

Performing the *Apeironic* Body: Breaking Boundaries in Competitive Rock Climbing

Anna Holman

A young man rests against a tree, his body rigid with exhaustion. His eyes are closed, but the lines of pain on his face belie any notion of sleep. He could be a soldier at the end of a grueling battle except for his clothing: a tight-fitting polyester t-shirt and lycra leggings. Scuffed climbing shoes encase his feet. The sound of metal hardware on rock tinkles through the trees around him. “Rooooope!” calls out a nearby rock climber as he pulls his rope down from the anchors above. The multicolored rope comes whirring down the rock face and slaps into the dusty ground at the climber’s feet. Other climbers, still on the rock, push themselves through the motions of ascending the cliff. They look haggard and weary. I feel like a voyeur, spectating these competitors at the end of their physical and mental limits. A few climbers slur their words as they try to communicate with their partners on the other end of their rope. Their brightly colored tutus and sparkly leggings are rumpled, face paint so meticulously applied has run and smudged. These strangely appareled rock denizens have been climbing for nearly twenty-four straight hours, taking part in the endurance climbing competition that is the 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell.

Horseshoe Hell, or “Hell” as participants affectionately call it, invites competitors to a dude ranch in northern Arkansas for a weekend of endurance climbing. This article explores the performance of what I term the *apeironic*, or boundaryless, body through several aspects of the Horseshoe Hell competition, from its community rituals to the individual experiences of the climbers as they reflect on the event. The narrative of the event itself as the “wildest” climbing competition, complete with absurd costumes, risqué team names, and theatrical rituals led by

Anna Holman is an Instructional Assistant Professor at Texas A&M University in the School of Performance, Visualization, and Fine Arts. She studies the rock climbing and mountaineering body across performance mediums. Her research interests also include race and gender in outdoor adventure sports, the performance of wilderness, and pedagogy in higher education.

a Dionysus-like character named Gordo the Great, co-creates the *apeironic* body. Utilizing a phenomenological approach, I serve as a spectator and witness to the theatrical pre- and post-competition ceremonies and to the climbing itself. Survey responses from seventy-seven of the participating Hell climbers tell the story of Hell from the competitor's point of view.

Exploring the climbing body through the lens of performance creates an awareness that the body is doing more than just ascending and descending rock. The body plays a part in constructing or promoting the way members of the climbing culture are expected to behave. Unlike mainstream sports that often require adjudicating bodies to oversee formal rules and regulations, the climbing world has long been governed by generally unenforceable unwritten rules, a set of ethics learned from other climbers' stories. Different bodies tell different stories, and as the stories change, so too do the rules. Climbing therefore serves as an ideal framework for exploring how dominant cultural narratives (the accepted behaviors of belonging to a particular culture) complexify over time. To investigate the climbing body as performance, I call upon Nina Tecklenburg and Thomas Fuchs to act as my "belayers" for this expedition. For Tecklenburg, narratives are generative embodied experiences. Just as John L. Austin argues that words *do* things, for Tecklenburg, stories *do* things too. The telling of stories "yields a cultural knowledge, an order of things, and intersubjective relationships."¹ While Tecklenburg examines what stories do in theater and performance art, my research centers on what the climbing body does and how that affects the narrative. Fuchs' model of collective body memory incites members of a group to conform to established body configurations and behaviors in order to maintain the group's identity.² I activate these theories to examine how the communal *apeironic* climbing body breaks boundaries within the sport.

The experience of Horseshoe Hell prompts me to turn to Radim Kočandrle's interpretation of *apeiron*. *Apeiron* is an ancient Greek word meaning limitless or without boundaries. However, there is debate as to what Anaximander, the 6th century BC philosopher to whom the term is attributed, meant in its usage. Only one fragment of Anaximander's writing remains, and that in the form of a quotation in a later philosopher's work. Kočandrle contends that *apeiron* acts as a

¹ Tecklenburg, *Performing Stories*, trans. William Locke Wheeler (London: Seagull, 2021), 36.

² Thomas Fuchs, "Collective Body Memories," in *Embodiment, Enaction, and Culture*, ed. Christopher Curt, Thomas Fuchs, and Christian Tewes (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2017).

modifier of the ancient Greek word for nature. Thus, *apeiron* is tied to nature as limitlessly generative, “spatially omnipresent” (the creative power of nature is not limited to any one place), and beyond human experience. In other words, Kočandrle posits that Anaximander’s theory of *apeiron* can be understood as the “power of boundless nature.”⁵ Nature, in this sense, taken from its etymological meaning, is the “active power of growth.”⁴ The *apeironic* climbing body is therefore one that has the limitless potential to grow beyond itself. If pushing the limits of the sport of climbing in its usual sense requires vertical progression (climbing ever higher and harder), the *apeironic* body encourages growth in all directions. The *apeironic* body dissolves boundaries laterally, connecting climbers to their surroundings, to other climbers, and to nature itself beyond spatial or temporal constraints. The Bacchanalian rituals of Horseshoe Hell activate this generative process.

