chapter 13

The Brotherhood of the Rope: Commodification and Contradiction in the "Mountaineering Community"

Stephen Slemon

I have felt the rope between us. We are linked for life.
— GASTON RÉBUFFAT, *Starlight and Storm*

ETYMOLOGICALLY, NOTES RAYMOND WILLIAMS, there is a fork in the road to the concept of "community." One road — from the Latin *communis,* meaning "fellowship, community of relations or feelings" *(Oxford English Dictionary)* — leads to an intangible destination: "the quality of holding something in common," "a sense of common identity and characteristics," as in a "community of interests" (Williams 1985, 75-6). The other road — a faint one, Williams tells us, until the nineteenth century — leads to something much more grounded: "the sense of immediacy or locality," "a body of people organized into a political, municipal, or social unity" *(Oxford English Dictionary).* At some point, however, the second road to "community" — the one that leads to a real group of individuals, cohabiting together, in one place and at one time — crosses over the first. Inhabitants of a material, local community, Williams claims, are always understood to be bound together by something "more immediate" than the concept of "society." And so "community," notes Williams, comes to occupy an unusual, indeed unique, location in the language of collectivist nomenclature. "Unlike all other terms of social organization (*state, nation, society,* etc.)," Williams observes, the concept of community "seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing terms" (76). In the context of globalization and its many

contested autonomies, such an optimistic etymology appears to be positioned for some further elaboration.

My narrow interest in approaching the question of "community" via Williams' forking path is to provide a certain shaping to his provocative suggestion that community's two conceptual "tendencies" — "on the one hand the sense of direct common concern; on the other hand the materialization of various forms of common organization" (1985, 76) — necessarily result in a "difficult interaction." Williams' claim pertains to the definitional meaning of "community," but I hope to show that this "difficult interaction" must also be *lived* by community's inhabitants and that such interactions have genuine effects. At a broader level, my general purpose in this chapter is to suggest that this unquestioned positivity located within the concept of community requires substantial rethinking, at least in certain cases.

My test case here is a particular community — "the mountaineering community" — and my argument, in a nutshell, is that whatever else it may be doing, "community" — like "globalization," like "autonomy" — can also (to misquote Foucault) become "a violence we do to others." I suggest that the "difficult interaction" between (and these are not Williams' terms) the "grounded" and the "virtual" in the concept of community provides the seeding ground for this violence. I suggest that the notion of a grounded community affords a structure of unrealizable desire to the virtual community and that the virtual lends a structural alibi to the grounded. Mountaineering appears to be a radical expression of autonomy at the level of both the individual and the group. Such autonomy is achieved by a process of physical — and problematic — self-globalization. And so I proceed in this chapter on the assumption that "the mountaineering community," though in some obvious ways atypical of "community" as we commonly understand it, can nevertheless provide a useful locus for reading the problematic of globalization and autonomy in a more general sense. Like all instances of community in Williams' etymological sense, the mountaineering community inhabits a structure of constitutive contradiction. Mountaineering locates one of the ways in which powerful interests manage the contradictions of "community" in the interests of the profit motive and through the structural enablement of community's "opposing and distinguishing terms."

One can trace this structure of constitutive contradiction in the word itself. The idea of "mountaineering" did not exist in Shakespeare's time, and neither did the word. Obviously, people did go up mountains for

practical or spiritual reasons, and occasionally for the view,[1] but there is no record of any early human practice of climbing peaks by technically difficult routes for reasons of sport or style. The word *mountaineer,* however, was just coming into use in the early seventeenth century, and it is likely that Shakespeare coined it. The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the first appearance of this word to *Cymbeline* (1609): a metropolitan dandy named Clotten calls Cymbeline's son Guiderius a "Rusticke Mountaineer," and the insult is thought sufficiently offensive to justify his beheading. The term "mountaineer" thus begins its linguistic life as a designation of both geographical distance and cultural difference between speaker and the designated individual. It is a term that characterizes someone who lives in the mountains — a location that is understood to be remote from the linguistic centre — and it comprises a form of identification that would not, unless ironically, be used as a designation of the self. The mountaineer, at this moment of linguistic origin, is an Other.

