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## The "Hypermasculine" Landscape of High-altitude Mountaineering

*Susan Frohlick*

### Introduction

This paper is part of a larger project on gender politics in high-altitude Himalayan mountaineering. [1] That larger project hinges on such questions as: In what ways does gender matter in men's and women's participation in contemporary cultural practices of high-altitude mountaineering? In what ways does the question of gender come up at all? What are the effects of discourses of masculinities and femininities on these social-cultural landscapes? My present study offers a provisional analysis of the various ways in which masculinities are engaged with and narrated in Himalayan mountaineering non-fiction literature. [2]

I take as my point of departure a radical claim made by anthropologist Sherry Ortner regarding the hypermasculine nature of Himalayan mountaineering. In her recent book, *Life and Death on Mount Everest* (the only ethnography to-date to focus on the cultural practices of Himalayan mountaineering), [3] Ortner contends:

Himalayan mountaineering until the 1970s had been an overwhelmingly male sport. It was engaged in almost (but not quite) exclusively by men, both Sherpa and 'first world:' it built on male styles of interaction derived from other all-male institutions, especially after the army; and while it was about many things—nature and nation, materiality and spirituality, the moral quality of the inner self, and the meaning of life—it was always in part about masculinity and manhood. (217)

Masculinity is a good starting point when analyzing Himalayan mountaineering for a variety of reasons. In the first place, it is imperative that feminist researchers extend their insights beyond discourses of femininity (see Stacey 1993). In addition, anthropology, to the extent that it is attentive to the politics of location and the spatialization of difference, must begin to address discourses of masculinity, specifically, the ways in which both men's and women's social locations are mediated through these discourses. But perhaps the most important reason for focusing on masculinity is the question raised by Ortner's hypothesis regarding the hypermasculinity of high-altitude mountaineering. While it might seem obvious that climbing Mt. Everest is, at some level, about masculinity and manhood, the crucial question is, how exactly are gender politics played out at high altitude? I want to examine Ortner's claim from two perspectives: First, in what ways do stories about Himalayan mountaineering normalize particular forms of masculinity? Secondly, in what manner is "masculinity" itself a more complex discourse than Ortner seems to assume? I begin with a brief discussion of Ortner's treatment of masculinity in order to provide some context for her representation of the social-cultural landscape of Himalayan mountaineering as "hypermasculine."

Ortner's ethnography addresses the issues of masculinity, for the most part, from two perspectives. In the first instance, she examines the impact of the entrance by North American and European women into the climbing scene in the late 1970s on the meanings and practices of sexuality, particularly

masculinity, for the Sherpa men who participate in high-altitude mountaineering. (The term Sherpa refers to a member of a tribe of Tibetan descent living on the southern side of the Himalayas. Though not all Sherpas are mountaineers, the term Sherpa will be used herein to denote those who act as such for treks in the Himalayas). While Ortner is interested in the interplay and dynamic between discourses of femininity and masculinity in the borderland of Himalayan mountaineering, her central analytical focus is on notions of cultural difference and authenticity. She is keen to trace the differences between the "the Sherpa point of view" and "the sahibs point of view" (the term sahib refers to international mountaineers). As a result of this focus, she reproduces instead of deconstructs stereotypical gender differences. For Ortner, masculinity becomes an unproblematic site for theorizing the power differences between sahibs and Sherpas. Stereotypical traits and attributes of men and of mountaineers (specifically, western male mountaineers)—including bravado, aggressiveness, competitiveness—are deployed in Ortner's analysis in order to criticize Himalayan mountaineering as the dangerous and highly problematic "enactment of desires of international mountaineers" (4).

There are a number of analytical problems with Ortner's treatment of masculinity. For one thing, she conceptualizes sahibs as a homogeneous group positioned oppositionally against "the other," that is, male Sherpas. As a result of this binary opposition, Ortner dismisses as irrelevant salient differences among international mountaineers including, for example, national and racial identities. [4] She argues that sahib is a "handy one-word tag for the international mountaineers in general, when there is no necessity for breaking them down by other specific characteristics" (5). More pointedly, she minimizes the importance of racial differences among international mountaineers: "Virtually all the early sahibs were white and thus of a different 'race' than Sherpas... [when] later sahibs came from other 'races,' a Japanese or Korean sahib (for example) is still a sahib in relation to the Sherpas, and 'race' will not be a significant category in this study" (32). Apropos of national identities, Ortner opines: "These various ways in which issues of 'nation' impinge on Himalayan mountaineering can be quite interesting, but as they tend to be somewhat remote from the on-the-ground operation of expeditions, and of the sahib-Sherpa relationship, I do not for the most part pursue them in this book" (33).