Horseshoe Hell History

The 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell began in the early 2000s when Andy Chasteen invited his friends Adam Peters, Andrew Tower, and Steven Charles to climb at Horseshoe Canyon Ranch (HCR).⁵ Conversation amongst the friends turned to how many climbs they thought they might be able to do that day, and later to how many routes they could climb over a period of twenty-four hours.⁶ Chasteen and his friends believed it was possible to climb for twenty-four hours straight because of the high density of quality routes at the ranch. Horseshoe Canyon lives up to its name as a small horseshoe-shaped valley ringed with limestone cliffs. These cliffs, or crags as climbers call them, create an abundance of single-pitch (one rope-length) climbing routes set within the walkable area of the ranch. Now with more than 450 individual routes, one could climb in Horseshoe Canyon all day and all night and never repeat a single route. In 2006, Chasteen organized the first competition, drawing one-hundred and twenty climbers to the Arkansas crag.⁷

⁵ Radim Kočandrle, *Apeiron Anaximander on Generation and Destruction*, trans. Dirk L. Couprie, SpringerBriefs (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2017), 99.

⁴ Kočandrle, 48.

⁵ Cole Fennel, *Rock Climbing Horseshoe Canyon*, 2018 Edition (Springdale: Natural State Publishing, 2018), 46.

⁶ *The 24*, directed by Clay Pruitt, (2020, YouTube), https://youtu.be/l_r3kBl3QP8.

⁷ Fennel, 3, 46.

Hearing of Chasteen's idea for a twenty-four-hour climbing competition at Horseshoe Canyon Ranch, professional climber Jeremy Collins asked to be included in its planning, providing advice on the competition's rules and scoring. He brought climbing brands on board to sponsor the competition, and each year dons the persona of Gordo the Great who leads the climbers in the recitation of the Climber's Creed. Besides Collins, 24HHH has seen professional climbers Tommy Caldwell, Alex Honnold, and Hans Florine take part. However, most of the competitors are amateurs from around the country or employees of local climbing gyms. The competition rules are straightforward: climbers have twenty-four hours to climb as many routes as they can. Each route is worth a certain number of points, and the taller or harder the route, the more points. Routes must be climbed "clean" (no falls or hanging on the rope) and each route can be climbed twice for points. Climbers are on the honor system when reporting the number of routes climbed. The competition awards individual and team points in each category and recognition for accomplishments such as climbing a vertical mile, most "trad" routes climbed, and best team costume.⁸

The Pre-Competition Rituals

The competition begins with the Roll Call, a ceremonial reading of the team names, and recitation of the Climbers' Creed in front of the ranch's office/general store. At the 2021 competition, standing atop a truck bed, decked out in his traditional grey robe, gold chain necklace, sandals with socks, and trademark blonde mullet, Chasteen looks like a surf-bum-preacher about to deliver a sermon on how to keep the "stoke" alive. Below the ranch truck-turned stage, the competitors don their alter-egos in the form of costumes and team names. Team "The Devil Wears Prana" sports devil horns attached to their helmets and wears matching Prana brand t-shirts. The knitted woolen shorts on another team give them a distinctly satyr-like appearance. Their matching t-shirts read, "Herd Immunity." Leopard-print leotards, men in tutus, denim duds, unicorn heads, flight-suits, and 80s-style headbands all make an appearance. One team sports red-and-white-striped button-up shirts and giant hot dog hats on their heads. They call themselves the "Carabiner

⁸ "Trad" climbing refers to climbing in the traditional style as opposed to "sport" climbing. In sport climbing, route developers place bolts along the route to which climbers attach the rope as they ascend. In trad climbing, climbers must place their own protective pieces in cracks or other features on the rock and then attach, or "clip," their rope to those pieces.

Wieners” (see Fig. 1). Chasteen’s Roll Call of the 24-Hour team names is an opportunity for each team to display their costumes and monikers to the other competitors. As Chasteen calls out each name, the team stands to be acknowledged, waving or pumping their fists into the air with a “wooo!” or shouting out a prepared phrase in response.



Fig. 1: Team “Carabiner Wieners” (Zach Weaver, Jessie Weaver) and Team “Long Live Bigg Scruggs” (Drew Meyer, John Campbell), 2021. Photograph by Anna Holman.

