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Climbing Mount Everest: Postcolonialism in the Culture of Ascent

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It scarcely needs saying that "Mount Everest" is *not* just "there."[1] As just about every book on Himalayas mountaineering likes to point out, "Mount Everest" was hoisted into physical—and cultural—ascendency through a prodigious act of imperial technology: the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India.[2] Mount Everest began as a theodolite measurement taken from a hundred miles away in 1847; it became a notation called "Peak XV" within an archive of survey records which reproduced the Indian subcontinent (or at least the parts the British could get at) as a vast grid of measured, crisscrossing triangles; five years later these measurements passed into the hands of two rows of mathematicians, or "computers" as they were called, seated at a long table in Calcutta, who refigured them through logarithm into the measurement of "29,002 ft."[3] After this, legend sets in.[4] The chief computer, Radhanath Sickdhar, is said to have sent a message to the Surveyor General of India, Colonel Andrew Waugh, saying, "Sir, I have discovered the highest mountain in the world" (Krakauer 1997:13; Bilham 1997:26). Colonel Waugh reported to the Royal Geographical Society in London: "here is a mountain,

most probably the highest in the world, without any local name that we can discover, or whose native appellation, if it have any, will not very likely be ascertained before we are allowed to penetrate into Nepaul and to approach close to this stupendous snowy mass." Waugh therefore proposed that Peak XV be named "after his respected chief and predecessor in office," Colonel George Everest (Richards, "Tea in India" 1857). A political officer named B.H. Hodgson objected, writing from Darjeeling to say that "although he agrees with Colonel Waugh as to the fitness of the name of Mount Everest, and sympathises with the sentiment which gave rise to it, he must add . . . that the mountain in question does not lack a native and ascertained name; that the name is Deodhunga, Holy Hill, or Mons Sacer" ("Tea in India" 1857). The President of the Royal Geographical Society thanked Mr. Hodgson for his contribution but nevertheless concluded that "all who were present would be delighted if this mountain should for ever retain the name of th[at] distinguished geographer who . . . ha[s] been the means of carrying on that magnificent operation" ("Tea in India" 1857). And so it was that the mountain that Nepalese speakers now call Sagarmatha, which is usually translated as "Goddess of the Sky," and that Tibetans call Chomolungma, which is almost always translated as "Goddess, Mother of the World,"[5] became universally known as "Mount Everest," "the roof of the world." Later, when George Leigh Mallory was asked by a U.S. reporter in 1923 why it was that he wanted to climb Mount Everest, Mallory produced the legendary reply: "Because it is there" (Unsworth 1989:100).

What put Mount Everest "there" at the top of the world was technology and a powerful act of colonial naming, but what put the discourse of mountaineering into play—what it was that added the language of climbing the mountain to the meaning of "Mount Everest"—was Mount Everest's geopolitical location on the frontier of colonial control in British India. The act of naming "Mount Everest" took place squarely in the historical period which mountaineering literature now calls the "Golden Age of Alpine climbing"[6] (Unsworth 1989:73); but in this mid-nineteenth-century "Golden Age" the summits coveted by mountaineers were all in Europe. The Himalayas belonged to Tibet and Nepal— boundary sites for British colonial administrators. These were secret kingdoms to the British, places defined by their inaccessibility and by the burgeoning need to *know* about them as the competition between British and Russian interests in imperial expansion intensified in the region (Hopkirk 1982; Richards 1993:11-22). Thomas Richards has

