as well as the literal "wall" standing in the way of their doing so. In *The Push*, on the other hand, the wall enables the abjection, the pushing away, of the narrator/protagonist's trauma and thus acts as an agent of healing. Hubert Zapf, discussing Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, describes the novel as dealing with the tensions "between biophobic and biophilic energies" (199), and similar tensions can be found between the depictions of the wall in our primary texts. In *The Wall*, El Capitan is in Hugh's guilt-ridden and slowly deteriorating mind seen in paranoid terms as a semi-conscious "conspiracy of nature" literally "hunting them" (313). Estok has offered his concept of ecophobia as a more fruitful concept than those of biophilia (Kellert and Wilson) and biophobia (Ulrich) because ecophobia enables more effectively linking fear and hatred of nature with "homophobia and racism and sexism" (Estok 208), seeing that they all rely on the ontology of white heterosexual masculinity being above the feminized terrain of nature. Such connections are indeed evident in *The Wall*, where El Capitan is at turns described as a "monstrosity" out for "prey" (82, 84) or, indeed even "the devil" (152) "eating them alive" (363). Although Hugh recognizes the wall as "alive" and "abound[ing]

with energy and life forces” (207, 210), from the novel’s outset he rejects the paternalistic notion of El Capitan and nature as female: “People talked about Mother Nature. Mother, hell. One false move and you ended up in its belly” (17). For Hugh, El Capitan is something that is simultaneously (monstrously) inhuman and (anthropomorphically) agentic.

In *The Push*, the perspective is more biophilic, even geophilic (Cohen). For Tommy, El Capitan seems feminine and reminiscent of both a female lover and a tender Mother Earth:

After all these years the view of the wall above still leaves me breathless. I lay my hand on the cool stone and run my fingers along its surface. Then I lay my cheek on the wall and turn my eyes skyward, a ritual I have performed hundreds of times, paying homage to creation. I close my eyes and thank El Capitan for being here. Then I ask her to keep me safe through this journey. (Caldwell 293)

Tommy even supposes that his second wife Becca thinks of El Capitan as essentially his “mistress” (237). Contrary to some of the representations of the exaggerated masculinity of rock climbing in *The Wall*, Tommy is adamant that the wall is not something to battle against or conquer; rather, climbing it requires, “working with it, not against, the rock” (Caldwell 240). Hugo Reinert’s discussion of the Sámi people’s reverence of certain charismatic large rocks referred to as *Stállu* shows how stones have in some cultures been “recognized as powerful entities—capable not just of transacting with humans but of forming bonds and entering relations, gifting petitioners with luck and material benefits in return for appropriate offerings” (97). The offerings gifted and received in our primary texts vary dramatically. Reinert discusses how “lifelong relations with particular stones” (97) can be beneficial to the human half of the bargain, which is the case with Tommy in *The Push* because of his longstanding “relationship” with El Capitan. For Hugh, Lewis, and Augustine such rewards are not forthcoming, and in the end El Capitan “punishes” the men for their arrogance: Augustine narrowly escapes with his life, but is (re)traumatized, after “turning to stone and ice, dissolving into mist [...] like a myth where humans petrified or turned into trees or animals” (343).

### Pluralities of Masculinities

The protagonists’ white athletic masculinity influences both how they see nature and how traumatic events that take place therein affect them. This identity category, however, while seemingly singular, is in truth an “unavoidably complex and pluralised” one (Hultman and Pulé 2). Past trauma studies has focused so extensively on (certain) male responses to trauma that Brown has criticized the field for highlighting the experiences of “white, young-able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men” at the expense of excluding the experiences of those outside those categories (“Not Outside” 101). Critique of masculinist and ableist culture also resonates with recent interdisciplinary work on disability studies and environmentalism. Sarah Jaquette Ray indicates that “adventure culture’s investments are not just racial, gendered, elitist, or imperialist; they fundamentally hinge on the fit body,” and so the emphasis on fitness disregards “the category of disability” against which the risking, adventuring body is

defined (33, 36). Paradoxically, Ray suggests that adventuring bodies in fact risk disability due to their desired “environmental transcendence requir[ing] this corporeal experience” (36). Elizabeth A. Wheeler has voiced a similar critique of the notion that “the acquisition of ecological consciousness” through mountaineering requires a fit and able, usually male and heterosexual body and thus places “some people as closer to nature than others” (553).