Team names can be a play on climbing terms, usually in a sexualized manner, like team “Chains and Whippers Excite Me.”⁹ Names can also be a joke about the identity of its climbers such as “Team AARP.” Some names comment on current events like team “There’s hand sanitizer in my sack if you want to feel it,” a nod to the Covid-19 pandemic. Other long-time Hell competitors opt to keep their names from previous years. The Hell climbers’ costumes and act of renaming themselves with outrageous aliases transforms them from ordinary climbers into the superhuman beings necessary to complete a day in Hell. As the survey responses from the Hell climbers demonstrate, the enactment of community (seen in part through the costumes and team names) bolsters their mental and physical abilities, allowing many participants to climb longer and harder than they normally would have without the community’s support. As one climber writes, “The competition was great and I was able to keep climbing far longer and more than I would have expected [...] I expected to burn out fairly quickly but with the atmosphere of the community was able to climb most of the event.” Taken together, the costumes and team names create a sense of community where climbers band together in their shared irreverence.

For the Ancient Greeks, *apeiron* became associated with the chaos of non-individuality. Greek scholars came to uneasy conclusions about the nature of the “boundless.” Steven Rosen, drawing on Plato, argues that the Greeks sought to tame or control the chaotic *apeiron*, the power from which all springs:

In its sheer boundlessness, *apeiron* defies containment within the ordering contexts of space and time. To the early Greeks, this posed a considerable challenge. For, in the unconstrained many of *apeiron*, there can be no *one*; in its chaotic multiplicity, there can be no unity, no stable center of identity, no indivisible core of being, no *individual*.¹⁰

Individuality, according to Rosen’s reading of the early Greeks, has a stabilizing effect on *apeironic* chaos wherein the “boundless activity of wild nature is subdued.”¹¹ Rather than subduing the wildness of nature, Horseshoe Hell participants revel in its chaos. The lack of boundaries between the individual and their partners, the community, and the rock on which they climb becomes a point of

⁹ Chains are found at the top of routes or the end of a pitch and can be used as anchor points (secure points off of which climbers can repel or belay). Whippers are bad falls, usually resulting in the climber falling some distance and “whipping” through the air on the end of the rope.

¹⁰ Steven M. Rosen, *Dimensions of Apeiron* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), xiv.

¹¹ Rosen, 3.

pride. As one competitor states, “The rock and my body become one and, like so much igneous rock, melded into one another.” It is in Horseshoe Hell’s lack of individuality that the chaotic *apeironic* climbing body thus finds its full expression.



Fig. 2: Jeremy Collins (right) as “Gordo the Great” with Josiah Cooper (left). Photograph by Colby Rogers.

The instigator of this non-individuality is professional climber Jeremy Collins with his performance of Gordo the Great, a Dionysian character who leads the competitors in the Climber’s Creed. After the Roll Call, Collins, wearing a droopy bucket hat and sporting a fake gut under his button-up shirt, clambers awkwardly onto the truck. “Gordon,” Gordo the Great’s nerdy stand-in, tries to

compel the assembled climbers to recite the Creed. Nonplussed by this dweeby replacement, a competitor from the crowd shouts out, “What the heck is this? We want Gordo back!” The other climbers take up chanting the name of “Gordo” as several others rush the truck and vault into the bed in a pre-planned performance of transforming Gordon into Gordo. The AC/DC song “Thunderstruck” rumbles from the overhead speakers as the climbers in the truck remove Gordon’s clothing, revealing Collins’ Gordo outfit underneath: tight-fitting animal print leggings and a tank top sporting the image of a roaring lion. A fur collar, red jacket, black eyeliner, yellow headband, and red sunglasses complete the ensemble (see Fig. 2). Suitably dressed as Gordo, Collins falls backward into the waiting arms of the climbers below who pass him around in rock-concert body-surfing style. Once returned to the truck, transformation complete, Collins growls out, “Doesn’t it feel good to be who you really are?”

In this moment of theatricality at Horseshoe Hell, Collins’ Gordo character resembles the Greek god Dionysus, a god of depravity, pleasure-seeking, and transformation (including the ability to transform into a lion).¹² Arthur Evans also suggests that the name Dionysus may translate as “God of the Mountain,” a pertinent sobriquet for a rock climbing competition.¹³ Collins’ performance of Gordo is brash and seductive, his adoption of this character an invitation to the assembled climbers to also throw off their everyday personas and become rowdy, lion-like competitors. While Justin Varley has considered the Dionysus role in community formation (or *communitas*) in adventure sports as a separation from the “quotidian grind,”¹⁴ Collins’ Dionysian character calls upon the climbers to dissolve the spaces between themselves, their environment, and the climbers around them. As Bowden contends, the followers of Dionysus have the opportunity to see the god for who he truly is, without masks or disguises: “[t]o do this they abandoned the trappings of civilization [...] and went out into the wild landscape beyond the city and beyond the cultivated land around it, up into the uncultivated mountains and hills, dressed in animal skins.”¹⁵ For his entrance into the 2022

¹² Walter F. Otto, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*, trans. Robert B. Palmer (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1965), 110.

