

Climbing like a Girl: An Exemplary Adventure in Feminist Phenomenology

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This essay uses the phenomenal advent of women's climbing as a paradigm case for integrating feminism and phenomenology, and for analyzing how women experience and evolve free movement and existence. In contrast to the paradigm set by Iris Marion Young's "Throwing like a Girl," it stresses the category of the lived body over the category of gender, and it reveals how women, by employing and cultivating the body's motility and spatiality, engage and transcend the (gender) limits of crux situations.

Elles n'ont plus qu'à poursuivre leur ascension
(It remains only for women to pursue their ascent).

—Simone de Beauvoir

Girls who climb, if you haven't noticed, are on the
ascendance.

—Mick Ryan

If women *do* "pursue their ascent" as Simone de Beauvoir proposed (1952, 729), then what better approach to take account of it than feminist phenomenology, which Beauvoir herself pioneered? Yet, feminist philosophy is slow to assimilate phenomenology to its methodology. It regards phenomenology's nongendered frame of analysis with oft-repeated skepticism, while it continues to speculate upon phenomenology's potential usefulness for investigating women's lived body experience. The latest concerted effort to argue for a collaboration of feminism and phenomenology (to the critical benefit of both) is found in the

collection *Feminist Phenomenology*, edited by Linda Fisher and Lester Embree.¹ In her opening chapter, Fisher reviews and critiques the history of ambivalence that characterizes the relation between feminism and phenomenology. Stressing how feminism and phenomenology share a fundamental commitment to descriptive and experiential analysis, she calls for their greater integration. Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, she contends, is still the best example we have of an integrated approach (2000, 34). In response to the call for more, and more integrated, examples of feminist phenomenology, this article adapts Beauvoir's framework to analyze the "ascent" that women have experienced since the publication of *The Second Sex*. Nowhere, arguably, has women's ascent been actualized so concretely as in the climbing world. From the experiential material so richly supplied by women's climbing documentaries, feminist phenomenology can construct the exemplary study that it needs to get off the ground.²

"Climbing like a Girl" signals the phenomenal advent of women's climbing in this late metropolitan era and a supreme case for analyzing how women experience and elaborate free movement and existence. The phrase also marks this study's debt to and departure from Iris Marion Young's influential, though dissuasive, essay, "Throwing like a Girl: Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality," feminism's first case study that uses phenomenology to investigate contemporary women's experience. In this essay, Young "combines the insights of the theory of the lived body as expressed by Merleau-Ponty and the theory of the situation of women as developed by Beauvoir" to describe and analyze the modalities of motility and spatiality that constitute "feminine embodied experience" (2005, 31). To be more precise, she combines the insights of these theorists without noting Beauvoir's prior adaptation of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962). Like Beauvoir, Young adapts Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to analyze the experience of girls and women. Like Merleau-Ponty, she focuses on the *active* and *mobile* body and thereby redirects Beauvoir's prime focus on the encumbering facticity of female reproductive biology. But unlike Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, she conceptualizes girls' and women's experience of embodiment within a restrictive history of gender normativity that no longer typifies their contemporary situation and that fails to account for the phenomenology of their "ascendance" in new realms of freedom and existence.

Young's essay does not, as Fisher points out, fully theorize the philosophical basis for combining phenomenology and feminism so that it falls short of "enabling their fundamental integration" (Fisher 2000, 36–37). A reason for this may be the overarching emphasis that Young gives to women's interpellation of norms of femininity that constrain their motility and spatiality. In her recent collection of essays *On Female Body Experience*, where "Throwing like a Girl" reappears, Young revisits the "lived body." She acknowledges the centrality of that concept to Beauvoir's thinking, while she reemphasizes the critical

importance of gender as a category of social analysis. In her lead article, “Lived Body *vs.* Gender,” she considers Toril Moi’s close re-reading of *Le deuxième sexe* and Moi’s conclusion that feminists should “throw over the concept of gender altogether and renew a concept of the lived body derived from existential phenomenology” (Young 2005, 12). Young agrees with Moi that a renewal of the concept of the lived body clarifies problems of experience, identity, and subjectivity that exclusive focus on gender normativity obscures, but she rejects Moi’s bid to jettison gender altogether.

To be fair, Young’s retention of gender allows her to initiate phenomenological inquiry into women’s experience of the lived body in situations where the social structure and imposition of gender norms compromise women’s free movement and existence, and where gender normativity must itself be regarded as an existential obstacle to freedom—and no less an obstacle than the female body’s natural limitations, whatever those may be. Yet Young overstresses gender when she foregrounds women’s past interpellation of femininity and their negative experience of embodiment as “typical” of all women at all times. She narrows the field of phenomenological inquiry to prohibitive feminine motility and experience to the exclusion of women’s transformative experience, while establishing masculine motility as the idealized norm. Her focus on feminine motility and spatiality precludes analysis of how girls and women can and do embody free movement despite masculine domination. She fails to direct phenomenological inquiry to the change in women’s embodied experience and situation, to their ascendance in the world, since “Throwing Like a Girl” was first presented in 1977.

This article restores the centrality of the lived body that Beauvoir gave it in *The Second Sex*.³ I agree with Fisher (and Moi) that *The Second Sex* offers “one of the best examples” of “implementing a phenomenological approach as a means of framing feminist experiential discourse,” and, like Beauvoir, this article “undertakes a descriptive analysis of the lived experience and situation of women, grounded in a discussion of thematic, historical, and literary influences and representations” (Fisher 2000, 34). Taking Beauvoir’s lead, I adapt Merleau-Ponty’s conceptualization of the lived body to conduct a feminist phenomenological analysis of girls’ and women’s contemporary experience of embodiment and their ascendance *en corps* in today’s (climbing) world. Moreover, “Climbing like a Girl” critiques and advances the initiative taken in “Throwing like a Girl” by substituting typically negative and dated examples of women’s motility and spatiality with the exemplary ascent of free-climber Lynn Hill.

Lynn Hill climbs as a way of moving and living freely in a world dominated by men. Her recent autobiography, *Climbing Free: My Life in the Vertical World* (2002), chronicles her evolving ethos and style of *free climbing* (the sport, defined below) with emphasis on *climbing freely* (the existential activity). With this book, Hill chronicles the first history of free climbing *and* one of

the first climbing histories ever to be presented from a woman's perspective.⁴ She situates herself in relation to the cultural history of the routes she "frees" (climbs without artificial aid) and she foregrounds her groundbreaking ascents against a gender background that indelibly, if imperceptibly, informs every crux. For Hill, gender prejudice factors into every crux situation in which she freely engages. A rare girl among Yosemite's ambitious climbing fraternity, she throws into relief a "'hypermale' landscape" that Susan Frohlick similarly detects in high-altitude mountaineering (1999–2000). This attention to gender background, that is, to the literal ground whereon men set their routes and meet to redo and outdo them with finessed machismo, invites a Beauvoirian understanding of gender as background to women's situation in general. As Moi explains, Beauvoir adapts Merleau-Ponty's distinction between *situation* (the scene of our existential limit and possibility where we consciously try to enact our freedom) and *background* (the existential conditions of our situation that we do not always recognize and that affect our ability to act regardless of our intent) to include gender as part of the background (197–203). In a society of masculine domination, every situation a woman negotiates is framed by gender so that she is seen as "other" even if she does not see herself as such. Hill's lifelong free-climbing adventure reads as a groundbreaking trajectory of transcendence over the sedimented ceilings of gender no less than over the hazardous immanence of gravity and granite.

Hill describes how she experiences the body en route through the myriad obstacles of big-wall climbing, and she stresses her reliance on intuitive mobility against the implacable verticality and hypermasculinity of her situation. *Climbing Free* presents an unprecedented description of the lived body experience of women's ascension in the West today. For feminist phenomenology, it offers material for a paradigm analysis of how a woman lives her body as a primary situation of being-in-the-world and how she surmounts situational limits, including gender prejudice, by embodying free movement.