Ortner seems to suggest, albeit hesitantly, that there is a core or "essence" to western masculinity. Positing competitiveness as the most consistent strand of sahib masculine discourse in Himalayan mountaineering, she asserts, "It is as if it were the base, the core, the—dare I say it—essence of Western masculinity" (162). In short, Ortner's ethnography is an example of the kind of totalizing analysis of men and of masculinity that has recently been effectively challenged by proponents of a more critical anthropological practice (e.g., Gutmann; Cornwall and Lindisfarne). It seems to me that feminist critiques of essentialism must be extended to include discourses on masculinity. If masculinity is to be used as an analytical tool, it is imperative that we contest rather than normalize stereotypical notions such as "Western masculinity." Moreover, Ortner's arguments confuse, on the one hand, what Brittan refers to as "the ideology of masculinism" (that is, normative notions of naturalized sex differences) and, on the other hand, masculinities as practice, embodiment, subjectivities, and performance (Bloom 10).

A second problem undermines Ortner's analysis: she does not fully account for the constructed nature of gender and for the ways in which masculinity as a discourse changes over time. Instead, she views masculinity from the standpoint of fairly "objective" historical and social processes such as exploration and militarism. Ortner does not see discourses of masculinity as producing effects; for her they are an effect. Nor does she analyze masculinity as consisting of repetitive acts that occur through regulated practices (see Butler 1993). Such a reconceptualization of masculinity would enable us to consider the masculinization of high mountain spaces as the effect of repeated textual and other cultural productions. Paraphrasing Kathleen Stewart's formulations, I would argue that Ortner fixes her referents in a real world of causes and effects as well as in an ideal world of models; she disregards the rhetorical, performative, epistemological nature of things (396). Ortner does not challenge the nature and existence of masculinity as it is understood to be in the first place. Nor does she recognize her own entanglement with the production and naming of that gendered subject. By contrast, Cornwall and Lindisfarne begin their analysis by asking how it is that, in any particular setting, attributions of masculinity can be assumed or imposed (2).

As I have indicated, Ortner's ethnography can itself be regarded as a setting within which attributions of masculinity are assumed and imposed. The Himalayan mountaineering narratives on which she bases her ethnography can also be regarded as sites for the attribution of masculinity. Himalayan mountaineering is a highly textualized landscape. Ortner's claims about masculinity hinge on this textualization. (My own analysis attempts a more complex reading of the textualized masculinities of Himalayan high mountaineering). As Ortner herself explains, mountaineers are a highly literate group who write voluminous personal accounts of their expeditions. Mountain climbing has in fact been called the most literary of all sports (1999). As Bruce Barcott argues, "No other activity so compels its participants, from the international star to the weekend scrambler, to turn each personal conquest into public tale. Contemporary alpine societies publish journals thick with memoirs of members' recent ascents... A mountain climb is a ready-made narrative, perfectly suited to story" (65).

Most mountaineering narratives are written by men. [5] This reflects the disproportionately high numbers of men mountaineers compared to women mountaineers. Ortner relies on these gender-inflected stories for information regarding "sahib high-altitude culture." Addressing the crucial question of why sahibs engage in this sport, Ortner claims, rather smugly, that discourses of "hypermasculinity" are the "problematic cultural scenarios" that inspire high-altitude mountaineering (1999 9). It is instructive to emphasize that this claim is based on interpretations of mountaineering literature, a notoriously rhetorical genre. Ortner is, of course, not entirely wrong to assert that Himalayan mountaineering is always, at least in part, about manhood and masculinity. At the same time, however, attention needs to be focused on the rhetorical, performative, epistemological nature of masculinity. [6] We need to think of mountaineering narratives as settings wherein particular attributions of masculinity are assumed and imposed, as texts wherein discourses of masculinity are not only enacted but also reinterpreted.

### **Towards a Critical Anthropology of Masculinity**

What, then, do we mean by "masculinity?"  
(Cornwall and Lindisfarne,  
*Dislocating Masculinity* 18)

Proponents of critical anthropology argue that conventional ethnographies tend either to ignore the question of masculinity or to consider it "so much the norm that a separate inventory is unnecessary" (Gutmann 403). Anthropologists (and others) have tended to use masculinity as an analytical category in uncritical and normative ways, in essentialist dichotomous terms, as a set of universal essences, attributes, and traits, and as a unitary, oppositional category (Cornwall and Lindisfarne; Gutmann). The term "men" is still used as an unmarked referent for humanity in general, for bodies without genders (Cornwall and Lindisfarne). As Mathew Gutmann has argued, little attention has been paid to men-as-men, that is, as gendered embodied beings. The few studies of men-as-men that exist—such studies as David Gilmore's 1990 book *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity*—have tended to focus on men-only events and to approach masculinity as a cross-cultural and trans-historical underlying "deep structure" (Gutmann 387).