The term begins its change in polarity – towards a form of self-identification — at the turn of the nineteenth century, when it becomes applied to those Romantics who "travel to mountains out of a spirit other than necessity" (Macfarlane 2003, 15). It achieves its rugged, self-heroizing meaning — the mountaineer as the epitome of the autonomous individual — in the middle of the nineteenth century, with "the invention of mountaineer*ing*" (Hansen 1995) as a specific form of organized and codified leisure activity. Though the original meaning of mountaineer — a designation of someone else, a "hillbilly" like Jed Clampett — will largely fade into obscurity, it remains, I think, a sedimentation in the conceptual apparatus of the contemporary mountaineer. This conceptual contradiction in the meaning of mountaineer — a "difficult interaction" between Self and Other — is an etymological allegory of what I now want to argue is the mountaineering community's structural dependence on something other than itself, a contingency on its autonomy, which continues to disturb.

"Mountaineering" as a form of self-identification, the name for "the action or sport of climbing mountains" (*Oxford English Dictionary*), is not only a relatively recent phenomenon — an "invention" by the British Victorians[2] — but also one that comprises itself within cultural, gendered, and class-specific limits. "Mountaineering" did not organize the way in which earlier scientific expeditions or Romantic travellers went into mountaineer regions. But in the 1850s, mountaineering became a distinct, coherent, and ultimately highly codified practice, and what made it so was

the formation of a consolidated, organized, metropolitan, male-only, and middle-class community: the Alpine Club, formed in 1857, and centred in London, England. The Alpine Club was comprised primarily of "public school and Oxbridge educated" members, "academics, teachers and 'intellectuals'" (Robbins 1987, 585). Its declared objective was "to facilitate association among those who possess a similarity of taste, and to enable its members to make arrangements for meeting at some suitable locality whence they may in company undertake any of the more difficult mountain excursions … The members will occasionally dine together" (Alpine Club 1857). The Alpine Club would not admit women until 1976.

It is hard to think of a more striking example of a grounded and localized "community of interest." The Alpine Club brought people physically together in one place in order to organize their individual and collective expeditions to the mountains and to foster a sense of mutuality and purpose in the men who practised mountaineering. The Alpine Club's first publication, a document entitled *Peaks, Passes, and Glaciers: A Series of Excursions by Members of the Alpine Club* (Ball 1859), speaks specifically of that "sense of common identity and characteristics" that Williams refers to as foundational to the concept of community, and it posits that sense of identity as arising from participation in a common kind of experience. "The community of taste and feeling," writes John Ball, the Alpine Club president, in his preface, "amongst those who in the life of the High Alps have shared the same enjoyments, the same labours, and the same dangers, constitutes a bond of sympathy stronger than many of those by which men are drawn into … mutual feeling" (xi-xii).

The Alpine Club community was not only locally grounded but also self-globalizing. Expeditions to the Alps in the 1850s led to expeditions in the Caucasus Mountains in the 1860s (Hansen 1996) and thereafter to the Andes, the Rockies, and the Himalayas. Alpine Clubs were formed throughout Europe in the 1860s and 1870s; in New Zealand, the United States, and Canada in the 1890s and 1900s; in India and China in the 1930s and 1950s, respectively; and now exist in every place where money and interest conspire together. A discourse of shared experience, sentiment, and values, however, stays in the mountaineering community[3] long after mountaineering exceeds its singular association with the Alpine Club in London, and long after it goes global. At the funeral for George Mallory, the British mountaineer who perished on Mount Everest in 1926, the bishop of Chester identified that discourse of sentiment as a brotherhood: "The lovers of the heights," he claimed, "are a brotherhood more intimate,

more closely united, more affectionately disposed to one another than almost any other group of men" (Younghusband 1926, 244).