THE ASCENT OF WOMEN'S CLIMBING

What does Beauvoir mean by *ascension* in the passage from *Le deuxième sexe* cited in the epigraph with which I began this article? The word has several definitions in French, including "the action of climbing a mountain" and "the social action of rising toward an ideal." At the end of her book, Beauvoir heralds the rise of women in society as free, autonomous individuals in solidarity with the free world at large. But given her predilection for illustrating women's (potential) free movement and existence with climbing examples, it is not far-fetched to argue that she has this other ascension also in mind. In her chapter "*La jeune fille*" (the young girl), she offers mountain climbing as a prime antidote against "a general timidity" that becomes femininity: "Let her swim,

climb mountain peaks, pilot an airplane, battle against the elements, take risks, go for adventure, and she will not feel toward the world that timidity" (1952, 333). Though she accepts as immutable the ontological "fact" of girls' physical weakness (compared to boys' muscularity) and the biological "afflictions" of menstruation and pregnancy, she adamantly attributes the major handicaps of becoming-woman to the existential—and transcendable—cultural, social, psychological, economic, and historical conditions of women's oppressive situation. For Beauvoir, ascendance and transcendence are related.⁵

In 1940s France and in the metropolitan world at large, young women were forbidden to engage in bold physical activity. As Beauvoir described it, femininity is forced on the girl in ways that discourage and inhibit her ability to project herself into the world. To become woman proper, she must abandon play that calls on the forces of the body. Instructed and encouraged to embody feminine passivity, she is diverted from living her body autonomously and adventurously. She finds herself limited to organized sport at best:

Sports are still open to her; but sport which means specialization and obedience to artificial rules, is by no means the equivalent of a free and habitual resort to force; it is a marginal feature of life; it does not provide information on the world and the self as intimately as a free fight, an unpremeditated climb [*une escalade imprévue*]. . . . Moreover, in many countries most girls have no urge toward sports; since scuffles and climbing are forbidden, their bodies have to suffer things only in a passive manner; much more definitely than when younger, they must give up *emerging* beyond what is given and asserting themselves *above* other people; they are forbidden to explore, to venture, to extend the limits of the possible. (330)

Alternatively, mountain climbing embodies precisely "a free and habitual resort to force" and an occasion "to explore, to venture, to extend the limits of the possible." Beauvoir favors climbing for its open ground and free movement outside fixed and rule-bound playing fields. In climbing, one reaches beyond domestic norms, sedimented patterns, and restrictive rules. Each climber pushes the other to climb ever higher, with no limit on how freely one might ascend: "two free beings confront each other as having on the world a hold that they propose to enlarge; climbing higher than a playmate" (330).

Since the publication of *The Second Sex*, women have been climbing higher, harder, and farther afield than Beauvoir could have imagined. Today it is a French woman, Catherine Destivelle, who arguably epitomizes women's reach, with her extreme mastery of every variety of climbing: big-wall rock climbing, alpine climbing, high-altitude mountaineering, ice climbing, and sport climbing. *Ascensions* (2003) is the title of her recent autobiography. Each chapter

features a spectacular alpine ascent (or two): the Trango Tower and the Bonati Pillar, the Drus, the Grands Jorasses and the Cervin, and the Eiger in winter, solo. But Destivelle, with her inimitable combination of hard climbing and severe mountaineering, represents an ascension that is too exceptional to address women in general, though doubtless she plays a role in inspiring other exceptional women to engage in the sport.

Before offering Hill's climbing as that exception to the exception with her style of self-presentation that has made climbing a popular movement in North American girls' (sub)culture, it should be noted that, since Beauvoir's day, climbing has split into an array of specialized activities. What was simply "mountain climbing" has evolved into practices that may or may not aim at topping a mountain, including rock climbing, ice climbing, mixed (rock and ice) climbing, free (or gear) climbing, sport (or aid) climbing, and Alpine climbing (mountaineering). Free climbing involves technical routes up vertical walls, whereas Alpine climbing involves ascending whole mountains via more moderate routes and lengthy approaches over remote, often glaciated, terrain. The objective of free climbing and sport climbing is the route, not the summit, and the more subtle the route the greater the objective.⁶ The route may be bolted for protection for sport climbing, or it may be relatively unbolted with only the occasional anchor set in place for belaying and rappelling. Free climbing is rock climbing that disdains artificial aid and emphasizes the climber's ability to move with the rock's natural features. More than sport climbing, free climbing allows the climber to discover new routes and new moves, and to ascend rock faces deemed not climbable. Free climbing is Hill's primary mode of moving in the world. Though she is as accomplished as Destivelle, Hill describes climbing as a way of embodying freedom that all (climbers, readers) can grasp, even women who have never dreamed of climbing and especially women who want to climb but are intimidated by the masculine domination of the sporting world. How, then, is Hill both exceptional and exemplary?

THE EXEMPLARITY OF LYNN HILL'S ASCENSION

In 1993 Lynn Hill made the first free climb of the long, overhanging Nose route on Yosemite's El Capitan in four days. The next year she did it again—in just twenty-three hours.

No one else has managed to repeat the ascent since.

Once a simple climb was pejoratively called “an easy day for a lady.” That designation has been eclipsed by the statement, “Someday a guy's going to free climb El Cap.”

—Arlene Blum

Lynn Hill is the perfect example of what everyone should aspire to, male or female.

—Yosemite climber Roger Breedlove

Lynn Hill rose to the top of the climbing world with her freestyle ascents. She is best known for becoming the first person to free climb The Nose route on El Capitan, and then to do so under twenty-four hours, a feat unsurpassed for over a decade. With these and a host of other first ascents she has raised the limits of capability for all, showing how even a small-framed woman can embody the highest aspirations in the field. Yet she represents herself not as a superstar but as a free spirit whose bold approach to the world is itself mobilizing. As “stone master” John Long attests, “enjoyment, excellence without guile, tenacity in fearful situations, and naked boldness . . . factored into the success of the five-foot, one-hundred pound dynamo . . . who would soon come to dominate the ‘greatest sport in the world’” (Long 2002, x). In *Climbing Free*, Hill chronicles twenty-six years of throwing herself at big-wall problems to tackle new or well-rehearsed routes with agile open-mindedness. She articulates in thoughtful prose those complex moves she articulates in space (“the vertical world”) and time (“the history of climbing”), and she considers the most difficult moves with existential insight. On “freeing” The Nose, for example, she reflects that, “Whenever I was faced with another unexpected problem, I kept reminding myself, *‘It's all part of the climb. I must accept whatever happens and keep moving forward’*” (242). In part, it is her able description of free movement and existence that makes her case so exemplary for feminist phenomenological analyses.

Climbing Free exemplifies Merleau-Ponty's primary claim that “the body is the vehicle of being in the world” and that “having a body is, for a living creature, to be intervolved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 82). Hill's vertical world becomes approachable and explorable through her

climber's body, whose movements she describes as practiced and spontaneous, thus recalling Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body as comprised of two-layers—"the habit-body and that of the body at this moment" (82). Hill details "moving forward" into an "environment" of granite with which she becomes "intervolved": inhabiting space as a mobile body among rock bodies, she reaches in response to the "call" of the rock and she "wonders" it with her gaze and touch so that it becomes definably climbable. She throws herself into the world into which, as an embodied subject, she is already thrown, augmenting her "thrownness" by adopting what Merleau-Ponty refers to as the body's "natural attitude." He explains:

Apart from the probing of my eye or my hand, and before my body synchronizes with it, the sensible is nothing but a vague beckoning. . . . A sensible datum which is on the point of being felt sets up a kind of muddled problem for my body to solve. I must find the attitude which *will* provide it with the means of becoming determinate. . . . I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery, it "thinks itself within me." (214)

On rock, Hill is ever encountering "unexpected problems" that she plunges into and surmounts by "accepting whatever happens as part of the climb" and by giving the lead to the body that moves intuitively in rapport with the environment.

Hill makes her *Life* exemplary by describing her experience with masterful, guru-like body awareness, as for example, when she recounts her preparations to free climb *The Nose* in a day:

As I practiced going the farthest while expending the least amount of energy, I discovered a new consciousness in my climbing. I learned to appreciate how subtle shifts in my attitude could greatly affect the quality of my movements. By focusing on maintaining a "soft grip" and a "relaxed face," I was better able to relax all the muscles not necessary for each movement. By observing my breathing patterns, I discovered that while reaching in stretched-out positions, it was helpful to inhale in order to give extra lift, and conversely, while making powerful or dynamic moves, it was helpful to exhale in a quick burst or to make a karate-style grunt. I focused on maximizing the use of momentum in order to move quickly through awkward body positions or to jump between holds instead of wasting precious strength. Conversely, I practiced minimizing all excess movement to arrive at a "still point" before committing to a delicate move. Throughout the months of training, I practiced an

attitude of acceptance; no matter what the situation presented, I made an effort to remain patient and relaxed each step of the way. My intent was to pay attention to my intuitive sense and follow the natural intelligence of the body. (240–41)

Although she ultimately used these maneuvers “to climb 5.13b on-sight [for the first time] after climbing all day” (241) on a two-thousand foot route of thirty-three pitches—a feat that few people can even contemplate attempting—Hill does not generalize from her particular experience. Rather, she offers her experience as a particular instance of the general, as particularly instructive, and she names “the body” with its “natural intelligence” as primary instructor.