Studies such as Gilmore's do little to disrupt normative notions of masculinity or to recognize the plurality of masculinities in any particular setting. Masculinity is "neither tangible nor an abstraction whose meaning is everywhere the same. In practice, people operate according to many different notions of masculinity" (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 12). A critical anthropology of masculinity must account for the ways in which masculinities, as embodied discourses, are enacted and performed both consistently and inconsistently with normative ideas about what it means to be a man in specific contexts (for men as well as women). As Cornwall and Lindisfarne contend:

If notions of masculinity, like the notion of gender itself, are fluid and situational, we must consider the various ways people understand masculinity in any one particular setting. And we must explore how various masculinities are defined and redefined in social interaction. How do individuals present and negotiate a gendered identity? How and why are particular images and behaviours given gender labels? Who benefits from such labeling? And how do such labels change before different audiences and in different settings? (3)

Masculinities ought to be recognized as both engendered and engendering practices (Gutmann). That is, masculinities ought to be recognized as sets of words, speech acts, and vocabulary items as well as behaviors and repertoires that produce naturalized "sex" differences. The effects produced, however, are not always the ones intended. As Judith Butler puts it, "'sex' is a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled, and this materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through "certain highly regulated practices" (1). The outcome of the highly regulated gender practices of high-altitude mountaineering and its cultural productions and representations is neither straightforward nor predictable. It cannot be read simply as an instance of hypermasculinity.

### **Disembodied Masculinities**

Sometimes they forget that "the body" comes in genders.  
(Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* ix)

What, then, does Ortner mean by "masculinity"? She begins by placing contemporary practices of high-altitude mountaineering in the context of the wider history of western male climbers. While she does not completely disregard the impact of Sherpa masculinity on these practices, her analysis focuses for the most part on the powers and bodies of western men. She therefore confines her analysis to representations of "western" masculinities. I have already critiqued the false homogeneity Ortner imposes on this group under the guise of the "essence" of western masculinity. Her ethnography maps

out a "hegemonic masculinity" defined through a reading of western mountaineering narratives. [7] This masculinity consists, as I have pointed out, of ascribed behaviours associated with western men (e.g., risk-taking, bravery, raunchiness, competitiveness, and physical strength). One of the reasons that "the rhetoric of hegemonic versions of masculinity is so compelling," Cornwall and Lindisfarne argue, "is that it rests on the apparent certainty: that 'a man is a man' everywhere, and everywhere this means the same thing" (3). In this section I examine how normative ascribed notions of masculinity emerge in mountaineering narratives written by western men. Characterized by a certain disembodiedness, these narratives, to some degree, support Ortner's representation of high-altitude mountaineering as hypermasculine. However, as I demonstrate in the next section of my paper, there are alternate readings of these landscapes and representations.

What is particularly instructive for a feminist analysis of masculinity is the extreme extent to which mountaineering narratives written by men remain unaware of and inattentive to the question of gender. Male authors rarely refer to their bodies or to their identities in gendered terms. They remain unmarked and are assumed to be male, or worse, to be neutral as though gender meant nothing to the world of high-altitude mountaineering. One of the obvious ways the effacement of gender plays itself out is in the language used to talk about high-altitude mountaineering. In an exemplary way, Sir Chris Bonington de-genders the representational space when he writes in anticipation of his successful ascent of Mt. Everest, "I'd be the seventh Briton to reach the top of Everest" (1987, 238). What does not get said is the fact that he would be seventh male Briton since no British woman had ascended to the top by the point in time. It would be years later, in 1993, when Rebecca Stephens would become the first "British female" to ascend Everest. Narratives of her ascent—and those of other women—are worded in gender-inflected terms, with the pointed insertion of the term "female").

The practice of naming and ranking ascents produces a masculinized landscape women are not expected to occupy. [8] Over and over again, when men reach the summits and claim their titles, they do so in gender-neutral terms: "seventh Briton," "first without bottled oxygen" (Bonington 1987), "second American to reach the summit of K2" (Wickwire). (K2 is the second highest summit in Himalayas). [9] Unlike women climbers, the men's gendered bodies remain neutralized. In other words, the men forget, as Butler would put it, that their bodies come in genders (ix).

In addition to the appropriation of gender-neutral terms, the use of sexist language pervades male mountaineering narratives. Mountaineering peers are invariably assumed to be male as can be seen in the example of the casual observation in a recent narrative, "everyone and his grandmother seems to climb it [Mt. Everest] nowadays" (Simpson 169). An even more problematic example can be found in the preface to a recent anthology of mountaineering essays in which it is claimed, "such are the ingredients of the relationship between mountains and men" (Hunt in Bonington 1994). Although narratives that use "man" as a universal term tend to have been written in the 1970s and earlier, these texts remain important because they form the mediating textual ground on which younger climbers and authors make their own connections between masculinity and mountaineering. Reinhold Messner's often-cited book *Everest: Expedition to the Ultimate*, to pick a famous example, is replete with references to "universal man," including such references as, "Mountains are so elemental that man does not have the right nor the need to subdue them with technology", and "Can man, solely by his own efforts, reach the summit of Everest" (Messner 10). Messner effectively produces a landscape naturalized to be one without any women. Joe Simpson reproduces (and modernizes) this masculinist landscape when nearly twenty years later he draws from Messner's late seventies discourse on the ethics of mountaineering. Addressing the question of the proper way to climb Everest (and other 8,000-metre Himalayan peaks) Simpson contends: "If shutting the door on a man's last imploring gesture, or avoiding eye contact while climbing sternly past three dying men, are the requisite skills for modern high altitude climbing, then I want none of it" (198).