The picture that emerges from this assumption of intimate brotherhood is one of excessive group autonomy within a grounded community: the Alpine Club, and the ensuing mountaineering community that it will precipitate globally, are agential, self-knowing, full of purpose, and capable of extreme individual and team mobility. And yet the Alpine Club brotherhood was made possible by all kinds of contingencies, and they are important to my argument. One such contingency was a development in technology: "the extension of the railways through France to the Alps" (Robbins 1987, 586). This development, argues David Robbins, made it possible for British men in middle-class professions, men with relatively limited holiday time, to mountaineer in the Swiss or Austrian or Italian Alps and then to come promptly home — for mountaineering was an activity for amateurs with money.

Another contingency was the development of an Alps-based infrastructure for the management of tourists and travellers. Much of the documentation in the first three editions of *Peaks, Passes, and Glaciers,* and in the *Alpine Journal,* which followed from it, is given over to the discussion of the tariffs and per diems that ought to be given for Alpine, and later Himalayan, pack animals, porters, and guides. It hardly needs to be said that many of the heroic "first ascents," so proudly claimed in the *Alpine Journal* as evidence of mountaineering's onward advance, were in fact organized, enabled, and ultimately led by exactly those local inhabitants of mountainous areas — guides such as Michael Croz, who led Edmund Whymper to his famous first ascent of the Matterhorn — who in the earlier nomenclature would have been known as "rustic mountaineers."

A third contingency for the mountaineering community is a sociological one. Robbins notes that mountaineering came into existence as a distinct human practice in Victorian England at an uneasy point of intersection between "three different and potentially conflicting discourses or 'structures of feeling'": scientism (climbing for geographical and geological information, as encouraged by the Royal Geographical Society), athleticism (mountaineering as a pure sport capable of affording "moral and physical improvements"), and Romanticism (mountaineering as "a means of penetrating to realities deeper than those encountered in everyday life") (1987, 587-93). There is an insuperably "difficult interaction" between these discourses: one cannot, for example, scientifically calculate altitude through boiling-point measurements for barometric pressure and at the same time

experience Romantic awe in contemplation of the ineffable and mountainous Sublime. Mountaineering is therefore at some foundational level a deeply incoherent activity, but it is possible to see that the tension between these founding discourses also affords an enabling energy to mountaineering practice. Mountaineering could understand itself through all kinds of organizing motives, justify its activity through its affiliations with broader discursive movements, and define itself as a practice that took place at the nexus of debate between larger social forces.

A fourth structural contingency for mountaineering practice arises specifically from this structure of sociological overdetermination, and that is its overwhelming — indeed defining — dependency on the medium of print culture. As an activity within scientism, mountaineering needed a literature to sustain it: Robbins (1987, 586) argues that this is why the Alpine Club constituted itself as a learned society (like its sometimes rival, the Royal Geographical Society) and foregrounded scientific observation in the *Alpine Journal*. As a modality of sport — again, this is Robbins' finding — mountaineering became a competition acted out far from the playing field, with no immediate audience and no formalization of "the rules of the game": the *Alpine Journal* therefore did the work of providing the sport of mountaineering with its audience and its rules of engagement. It was the medium of publication, Robbins writes, that "established a climber's claim to a particular route" (586). And as an exercise in Romantic feeling, mountaineering needed expression in a creative, poetic, and narrative literature. The preface to the second series of the Alpine Club's *Peaks, Passes, and Glaciers* shows just how thoroughly mountaineering derived its social force from readers "who had never been actors in adventures such as were narrated. The favour with which the First Series was received has encouraged the members of The Alpine Club again to endeavour to interest a wide circle of readers. The taste for these adventures is becoming more extended; the Club has doubled the number of its members" (Kennedy 1862, v).[4] From its beginnings, then, mountaineering constituted itself as foundationally — and these are Bruce Barcott's (1966, 65) words — "the most literary of all sports." The mountaineering community began as an excessively grounded and local community — a metropolitan club whose members travelled. But from the beginning, it was inseparably roped to a virtual community of readers.