This attention to the body’s “natural intelligence” foregrounds the knowingness that characterizes phenomenology’s lived body. Hill expresses a climber’s understanding of that primacy of perception that Merleau-Ponty attributes to the “natural self,” that is, to the prereflective, prepersonal knowing of the body that both grounds and transcends the willful, thinking, conscious, and self-conscious cogito. As he explains:

We must indeed distinguish between my express intentions, for example, the plan I now make to climb those mountains, and general intentions which evaluate the potentialities of my environment. Whether or not I have decided to climb them, these mountains appear high to me, because they exceed my body’s power to take them in their stride. . . . Underlying myself as a thinking subject, who am able to take my place at will on Sirius or on the earth’s surface, there is, therefore, as it were a natural self which does not budge from its terrestrial situation and which constantly adumbrates absolute valuations. . . . The mountain is great or small to the extent that, as a perceived thing, it is to be found in the field of my possible actions, and in relation to a level which is not only that of my individual life, but that of “any man.” (440, 442).

Likewise, Hill distinguishes *her* express intentions to climb The Nose from that of *the* “natural intelligence of the body,” or the general, corporeal intuition with which she assesses the next move. She understands her body not as an object among objects but as an embodied intentionality, a “for-itself,” capable of grasping a project and of projecting herself into the world and up the mountain. As Merleau-Ponty explains, “Motility is not a handmaid of consciousness, transporting the body to that point in space of which we have formed a representation beforehand. In order that we may be able to move our body towards an object, the object must first exist for it, our body must not belong to the realm of the ‘in-itself’” (139). Likewise, spatiality is constituted

not by geometric reason or recognition but by the body's "natural" orientation to an object in space. When, for example, we look at a familiar face upside-down, our gaze is radically defamiliarized, and yet, we see a "route" by which to orient ourselves. "To see a face . . . is to take a hold on it, to be able to follow on its surface a certain perceptual route with its ups and downs, and one just as unrecognizable taken in reverse as the mountain up which I was so recently toiling, and down which I am now striding my way" (253). For Hill, spatiality is literally a matter of seeing routes not yet recognizable on the "faces" of an extremely vertical terrain. In the exemplary case of *The Nose*, she scans a face of El Capitan that has been radically defamiliarized by the removal of climbing aids. Calling on the "the natural intelligence of the body," she perceives a route as she moves in lieu of any preestablished line of ascent.

Hill attributes her climbing ability to the body's motility and spatiality, to the body in general. At the same time, she clarifies that the body she relies on for climbing is not that of "any man" but a sexed body. Hers is the body of "any woman" that must approach every climbing situation against a background of masculine domination where the feminine is thrown into (often hostile) relief. She attests to calling on the natural intelligence of the body to see her way through not only the problems that a difficult route presents but also the obfuscation of those problems by an atmosphere of hypermasculinity (or anti-feminism). Hill offers her own experience for reflection on the phenomenal modalities of climbing like a girl as a model of female self-affirmation. That she sees her experience as exemplary is not, however, to say that she places herself above other women. As Moi explains of Beauvoir's tactic of using as examples her own experience to address women's experience at large: "If I have the courage to make an example of myself, I am doing so in the hope that it will be recognized that my experience is an illuminating instance of a more general state of affairs" (2001, 227). Hill makes an example of her climbing experience to illustrate the bodily modalities of free movement and existence that any woman can discover and cultivate for herself, even when she finds herself situated in hypermasculine space.

Another feature of Hill's exemplarity is the authoritative way she voices her climbing experience. As Moi says of Beauvoir, she stylizes a voice that "arrogates" the right to address women's situation with authority even as she speaks as a woman among male peers who question that authority simply because she is a woman (233–34). Hill's autobiographical voice arrogates the right to speak as master climber even though she speaks as a woman in a world dominated by men and encumbered by sexism.⁷ She claims this right with the arrogance of one who feels sure of the capability of her female body and who deflects any gender prejudice that she encounters in the field with undaunted confidence and accustomed defiance. She reports, for example, that a year after readily "sending a route of 5.12d" (ascending a route of unsurpassed difficulty)

at an international free-climbing event, she met and was congratulated by the event's organizer. To his exclamation of surprise—"I have not seen a woman climb a route so hard!"—she responded: "I was flattered, though I felt that the climb had been well within my abilities. By now I was accustomed to being judged not just as a climber, but by my gender" (189). Well aware that by writing on climbing she enters hypermasculine literary territory, Hill presses on as staunchly here as on rock. She refers with dismay to Galen Rowell's climbing history, *The Vertical World of Yosemite* (1974), from which "women are conspicuously absent" and which she reads to prepare for the first all-female ascent of The Shield, another route on El Capitan. Against Rowell's claim that "there simply were no major first ascents in Yosemite done by women in the formative years of the sport," Hill charges that "women climbers were out there" and she names them proudly.⁸ Her own formative years were "directed by a fraternity of men and there was little encouragement, or frankly, inclination for women to participate." But she reveres the "self-taught and determined" women who inspired her with their groundbreaking ascents:

If I had a role model or heroine during my formative years of climbing, it was Bev [Johnson]. . . . While books about climbing touted El Cap climbs like the North America Wall, put up by [Royal] Robbins, [Yvon] Chouinard, and others as being landmarks in climbing history, I personally found it significant to know that Bev had made a ten-day solo ascent of the Dihedral Wall route on El Capitan in 1978. Her effort is barely mentioned in the climbing books, but . . . I was awed. . . . It was the courage and confidence that it took to put herself on the line, to do something on the cutting edge—to climb one of the world's greatest big walls in one of the most challenging ways possible: solo. She had succeeded and she'd given women climbers like me enormous confidence to be ourselves and not feel limited by being a minority in a male-dominated sport. (126)

Making public what and who she finds personally significant, the world-renowned Hill puts women's climbing on Yosemite's historical map. *My Life in the Vertical World* signals her conspicuous contestation of Roswell's *Vertical World* and his reluctance "to change history" by including women (125).

Hill's arrogation of voice appeals to the grrl generation and has been exploited as a popularizing tactic and marketing tool by the climbing media. Poster girl for gear and clothing ads, Hill exhibits her phenomenal prowess with captions like "Someday, some guy's gonna free the Nose" and "It goes boys!"⁹ Major climbing magazines such as *Climbing* and *Rock & Ice* report her ongoing ascent, and *She Sends*, the only magazine devoted to girls and women's climbing, acknowledges her as a major forerunner. Girls today form a critical mass

in the climbing world where they regularly lead high (5.13+) grades, tie into women-only ropes on big walls and alpine ascents, and vagabond together on cross-country climbing trips.¹⁰ Mick Ryan's four-part on-line series "Climb like a Girl" credits Hill with being a generational model for today's hard-climbing, free-living girls and he attributes her formidable style to the valorizing of the phrase. He also pays uncritical tribute to the sexual-commercial exploitation of girl climbers in outdoor fashion venues (Ryan 2005). Nonetheless, his attention to the phenomenal ascent of girls in climbing throws into relief the outdatedness of the norm of bodily experience and performance in "Throwing like a Girl."

A CONCRETE CRITICAL MODEL FOR FEMINIST PHENOMENOLOGY

Hill develops and describes a bold style of climbing like a girl that features optimal motility and spatiality. For Hill, climbing is not a feminine (or masculine) activity, nor does it engage modalities of feminine embodiment, though she learns to climb as a girl in situations dominated by men's methods and masculine ethos. It is as a rare girl among (often macho) male climbing partners and peers that she cultivates her own techniques and style of climbing. Habituating herself to moves that she invents as an adolescent during the formative phase of her career, she climbs like a girl well into womanhood.¹¹ Whether she climbs with men or other women, Hill exemplifies Merleau-Ponty's understanding that to be a body in this world is to be a sexed body, and thus to relate to other bodies differently according, in part, to one's different sex.¹² She advances Beauvoir's understanding that to be a woman in a man's world is to occupy a primary existential situation, one that places different challenges on men and women to act freely and that calls for women's extra effort to overcome masculine domination and normative femininity.

I identify five broad descriptive themes in *Climbing Free* that present key criteria for a paradigm feminist phenomenological study of the lived body. If Young deduces from her throwing example the basic negative (feminine) modalities for analysis of "ambiguous transcendence," "inhibited intentionality," and "discontinuous unity" (35–38), I abstract from Hill's climbing example the positive modalities of "reach," "crux coordination," "flow," "freedom," and "synesthesia." I explore the phenomenological intent implied by the aim "to describe the experiences that have most shaped my life and love for climbing" that Hill announces in her "Acknowledgments." As I see it, Hill's lived female body is ever situated within a territory and history of masculine domination and the key that she offers for transcending/ascending the crux of each situation is to rely on the "natural intelligence of the body" to move through it.

1. *The reach of climbing like a girl as a modality of free movement and existence.* Hill narrates a lifelong course of acquiring moves to attain optimal reach and of exercising those moves to reach even further. She describes becoming conscious

of the world only by literally taking grasp of it, thus confirming Merleau-Ponty's contention that "our body, as the potentiality of this or that part of the world, surges towards objects to be grasped and perceives them" (1962, 106).¹³ Climbing for Hill means surging toward objects that make themselves perceptibly graspable, maneuverable, and reachable. Her reach envisions a virtual *horizon* of handholds, exemplifying the phenomenon that "we see as far as our hold on things extends" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 277). When she discovers how to make a hold by grasping it, she returns to it repeatedly until she "knows" it bodily, observing with Merleau-Ponty that "knowledge is in the hands, which is forthcoming only when bodily effort is made, and cannot be formulated in detachment from that effort" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 144).