argued that a dominant mode for managing a developing sense of crisis over the actual administration of an expanding British Empire in the latter nineteenth century was a specific form of symbolic management that he calls "archival confinement" (Richards 1993:11)—that is, the act of amassing data about colonial regions at both a physical and an ethnographic level, tabulating that information, storing it, building up the "imperial archive," finding new and increasingly complicated ways of filing and indexing the archive, and all this as a way of managing— but only on a *symbolic* plane—a sense of administrative drift in the actual practice of British imperial control. Tibet and Nepal, Richards argues, were crisis sites for the imperial archive: they were framed within a discourse of absent information[7] at precisely the moment that the armature of surveillance and knowledge construction was being made to stand in for actual administrative colonial control. As I read it, the inaccessibility of the highest mountain in this secret region on the colonial frontier took on *allegorical* purchase: it became an allegory for the inaccessibility of that information which would provide the material for knowledge construction in the symbolically controlling imperial archive. The English regarded Everest as "the British mountain" (Morris 1993:xiv);[8] and though it was obvious that actually climbing to the top of it would mean little to the imperial archive in terms of useful scientific data, and absolutely nothing to the archive in terms of ethnographic or human information, the idea of a British climber triumphantly *on* Everest—one foot in Nepal, the other in Tibet (Krakauer 1997:5; Gikandi 1997:19), symbolically "the-monarch-of-all-I-survey" (Pratt 1992:201, 205-206)—sutured mountaineering to the principle of imperial paramountcy, and "Everest" became the inevitable site for an allegory of colonial continuance. "English being the first mountaineering race in the world," wrote Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, "an Englishman ought to be the first on top" (Unsworth 1989:18).

Later, after Peary bagged the North Pole in 1909 and Amundsen the South in 1911, this imperial allegory took on universalizing dimensions. Everest came to be talked about as the earth's "third pole" (Krakauer 1997:14). Francis Younghusband—the famous "Great Game" political officer—called Everest "the embodiment of the physical forces of the world" and said that the attempt to climb it tested nothing less than "the spirit of man" itself (Unsworth 1989:125). George Leigh Mallory claimed that "there is something in me which responds to this mountain and goes out to meet it; . . . the struggle is life itself, upward and forever upward" (Morrow 1986:63). But the

original grounding of what it means to climb Mount Everest in the alle-gory of colonial authority—in a discourse in which symbolic manage-ment stands in for the handling of an actual crisis in colonialist information and administration, but can only ever be *symbolic* manage-ment—has specific consequences for what the literature of climbing Mount Everest will come to look like.

The first of these consequences is that triumph on the mountain, getting to the top, calls the apparatus of allegory into play—and alle-gory, as every reader of Edmund Spenser knows, traditionally associ-ates mountaintop vision with the principle of revelation. The principle of revelation informs just about all descriptions of the first sighting of Everest, and it comprises one of the structuring principles of the writ-ing: "We had seen a whole mountain range, little by little, the lesser to the greater," writes George Mallory, "until, incredibly higher in the sky than imagination itself had ventured to dream, the top of Everest itself appeared" (Coburn 1997:23). What remains foundational in the litera-ture of climbing Mount Everest, however, is the extent to which the motif of revelation needs constantly to be *staged*. Mallory's description is characteristic of how writers describe their first sighting of the Mountain—the organizing category is "the sublime" (MacLaren 1984: 58-59; 1985, 90-101)—but what is remarkable about the topos of reve-lation concerning Mount Everest is the extent to which the revelation of triumph on the mountain is physically overproduced in order explic-itly to allegorize the principle of colonial continuance.

The paradigmatic moment of this staging, of the claiming of Everest as an allegory of imperial continuance, is the brilliant First Ascent of Everest in 1953. (This paper will address three "great" moments in which climbing on Mount Everest becomes world news, and this moment historically is the second of those three.) Everyone knows the story: Edmund Hillary of New Zealand and Tenzing Norgay of Nepal summiting from the south col route on 30 May; the news reaching the young Queen Elizabeth the night before her coronation on 2 June; word passing along the street as people gathered patriotically in the postwar early morning to watch the Coronation procession go by; newspapers around the world reporting the triumph—"The Crowning Glory"; "Everest Is Climbed"; "Tremendous News for the Queen"; "Hillary Does It!"; Everest not only conquered, but conquered by the "new Renaissance Men" "of British blood and breed" (Tiffin and Lawson 1994:1; Morris 1993:xi-xii). It hardly needs to be said that "in Britain at least the linking of the two events was regarded almost as an