¹³ Arthur Evans, *The God of Ecstasy: Sex-Roles and the Madness of Dionysos*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988), 132.

¹⁴ Justin Varley, “Sea Kayakers at the Margins: The Liminoid Character of Contemporary Adventures,” *Leisure Studies* 30, no. 1 (2011): 96.

¹⁵ Hugh Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 136.

competition, Collins rode through the assembled crowd on a palanquin held aloft by ten half-naked male climbers. The City Dionysia, the ancient Greek theater festival in honor of the god, began with a similar ritual: the carrying of Dionysus' statue from Eleutherae to Athens.¹⁶ Charles Segal contends that Dionysus inhabits a liminal space where "fusion replaces boundary" and Mera Flaumenhaft suggests that Dionysus not only abolishes boundaries but also "[f]or those touched by Dionysus, life ceases to be measured, articulated experience in space and time."¹⁷ The only path towards achieving the limitless body is to be initiated into the cult of the god.¹⁸ In these respects, Dionysus embodies the boundaryless and chaotic nature of *apeiron*. For those climbers touched by Gordo, the boundaries between their bodies and the rock, nature, time, and their partners lose definition. In risking the dissolution of boundaries, the climbers gain a sense of limitless possibilities.

Following Gordo's spectacular entrance into the competition, Collins as Gordo then leads the climbers in the annual Climber's Creed. The Climber's Creed is a ritualized speech that symbolically binds each climber to their partner, builds the energy of the community to a fever pitch, and then releases the climbers in this near-ecstatic state into the surrounding hillside. Collins begins with the following stanza while the climbers stand face to face with their partner, right hands raised, repeating his words after each line:

Partner.
 The hour is upon us.
 The sun has risen in the east
 And desire rises in my soul.
 Now we too shall rise
 On walls of stone.

Collins continues the Creed with repetitions of the word "partner" and stanzas that reflect themes such as the climbers as warriors or heading into battle ("We are warriors") and the climbers as lions ("We are lions in a field of lions!"). The exact wording of the Creed changes slightly from year to year; for example, Collins referred to the Covid-19 pandemic at the 2021 event ("Give me ample slack. Do not

¹⁶ Bowden, 107.

¹⁷ Charles Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides' Bacchae* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 13.; Mera J. Flaumenhaft, *The Civic Spectacle: Essays on Drama and Community* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 58.

¹⁸ Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 11.

give me ample Covid”), however the purpose of the Creed is to raise “the stoke” (climber lingo for encouragement or to excite, as in to stoke a fire). The Creed also creates an intimate moment between climbing partners when they look into each other’s eyes and repeat the affirmations of Collins’ speech. “Partner,” they say to each other, “I chose you not for thine strength and will, but for thine determination and skill.” The risk of being vulnerable in this moment, staring their partner in the eyes, causes some climbers to laugh nervously or shift in discomfort. Others clasp hands tightly, enjoying the special connection between climbing partners. The Creed is a reminder to one’s climbing partner that they literally hold your life in their hands. The line, “Do not freaking drop me!” a perennial inclusion, gets a fervent repetition. At the end of the Creed, their initiation into the cult of Gordo just beginning, Collins repeats the phrase, “we are lions” three times, at which point the assembled climbers throw their heads back and roar into the sky. The stoke is real. The sharp crack of a shotgun sets the competition in motion, and climbers dash into the wooded hills where they embark upon their first of twenty-four hours of climbing.

Apeiron in Action

The following consideration of the twenty-four-hour competition draws on my experience as a spectator and the Hell climbers’ responses to the survey they filled out after the 2021 event. Set within the forested hillside of Horseshoe Canyon Ranch, there is no central area to watch the actual climbing. The survey therefore provides a broader perspective of what was happening throughout the ranch during those twenty-four hours. In the survey, I asked the climbers to write about their experience during the competition, the relationship between their body and the rock, with their partner, time, nature, and whether they experienced “flow state.” Maria Coffey defines flow specifically in regard to climbing as “Focus, peak experience, epiphany, the reintegrated moment, flow, in the zone—different names that convey the same meaning: the sense of being intensely alive. The moment when life is now, without past or future, beyond earthly mundanities. An intoxicating state. A fleeting sense of immortality.”¹⁹ Flaumenhaft’s discussion of Dionysus also depicts Dionysus’ disciples in their state of delirium as living outside of time, intoxicated, and beyond earthly matters. “[T]he followers of

¹⁹ Maria Coffey, *Where the Mountain Casts Its Shadow: The Personal Costs of Climbing* (London: Arrow, 2004), 23–24.