A final set of contingencies arises from mountaineering's literary turn outward from its origins in male-only, club-based, white self-privilege. The literature of mountaineering draws consistently on military metaphors:

Charles Granville Bruce (1922) would title his book *The Assault on Mount Everest;* Sir John Hunt (1954) would call his *The Conquest of Everest;* Paul Bauer's (1937) is entitled *Himalayan Campaign: The German Attack on Kanchanjunga*. Mountaineering literature has retained and promulgated an inseparable association with nationalism. Lord Curzon once claimed that "the English being the first mountaineering race in the world, an Englishman ought to be the first on top of Kangchenjunga, and, if possible, of Everest also" (Hansen 1996, 62). James (Jan) Morris' book *Coronation Everest* (1958) is just one of the many literary documents that narrativizes mountaineering as a nationalist activity: it is a firsthand account of the intricate manipulations of timing and control of information that proved necessary to the coincident reporting of Hillary and Tenzing's "crowning glory" on Everest with the occasion of Queen Elizabaeth II's coronation as monarch of a resurgent British Empire (see Bayers 2003; Hansen 1996, 320; Slemon 1998). And mountaineering has consistently been narrativized as playing a socially symbolic role in the advancement of European imperialism. Hansen cites Victorian attempts to equate "the climbing spirit" with that "form of restless energy, that love of action for its own sake, of exploring the earth and subduing it, which has made England the colonizer of the world" (1995, 320). Walt Unsworth (1989, 141) reports this from the *Morning Post:* "The spirit which animated the attacks on Everest is the same as that which … led to the formation of the Empire itself." No wonder that mountaineering has been one of the organizing themes in publications like the *Boy's Own Paper* (from 1879 onward) and continues to inform male self-fashioning in popular representations (think of Sylvester Stallone in *Cliffhanger* or Tom Cruise in *Mission Impossible II*).

It goes without saying that Victorian women climbed mountains by technical means and that women have climbed and continue to climb mountains at the highest levels of mountaineering attainment. PearlAnn Reichwein and Karen Fox (2001) have demonstrated that Alpine Club formation in Canada is actually dependent on the laboured participation of women, and this finding is just one of the many pieces of evidence that document mountaineering's foundational dependence on the participation of women from its earliest moments through its several globalizing turns. It also goes without saying that many, and possibly most, of the world's top climbers have come from the other side of the European colonial divide: the Nepalese high-altitude "sherpa" Apa Sherpa, for example, has "scaled Mount Everest a record of 16 times," this while carrying gear and oxygen for paying clients and guiding them to the top (*Tapei Times* 2006). But

as a form of self-identification that takes its beginnings within cultural and gender-specific boundaries, then — European, middle-class, masculist, nationalist, imperialist — and as a social collective that seeks to disavow its structural contingency on technology, on discursive overdetermination, on print, on the presence and participation of a virtual audience of readers, and on the enabling labour of women and cultural "others," the mountaineering community has presented itself as something inherently resistant to inclusivity, to mutuality, and to outreach. It has manifested itself as a "brotherhood": something inherently difficult for "others" — non-whites, women, readers — to fully identify with. My argument for this chapter, in a nutshell, is that this overdetermined structure of the mountaineering community as comprising both a grounded and a virtual constituency, and of mountaineering as a practice that is radically dependent on some other that is innate to the community but necessarily disavowed, has real implications for the autonomy of individuals and communities across the spectrum of globalization's economic divide. Mountaineering's difficult interaction is ultimately a lived one, especially now in this contemporary moment of its communal globalization.