omen, ordained by the Almighty as a special blessing for the dawn of a New Elizabethan Age" (Unsworth 1989:340). What Jan Morris makes clear in her astonishing book entitled *Coronation Everest* (1993), however, is the extent to which this remarkable coincidence between mountaineering paramountcy and imperial coronation depended upon a conscious, staged manufacture and manipulation of this moment of allegorical revelation. James Morris, then a correspondent for the *Times* (and later to become the famous travel writer Jan Morris) writes here about how, in anticipation of stage-managing the Coronation Everest coincidence, he left Base Camp on the morning of 29 May and climbed up to Camp IV, how on the next day he met the triumphant climbers descending to their tents, how he raced down to Base Camp and in a state of exhaustion sent a runner to the transmission office at Namche Bazar, how the transmission went out to the world, but in cipher—"snow conditions bad stop advanced base camp abandoned yesterday stop awaiting improvements"[9]— and thus how it was that triumph on Everest was stage-managed in coincidence with the great imperial moment of Elizabeth's coronation, and why it was that the *Times* of London had its scoop.

My thesis is that this language of triumphalism in climbing Mount Everest is predicated on an allegory of symbolic management for actual colonial relations. The association of this language of triumphalism with the literary device of allegory accounts for the ubiquitous figuration of revelation in the discourse. The practice of symbolic management, however, depends on the assumption that the social and political field is organized by representations—not merely on the assumption that representations have social and political effects—and this assumption gives rise to the anxiety that symbolic management can only ever be symbolic management. This anxiety, when it takes root within the language of triumphalism, has generative purchase: revelations of triumph on Mount Everest are anxiously overproduced, or staged, in the writing. The language of triumph on Everest is grounded in colonial allegory, and this structure of predication accounts for the curious undercurrent of nostalgia that inhabits the writing. For underneath the language of triumph in ascent runs a constant murmur of awareness that symbolic imperial management can never actually do its real political work: nostalgia is the effect of this awareness of crisis in the discourse of colonial continuance. Early figurations of this nostalgia pertain to the space of Mount Everest itself— this is the general tenor of an editorial that appeared in the *Evening*

News in 1920, opposing the idea of the first British attempt on Everest on the grounds that "Some of the mystery of the world will pass when the last secret place in it, the naked peak of Everest shall be trodden by . . . trespassers" (Unsworth 1989:24). But later the focus of nostalgia changes: it becomes not so much the mountain that is to be lamented but the mountaineer who attempts to claim it. This suturing movement—this surrogation of the climber for the place to be climbed, the self for the site of otherness—is in my view precisely what it is that defines the cultural work of mountaineering literature and gives it its social force. To ground this argument, I want to turn to the first of the three great historical moments in which the climbing of Everest made world news.[10]

   In 1924 the British made the third of their consecutive attempts at a First Ascent of Everest, this by the north ridge through Tibet. All eyes were on George Leigh Mallory—a vain and careless climber, but wildly handsome, a *Boy's Own Paper* figure adored by Lytton Strachey, and regularly called "Gallahad" in the British press (Unsworth 1989:41-43; Wainright 1997:9-14). On 8 June, this time wearing the oxygen mask that he had previously dismissed as "unsporting, and therefore un-British" (Unsworth 1989:78), Mallory, accompanied by the young and inexperienced Andrew Irvine, set out from Camp VII on the North Shoulder into what has become without doubt the most famous failed summit bid in mountaineering literary history. Noel Odell, clearly the strongest climber of his day, but left behind by Mallory at Camp V to watch,[11] recorded his last sighting of Mallory and Irvine before they disappeared into the mountain, and his description of this last sighting has become the most famous paragraph in mountaineering literature. Notice how Odell employs the language of revelation and then of loss to capture his sense of the moment:

> as I reached the top there was a sudden clearing of the atmosphere above me and I saw the whole summit ridge and final peak of Everest unveiled. I noticed far away on a snow slope leading up to what seemed to me the last step but one from the base of the final pyramid, a tiny object moving and approaching the rock step. A second object followed, and then the first climbed to the top. As I stood intently watching this dramatic appearance, the scene became enveloped in cloud once more. (Unsworth 1989:127)