Recalling a lifelong trajectory of first ascents, from her first climb ever to the first free ascent of El Capitan's Nose, Hill pauses on those cruxes that have forced her to embody new levels of reach. It is a *girl's* reach that marks her formidable style, as John Long explains:

Lynn Hill was (and still is, when she wants to be) as good as the very best male climbers, which considering her size, is miraculous. Many climbs favor masculine dimensions, such as wide fist cracks and steep faces obliging a long reach. Lynn comes up to the middle of my chest, and I swear she can slot her fist inside a walnut shell. Yet even on those wide cracks and reachy face climbs she can hold her own. God knows how. (2002, x)

For Hill, who does not consider her climbing miraculous, it is only right that a girl should find a reach that fits her girl's physique, especially in free climbing that involves "anything using your own body—hands, feet, gams, et al. [*sic*]—for upward progress" (xi). As a girl among men, Hill has to invent a makeshift style that alters or surmounts set routes, methods, and limits of reach. It is a girl's reach that she adapts to free climb routes previously mapped and bolted by men, including The Nose, at the apex of her career.

Hill came to climbing at fourteen when her sister's boyfriend took her and her sister to Big Rock near Los Angeles. The girls were left to climb alone and Hill's sister, who secretly feared climbing, handed Hill the lead. It was a germinal moment for Hill who discovered for herself how to "send" a route and to clip her rope into protection (Hill 2002, 27–32). Later, on first trying bouldering, she discovered that she must find a reach of her own even when following men's lead: "I found that it wasn't much help to me to watch the way other climbers solved a problem. Being small, with my own unique physical characteristics, I found that I often climbed completely differently from the men who surround me. To get up a boulder problem, I had to explore all the options and touch all the holds myself" (43). She also learned to handle the sexism of men whom she offended with her ability and who treated her as a gender interloper (43).

For the adolescent Hill, climbing presented a situation that necessitated both reaching like a girl and reaching beyond the limits of femininity that the climbing world would have her interpellate.

“Crimping” and “slipping” name two of the most differentiated moves that Hill describes in reaching like a girl. They involve pinching small features of the rock with one’s fingers and slipping one’s hands into very thin cracks (129), and are the primary methods that she uses to ascend problems that men tend to engage with dynamic thrust. Early in her career, Hill partnered with John Long—“Largo”—who is nearly twice her size. Though graceful, Long has relied on techniques of jamming his fists into wide cracks and leaping dynamically from hold to hold (129). For Hill, these differences arise from the body’s intuitive and exploratory fit with the rock’s body and not from an embodiment of gender norms. A crux of climbing like a girl is the challenge to debunk the myth that a small/girl’s stature is inadequate to the task:

The big lesson for me here was to realize that despite what appeared to be a limitation due to my small stature, I could create my own method of getting past a difficult section of rock. John’s size and power enabled him to make long reaches and explosive lunge moves that were completely out of my range. I, on the other hand, often found small intermediate holds that John couldn’t even imagine gripping. But more importantly, I realized that no matter what our physical differences, with the right combination of vision, desire, and effort, just about any climb was possible. (143)

As Hill sees it, the rock beckons and the body reaches, and in this synthesis of external world and body intentionality, the climber elaborates her environment in movement that mimes the surface she climbs. Hill must fit her girl’s body to the form of the rock and not to some gender-prescribed body form. She sees her reach reflected in those mirrors in the cliff on which she traces her own bodily dimensions. This natural mirror eclipses any imaginary mirror implanted there by masculine specularity. Learning to climb with Long forced her to reach her next move relative to the rock not the man, and to draw on the body’s innate “mimetic faculty.”¹⁴ By contrast, Young views “throwing like a girl” against the motility and spatiality of boys and men, and finds women’s capability lacking in comparison.

Playing on rock with other girls, Hill discovered that she shares their soft-fingered light-footed style. With Mari Gingery, for example, she “found a sisterhood in figuring out our own methods of getting up sections of route the guys simply muscled through” (87). Readily attuned to each other’s style, they “lose track of time, like children playing, as we roamed the desert from boulder to boulder, climbing until our skin burned from the sharp rock and we couldn’t

hang onto the holds any more.” Often “the only women in a sea of coarse-talking, hard-cranking men,” they matched each other’s reach in a composite style of their own making: “We shared a love of free climbing, and a big part of our devotion came from the joy of figuring out our own unique choreography of movement using the natural features of the rock.” Climbing like a girl for Hill involves climbing not only differently than men but also with other girls with whom she learns to assimilate a play of reach comparable to body size and kinesthetic sensitivity.

2. *The crux of climbing like a girl as a modality of free movement and existence.* Hill opens her autobiography with a near-fatal fall off a crag in Buoux, France. Falling is a basic climbing skill, but this fall was wholly unanticipated. Preoccupied by a forthcoming world-class sport-climbing competition that she was training to win, Hill forgot to tie into the rope. After handily ascending the 72-foot pitch (the height of a seven-story building), she leaned back to rappel and hurled unanchored into space. During recovery and with intense reflection, she decided to abandon sport climbing and to devote her life to free climbing.

In every climb there is a crux. It is the most difficult and most daring (most “committed”) section of a route. Exemplary climbers like Hill seek the crux that will test their ability to surpass the limit of human reach. But on this easy outing in Buoux, the fall was the crux. After kicking off from the top belay, Hill found herself falling. Yet she did not abandon intentionality. Her habit-body saved her: “As I fell backward I waved my arms frantically in a circular motion to keep myself from landing on my head. Instincts dating back to my days as a gymnast must have resurfaced from deep in my subconscious: *Look for a landing*, some inner voice instructed me. I veered toward the leaves of a tree to my left . . . tucked my body into a ball, blasted through its branches, then my left buttock slammed into a lattice of tree roots sprawling on the ground” (7–8). A woman not so habituated to climbing like a girl would have been immobilized. She not only defied imminent death but also lived to reflect on her failure to secure herself and its existential implications.

Hill survived this crux to face the crucial decision of whether to continue sport climbing as the world’s top female competitor or to relinquish her career for free climbing. She chose free climbing despite the uncertain livelihood it offers and minus sport climbing’s certain triumphs, set routes, and ready lucre. It was not high expectation but the encumbrance of competition that she was aiming to avoid. Rejecting sport climbing’s crowds, its circus of events, and its sexism and commercialism, Hill was seeking the autonomy of a modest living, a single sponsor, and climbing with friends. She interprets her fall as a cue to reclaim her climbing life from competitive sport and to liberate the range of her free reach. She re-creates her situation to further what Beauvoir calls “the free movement of existence”: “In order for my freedom not to risk coming to

grief against the obstacle which in its very engagement it has raised, in order that it might still pursue its movement in the face of failure, it must, by giving itself a particular content, aim by means of it at an end which is nothing else but precisely the free movement of existence" (Beauvoir 1948/1976, 29). Hill's free climbing incorporates climbing's freest movement by ascending new routes of unimaginable difficulty including those that had only been aid-climbed. Through free climbing, she regards her life in the vertical world as a lifelong crux situation, extending her reach into ever remote and featureless space.

One of climbing's most outgoing situationists, Hill takes the lead in discovering and tackling each new crux, never abandoning it to the hard-climbing men with whom she frequently partners. Her resolve draws from her early experience of taking over where others cannot go. For example, on her first aid climb of The Nose when she was just eighteen, she led the penultimate pitch in the dark (Hill 2002, 101). Her description of this pitch illustrates Merleau-Ponty's contention that nowhere as much as in nocturnal space do we sense the "tireless impulse which drives us to seek an anchorage and to surmount ourselves in things" (1962, 283). But she identifies the crux of this climb as the point where she and the other woman on the rope had to take over the lead from their male partner whose vertigo had become paralytic (Hill 2002, 94). The women must then and thereafter overcome any tendency to look to the man for leadership before proceeding across the void. His terror and dependence ultimately proved more taxing than climbing manless would have been (98).