In critical research on human-nonhuman relations men have traditionally been conspicuously absent to the point of leaving them “categorically unmarked” (MacGregor and Seymour 10). This is despite Richard Twine’s assertion that hegemonic masculinity is deeply rooted in a “dominating and alienated relation to nature” (1). Emerging work on ecological masculinities has therefore taken on board the critical tools of ecofeminist work and started to both critically investigate “masculinities as plural” (MacGregor and Seymour 11) and outline ways for them to challenge and dismantle hegemonic assumptions (Hultman and Pulé).

Ecofeminist Greta Gaard has insisted that environmental justice aspects are vital to the deconstruction of hegemonic masculinities (*Critical*), and offered non-damaging outdoor practices such as cycling and gardening (“Toward”) as means that could facilitate men “to stand with—rather than on top of” those oppressed (*Critical* 161). Although sport has often been seen as a field that reifies hegemonic masculinity and its “celebration of danger, risk and competition,” sociologist Victoria Robinson, who has studied masculinities and rock climbing, is critical of such blanket statements (106). She argues that the willingness to practice a risky sport like rock climbing can also be the result of wanting to “resist and transform” established masculine praxes (161). Therefore, there are ethico-political advantages in a critical study of rock-climbing masculinities, especially as feminist trauma scholar Jennifer Griffiths has shown that a(nother) way for trauma studies to be politically relevant is to emphasize trauma’s relation to “masculinity itself” (182) and gender’s relation to power.

Even further ethical implications of studying representations of trauma emerge when the objects of study are implicated in the birth of the traumatic events. After all, the male rock climbers in our study choose to do things and go to places where traumatic events are likely to occur. In a twist on the misogynist justification of rape (i.e., gendering public places as male and excluding women from them by excusing rape and saying that the victim “should not have walked there, drunk, in that bad neighborhood at night and dressed like that, etc.”), we might say that all of the (male) trauma victims in *The Wall* and *The Push* are at least partially “to blame” for their being victimized. Unlike, for example, soldiers suffering from PTSD who, often, did not choose to go to places where traumatic events are likely to happen, these rock climbers willingly put themselves in harm’s way. Moreover, despite waxing lyrically about the beauty of the pristine mountain landscapes, their very presence in that environment arguably contributes to the destruction of not only that specific place, but to the environmental catastrophe at large (Wörsching).

Representations of masculinities in the primary texts are never simple and static but contestable and volatile, consisting both of hegemonic hypermasculinities and efforts at deconstructing these. For example, although Hugh is depicted in increasingly

unflattering terms as the narrative in *The Wall* develops and his role in his wife's death is elucidated, this portrayal is also accompanied by the narrative voice becoming more critical. Moreover, although Caldwell expresses caring and equitable ideas in his memoir, there is also an implicit understanding that for being a successful professional athlete, his wife's nearly unquestioning support is expected.

The lack of gender equity in *The Wall* is conspicuous, and throughout the novel, the male climbers' attitudes to women are characterized by misogyny. Hugh and Augustine are portrayed thinking that the "Trojan women" are belongings of the men (151). Augustine's interior soliloquy depicts the women as having "trespassed beyond some border" even though "they must have known they didn't belong here" (216). He even considers the women's climbing ambitions as merely wanting "to show the world how big their balls were" (220). Moreover, Augustine manages to remarkably associate his own trauma with El Capitan by describing the route of the "Trojan women" on it as "an open wound" (213). "Wound", the literal meaning of trauma, here acts as a powerful allegory of the men's desperate journey up the wall while trying to stay independent, masculine men against the feminizing effect of being trauma victims. For Hugh, the attempt to retain his masculine autonomy, "not giving yourself away" was even the central motive for killing his wife, and "to purge the impulse" of performing "Samaritan acts" (306) was for him an essential requirement of realizing his masculinity.