By paying attention exclusively to a particular kind of difference (Sherpas versus Westerners), Ortner reproduces the image of the sahib as a generic and largely disembodied western male. In an analogous fashion, generic narratives inattentive to gender differences normalize the image of an idealized male mountaineer. Simpson contends: "Mountaineers are the same the world over. We have the same values, the same aspirations, and the same love of the hills"(92). Significantly, Simpson is a British mountaineer who broke his leg in a climbing accident in the remote mountains of South America. His climbing partner left him for dead at the bottom of a deep crevasse. He was forced to literally crawl to safety for days without food across steep, treacherous, icy ground in a much-celebrated act of self-rescue. Simpson's experience (alleged to soon transformed into a motion picture starring Tom Cruise) is one of the most extreme mountaineering survival stories ever written (Chessler). In other words, he would be hard-pressed to consider himself an exemplary "mountaineering everyman"; yet this unwritten masculinity is part of the formulaic narrative of common experience that he reproduces, his extraordinary experiences notwithstanding.

In a similar vein, Jim Haberl (a Canadian Himalayan mountaineer who died in 1999 in an avalanche while skiing in Alaska) attempts to transform his extreme experiences into typical everyman

experiences. After watching his good friend tumble off the mountain and die hundreds of metres beyond his reach, Haberl writes, "... each climber, no matter the country, knew the makings of our tale. Though it was personal for me, for K2 it [his friend's death] was generic. K2 kills climbers . . ." (59). Gender is not written onto this script, although, interestingly, nation is. However, even the importance of national identity is effaced in order to reproduce the figure of the generic mountaineer. This mountaineer is often idealized. A composite image of the most valued traits and attributes of a high-altitude mountaineer starts to congeal after reading a succession of these narratives. Each new mountaineer performs his own masculinity in the act of upholding the image and symbolic currency of prior ones. Chris Bonington and Charles Clarke actually describe this "ideal mountaineer" for us, referring to two well-known (male) Himalayan mountaineers:

[Peter Boardman and Joe Tasker] believed that hard high-altitude climbing was a reasonable sport within mountaineering. Statistically dangerous, yet, but with care, stealth and speed, within reason... they knew and respected the arena of avalanche, storm, and stonefall. They pushed hard and fast. . . . retreated in the face of avalanches . . . they were wily and sometimes very frightened. They never showed self-indulgent elation when successful . . .(115)

This description reads like a checklist for action heroes; it disguises the fallibility, the flesh-and-bloodness of the men and women who climb high mountains. The masculinity performed in many of these narratives is caught up in the heroizing and disembodied discourses such as the one condensed in this description.

Despite the disembodied nature of their discourse, most of the narratives by men reveal the emotions and feelings they experienced while climbing high mountains such as Everest and K2. But they tend to do so in a generalizing way, presuming that their experiences are common to all mountaineers. All mountaineers are naturally presumed to be men. Reinhold Messner, an Austrian super-mountaineer best known for his so-called oxygenless ascent of Mt. Everest in the late 1970s, reveals his feelings repeatedly in his account of that expedition. (Until the late seventies ascents of Everest were made with the help of bottled oxygen to compensate for the low levels of oxygen in the air at altitudes above 8,000 metres. Oxygen bottles continue to be used routinely to this day). At one point in his triumphant narrative Messner ponders, "Why do we climb these mountains? Who can say? Indeed, I don't think I would really want to know the reason, but I often indulge the theory that perhaps it has something to do after all with the fact that we men cannot bear the children" (57). According to this logic, women, as bearers of children, simply do not climb mountains. In a single sentence (and there are many other examples in his text), Messner calls up the power of biology and of natural differences to protect the hypermasculine space of high-altitude mountaineering. Messner's rhetoric is embedded in excessively masculine discourses linking manhood with technology and one-upmanship.

One of the most persistent themes running through the men's narratives is the question of ethics amid rapid technological progress. A strong link between discourses of technology and "hegemonic masculinities" is highlighted over and over again in the men's mountaineering narratives. Technology has played a significant role in the changing nature of the social-cultural landscape of high-altitude mountaineering (see Clark; Frison-Roche; Ward and Clark). Wartime development of a range of technologies (including cartography, aerial photography and bottled oxygen apparatuses) and postwar technologies (such as nylon ropes and water resistant-breathable fabrics) have allowed mountaineers to climb high-altitude mountains in newer and, arguably, more dangerous ways. The first ascent of Mt. Everest in 1953 would not have been possible without the improvement in the technology, specifically the design of bottled oxygen apparatuses, or so the story goes. However, it is not this first ascent, but rather, Messner's subsequent "first ascent of Everest without bottled oxygen" that is instrumental for contemporary discourses of high altitude masculinity. This ascent in the late 1970s marked a moment in mountaineering history "that upped the ante" for high-altitude mountaineers who now have to choose whether to risk injuries or even their lives to enact this "bold new style" (Krakauer 1999).