When Hill returned to free climb The Nose fifteen years later, she approached those crux sections she had previously aid climbed with prospective and retrospective vision. She mobilized free movement that called upon past maneuvers at the same time it projected her reach into a new range of mobility. "The idea of making an all free ascent of The Nose *in a day* represented a new free climbing challenge in a class of its own" (Hill 2002, 240). Hill's detailed description of rehearsing through these cruxes brilliantly illustrates Merleau-Ponty's observation that "in every focusing movement my body unites present, past and future, it secretes time, or rather it becomes that location in nature where, for the first time, events . . . project round the present a double horizon of past and future and acquire a historical orientation" (1962, 239). In free climbing The Nose, Hill did not just lead where no woman has led before. She freed the hardest route in the history of men's climbing. To do so she arrogated a territorial and historical right to master and better what men had previously achieved and with a technique so spare it virtually stripped the venerated route of its heavy apparatus. Climbers remember the first ascent in 1958 in awe of its "epic" haul up the face of "more than eighty pounds of hardware (mostly pitons)" over twenty-seven days and the hardest of Yosemite's hard men, Warren Harding and Dean Caldwell, "laboriously drilling bolts and rivets to get through huge blank

sections” (Hill 2002, 97). Hill freed and linked these sections in a single push to the top in under twenty-four hours (225–47). She flowed through her paces, anchored in the body’s synthesis of past and future projects, while surpassing the bolts of history and its background of exclusion and omission.¹⁵

3. *The flow of climbing like a girl as a modality of free movement and existence.* Hill regards reach as a consequence of flow and flow as a consequence of moves that generate momentum. Reach draws on the momentum of flow so as to “dance” unaided over extremely vertical terrain: “The balletlike free climbing movements we had perfected allowed us to dance on our fingers and toes over many sections of rock that Salathé [a historic Yosemite climber] would have aid-climbed” (85). Accordingly, flow entails choreographing the push/pull forces of full-body torsion with agility, speed, and rhythm, something girls are good at given their tendency to refine technique rather than to “muscle through.” Hill experiences flow as a synchrony of mind and body as she swings from hold to hold in pace with her perception of graspable features. For example, she describes rehearsing the interval of moves before arriving at the flow she needed to send *Masse Critique*—the first 5.14 ascent by a woman:

As I tried the route more and more, moves that had seemed impossible on one day became feasible the next as my body and mind worked in sync to make one section of the climb flow into the next. . . . [On] the ninth day since I had embarked on *Masse Critique* . . . I passed each crux section as if in a trance. I made sure to wait for the right moment of positive feeling before committing to action, but once committed I was conscious only of the flow of movement. (208–10)

Climbing like a girl for Hill entails flow, whereas throwing like a girl for Young entails “discontinuous unity”—positive and negative expressions, respectively, of what Merleau-Ponty identifies as the body’s “unifying and synthesizing function” (Young 2005, 37–38). As Young explains,

By projecting an aim toward which it moves, the body brings unity to and unites itself with its surroundings; through the vectors of its projected possibilities it sets things in relation to one another and to itself. The body’s movement and orientation organizes the surrounding space as a continuous extension of its own being. Within the same act in which the body synthesizes its surroundings, moreover, it synthesizes itself. The body synthesis is immediate and primordial. “I do not bring together one by one the parts of my body; this translation and this unification are performed once and for all within me: they are my body itself.” (37–38)

Even though “body synthesis is immediate and primordial” for all human beings, “women tend to locate their motion in part of the body only, leaving the rest of the body relatively immobile” (38). Accordingly, femininity so inhibits women that discontinuous unity becomes their typical motility. Conversely, flow becomes women like Hill for whom this basic bodily facility evolves with practice. Hill describes achieving flow not just by exercising intuition but by training extensively. Much of her *Life* is a reflection on how she habituates her body to climb like a girl. Habit is her prime modus operandi for evolving as a climber. To climbing Hill brings gymnastics skills. She admires gymnastics’ flowing choreography but rejects its stultifying feminine mannerisms. “As an eager young girl,” she reflects, “I was more interested in learning complex acrobatic maneuvers than focusing on pretty formalities. The cute poses, stylish hand gestures, and fake smiles . . . went against my nature” (Hill 2002, 26). Climbing stimulates her girlhood predilection for acrobatics, while also delivering her from gymnastics’ gender performativity: “Where gymnastics required a contrived, scripted form of grace, climbing was beautifully free-form and spontaneous, each movement being different from any other” (43). Eventually, she embodies a repertoire of climbing maneuvers over a range of terrains. “Crimping,” “slipping,” “stemming,” “smearing,” “jamming,” and “chunking,” she links various moves as she goes and as the rock requires. With each episode of climbing, she illumines Merleau-Ponty’s hypothesis that habit is the fundamental form of creativity (1962). As Beth Preston clarifies, “Since habit is the basic ability to generalize and adapt familiar bodily movements to situations which are in some respects unfamiliar, habit is essentially creative” (1996, 178). Hill cultivates a climber’s body—a body primed for climbing creatively—and thereby extends the range of terrain she can approach meaningfully by making it climbable. For Hill as for Merleau-Ponty, “The body has understood and habit has been cultivated when it has absorbed a new meaning, and assimilated a fresh core of significance” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 146).

In describing her rehearsal of moves through Changing Corners, a crux section on The Nose, Hill demonstrates the little-understood process of acquiring and exercising habit at the same time:

Climbing up this corner demanded an ingenuity of movement that I had rarely ever encountered. We spent three days working on this pitch, and by the end I had pieced together a sequence of moves that went together like a crazy dance. I had invented a wild tango of smears with my feet, tenuous stems, back steps and cross steps, lay backs and arm bars, and pinches and palming maneuvers. . . . Using a carefully coordinated sequence of opposite pressures between my feet, hands, elbows, and hips against the shallow walls of the corner, I turned my body 180 degrees around. (Hill 2002, 237)

This passage shows how she exercises old habits (smears, stems, lay backs, arm bars) and links them into a new choreography (a crazy dance, a wild tango) on terrain that is, at once, familiar and unfamiliar (she had aid climbed The Nose before but this was her first attempt to free climb it). As well, it demonstrates her way of acquiring new habits that itself is habitual; she habitually choreographs visually the difficult “chunks” of a pitch before actually dancing them through.¹⁶

Hill’s rehearsals on The Nose recall Merleau-Ponty’s example of the virtuoso organist whose cultivated habit-body can adapt spontaneously to an instrument she has never played and perform difficult scores on sight with flourish. The musician’s “movements during rehearsal are consecratory gestures,” Merleau-Ponty observes; “they draw affective vectors, discover emotional sources, and create a space of expressiveness” (146). Likewise, Hill’s movements during rehearsal of Changing Corners cue her to “discover a new consciousness” and appreciate those “subtle shifts in attitude” that affect her performance (241). After rehearsing for weeks, she is able to link the intervals of crux moves so “the sequences flowed together” and thereby to complete all thirty-three pitches in a single day’s crescendo (246).

Hill confirms Richard Mitchell’s understanding that flow is climbing’s quintessential “situation.” With the aim of theorizing “mountain experience” for social psychology, Mitchell defines flow as “the state in which action follows upon action according to an internal logic which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part. We experience it as a unified flowing form one moment to the next in which we are in control of our actions and which there is little distinction between self and environment, or between past, present, and future” (1983, 153, quoting Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi). Like Merleau-Ponty, Mitchell stresses the body’s unity and synthesis, and he further emphasizes social cohesiveness: “A flow situation is a social system with no deviance” (168). Accordingly, a flow situation occurs when everyone climbs in accord with the collective ethos. It is remarkable then that Hill is able to achieve “flow” despite the masculine prejudice she so often encounters. Before setting foot on Masse Critique, for example, she learned how famed French climber Jibé Tribout proclaimed after making the first ascent that “no woman will ever be able to climb this route” (208). She tackled the task defiantly, and by her ninth attempt, she surmounted both the crux situation and its background of gender prejudice, reflecting that “once committed I was conscious of only the flow of movement” (210).

4. *The freedom of climbing like a girl as a modality of free movement and existence.* For most of her climbing life, Hill has surmounted obstacles that she has voluntarily approached in the first place. Her climbing is an exemplary embodiment of the freedom Merleau-Ponty ascribes to the task-able body in general:

An unclimbable rock face, a large or small, vertical or slanting rock, are things which have no meaning for anyone who is not intending to surmount them, for a subject whose projects do not carve out such determinate forms from the uniform mass of the *in itself* and cause an orientated world to arise—a significance in things. There is, then, ultimately nothing that can set limits to freedom, except those limits that freedom itself has set in the form of its various initiatives, so that the subject has simply the external world that he gives himself. . . . When I say this rock is unclimbable, it is certain that this attribute . . . can be conferred upon it only by being the project of *climbing it*, and by a human presence. It is, therefore, freedom which brings into being the obstacles to freedom, so that the latter can be set over against it as its bounds. (1962, 437, 439, emphasis added)

Climbing Free chronicles a life of free movement initiated by prospects of free climbing. In this life, Hill deploys the freedom of free climbing to reach and raise the limits of climbing universally so that everyone's route to the unclimbable is projected ever further. Hers is a life of freely designated and creatively choreographed first ascents.¹⁷ Though Hill records only her most accomplished climbs, she describes how she approaches them, knowing that many have been judged unclimbable for a woman, and how she must liberate herself and other women of such judgment.