Dionysus drink him and eat him raw, ignoring even bodily boundaries to become one with him. Losing oneself in Dionysus is a reassertion of one's ties to the earth, but, at the same time, it is an attempt to assimilate oneself to the condition of a god."²⁰ Lastly, I add to the *apeironic* climbing body an understanding that it exists in "indefinitely extended space and time."²¹ The sections that follow explore how the climbers perceived their bodies in space and time, and in relation to their partners, nature, and the Hell community. Dionysus' devotees and those Gordo has enthralled tell a story of abolishing boundaries between nature, rock, bodies, and time, sometimes experienced as flow state.

The Apeironic Body and Nature

For the ancient Greeks, *apeiron* was nature at its most wild, chaos beyond the confinement of time, space, and the individual.²² At Gordo's urging, the Hell climbers transform into creatures that are part of the "natural" (i.e. nonhuman) world: "jungle cats in leotards. We are the terror of the Savannah!" As many of the competitors conveyed in their survey responses, they felt immersed in nature during the competition, and the act of climbing became a part of nature itself. The rites of the cult of Dionysus express "the ancient magical belief that man and animal and nature are one," and that the act of worshipping the god "animated the mystical powers of vegetation."²³ Worshipped as a god of fertility, Dionysus is also known as he who "makes things grow," a fitting god for bodies experiencing the limitlessly generative capabilities of nature: *apeiron*.²⁴ As one climber enthused, "Oh my gosh [nature] was my favorite part. The moon and stars were perfect at night. It was awesome to feel the rock and look back at all the trees. Even though we were competing, I kept finding myself appreciating the earth around me." Another climber wrote that they loved climbing at the ranch because they felt nature had

²⁰ Flaumenhaft, *The Civic Spectacle*, 60.

²¹ "2021 Results," Horseshoe Hell App, accessed February 22, 2022, <https://horseshoehellapp.com/events?33>.

²² Rosen, *Dimensions of Apeiron*, xiv.

²³ Noel Robertson, "Orphic Mysteries and Dionysiac Ritual," in *Greek Mysteries: The Archaeology and Ritual of Ancient Greek Secret Cults*, ed. Michael B. Cosmopoulos (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), 232; Christina Papaioannou and Georgios Lykesas, "The Role and Significance of Dance in the Dionysian Mysteries," *Studies in Physical Culture and Tourism* 19, no. 2 (2012): 71.

²⁴ Madeline Jost, "Mystery Cults in Arcadia," in *Greek Mysteries: The Archaeology and Ritual of Ancient Greek Secret Cults* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), 146.

“engulfed” them. Others referred to nature as the feel of the stone under their hands and feet and the experience of “flowing” over the rock.

The fusion with nature that the Hell climbers experienced lies at the heart of *apeiron*, a state that requires a loss of the individual self. Many of the climbers, including those cited above, felt not only connected to, but merged with nature. Animals, plants, rocks, the dirt on their hands, the wind on their skin, the light from other climber’s headlamps, the act of climbing itself was “nature” for the Hell climbers. Through this embodiment of nature through climbing, the competitors joined with the earth and the living beings around them. From connecting with the stones that embody limitless time to the act of pushing their bodies beyond their limits, the Hell climbers both enact *apeiron* and become *apeiron*, nature in its rawest form. In so doing, they experience, as Flaumenhaft says, the “god himself,” the numinous sublime qualities of their relationship to nature, flow, their partner, and to the rock.

The Apeironic Body and Rock

When asked about the relationship between their body and the rock, the majority of the Hell climbers focused on the effect the rock or the act of climbing had on their bodies. In “The Climbing Body, Nature and the Experience of Modernity,” Neil Lewis argues that rock climbing is a reciprocal act; climbers touch the rock and the rock touches them back. “In mapping the rock with his body – fingers, fists, feet, blood, sweat, obscenities – [the climber] is, in turn, mapped by the rock. For the climber and environment inscribe each other.”²⁵ The way the Hell climbers wrote about the rock/body relationship bears out Lewis’ contentions. They did not need to explicitly reference the rock because the effect of the rock on their body told the story for them. Their relationship with the mixed sandstone/limestone on Horseshoe’s crag was one of movement. For example, one climber wrote:

I felt I was flowing through my pre-planned set easily and without much resistance from my body, the rock, or other competitors. I felt competent and sure of myself, confident that my body would perform more difficult moves. [...] I [felt] as though the rock was not my adversary. It was simply the medium over which I tested myself.