In his narrative about the historical climb, Messner asserts that he was propelled to climb without bottled oxygen because he felt that to use "artificial" oxygen and thus submit to modern technology was for "mechanical men" rather than (natural?) "Man" (Messner). The desire to climb Mt. Everest "by fair means," then, was to be caught up in this interplay between technology and manhood:

Can Man, solely by his own efforts, reach the summit of Everest? Is the world so constructed that Man can climb to its highest point without mechanical aids? (Messner 9) . . . Mountains are so elemental that man does not have the right nor the need to subdue them with technology. Only the man who chooses his tools with humility can experience natural harmony (ibid. 10) . . . if I want to experience Everest's unique sheer bulk, then to be able to feel it, sense it, I have to climb without technical tricks. Only then will I know what a man feels like being there, what new dimensions it opens up for him, and whether he can thereby learn anything new in terms of his relationship to the Cosmos. (ibid. 165)

According to Messner's logic, it is manly to climb above 8,000 metres (a physical and medicalized domain commonly referred to as "the death zone") without the aid of an oxygen canister. While this logic may seem very strange and old-fashioned, its influence lingers in Himalayan high mountaineering. Contemporary climbers continue to moralize regarding the place of bottled oxygen in high-altitude climbing. Climbers criticize "the ill-informed public" for regarding just "any style of ascent" of Everest as the ultimate mountaineering achievement (Haberl; Krakauer; Simpson). Simpson ponders, "It seems strange at a time when technical standards of mountaineering have reached such extraordinary heights that just-collected high altitude summits by any means available should attract any acknowledgment or prestige" (194). Read on its own this sentence seems to say little about discourses of masculinity but recognizing its history as part of a broader narrative about technology and modernity, it says a great deal.

One of the strongest connections Ortner makes is between discourses of modernity (or rather "counter-modernity") and high-altitude mountaineering. She argues that the desire to drop out of the continuity of modern life because one finds it lacking in adventure is perhaps the dominant, although not the only, motivation for the sport (36). For most climbers, Ortner suggests, "the point of climbing is to find something that one cannot find in modern life, that indeed has been lost in modern life" (*ibid.*). What exactly is missing from modern life changes over time but the relationship between *sahibs* and modernity stays the same. The *sahibs* are trying to escape modernity to such an extreme extent that Ortner posits a kind of anti-modern "essence" as constitutive of western male high-altitude mountaineers. This link between masculinity and anti-modernity is surprisingly pervasive in the men's mountaineering narratives. Appeals to set standards, to a "pure style" and a "less is more" approach (Thompson) are commonplace in these narratives.

Climbing is viewed by many as the desire for anarchy (Salkeld), "venerating its own traditions at the same time as flouting accepting orthodoxies" (Bonington 1998), a place where there are no rules (Simpson). Simpson's narrative implies that to figure out what kind of approach one is going to take to climb Everest is to work out what kind of man one is. Once again, the maleness of the mountaineer is assumed. Having to acknowledge that he would likely rather ascend Everest in a guided expedition rather than "in a purer style of ascent," puts him ill at ease with his sense of self. He longs for the days when men climbed in a more pure style, for the pure joy rather than for the media-title-seeking that motivates them now:

These early [male] mountaineers did not climb in order to win gold medals, or to become famous or wealthy. They wanted to climb the hardest routes on the biggest mountains in the purest way simply because it was a direct new challenge... It was how one played the game, the style of one's success, that was fundamentally important. (89)

This nostalgia for a "pure style" belies the wide range of "technical" climbing gear, outdoor equipment, and other highly advanced late twentieth century "technologies" that are in fact relied on for every climb to high altitude. Unawareness of the power associated with this kind of contestation and resistance to "modernity" along with a desire for autonomy, have been attached to discourses of masculinity, especially "white heterosexual bourgeois masculinities" (e.g., see Rose).

The cultural productions and performances of these so-called disembodied masculinities can usefully be theorized as excessively masculine in that they call up strong cultural idioms and stereotypes about manhood, about "men being men." At the same time and in a paradoxical way, these narratives produce an incredibly gender blind high-altitude mountaineering landscape. Occupied by universal (male) heroes oblivious to their positions and privileges in the world, high mountain peaks are presumed to be free of women. Gendered bodies disappear from view even as the space is aggressively masculinized.

## **Embodied Masculinities**

. . . individual subjects should not be seen simply to adopt roles which are mapped out for them by discourses; rather, they experience discomfort with certain elements implicit in discourses, they find pleasure in some elements, and they are openly critical about others.  
(Sara Mills, *Discourse* 97)

Cultural geographer, Peter Jackson has suggested that we "must begin to explore the various instabilities and contradictions that inhere within the notion of masculinity" (210). I would argue that the disembodied masculinities I have been examining are part of the rhetorical nature of men's mountaineering literature—a particular setting in which a particular conception of masculinity is imposed and assumed. The rhetorical nature of masculinity can be regarded as an examination of the contradictory nature of "embodied masculinities." [10] These embodied masculinities challenge Ortner's normative and rather rigid conceptualization of an essentialized masculinity. Various forms of "hypermasculinity" certainly play themselves out in men's mountaineering narratives, as I have shown

in the previous section. Yet, the danger in Ortner's analysis lies in the way she imposes "essences" and "traits" and "attributes." She ignores the material and embodied practices through which masculinities are lived everyday. In addition, she ignores the conflicting interpretations of masculinity and enactments of manhood.