Hill advances (her) free climbing with an ethos of climbing as freely as possible. Evolving her own style of climbing, she elaborates existential free movement or movement encumbered by any obstacle other than what that movement designs for itself. By becoming proficient at climbing like a girl, she frees herself to confront gender prejudice and the extra, insidious challenge it presents. A major aspect of her free ethos is commitment to women's self-reliance. She counts the six-day, first all-female ascent of The Shield (another Yosemite big-wall route) in which she took part as an opening of male-dominated history and territory to women's (self)-discovery (Hill 2002, 118–25). Her first all-female ascent on The Shield prepared her to free The Nose and, later, to send Bravo Les Filles, a big-wall route in remote Madagascar that she describes as “perhaps the most difficult ascent ever done by a team of women” (268).

To free climb more freely, Hill learns to manipulate new technology in her repertory of movements. She recalls using Realized Ultimate Reality Pitons (RURPs) for the first time on her climb of The Shield (123), exemplifying what Merleau-Ponty defines as the body's ability to “incorporate” instruments into its own sphere of motility (1962, 145). She reports inventing and defending new techniques that advance free climbing's evolving freestyle—for example,

“hang-dogging,” a technique of resting on an anchor while visually choreographing crux moves (186–88). No mere adventurer, Hill furthers the freedom of other climbers by communicating her technical knowledge. Her book is one site of communication. She also publishes on-line climbing lessons. Recently, she has been running climbing camps around the United States for people of varied skill levels. The aim of all these projects is to teach students how a climber can embody free-flowing movements by relying on “the natural intelligence of the body” even as she incorporates new technique and technology:

The essence of climbing technique hinges on having a keen sense of body awareness. Experience plays a critical role, but the focus of attention is paramount. . . . When I look at the shape of each hold, I imagine a perpendicular line of force in relation to the angle of the hold, which I refer as the “vector force.” No matter how the rest of my body shifts position in its upward progress, I try to maintain this perpendicular application of force on each hold. With this simple image in mind, I allow the natural intelligence of my body to control the push/pull forces necessary to create a smooth flow of movement. (n.d. 1–2)

Believing that “having a conscious understanding of the various forces and body mechanics involved helps me optimize my efficiency on the rock,” Hill teaches that understanding as an exemplary practitioner (2). At the same time, she acknowledges that much body awareness is preconscious and pre-personal. Instead of dwelling on personal chutzpah like most (male) climbing literature, her book focuses on a kinesiology that transcends the ego. “Is it about my ego or about the climb?” she asks, stressing that proficiency in climbing necessitates relinquishing self-conscious expectation (Hill quoted in Potterfield n.d. 5). In emphasizing the body’s ability to synthesize all the components of motility, spatiality, and sensitivity that make up the climb, Hill confirms Merleau-Ponty’s key contention that “it is not I who touch [or move], it is my body” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 316). It is the body with its general, prepersonal (but not unsexed¹⁸) orientation toward free movement that allows Hill to transcend her own reach. At crucial moments of every climb, she gives over to the natural intelligence of the body to make the push/pull forces needed to create flow. Instead of stridently willing her way to the top, she switches control to bodily intuition. Nor does she think about gender even as she surmounts gender barriers. She enacts a climbing like a girl in prepersonal and prereflective rapport with the rock, and the rock, she acknowledges, takes a role in her climbing like a girl. She engages the rock in free play, led by the rock’s vague call for her to climb in ways she does not anticipate. By giving the lead to this natural attitude, Hill frees her movement to evolve before it sediments into a trademark style.¹⁹

5. *The synesthesia of climbing like a girl as a modality of free movement and existence.* Hill describes how, even on her first outing, she perceived a connection between the form and feel of the rock and her desire to climb it. “By the end of the day I knew I had been hooked on some new sensation. . . . I watched the late afternoon sun turn the granite orange and highlight every nubbin and detail on its surface. Already I began to associate the beautiful form and texture of the rock with my desire to climb it. From that day on, I never saw a cliff in exactly the same way again” (Hill 2002, 32). Her “desire” arose from the “sensation” of looking on a landscape over which she had been moving and being struck by its sight and feel. As Merleau-Ponty explains, “Sensation is a modality of general existence, one already destined for a physical world and which runs through me without my being the cause of it” (1962, 216). Moreover, Hill perceives the close tie between sensation and movement. Only *after* a day of climbing does this “new sensation” dawn on her. It is exposure to moving on granite, not just the rays of the setting sun that illuminate the cliff so sensorially.

Moreover, Hill recalls sensing the cliff’s tangibility or tangible visibility. A sensation of the cliff’s form and *texture* inspires her vision of climbing it. Touch for Hill is climbing’s visionary dimension. Her descriptions of discovering movement through touch illustrate what Merleau-Ponty means when he says that “like the exploratory gaze of true vision, the ‘knowing touch’ projects us outside our body through movement” (270). For example, she refers to the “texture” of rock that opens her to “an entirely new world of climbing” when she on-sights routes in New York’s Shawanagunk Mountains (The Gunks):

When I laid hands on our first route, called Cascading Crystal Kaleidoscope, I found myself in agreement. Oxides and lichens had painted the cliff with a riot of reds, greens, and yellows; sharp edges perfectly shaped for fingers peppered the walls; and tiers of roofs jutted out over our heads. Out West, I had been raised on a diet of granite, but here, on the quartz conglomerate of the Gunks, I discovered that a different texture of rock could offer me an entirely new world of climbing. (Hill 2002, 175)

She describes the limestone cliffs of Fontainebleau as equally wondrous to the touch: “I was amazed at how fluid and dancelike the movement could be on this ornately featured rock. Pockets and edges provided in-cut handholds on even the most overhanging faces, and this produced wildly acrobatic climbs” (188). The limestone’s porosity stimulates creative maneuvering. Natural “in-cut handholds” produce “wild” climbing choreography in a dance that entails what Merleau-Ponty calls a “symbiosis” of the body and the outside world. The outside world impresses its feel on the body and the body greets that impression with its touch. Climbing circumvents solipsism. The world outside the body enters into the experience of climbing with touching intimacy. “Hardness and

softness, roughness and smoothness, moonlight and sunlight, present themselves in our recollection,” Merleau-Ponty observes, “as certain kinds of symbiosis, certain ways the outside has of invading us and certain ways we have of meeting this invasion” (1962, 317).

Does Hill sense rock with a *girl's* touch? How does her description of synesthesia and symbiosis compare with that of men's? Men's climbing literature rarely considers the intricate and propelling chiasms of touch, and very few, if any, attribute the prime mover of their motility to the feel of the rock. But in a rare piece of writing by Peter Livesey, touch is highlighted. Predictably, “I Feel Rock” (1980) privileges the “I” and “eye” of feeling. Hardness is what Livesey's I/eye rationalizes as the measure of a route's difficulty, as focus fixates on the magnitude of rock features, the size of nut or clog needed to be inserted for protection, and the dynamic hand-jamming moves he uses to haul himself up a face. Instead of incorporating rock and gear into the body of the climb, Livesey's narrator objectifies them: “The first pitch is a wicked curved slash like a sabre scar, but it's just my size. 40ft. Up, 20ft. to go, and I put a chock in. Handjam-size, number 9, pick it up on a tatty white tape and throw it in” (1980, 75). With intentional virility, but too aggressively, “I” throws the chock in—just beyond reach, and when “I” tries to pull the chock out, he spies the hand of another climber as it reaches for the same hold. The hand remains detached until the end of the story, when “I” spots the other climber “with my nut”—another sexual synecdoche of disembodiment like the “slash” (75).

The body that stars in Livesey's tableaux of cragging and big-wall climbing is highly masculinized and, at the same time, highly alienated as an instrument of egoistic reason. The “I” finds hands serviceable but has no use for feet (“feet are an embarrassment: there appears nowhere to put them. . . . I finally worked out that the best scheme was to hide them away underneath your feet” [79]). Then there are “discreet” walls with “small hidden holds 10ft. apart with smirches, flickets and wrinkles in between, but where to go? . . . So I hand on a half a wire nut and smash hell out of my number 1 Clog, and make it . . . not so unreasonable” (77). Livesey accents his discourse of feeling with sexist machismo: “Do you know what it feel like to sit up there on the biggest tit there is, looking down on a pine-chested woman with eleven more tits around you? Outasight, man” (80).

A rhetoric of masculinity blocks Livesey from exploring the finer phenomena of attending to the feel of the rock. He regards any situation that threatens to elude his grasp as “ugly,” and sees beauty only where it arises from his own corporeality: “The ugliness of the situation is enveloping, the crack itself more of an evil unnatural slit If any beauty is to be found on Wellington Crack, it can only be through feedback from the body and its movement” (78). In contrast, Hill embraces all features and textures of rock with an adaptive orientation to the outside world: “Different rock types have different forms and you have to

adapt yourself to that form and shape. That's the beauty of climbing; . . . there's no better way to learn about nature and life than to go with the flow" (quoted in Gasperini 2001, 3). Livesey may not represent the way men in general feel rock but he does throw into relief Hill's very different way of feeling when climbing like a girl, as well as the masculinism of the situation she entered into when she first began to climb.