Signs of this "difficult interaction" are everywhere. The exemplary representative of this community — an amateur in Victorian times, like Virginia Woolf's bookish father Leslie Stephens — has morphed into a highly singularized, commercially sponsored, full-time professional climber whose accomplishments rise to a level of athleticism and risk that are light years beyond the reach of almost all members of mountaineering's larger, virtual community. Mountaineering's various but integrated skill sets — large-group expedition activity, alpinism, ice climbing, mixed climbing, bouldering, rock climbing, ski touring, and so on — have fractured into professionalized, non-associational singularity, each now with its own separate literature and each with its own gear industry. A great deal of contemporary mountaineering activity now takes place far from actual mountains, much of it in that paradigmatic figure of contemporary alpine dissociation: the indoor climbing gym. Dependency on guiding services — always normative in mountaineering, though always disavowed — has become hyperactive and defining to climbing practice: the current rate for participation in a Mount Everest expedition, with a top-level professional guiding company, is US $60,000 (see Adventure Consultants website). The rise in gym climbing, and in "client" mountaineering, has effected a radical split between mountaineering's inner brotherhood and its virtual community inclusion seekers: "high alpinism has become tourism and show,"

claimed Reinhold Messner in 2004–5. "Mountaineering is over and alpinism is dead." This nostalgia for lost mountaineering presence within the brotherhood speaks in many voices: one of them is a radical disavowal of outward connectedness to, and contingency with, the virtual community of non-professional mountaineering participants. "Our climbing partnership, while it joined us and drew us nearer to others who had entered into similar brotherhoods," writes Mark Twight, "also separated us from climbers that did not resonate on the same plane. We brothers could only speak among ourselves" (2004, 55).

The professionalization of mountaineering's inner brotherhood has also intensified the representational distortion of mountaineering's masculist representational landscape, to use Susan Frohlick's metaphor and term, and rendered it fully "hypermasculine." Frohlick claims that mountaineering has always masculinized the terrain of "unmarked physicality" in climbing, so that all non-masculine participants and achievements (however they are conceived) need to be marked, and made separate, as feminine — for example, first "female ascent" (2000, 99–101). But in the contemporary global moment, mountaineering's masculism has become so excessive that even exemplary mountaineering individuals (such as Alison Hargreaves, the first climber to solo all six classic north faces of the Alps in a single season) are consistently represented as structurally egregious to the mountaineering brotherhood — when they are also women. "Our Brotherhood values courage over technique," continued Twight in his 2004 article, "because we believe that the risk of death is a necessary component of spiritual growth" (55). When Mallory, a father of three, died on Everest in 1926, his death was registered as a triumph of the human spirit, as well as a national tragedy. When Hargreaves died on K2 in 1995, her death provoked furious debate within the mountaineering community over her perceived "selfishness," her "self-serving" nature, and her temperamental irresponsibility, and this because she was a mother of two (see Rose and Douglas 1999).

"Mountaineering" in the global present can no longer coincide with "mountaineering" as a historical category of practice and self-identification. And mountaineering's virtual community — those who approach the brotherhood primarily through reading and viewing — can no longer coincide with the brotherhood of the rope. The idea of a unified mountaineering community still circulates widely in globalization's virtual present, but it circulates primarily as a *desire* for a coherence that is nevertheless understood to exist in no one place and to comprise no specific people. Run a phrase search in Google on "the mountaineering community" and

you'll be taken to sites that explain how a particular climbing accident, or an environmental problem, or an ethics debate, or a climbing style controversy is being registered across a geographically dispersed collective. In almost every case, the mountaineering "community" will be understood as a projected "community of interests" whose locality is purely oppositional: it is not "the general public." One cannot join such a community except through virtual forms of upward mobility. One joins it through commodity fetishization — by literally buying in.