Men's mountaineering narratives participate in an ongoing, contested, multivocal, and contradictory conversation about the meanings, practices, and contravening discourses of masculinity. Some discourses are more powerful than others—"masculinity" is undoubtedly one of the most powerful discourses in high altitude mountaineering. At the same time, there are alternate readings, that is, "multiple geographies of masculinity" (Jackson). While the term "hypermasculine" may in some ways be considered an ethnographically accurate label for some performances in particular narrative texts (such as the ones I described), using the term too broadly without attending to the rhetoric of the ethnographic source is highly problematic.

Mountaineering literature frames "Modern" climbing as a moral dilemma for many men. For example, making reference to a now well-textualized incident during which certain mountaineers stepped over the bodies of dying mountaineers without helping them while summitting Mt. Everest, Simpson comments, "No man should be able to witness such harrowing events and not be moved to help. Or, am I biased, knowing how it feels to be left for dead?"(204). Despite being consistent with the hegemonic masculinity of high-altitude mountaineering (as disclosed by his sexist language), Simpson's narrative can also be read as a contravening discourse because it points to performances that recognize men's bodies, materiality of other bodies and corpses, and sensory experiences. These kinds of narrated experiences that call up the corporeality and subjectivity of the body and challenge to some degree notions of a stoic, disembodied, hero high-altitude climber. Matt Dickinson, a British film-maker, talks about how seeing a dead body while climbing to the summit of Everest served as a gruesome mnemonic device, reminding him of the materiality of his own body:

I could not bring myself to film the dead man lying so pathetically at our feet . . . As we stepped over the legs of the corpse to continue along the Ridge, we crossed an invisible line in the snow . . . Human life, any life, does not belong in the Death Zone, and by stepping over the dead body we made the conscious decisions to push further into it. The dead body had been the starkest reminder we could have that we were now reliant for our lives on our equipment, our own strength and our luck. (31)

The act of stepping over a body was a symbolic crossing for Dickinson: the existence of a dead person on the mountain was not only part of the visual, tactile, everyday landscape of high-altitude mountaineering (for there are many other frozen corpses), it was also a cartographic symbol marking "the death zone." References to bodies, then, call up an awareness of self and of other not found in all mountaineering narratives. They remind the reader that masculinity is not merely constitutive of traits and attributes but, rather, of material practices mediated through multiple discourses.

Narratives that question mountaineering ethics in a seemingly troublesome era of increased commercialization and access to high mountains, draw on (disembodied) discourses of modernity and technology that are often inconsistent with embodied practices. A common response to the materiality of the dead bodies littered on the high mountain landscape often registers discomfort and uneasiness with the narrators. Simpson writes, "There is something unnerving about this carnage. I feel as if I am grasping at straws in an effort to understand why mountaineering ethical standards seem to have slipped to such low levels on Everest" (203). Krakauer, too, in a narrative describing his account of thirteen deaths in an exceptionally tragic season on K2 (the second highest mountain in the world), links this troubling "carnage" with issues of ethics, "The new modus operandi leaves so little margin for error that climbers now commonly begin their ascents with the understanding that if things go wrong, the bond between ropemates—a bond that was until recently held to be sacrosanct—

may be discarded in favor of a policy of every man for himself" (1997, 217).

This "sacrosanct bond between ropemates" serves as an idiom of male camaraderie, loyalty, and unity that upholds the notion of the ideal (male) mountaineer. It also points to the way that "machismo" comes up in these narratives and how it plays a strong mediating role in legitimizing some experiences over others (i.e., heroism). Yet at the same time, Simpson's and Dickinson's disturbances over death and carnage draws attention to and maps out a new voice of (male) resistance. Their voices challenge the competing discourses of masculinity in which they find themselves complicit. This stands in stark contrast to the "hypermasculine" "breast-beating" of Messner's and others (see Krakauer 1997).

There is a way in which multiple references to the physicality of the high-altitude landscape invoke the embodied physicality of the everyday. What I mean by this is that while narratives that tell of physical hardships can be seen as masculinist, they can also be seen as an embodied masculinity because the men are describing the everyday things they need to do to stay alive. These activities include getting dressed, turning on the stove, melting water, putting up the tents, digging wind shelters, and so forth.

High-altitude mountaineers, like anyone else, have to eat, sleep, and take care of bodily functions; these practices are always carried out through gendered bodies. Masculinity is a lived experience. Men as high-altitude mountaineers do not merely haul heavy loads or climb out of crevasses with broken legs but perform everyday "domestic" acts that are part of the narrated landscape.