With texture, Hill emphasizes color (whereas color is entirely missing from Livesey's narrative). She points to the "granite orange" of the first slab she climbed at Big Rock, of the "reds, greens, and yellows" of The Gunk's "quartz conglomerate," and "the blues and greens" and other rock tones of the High Sierras (Hill 2002, 163). She views rock color and texture as intricately intertwined, confirming Merleau-Ponty's observation that "colour is never merely a colour, but the colour of a certain object, and the blue of a carpet would never be the same blue were it not a woolly blue" (1962, 313). For Hill, seeing color illuminates texture and connects touch to vision. It also nurtures the symbiosis she senses between herself (her touch) and the rock (its touch): "I loved the touch and feel of the rock, and the intimacy between climber and cliff. That to me was beauty" (Hill 2002, 79).

The body that undertakes to climb like a girl in Hill's autobiography is an *aesthesiological body*. Merleau-Ponty coined the term to signify the cohesive orchestration of synesthesia, kinesthesia, and body-world symbiosis. "The moments of the sonata, the fragments of the luminous field," he writes, "adhere to one another with a cohesion without concept, which is of the same type as the cohesion of the parts of my body, or the cohesion of my body with the world" (1968, 152). Hill's climbing body performs free-flowing movement all over the vertical world, adapting to different terrain through movement that touches, touches upon, is *in touch* with, and attuned to, nature. For her, "climbing is about being in harmony with nature. . . . If you're open and receiving it—nature is the best form of art to me" (quoted in Gasperini 2001, 5). Having to improvise on routes set by male bodies with a reach well beyond her own dimensions, Hill cultivates a profound adaptability to the rock's natural features. Conversely, natural features prompt her to move with greater affect and move her to move more effectively than do bolts and other man-made mechanical aids.

Such kin/aesthetic symbiosis between the lived body and the natural world presages geoethics. Hill's involvement with rock generates respect for it and for the earth in general, as well as for "native people that still maintain a close connection to the earth" (Hill 2002, 268). She and other principled free climbers make "a pact with the rock" to climb without altering it even "if that meant you came to a blank section and had to climb 50 feet without protection" (160). She opposes "people [who] actually change the rock so that they can climb it" and who "chip holds and add cement, so that it matches what they think the choreography should be," and she insists that "if I can't adapt my form to the

rock, then I shouldn't be doing it" (quoted in Gasperini 2001, 5). She has started to publicize this pact. A poster advertising North Face climbing gear features a photo of Hill leaning out on a sea cliff in Ha Long Bay, Vietnam. Taken from above, the image barely sights her belayer far below, while the cliff is tangibly, luminously, and colorfully visible. The caption reads: "I do not conquer that which is my partner."

OVERTHROWING "THROWING LIKE A GIRL"

Hill's exemplary climbing body contrasts sharply with the body that serves to exemplify women's typical experience of embodiment in Young's "Throwing like a Girl." Young would disqualify Hill's experience as exceptional rather than typical. But Young's idea of typical presumes a situation wherein girls are restrained by systemic sexism from acquiring and exercising forceful, full-bodied movement. Given that the situation has changed since 1977, when Young first presented her paper, and that girls are now running, swinging, hitting, and even climbing more than ever, this description of girls' "typical" motility is radically outmoded. Women like Hill have transformed girls' climbing (throwing, running, and so on) by creating modalities of free movement and existence for themselves and other women. Thanks to Hill, and the *grrl* generation that she modeled, "climbing like a girl" is a valorizing phrase in today's sport culture.

Young deduces her analytical criteria for understanding feminine motility and spatiality from the way that girls and women move their bodies in basic, task-oriented activity. Drawing her prime "throwing example" from a study by Edward Straus and unsatisfied with the reason he gives—the self-evident one of "femininity"—to explain the relative failure of girls (versus boys) to use lateral space, she sets out to demystify and illuminate how girls' "embodiment" of normative femininity affects their performance and lived body experience. From this example, Young deduces that the feminine mode of throwing (a limited pronation of the forearm in place of full-body movement) implies a feminine mode of performing all full-body movement: "Not only is there a typical style of throwing like a girl, but there is a more or less typical style of running like a girl, climbing like a girl, swinging like a girl, hitting like a girl. They have in common first that the whole body is not put into fluid and directed motion" (2005, 33). Young equates the current (1970s) expressions and experience of "feminine bodily comportment" with "a general *failure* to make full use of the body's spatial and lateral potentialities" (33). Conflating empirical examples of bodily comportment with the theory of lived body experience, Young reasons that what was typical for girls and women to experience in conformity with 1970s femininity exemplified their experience of embodiment in general, and thus constituted the phenomenological norm. Accordingly, girls and women *typically* and in general (for all time and in all realms of activity) embody a

feminine motility whose “style tends not to reach, extend, lean, stretch, and follow through in the direction of her intention” (146).

To the throwing example Young adds one from her own experience, namely hiking, that she confesses performing overcautiously for “fear of getting hurt, which is greater in women than in men” (34). These examples share a bodily incapability that Young interprets as typical of not just hyperfeminine girls and women but all or most girls and women, an interpretation that allows her to make general observations from her own particular experiences. To be sure, these cases of throwing and hiking exemplify what girls and women typically cannot do if they embody gender constraints and stereotypes. And they do exemplify how girls and women typically performed full-body activity in the 1960s when Strauss conducted his study. But they do not exemplify what girls and women *can* do beyond embodying gender, nor do they exemplify how girls and women typically perform full-body activity today.

Young’s focus on “feminine embodied experience” deviates from Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology not in that it regards gender as a factor of women’s embodied experience but in that it privileges gender to the exclusion of factors that are crucial to phenomenological analysis. First, Young constitutes gender as the *source* of bodily incapability for girls and women, whereas Beauvoir uses Merleau-Ponty to understand gender as the social and cultural *background* against which girls and women find themselves situated and must try to confront and overcome. Second, Young emphasizes the typical incapability of “feminine bodily comportment” over Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on the body’s general capability—or the body’s “natural,” pre-personal, pre-reflective motility and spatial orientation that allows the individual to negotiate, if not transcend, gender and other sedimented social norms. Third, the examples from which Young extracts her criteria for analyzing feminine motility center on the inexperienced and unpracticed body, whereas it is the experienced, well-practiced, habit-body that for Merleau-Ponty constitutes the norm. The unpracticed body can hardly be the basis for a phenomenological analysis of the lived body experience of *active* girls and women. Yet as Preston explains, Young

has limited the examples from which her phenomenological description is drawn overwhelmingly to activities in which women are typically not in the habit of participating, and has admitted moreover, that her results cannot be expected to apply to the embodied experience of any women who, untypically, *do* engage in these same activities. . . . In so doing she has not merely taken masculine embodied experience as the norm, but held up male sex-typed activities as the ideal, as paradigmatic for bodily activity in general. Consequently, she is led to

claim that if women's bodily experience and performance in these activities is deficient, then all of our bodily experience is similarly deficient. (Preston 1996, 180–81)

If Young “has laid the groundwork for a phenomenological account of this underemphasized aspect of embodied existence” (184), she has left it to women like Hill, who do cultivate active and adventurous habit bodies, to raise this account off the ground.

Hill's free climbing presents a contemporary and kinetic counterexample to Young's dated and static “throwing example.” A phenomenologist of sorts, Hill shares with Merleau-Ponty the same emphasis on the “natural intelligence of the body” as a general and primordial being-for-itself that finds intuitively the motility with which to “grasp” the “beckoning” (vertical) world as a “problem,” and with which to anchor and transcend itself. Like Beauvoir, she understands gender to be not a source of bodily incapability but a background of constraint and antipathy to most (climbing) situations that she resolves to overcome with bodily know-how. Hill exemplifies, above all, how she or any woman can climb like a girl most capably and adventurously without endorsing and performing femininity (or masculinity) even as she lives in a hypermasculinized world.

Hill's life-long experience of discovering and evolving ways to extend her reach in vertical space departs radically from that “feminine bodily comportment” which Young describes as “a general *failure* to make full use of the body's spatial and lateral potentialities.” Young asserts that the feminine style, which women typically embody, “tends not to reach, extend, lean, stretch, and follow through in the direction of her intention,” whereas Hill habituates her body to dancing on rock with a full-body reach and a flowing choreography of moves that extend the direction of her intention over thousands of vertical feet. Finally, Young's throwing example echoes the “general timidity” that Beauvoir views as symptomatic of women's interpellation of the mythic debilities of “the second sex,” whereas Hill's exemplary climbing overthrows all fear of gravity in its literal leap of bodily faith (Young 2005, 32–33).