This passage, I believe, marks the tropological centre of mountaineering literature in its classic, colonialist mode. It fixes the moment of passage from revelation to nostalgia, the passage of the human climber

into the mountain he tries to climb, the moment where revelation of the mountain becomes coterminous with revelation pertaining to the mountaineering self. This is the moment where the mountain becomes *peopled,* and this by death: this is the transformation that sits at the figurative centre of mountaineering writing. "If anything could mitigate our sorrow in the loss of Mallory and Irvine," wrote a mourning team member, "it is the knowledge that they died somewhere higher than any man has ever been before, and it is possible for their relatives to think of them as lying perhaps even at the summit" (Unsworth 1989:133).[12] The news of Mallory's death, along with Irvine's, produced a national display of mourning in England. The deaths, inevitably, produced fierce debate over the question: Was the sacrifice worth it? An editorial in the *Morning Post* on 24 June 1924 gave the following answer:

> In the days of peace England will always hold some who are not content with the humdrum routine and soft living. The spirit which animated the attacks on Everest is the same as that which prompted arctic and other expeditions, and in earlier times led to the formation of the Empire itself. Who shall say that any of its manifestations are not worth while? Who shall say that its inspiration has not a far-reaching influence on the race? It is certain that it would grow rusty with disuse, and expeditions like the attempt to scale Everest serve to whet the sword of ambition and courage. (Unsworth 1989:141)

In a recent article in *Harper's Magazine,* Bruce Barcott argues that mountaineering has become "the most literary of all sports," and the only participatory sport that ritually insists that some of "its players die" (1996:65). This narrative need for death, in my view, is grounded to the suturing of nostalgia for the mountain to nostalgia for the mountaineer, and in order to locate the ideology of mountaineering literature with a bit more precision I want to identify some additional features, which seem to me definitive of the genre. First, the classic literary texts of mountaineering focus on first ascents and new routes: the values they extol are self-discipline, privation, training, technical knowledge, the ability to improvise and the capacity to carry teamwork to its absolute limit. Second, the organizing genre of these texts is travel, but mountaineering literature differs from imperial travel writing in that mountain climbers journey towards fetishized arrival points that are by definition *unpeopled* by cultural others. Third, mountaineering literature almost uniformly suspends the generative agency of the enabling, "native" guides on climbing expeditions. "Native" figures in climbing writing never really stop being just coolies or porters, and even when

they climb as team members on the final pitch, they are never route finders, and they never get there first. Collectively, these features define mountaineering literature as a travel genre in which all transformations are entirely internal: the genre never breaks with the Manichaean logic of separate spheres that Syed Manzurul Islam, in his excellent book *The Ethics of Travel* (1996), sees as the primary obstacle to the latent transformative potential of actual self-other cultural encounters. Instead of cultural encounter, classic mountaineering writing articulates a map; it charts an assault line. But it is axiomatic to the genre that *great* climbing writing produces a map that virtually no reader, as a physical traveller, could ever actually follow.

If the text of "climbing Mount Everest" has an originary grounding in an allegory of colonialism, it should come as no surprise that when colonial political relations reformulate themselves into neo-colonialism, and when most of the potential routes for a first ascent on Everest come to be exhausted, the meaning of "climbing Mount Everest" is going to have to change. The turning point for this change came in 1985 when a wealthy Texas oil tycoon and resort owner named Dick Bass, a man with "limited climbing experience" (Krakauer 1997:21), "cliented" his way up Everest at the age of fifty-five—accompanied by his climbing partner Frank Wells, president of Warner Brothers—under the wing of one of the world's best mountain guides. Bass and Wells thus became the first human beings to reach the top of each of the highest mountains on each of the seven continents on earth, and their climb of Everest became the first in a new line of Everest climbing identities, and the last of the old firsts—though the first Everest paraglider, the first father-and-son success, the first husband-and-wife team to summit remained just a little in the future (Coburn 1997:249). Bass and Wells's book, *Seven Summits* (1986), foundationally changed the meaning of climbing Mount Everest (Dowling 1996:40). As Jon Krakauer puts it, the book "spurred a swarm of other weekend climbers to follow in his guided bootprints, and rudely pulled Everest into the postmodern era" (1997:22).