The tactile and sensory experiences of high-altitude mountaineering, then, are tied up with the engendering of its landscape. The following description, selected from the countless examples of narratives outlining the performance of bodily functions and practices, is instructive in this regard:

I had been climbing for over fifteen hours at 8,000 meters. I was physically exhausted and had just ridden an emotional rollercoaster . . . It had been three days since my last morsel of food. (Haberl 54)

. . . quick, cut a ledge. Ice axe and burrowing hand-that's it. Quick. Just enough of a hollow to sit down. Must rest. Must have a pee . . . Then my strength gave out and I collapsed, wetting myself and suffocating in another fit of hyperventilation. (Venables 53)

I disagree with Ortner's claims that "the sahibs rarely talk about physicality." As the example cited above demonstrates, the narratives I read are filled with references to aesthetics, physical activities, and bodily functions. All these references contribute to more embodied vision of masculinity than is condensed in essential "traits and attributes." I concede that the body talk that I am emphasizing here comes up in unexpected ways. Intervening narratives, such as Galen Rowell's, are highly critical of the aggressiveness and competition that takes place within high-altitude mountaineering as the quest for "the summit at all costs," where health and safety are regarded as less important than "the glory of reaching the Summit" (178). Rowell contests a competitive race for the summit of K2 that, he felt, divided the team members and ultimately was to be blamed for their "defeat." Linking this competitiveness, as Ortner does, to militarism, he argues:

Perhaps one of the biggest flaws in expedition mountaineering is that it can sometimes promote a ruthless brand of militant enthusiasm that runs roughshod over friendships, health, safety, and reason. For a time, in the face of storms, avalanches, and extreme altitudes, climbers in the militant rut must consider themselves mortal... They seek that one memory of standing for a few moments above everyone else, and in order to get there they constantly try to elevate themselves and lower others. (183)

The point to emphasize here is the way multiple discourses crosscut one another so that masculinity cannot be seen as one thing or as a seamless discourse. There are many inconsistencies and contradictions. A strong theme in Rowell's (and others') narrative is the link between the embodiedness of masculinity. Male friendships seem integral to high-altitude mountaineering. Social connections, camaraderie, physical presence are all vital elements in the logic of men's mountaineering narratives. To cite one powerful example, Simpson concludes his narrative with a haunting critique: why couldn't they just give the dying man the comfort of their presence?

The world of friendship, camaraderie and physicality does not always play out consistently with what Ortner has termed "male styles of interaction," by which she means "army-like," boisterous, aggressive, hierarchical, "old-boy"ish. Some stories indeed invoke that "army-like" model of male interaction. Exemplary of this is a narrative by Jim Wickwire, a member of the K2 expedition mentioned above that failed to make the summit, who claimed that there is no room for sentiment on high altitude expeditions and that friendships should not stand in the way of the push for the summit (see Wickwire 1998). Others' stories definitely do not invoke this masculinist world. A competing narrative to Wickwire's, written by Galen Rowell and labeled a "tell-all expedition book," provides a very different multi-vocal and contested account of the politics of the male relationships on that expedition by drawing on a number of members' voices through their diary entries and even giving the last word to Jim Wickwire himself.

### **Conclusion: Narrating Masculinities**

An account of an expedition is not a novel. Therefore an authentic account can never be given, let alone written down, by someone who was not present... An account of the expedition must, above all, given a true rendering of the facts, and make it possible for all those who took part in it to identify with the tale that is told... The great art of writing the book of an expedition consists in recounting faithfully an actual and inextinguishable experience and in revealing one's own feelings in the first person. If a man is not prepared to reveal anything, he has nothing to say. (Reinhold Messner, *Everest* 253)

Any answer to the question of whether mountaineering literature supports Ortner's claim must draw attention to the rhetorical effects of these texts. As one male mountaineer says about the writing of mountaineering narratives, a man must be prepared to divulge things about himself (see Messner). Men's mountaineering narratives indeed reveal a great deal about how masculinity is played out in



high-altitude mountaineering. More specifically, they reveal much about the kinds of experiences that are counted as legitimate mountaineering experiences and the complex ways that masculinity gets tied up with these experiences. Crucial to keep in mind is the storied-ness of much mountaineering literature, something Ortner overlooks. They are perfect stories, critics such as Barcott and Chessler have argued, because they include "the major elements of suspense, adventure, death, money, ego, power, male rivalry, sex, and the immortal battle with nature" (Chessler 172). But these stories are at the same time texts written for a particular audience and caught up in their own naming and regulatory practices. As Rosenwald and Ochberg implore:

Stories people tell about themselves are interesting not only for the events and characters they describe but also for something in the construction of the stories themselves... what they emphasize and omit, their stance as protagonists or victims, the relationship the story establishes between teller and audience—all shape what individuals can claim about their own lives. (1)

Mountaineering narratives tell the stories of individuals' mountaineering experiences, usually in the first person (but not always) and usually in a formulaic, highly standardized way. Barcott quips, "The characters gather at low altitude and encounter increasingly perilous situations on their way up; some may die. In the end they snatch glory on the mountaintop or turn back, humbled by the brutal force of nature. End of story" (65). But these narratives are "more than a recital of events." They are an organization of experience through which the reader learns more about what constitutes legitimate (and profitable) mountaineering experiences than about the broader range of experiences that take place "on-the-ground" beyond the author-audience relationship. These legitimizing experiences are caught up in a number of ways with the production of masculinities. One of my biggest criticisms of Ortner's ethnography is that she seems to take mountaineering stories to represent the entire realm of what goes on in mountaineering. She claims to have "got it" as far as comprehending why North American men and women participate in the dangerous sport of high-altitude mountaineering. Yet this comprehension stems entirely from what gets published and consumed as part of a socially and culturally specific genre and industry. Masculinities, within the cultural-social landscapes of Himalayan mountaineering, require much more unraveling.