In the novel's climax, Hugh has to finally embrace his feminine side and relinquish his hubristic sense of separateness. He is an oil company geologist and thus literally an embodiment of "toxic" masculinity, but at the dramatic peak of the novel's climbing action, when he leads himself and Augustine up the wall on the "Trojan women's" elusive route, Hugh has to symbolically become a woman to be able to trace the female climbers' path. His comfortable privileged masculinity is at a loss in the "*female labyrinth*" (223) that the "Trojan women" have created up the wall, which has "erased all his reference points" (234). Already at the beginning of the novel, Hugh has been uneasy about feeling uncharacteristically "illiterate with the land" when planning their climb (23). As Rodi-Risberg has discussed, "the observing position from which landscape has historically been viewed within Western geographical discourse has been masculine (and white and heterosexual)" (*Writing* 187). Here in the novel, when Hugh's normal ontological position and practices are questioned, he must reflect on his own embodied masculinity to find his way out of the "labyrinth."

The solution comes to Hugh as he realizes that as "a guy, he was naturally inclined to muscling moves", but only by accepting the need to climb "delicately" and using "finesse" will he be able to climb up (Long 247). Although it is temporarily empowering for Hugh to get in touch with his feminine side, automatically equating delicateness with femininity is not without its problems, as "cultural male/female dichotomies" (Salovaara 77) in representations of climbing can have negative, self-perpetuating repercussions to gender equity and, as Hultman and Pulé state, thus lead to reinforcing "stereotypical gendered differences" (197). As an example of current, culturally stereotypical assumptions of masculinity, Hultman and Pulé refer to the notion that "being a real man is being the one who penetrates, not the one who is penetrated" (9). The implicitly

feminizing event of being penetrated is in Hugh's mind merged with the idea of being "gaping open, utterly vulnerable" (366). During a night spent in their hanging tent platform on the wall, the ghost that haunts them on their climb is felt by Hugh to be moving beneath the tent floor: "Hugh felt it crossing his rump [...] It poised beneath his anus, and he felt open" (366). Hugh's fear of being anally molested by the ghost is only dissolved after terrified, violent resistance, at the end of which each of the climbers "separated into animal solitude" (367) for the duration of the rest of the night.

In *The Push*, Tommy exhibits a masculinity that shares some of the hypermasculine elements found in the characters in *The Wall*, but that is also decidedly different in that there are explicit declarations of appreciation for the women in his life. Tommy also emphasizes the role of nature in molding his masculinity in a positive direction by claiming that he was "shaped by the mountains into a man who can love" (336). However, like *The Wall*, *The Push* discusses the environmentally damaging practice of placing metal bolts in the rock for protection as implicitly feminine, as opposed to the "machismo" (Caldwell 47) of using removable, "natural" pieces of protection. The hypermasculine, macho, notion of bolts as the epitome of cowardice and degenerated masculinity, is evident in first Hugh's, then Lewis's musings in *The Wall*, where "pure" rock may be seen as a metaphor for "pure" femininity, ripe for picking for the male conquerors, but also acts as a symbol of the protagonists' environmental ethos.

Chicken bolts [...] the work of pretenders to the throne [...] the drilling of even a single bolt [...] an event very close to statutory rape [...] Many climbers had backed off from routes rather than despoil them with a bolt, preferring to leave the rock pure for those with more talent [...] To him [Lewis], bolts weren't just an eyesore, they were evil. They were the Machine, the paving of the American frontier, the cowardice of urban weaklings." (Long 94-95)

Significantly, when Hugh and Augustine arrive at the belay station of the "Trojan women," Hugh describes the profusion of bolts at the scene as irrevocable evidence of the women's deteriorating mental state and "[p]aranoia" (257), as an embodiment of an essentially female terror and irrationality. The implication here is that relying on the inherent safety of the bolts is undoubtedly less manly than being more autonomous, indeed frontiersmanlike, and placing one's own protection.

In conclusion, the representations of privileged, white athletic heterosexual men's trauma and their responses to it vary on a spectrum ranging between the hegemonic and, at least moderately, ecological. Further, because the convergence of trauma, nature, and, specifically, masculinity, has been neglected in previous studies, this convergence needs to be made more conspicuous, and men marked more explicitly as a category. This ultimately has both ethical and political ramifications because *whose* trauma is represented and *how* matters (Rodi-Risberg, "Problems" 110). Therefore, overly simplistic notions of masculinity and trauma need to be further problematized, and the shifting, at times agentic and at other times more objectified, role of nature, considered. In studying these representations of masculinity, and eventually also other, nonbinary genders, combining trauma studies with ecofeminist and ecomasculine scholarship promises to be a productive locus of action. This is especially because it enables examining

the portrayals of healing processes, in our case specifically from trauma, as both gendered and localized.

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