

wonder about contemporary conflicts in alpinist action and invites reflection on how we might be able to justify our own conflicting pursuits in the Anthropocene.

Notes

- 1 David Robbins, "Sport, Hegemony and the Middle Class: The Victorian Mountaineers," *Theory, Culture & Society* 4, no. 4 (1987), DOI: [10.1177/026327687004004001](https://doi.org/10.1177/026327687004004001).
- 2 See, for example, Bruce Barcott, "Cliffhangers: The Fatal Descent of the Mountain-Climbing Memoir," *Harper's Magazine* (August 1996); Stephen Slemon, "The Brotherhood of the Rope: Commodification and Contradiction in the 'Mountaineering Community,'" in *Renegotiating Community: Interdisciplinary Perspectives, Global Contexts*, ed. Diana Bryon and William D. Coleman (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008); Zac Robinson, "Early Alpine Club Culture and Mountaineering Literature," in *Mountaineering Tourism*, ed. Ghazali Musa, James Higham, and Anna Thompson-Carr (London: Routledge, 2015), DOI: [10.4324/9781315769202-18](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315769202-18).

***False Summit: Gender in Mountaineering Nonfiction.* By Julie Rak (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021), 268pp.**

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DOI: [10.47060/jaaas.v2i2.144](https://doi.org/10.47060/jaaas.v2i2.144)

Julie Rak's *False Summit* is the most important work on gender and mountaineering in many years. The gender politics of climbing Annapurna, K2, and Mount Everest were recorded in nonfiction writing over the last century. For even longer, images of mountaintop figures standing above a sea of clouds (à la Caspar David Friedrich) have invited viewers to imagine themselves in the summit position of the sovereign individual. Rak notes that to substitute someone else into this position requires an equivalence, a form of physical embodiment, that often excludes those who are not white, male, and Euro-American. These challenges make it difficult for others to occupy this position which creates the "false summit" of the book's title.

Rak critiques these familiar images of modern man at the edge of a cliff by placing different bodies in the foreground. First are Bolivia's cholita climbers—women who have climbed Aconcagua and Andean peaks in skirts and hope to climb Everest—a story that bookends the text and provides its opening illustration. Rak later includes a photograph of Junko Tabei, Pan Duo, and Wanda Rutkiewicz, the first women to climb Mount Everest, to spotlight an intersectional feminism that contests the effects of nationalism, sexism, and racism that would view female climbers as inauthentic, ascents by a person in the wrong body.

The author demonstrates the importance of "mastery, of the body, the environment, and of others" (33) as a central theme in mountaineering, no matter the gender of the climber. This reading of climbing nonfiction amplifies influential accounts

by Sherry Ortner and Judith Butler of gender as a serious game or performative.¹ Rak notes that bodily politics in Himalayan mountaineering marks the bodies of climbers indirectly. Debates over styles of leadership or styles of climbing (siege or alpine) articulated a gender politics on Annapurna, K2, and Everest.

Annapurna, the first 8000-meter peak to be climbed, demonstrates the gender politics of climbing leadership in a French team in 1950, a British team in 1970, and an American, all-women climbing team in 1978. Maurice Herzog's siege-style expedition resembled war by expecting loyalty and obedience and resulting in the amputation of frostbitten limbs. Chris Bonington and Arlene Blum led teams that redeployed masculinity through counter-cultural discourses rather than break with earlier styles of siege ascents. Blum's *Annapurna: A Woman's Place* (1980) is a lesson in American liberal feminism's belief in gender equality as well as its blind spots.² Efforts to recruit female Sherpas to join the expedition assumed a universality of oppression and took little account of Sherpa culture. Ascents of Annapurna by American women with (male) Sherpas, followed by the deaths of two other Americans in a women-only attempt without Sherpas, led to a misogynist backlash in the American climbing press that highlights a longstanding double-standard.