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Susan Frohlick is a doctoral candidate in cultural anthropology at York University in Toronto, Ontario. Her dissertation research project examines the gender, racial, class, and national politics of mountaineering practices in Nepal, Canada, and the United States

## Notes

1. The project I am referring to is my doctoral dissertation in cultural anthropology. For my dissertation, I am conducting multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in Nepal, Canada, and the US from March 2000 to March 2001. The research for this paper was carried out in 1999 as part of a literature review.
2. Himalayan mountaineering differs a great deal from general mountaineering in that the mountains

are higher than 8,000 meters. This means that a significant and often exorbitant amount of time, money, and risk is invested in an Himalayan expedition compared to other mountains of lower altitude. Eight thousand meter peaks hold a particular social currency within the elite mountaineering community and the public imagination in North America and elsewhere more generally, which makes them important terrain for critical analyses of class, race, and gender. Not all mountains in the Himalayas are over 8,000 meters but all 8,000-meter peaks in the world are located in the Himalayas. In this paper, I use the terms "Himalayan" mountaineering and "high-altitude" mountaineering interchangeably.

**3.** Vincanne Adams has written on some aspects of Himalayan mountaineering in her ethnography about virtual Sherpas, but this is not her central focus.

**4.** See Bloom for a more nuanced discussion of the need to take race into account of constructions of gender. This is an important topic that I don't have time to develop more fully in this paper. Bloom's book on gender ideology in early twentieth century polar expeditions also demonstrates the importance of relationships between "masculinism" and nationalism specifically within the cultural productions and practices of "exploration."

**5.** Women have written a few Himalayan mountaineering narratives. These narratives are the focus of another paper in which I try to show how these narratives further complicate how masculinity is understood, represented, and mediated by variously positioned persons.

**6.** There is much analytical work to be done on masculinity in the Himalayas, particularly with regard to axes of class, race, and nationality. However, from what I have been so far able to ascertain, few mountaineering narratives have been written by non-westerners or at least published and made available for the North American market. An examination of the ways discourses and practices of masculinity overlap and are mediated by race is something that will be addressed in the larger project.

**7.** See Carrigan, Cornwall and Lindisfarne, Donaldson, and Gutmann for detailed discussions of the concept of "hegemonic masculinity." Following Carrigan et al., it is useful to think of those ideologies that privilege some men (and women) by associating them with particular forms of power as "hegemonic masculinities." Hegemonic masculinities define successful ways of "being a man"; in so doing, they define other masculine styles as inadequate or inferior (3). Such dominant constructions determine the standards against which other masculinities are defined. In different contexts different hegemonic masculinities are imposed by emphasizing certain attributes, such as physical prowess or emotionality, over others (ibid. 20).

**8.** The meaning for women of this practice of naming and ranking significant ascents has recently been the subject of a satirical cartoon by Tami Knight, a fellow cultural producer of high-altitude mountaineering. It goes like this: a woman wearing cat-eye glasses with two summit flags sticking out from them with the numbers "8848" representing the height of Mt. Everest in metres, big ear-rings, and long fingernails is standing with her finger pointed towards the summit saying, "Pinnacle of geographic ostentation Everest represents the real and imagined summit of ontological potential... with the heady aroma of the fin-de-millennium and the resulting catharsis symptomologically moving towards its orgasmic Armageddon is anticipated in our EVEREST SUMMIT BID."

**9.** You might come across the words "first ascent for a male or female," meaning that a woman made the very first ascent but I have yet to see the words "first male ascent."

**10.** While Ortner does let the reader know she obtained her ethnographic information from mountaineering accounts, she treats the texts as unmediated accounts rather than as representations. Moreover, although she spoke with and interviewed Sherpas as part of her research for this ethnography, she did not speak with or interview any non-Sherpa mountaineers.

landscape, nature, mountain, snow, winter, cloud, sky, hiking, valley, mountain range, panorama, high, glacier, weather, ridge, summit, height, mountaineering, expedition, trekking, mountains, alps, lhotse, plateau, fell, high mountains, mountainous, himalayas, landform, extreme sports, bergsport, meteorological phenomenon, mount everest, chomolungma, expedition mountaineering, high altitude mountaineering, extreme mountain climbing, geographical feature, mountainous landforms, glacial landform. wilderness, mountain, hiking, lake, mountain range, panorama, dusk, reflection, high, glacier, fjor