²⁵ Neil Lewis, “The Climbing Body, Nature and the Experience of Modernity,” *Body & Society* 6, no. 3–4 (2000): 74.

Taking Lewis' arguments into consideration, the climbers' relationship with the rock, whether they felt they were reaching their goals or climbing strongly, bled over into how they viewed their bodies and the competition as a whole. Seen in another way, the boundary between self and rock became less stable in the climbers' stories. In telling the story of the rock through the body, the Hell climbers painted a picture of the rock at Horseshoe Canyon as inseparable from the act of climbing. Rather than two separate entities, body and rock, there was no clear demarcation between the two in the climbers' accounts.

As a communal body, the Hell competitors create an understanding of the rock at Horseshoe Canyon Ranch that transcends an individual's encounter with stone. During the 2021 Horseshoe Hell, a majority of the competitors chose to climb a route called Action Hotdog.²⁶ The official Horseshoe Canyon climbing guide instructs climbers on this thirty-foot 5.6 to "follow the obvious line of buckets, stepping left into a water groove near the top."²⁷ A relatively short route, Action Hotdog earns climbers of all ability levels easy points in the competition. Of the two-hundred and nineteen climbers who tackled Action Hotdog over the course of the competition, likely no one would have climbed the route exactly the same. Their height and body shape, the choices they made about where to put their feet and hands, even the weather or time of day, which can affect the rock, would have changed the experience. Many of the competitors would have climbed the route at night, drastically altering their perception of the climb. With only their headlamps for illumination, everything outside the small circle of light fades into darkness. The dark limits the climbers' vision to the next set of hand and foot holds on the rock; the ground could be five or fifty feet away. Getting off route is a legitimate concern, so climbers look for the bright white splash of climbers' chalk left on the holds or the next bolt leading to the anchors to chart their course. When competitors climb the same route twice (they are allowed up to two "laps" on each route), each time becomes its own experience as the climber may use different hand/foot holds each time. Action Hotdog, like every route, contains limitless variations. Rather than an individual push against the boundaries of the sport, the repetition of Action Hotdog at Horseshoe Hell stands as community record setting. According to the results records, Action Hotdog was climbed at least four-hundred and thirty-one times over the course of the thirty-six hours of

²⁶ "2021 Results."

²⁷ Fennel, *Rock Climbing Horseshoe Canyon*, 52.

competition.²⁸ Moreover, the route, its nuances of stone and height and environment, now exists as communal embodied knowledge. Bodies of many different kinds have now climbed Action Hotdog at all hours of the day and night, blurring the lines between the known and unknown of this particular piece of Arkansas rock. The climbers have mapped out a route on this stone, and the stone has mapped itself onto the Hell community.

The Apeironic Body and Other Climbers

The theme of boundary-dissolving continued for the Hell climbers when writing about their partners. Twelve climbers wrote that the competition deepened their personal connection with their partner. As one stated, “We started as friends that had not competed together. Seeing one another vulnerable and pushing hard added another layer of respect and depth to our friendship.” Another climber simply wrote, “Basically married by the end.” Thirty responses talked about how the climber felt they and their partner were a good match or had a solid relationship. Twenty-six mentioned how supportive and/or encouraging the relationship was, and twenty said they had good communication with their partner or knew how to read their non-verbal cues. One climber felt, “Increased empathy, desire to support or sacrifice for others, greater levels of trust and appreciation. Like we now have a bond that one can only get from overcoming great feats together.” In keeping with the Dionysian aspect of the competition, Papaioannou and Lykesas contend that Dionysian mysteries (cults) were places where “people who joined the same dance and participated in the same proceedings felt united with one another forever.”²⁹ Climbing, as a kind of vertical dance, performed a similar function on the Hell climbers in uniting them with one another. The devotion to one’s partner during Hell stands at odds with the current climate of individual achievement stories in climbing. From documentaries about solo climbers such as *Free Solo* (2018) and *The Alpinist* (2021), to the emphasis on individuality in the climbers at the 2020/21 Tokyo Olympics, to the almost daily reports from magazines like *Climbing* that highlight the triumphs of a single athlete, contemporary climbing stories rarely focus on climbing partnerships. For Horseshoe Hell, the climbers’ partners were inseparable from the story they were telling.

²⁸ Data includes results from the 12-hour competition held the day before the start of the 24-hour competition.