In conclusion, “Climbing like a Girl” presents a paradigm case study of woman's ability to move freely in the world and in rapport with nature. In contrast to the paradigm set by “Throwing like a Girl,” this study emphasizes the category of the lived body over that of gender, and it shows how women can, by cultivating the body's full and free movement, surmount the gender limits of their situation. It restores the centrality that Beauvoir gives the lived body in her adaptation of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology for a feminist analysis of women's experience. Adapting Beauvoir, in turn, I focus on the lived experience of supreme bodily mobility in place of her focus on the lived experience of an immobilizing and debilitating female sexual biology. With such affirmative emphasis on the lived body, this study is also able to integrate feminism and

phenomenology more fully than Young's restrictive, negative application of phenomenology to an analysis of feminine embodied experience.

Hill's exemplary climbing offers for feminist phenomenological analysis modalities of free movement and existence that Hill herself identifies and elaborates from a woman's evolving perspective. These modalities—reach, crux coordination, flow, freedom, and synesthesia—are those that women, in general, can cultivate if given the chance to climb. Hill moreover demonstrates that these modalities, elaborated through life-long practice, are the route to an evolving engagement with the larger world. “What started out on a rocky outcrop in southern California twenty-six years ago has become a vehicle for evolving as a person, learning about the world and sharing those experiences with others” (270). Habituated to climb like a girl, Hill goes on to inhabit the different vertical worlds of “Morocco, Vietnam, Thailand, Scotland, Japan, Australia, and South America, as well as all over Europe” (267). Climbing leads her to dwell abroad and to learn foreign languages. A way of moving in the world, climbing is also a becoming-worldly, or as Merleau-Ponty observes, “our bodily experience of movement is not a particular case of knowledge; it provides us with a way of access to the world” (1962, 140). Lately, Hill has incorporated breast-feeding into her climbing, thereby freeing that immanence of female biology which Beauvoir deemed insurmountable.²⁰ Therein lies matter for further adventure in feminist phenomenology.

NOTES

I would like to thank Lynn Hill for generously partaking in a telephone conversation I initiated on the topic of her climbing experience and writing, as well as Bernadette McDonald, Director of the Banff Centre for Mountain Culture, for connecting us.

1. “Just as feminist critiques of omissions or lacunae in phenomenological accounts and corresponding elaborations and analyses of gendered experience serve to expand, deepen, and correct the phenomenological accounts, so phenomenology can lend insight to feminist accounts, particularly with respect to frameworks for experiential analysis” (Fisher 2000, 33).

2. See, for example, such post-1950 classics in women's English-language climbing literature as Underhill 1956; Jackson and Stark 1957; Moffat 1961; Morin 1968; Blum 1980/1998, 2005; Tabei 1982; Tullis 1987; Allison and Carlin 1993; Da Silva 1990; Hargreaves 1994; Vause 1999; Howkins 2001; Hill 2002; and Jordan 2005. As this article was going to print, Steph Davis published her soon-to-become-a-classic in women's climbing literature, *High Infatuation* (2007).

3. In declaring that “woman, like man, is her body,” Beauvoir quotes Merleau-Ponty: “So I am my body, in so far, at least, as my experience goes, and conversely my body is like a life-model, or like a preliminary sketch, for my total being” (1952, 29, 29n1).

4. "I think the book is important from that standpoint, because I am a woman, and there are not very many female viewpoints on climbing, or the history of climbing out there" (Hill quoted in Potterfield n.d. 4).

5. Beauvoir insists that for girls to become free and autonomous beings in the world they must in the first place be free to climb. Conversely, for women who suffer themselves to embody feminine domesticity, a trip to the mountains will rekindle girlhood's natural free play. "Let the tired housewife loose in the hills and she will sense again that freedom which Nature re-awakens in her: Enslaved as she is to her husband, her children, her home, it is ecstasy to find herself alone, sovereign on the hillsides; she is no longer mother, wife, housekeeper, but a human being. . . . Before the mystery of water and the leap of summits, the male's supremacy fades away" (1952, 619–20).

6. Rock climbing is graded according to difficulty. To grade her climbs, Hill uses the Yosemite Decimal System, which is an open-ended system that begins at 5.0. After 5.10 there is an additional subdivision of letter grades: 5.10a is easiest, 5.10b is more difficult, and 5.10d is most difficult in the 5.10 level. As of 2002, the hardest climbing routes in the world were graded at the 5.14 level. When routes involve aid climbing, the letter A and the level of difficulty (from 0 to 6) is added: for example, Hill grades Bravo Les Filles, a first all-female ascent that she helped lead on the Tsaranoro Massif in Madagascar, at 5.13d/A0.

7. That Hill wrote *Climbing Free* "with Greg Child" does not compromise her voice. In conversation with me, she confirmed that she wrote most of the book on her own. Moreover, the book's early chapters set the tone for the whole, tempering the voice of mastery with the excitement and passion of an adolescent girl who is just realizing her climbing virtuosity. If Child lends authority to that voice, he also colludes in Hill's life-long project of becoming a climber-girl.

8. "The first all-female ascent of El Capitan had been Beverly Johnson's and Sybille Hectel's ascent of the Triple Direct route in 1973. Then, in 1977, Barb Eastman and Molly Higgins made the first all-female ascent of The Nose. Self-taught and determined, Barb and Molly made a respectably fast three-and-a-half-day ascent of their climb" (Hill 2002, 126).

9. Cited from an advertisement (no reference) for Vectors climbing boots that features a photo of Hill free climbing The Nose. The fine print caption quotes Hill as saying: "I had to use every technique I've ever learned to free The Nose, The Vectors worked perfectly."

10. See, for example, Scully 2005; Weil 2005; "Sheclimbs," <http://www.sheclimbs.org/>; and "Chicks with Picks," <http://www.chickswithpicks.net/>.

11. Throughout her book, Hill describes the evolution of a style of climbing that she first proficiently embodied in her teens. Though she often refers to herself as a woman, she never refers to her climbing as womanly. Throughout this essay, I use *girl* to signify a proficiency of the female body that cannot be tied to age.

12. "The inevitable asymmetry between the sexes is primarily based on the existence of the lived body, that is, the bodily *orientation* toward the other" (Stoller 2005, 21).

13. Echoing Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir states that "the body is not a *thing*, it is a situation . . . it is the instrument of our grasp upon the world" (1952, 34).

14. Hill repeatedly insists that climbing entails adapting one's movement to fit the rock's form. She also notes the mimetic faculty of climbing technology: "Made of carbon steel, [John] Salathé's new designs were stronger and more durable than the old iron pitons, and they were better shaped to fit the cracks of Yosemite. They even resembled the shape of the Lost Arrow Spire" (2002, 84). For a better understanding of how the human body evolves this "mimetic faculty" see Taussig 1993, 1–46.

15. Despite Hill's remarkable achievement, Chris Jones does not mention it in his acclaimed *Climbing in North America* (1997), though he covers Harding and Caldwell's climb in detail. His history only goes as far as 1960, at which time he reckons all formative climbing on El Capitan was done.

16. "The experience of *acquiring* a habit by engaging in *unfamiliar* activity is phenomenologically different from the experience of *activating* a habit by engaging in *familiar* activity" (Preston 1996, 179). Preston points out that "Merleau-Ponty does not discuss this difference in any great detail, but it is clear from numerous passages that he does recognize it" (179).

17. Ophir Broke (Ophir Wall, Colorado, first ascent, 5.12d, 1979); Levitation 29 (Red Rocks, Nevada, first free ascent, 5.11c, 1981); Running Man (The Gunks, New York, first free ascent, 5.13d, 1986); Masse Critique (Cimaï, France, first free ascent by a woman, 5.14a, 1991); Simon (Frankenjura, West Germany, first on-sight ascent, 5.13b, 1992); The Nose (Yosemite, California, first free ascent, 1993, and first free ascent in a day, 1994); and Bravo Les Filles (Tsaranoro Massif, Madagascar, first all-women ascent, 5.13d/A0, 1999).

18. As Stoller (2005) argues, the ontological asymmetry that arises between the sexes results from a bodily relation between sexual beings. For Hill to say that she climbs with "the natural intelligence of the body" is not to say that her style of climbing is essentially female. But nor is it to say that her style is sex-neutral. As she experiences and describes it, her style of climbing like a girl emerges most distinctively in relation to that of a very large male body—namely John Long's.

19. "Freedom uses the gaze and its spontaneous evaluations. Without the latter, we would not have a world, that is, a collection of things which emerge from a background of formlessness by presenting themselves to our body as 'to be touched,' 'to be taken,' 'to be climbed over.' We should never be aware of adjusting ourselves to things and reaching them where they are, beyond us, but would be conscious only of restricting our thoughts to the immanent objects of our intentions" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 441).

20. Hill describes how, to the amazement of fellow climbers, she breast-feeds her twenty-month-old son between flashing (climbing on-sight) routes of 5.14. See Potterfield n.d., 3.

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