K2 entangled gender politics in the "brotherhood of the rope," an ideal that emerged in a 1953 American expedition on K2 and symbolized a community of men tied together by masculine heroism and selflessness. The rope saves lives in an accident, but the brotherhood excluded and marginalized others who were said to be not "real" climbers. The cohesion of the 1953 American team stemmed from its social uniformity, Boy Scouts-like masculinity, and affective bonds between men that had an emotional intensity superseding language. In the 1970s and 1980s on K2, women experienced sexism and were viewed as sexual objects that threatened the brotherhood of the rope. Rak also offers a fascinating reading of Kurt Diemberger's *The Endless Knot* (1991), an account of his climbing partnership with Julie Tullis written after her death on K2 in 1986, which respects differences and recasts the rope as a metaphysical connection between climbing partners and the mountain.³ For the predominant climbing culture on K2, though, the rope served as a proxy for a relationship between men that could not speak its name: "Rope operates as this sign of vernacular gender: it becomes a thing which stands in for what cannot be said about male love or desire" (139–40).

"Who belongs on Everest?" has been asked repeatedly over the last century. Following George Mallory's disappearance in 1924 and rediscovery in 1999, his body represented the "apex of modernist white British masculinity and its ideals" (154). Mallory became the archetypal figure who belongs on Everest. Close identification with Mallory's masculinity by later generations is deployed by more recent climbers as

evidence of their own right to be on the mountain. Working-class men, women, Sherpas, and others reworked earlier masculine discourses to assert that they belonged, resulting in narratives that Everest was in decline. Commercial climbing was criticized in gendered and racist terms that expressed nostalgia for the time when women and brown men were not on the mountain. Sherpas resisted paternalist and orientalist attitudes and Junko Tabei's memoir, *Honouring High Places* (2017), includes stories of other women that dispel sexist and racist narratives about Everest.⁴

Rak provides an extended discussion of the gender politics of the 1996 Everest disaster recounted in best-selling books and Hollywood films. By reevaluating competing accounts, Rak persuasively challenges Jon Krakauer's version that "places Everest firmly within a narrative of white male heroism acting beyond market forces" (195). Written shortly after the 1996 tragedy, Krakauer's trauma narrative about his experience contrasted authentic climbers and guides with rich but unqualified clients and dished out harsh criticism of women on the mountain. Rak finds correctives in documentaries, expedition transcripts, and other books like *Climbing High* (1999), by Lene Gammelgaard, a Danish climber.⁵ These counter-narratives make possible new ways of understanding the politics of gender on Everest "not as a sign of decline, but of change" (225).

A coda strikes more personal and hopeful notes. After reading *Into Thin Air* (1997), Rak took climbing lessons in the Canadian Rockies and witnessed male instructors discounting suggestions from a female guide who could easily outclimb them.⁶ Rak thought about the stories she had read and wondered why sexism is so integral to climbing. "That is when and why I decided to write about mountaineering nonfiction and gender one day" (228). This book fulfills that promise, which bodes well for Rak's concluding hope that by seeing how gender has done its work in mountaineering stories, "other stories of what it means to live and move in the mountains can emerge" (230). *False Summit* should be widely read and will have an impact in many fields and in areas well beyond the mountains.

Notes

- 1 Sherry B. Ortner, *Life and Death on Mt. Everest: Sherpas and Himalayan Mountaineering* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
- 2 Arlene Blum, *Annapurna, A Woman's Place* (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 1998).
- 3 Kurt Diemberger, *The Endless Knot: K2, Mountain of Dreams and Destiny* (Seattle, WA: The Mountaineers, 1991).
- 4 Junko Tabei and Helen Y. Rolfe, *Honouring High Places: The Mountain Life of Junko Tabei* (Victoria, BC: Rocky Mountain Books, 2017).
- 5 Lene Gammelgaard, *Climbing High: A Woman's Account of Surviving the Everest Tragedy*



Reviews

(Seattle, WA: Seal Press, 1999).

6 Jon Krakauer, *Into Thin Air* (New York: Villard Books, 1997).