²⁹ Papaioannou and Lykesas, “The Role and Significance,” 69.

As the climbers repeat after Gordo in the Creed, “Partner! Are we climbers? Nay. We are more than that.” The significance of the Hell partnership continued to appear even in responses to my survey prompts that had nothing to do with the climber’s relationship with their partner. In the aforementioned prompt about the climber’s relationship between their body and the rock, nineteen responses directly referenced the climber’s partner or used the pronoun “we” to talk about their experience. As one climber wrote of his rock/body relationship, “My body was pissed pretty much the entire time. My brain, my partner, and the Hell community carried my physical body to the end.” A reliance on one’s partner, or their own efforts to support the other were common themes throughout the climbers’ responses to the partnership prompt. “My partner is the best [...] make it known that I LOVE MY PARTNER,” wrote one such enthusiastic participant. All but two of the seventy-seven respondents put a positive spin on their partnership no matter what challenges they faced during the competition. Even when injury, exhaustion, or negativity threatened to derail their goals, most of the climbers reported that their partnerships survived the night and were stronger than they had been before.

The Apeironic Body and Time

The most apparent disruption of boundaries for the Hell climbers involved their perception of time. Of the seventy-seven climbers who responded to the survey, seventy-four reported feeling that time was distorted in some way during the competition. While Kočandrle argues that Aristotle conceived of *apeiron* as boundless space and infinite time, Kočandrle’s reading of Anaximander says that as the boundless power of nature, *apeiron* undergoes infinite *cycles* of creation and destruction.³⁰ In this model, time is as generative as nature itself. The climbers’ experience of time was not infinite, but came and went in cycles depending upon the ebb and flow of their bodies’ energy and the rising and setting of the sun. As one Hell climber explained, “The first 10 hours fly by, the sun is out and it’s all laughter and climbing. The next 8 feel never-ending, as if you will never stop suffering. The final 6 are relieved grins, resignation with the pain, and this strange elation that grows as the sun rises.” A third of the climbers reported that time seemed particularly slow at night. The requirement of climbing at night sets Horseshoe Hell apart from other climbing competitions (see Fig. 3, pg. 17). It also reinforces

³⁰ Kočandrle, *Apeiron*, 79.

the event's similarities to Dionysian rituals. Performing orgiastic dance rituals at night was a common feature of the worship of Dionysus, and earned the god the appellation of "Nightly."³¹ Some climbers responded that their perception of time depended on their movement: actively climbing, belaying, or resting between climbs. For a quarter of the respondents, time felt as though it sped up with the sunrise as the competition drew to a close. Although the competitors can keep track of the hours on devices like smart phones, they often choose not to, instead relying upon the Hell ritual of "the yell." Each hour, one climber or volunteer takes it upon themselves to begin the yell, a wordless cry that echoes around the canyon and prompts the hundreds of climbers and volunteers to begin roaring into the sky. From the centrally located ranch buildings, the surrounding forested hillsides reverberate with hair-raising primal screams. The yell simulates an animalistic cry, unseen bodies howling out from within the dense foliage. The chaos of the hourly yell disjoints human time as a declaration of the climbers' most ancient animal impulses.

The Apeironic Body and Flow

Time also takes on a sense of limitless potential when the climbers enter a flow state. I define flow as the embodied breakdown of time and space. As the borders between nature, rocks, bodies, and the linearity of time dissolve, so too do mental barriers, leaving climbers feeling "intoxicated," "immortal," and "intensely alive."³² Seventy-five percent of the surveyed climbers reported encountering flow at some point during the competition. As one climber described the experience:

Having complete and total trust in my partner's belay allows me to concentrate on the task at hand. There are a series of hard moves which I breathe through, and my body just makes the moves. I am thinking of nothing but breathing and moving. I perceive no danger, because I am completely confident that my body will do what it needs to do.

³¹ Papaioannou and Lykesas, "The Role and Significance," 71.

³² Coffey, *Where the Mountain*, 24.



Fig. 3: Hell climbers at night, 2021. Photograph by Anna Holman.