And the buy-in is ubiquitous. Mountaineering literature has become big business, with its own specialist publishers, shops, magazines, and festivals across Europe, Australasia, and North America. Recent television commercials have employed a mountaineering backdrop to sell beer, cars, home insurance, and acceptance into the US Marines. Schoolchildren regularly follow mountaineering expeditions through corporate-sponsored, weblog hook-ups — Global SchoolNet's "KidsPeak," which followed expedition client Sandy Hill Pitman on Everest in 1996, was one of the first in this new pedagogical movement. Mountaineering now plays a cornerstone role in the growing industry of corporate "motivational presentations." Byron Smith, for example, draws on "parallels between his Everest 2000 Expedition and his proven business processes" to provide "an essential and universal strategy for setting and achieving goals" (see Byron Smith website). The University of Pennsylvania's Wharton Centre for Leadership and Change Management organizes an annual "Wharton Leadership Trek" to Mount Everest to teach that "mountain climbers, like the mountains they climb, hold a central place in modern business and society." Mountaineers, claims the Wharton group website, comprise "a paradigm for how individuals striving for a goal can achieve what others label impossible." This global turn to the mountaineering buy-in also accounts, at least in part, for the extraordinary expansion of Canada's "largest supplier of quality outdoor equipment," Mountain Equipment Co-Op (MEC): an idea "conceived in 1971 within the cozy confines of a storm-battered tent," according to the website, and now a "vibrant retail co-operative" with "stores across Canada" and "more than two million members in 192 countries." MEC positions itself as an entry point into the mountaineering community at every level of corporate self-representation. "We are a member-owned co-operative striving for social and environmental leadership," claims the website. "Mountain Equipment Co-op provides quality products and services for self-propelled wilderness-oriented recreation, such as hiking and mountaineering, at the lowest reasonable price." In doing background

research for this chapter, I e-mailed the following question to an informed MEC staff member: "What percentage of MEC's total sales actually pertain to mountaineering?" The answer I received was this: "I feel it would be in the low single digits. We sell thousands more Trembant down jackets for people braving the … winters than we do as an exclusive belay jacket. The amount of mountaineering boots we sell per winter can be counted on fingers and toes."[5]

And so the mountaineering community, once generally capable of disavowing its foundational contingencies, once thus imaginable as fully grounded and radically autonomous, has globalized itself into an amorphous zone of consumption. The mountaineering community has become a place where images, words, and goods circulate in unfulfillable fetishization of that commonality of sentiment, inclusion, and participatory belonging that gives community, in Williams' sense, its unopposed and unquestioned positivity. This transformation may appear to resemble the sociological understanding that energizes a certain kind of anti-globalization critique (though significantly not in this volume): the loss of "real" community autonomy under the forces of rampant globalization. My argument, however, has been that the mountaineering community's present configuration as "a fearful sphere, whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere," to use Jorge Luis Borges' words (1962, xxx), is in fact a logical fulfillment of its foundational "difficult interaction" between grounded and virtual constituencies, one that is now being managed by the profit-taking motive, against the possibility of a community made whole.

The implications for autonomy are global ones. They pertain to the consumers of mountaineering fetishes — books, magazines, films, gear — who buy unstoppably into the virtual because they can never find a grounded entrance to the community that calls out. They pertain to those many mountaineers who climb for love of the activity but find the idea of a mountaineering "community" bewildering — and distant from themselves. They pertain to national control over "parks and wilderness" regions — under increased international and market pressure, for example, Nepal in 2001 "removed the necessity" for a liaison officer to accompany foreign expeditions on peaks below 6,500 metres (see Risk Online website). And they pertain to the environment. Everest, for example, despite recent cleanup attempts, remains "strewn with garbage" from Base Camp to summit (see World Tibet Network News website). And Gore-tex, the soul of modern mountaineering clothing, is made from PFCs — "notorious, global

chemical contaminants" that "contaminate human blood and wildlife the world over" (Environmental Working Group website). A distinguishing feature of PFCs — mountaineering's most persistent but invisible contingency at this contemporary moment of self-fashioning — is that they are completely resistant to biodegration. They circulate endlessly through our planet, and they never go away.[6]