This climber's account describes flow as happening in the now with intense focus on the movements of their body. Maria Coffey argues that climbers become addicted to the sensation of flow, and that because physical risk is integral to climbing flow, climbers continue to put themselves into high-risk situations in order to experience its intoxicating effect. Paradoxically, while in flow state, one's perception of risk is muted, as the climber quoted above indicates when writing that they "perceive no danger." The initiation rituals of the Dionysus mystery cults, which

included dancing in the mountains, created a “broadening of the consciousness, and the approach of the hidden divine aspects of man.”³³ Achieving a flow state could be considered a “broadening of consciousness,” the climber unlocking their “divine aspects” resulting in a diminished perception of risk. One Hell climber wrote: “Flow state is the reason many of us rock climb. It takes complete focus on the connection between my body and the rock. Any thoughts trailing outside of this moment will end in failure. It is one of the great pleasures of life to be so fully immersed in a moment.” Many of the competitors also reported that while in flow they were “in the moment,” leaving no room to fear the risk they were taking. Their movement became strong, effortless, or fluid, and as a consequence the experience was intensely emotional, euphoric, dreamlike, or magical.

When asked what precipitated the experience of flow, the most common response was repetition. The repetitive tasks of climbing in combination with the awareness of their bodies induced flow state:

I don't know if it was a specific moment, but for many stretches during the comp it was full on flow state. Climb, lower, pull, swap, climb, lower, pull, swap, belay, lower, off, swap, on, belay, lower, off, swap, etc. While that sounds mundane and repetitive, each of those tasks must be done with care because we hold our life and the life of our partner in our hands. So you must focus on each small task while also thinking, ‘what route's next, do I need to eat, drink, pee, whatever’ there was little time to think about what happened yesterday or what's gonna happen in the after party. It was just ‘go.’

The focus required to maintain the climber's and their partner's safety prevents the repetitive motions of climbing, belaying, and pulling down the rope from becoming monotonous. Within that state, risk is minimized, the boundaries between time and space dissipate, and the climber is left with the feeling that their ability to continue pushing themselves is limitless.

Conclusions

With the 10am shotgun blast on the morning of September 25, the 2021 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell ends. The climbers submit their scores either electronically through the competition's online score-keeping system or stumble down to the volunteer headquarters to offer their scores on paper. I watch as two climbers, the tape around their hands and fingers black and fraying, congratulate each other on

³³ Papaioannou and Lykesas, “The Role and Significance,” 68.

making it through the night and crack open a couple of beers. Most of the competitors retreat to their tents and vans and collapse into sleep. In the late afternoon, they rouse from their exhausted naps and prepare for dinner and the awards ceremony. The awards ceremony is held on the wide east-facing lawn that slopes down towards a long folding table holding rows of trophies sculpted with the Hell lion. In the distance rise the “Cliffs of Insanity” where headlamped climbers crawled up and down throughout the night. The climbers mingle and recount the stories of their competition experience, moving stiffly on sore muscles. One man sitting nearby kicks off his sandals and reveals feet the color of boiled lobsters. As per Hell tradition, Chasteen announces the winners, who then have to take a shot of “lion’s blood” (whiskey) and ride an inner tube down the hill on watered-down tarps before collecting their prize from the stage area. Chasteen crowns the Goat Busters, the Elite division team comprising Rob D’Anastasio and Vasya Vorotnikov, as the ultimate victors. The two have climbed a combined 25,000 vertical feet in twenty-four hours. Each member of the Goat Busters, winning both the team and individual competitions in their division, completed three hundred and twenty-three laps (climbing one hundred and sixty-one routes twice plus one more lap) in the 2021 competition. To climb a combined six hundred and forty-six laps meant that, on average, the Goat Busters completed a route every two and a half minutes for twenty-four hours straight.

The pre and post-competition rituals bear witness to the communality of the competitors and also the social chaos they embody through that communality. During the rituals like the Climber’s Creed and the Awards Ceremony, the climbing community enters a space of limitless potential. Collins’ words impel transformation as he calls upon the climbers to merge with nature itself, becoming “lions in a field of lions.” At the awards ceremony, the non-competitors (and perhaps some of the competitors as well) in the audience are left with the mystery of how the body can climb so hard for so long. The *apeironic* body is constructed in these moments when the climbing community’s abilities seem inexhaustible. During the competition, climbers experienced a lack of boundaries between themselves and their surroundings. Their partners, connected to the other end of the rope, became a part of this blurring of lines between the individual and the indefinite. Bodies merged with rock and nature and time became an illusion.

The closing event for the 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell is the After Party. Well after sunset, climbers, friends and spectators gather in the chilly darkness to dance, drink, and celebrate the end of another Hell, a Bacchanal at the end of a Bacchanal-like competition. Fireworks explode overhead, and the revelers, most of whom

had just completed the marathon of the climbing world, toss their inhibitions to the wind. Following the competition, climbers return to their home gyms and tell the story of their twenty-four hours in Hell. In an effort to maintain the community spirit, competitors will post pictures and comments to the 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell Community Facebook page throughout the year before returning in September to once again give themselves over to the uncontrollable chaos of *apeiron*.

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