Bruce Barcott locates one of the central changes in this shift *beyond* colonialism into the neo-colonial moment in mountaineering writing when he notes that "the early Everest books were driven by the climb; now the climbs tend to be driven by the books" (1996:66). In the spring of 1996—and this is the third of those three moments when climbing Mount Everest became world news—300 climbers from thirty separate expeditions gathered at Everest Base Camps, sixteen of those

expeditions planning to summit via the Hillary-Tenzing route of 1953.[13] Ten of these expeditions were commercial ones, with clients paying up to $65,000 U.S. apiece for a crack at the top. Two others were national teams seeking their first national ascent. In recent years, with the globalization of sports competition, it has become de rigeur for countries seeking to relocate their position on the postcolonial world stage—for countries hoping to send out the message that they have redefined themselves in relation to a colonial past and have fully arrived within the ambit of unquestionable self-determination—to invest very heavily in trying to put a national team of climbers on Everest. The Canadians did it in 1982: the picture of the Canadian flag on top was given a fanfare in the press, and the two climbers who summited had lunch with Trudeau (Morrow 1986:96). In the spring of 1996 a South African and a Taiwanese team were attempting to stage *their* moment of postcolonial nationalist triumph on Everest (Wilkinson 1997:45). The following year an Indonesian national team and a Malaysian national team would try for their own picture of the flag on the summit, but those teams would be clienting their way up under the tutelage of highly paid Western climbing guides (Child 1997; Wilkinson 1987:45). In the spring of 1996, several of the Everest climbing clients arrived at Base Camp with publishing contracts already in hand. One of those clients—a wealthy social climber, Sandy Hill Pittman—posted daily messages to the *Today* show through the NBC Interactive website (Dowling 1996:36). School children across the U.S. followed Hill Pittman's progress on the mountain by clicking on the "KidsPeak" icon on the Global Schoolhouse Net homepage, and carried out a series of integrated pedagogical activities across the curriculum which were designed to help them identify with Hill Pittman as she bagged the summit.[14] Hill Pittman's was already, as *Outside Online* reported, "the most-watched commercial expedition of all time" (Balf et al.).

Climbing Everest by the Hillary-Tenzing route has become big business. Nepal now charges $70,000 U.S. per expedition for a permit, plus an additional $10,000 for each climber after the seventh (Coburn 1997:38-39). Climbing Mount Everest by the Hillary-Tenzing route has also become blasé. The route gets called "the yak route" (Unsworth 1989:514), and it involves only forty feet of technical climbing, this near the top of the mountain at the famous "Hillary Step." Difficult climbing on the route takes place just above Base Camp, however, in the Khumbu glacier icefall. By 1996 the Khumbu icefall had been transformed into a toll route: a British team had it roped and laddered,

and other expeditions paid the British $2,000 apiece in order to pass through (Krakauer 1997:76). Beyond the icefall, the significant difficulties on Everest are really the height and the weather: climbers on Everest cover more vertical feet above 25,000 feet, in the oxygen-scarce "Death Zone" (Krakauer 1996:5), than they would on any other mountain, and storms can come on suddenly. To deal with this problem, the commercial expeditions employed top-notch Western climbing guides and paid them between $20,000 and $25,000 each; they also employed top-notch Sherpa climbing guides to do exactly what the Western guides were doing, but for a tenth of the salary (Coburn 1997:33; Krakauer 1997:44-45). Jon Krakauer records how Scott Fisher, expedition leader of the commercial outfit called Mountain Madness, promoted the yak route: "We've got the big E figured out, we've got it totally wired. These days, I'm telling you, we've built a yellow brick road to the summit" (1997:66).

On 10 May, twenty-nine climbers from three separate expeditions attempted a summit bid. But Lopsang Jangbu Sherpa, who was supposed to fix guide ropes on the summit ridge on the morning of the final assault, did not arrive at the summit ridge before the client climbers: he had exhausted himself the day before carrying Hill Pittman's satellite phone from Camp III to Camp IV (where it no longer worked), and by short-roping Sandy Hill Pittman on summit day up the slope like a water skier.[15] With their expedition leaders lagging behind, client climbers waited too long at the South Summit for permission to forge ahead, then clustered in long traffic jams at the Hillary Step, and then partied too long on the top of the mountain waiting for the expedition leaders to come up and tell them that it was O.K. now to get off; an unpredictable storm blew in; eight people died in the blizzard, two others lost their fingers and their noses to frostbite; and for the third time Everest became genuinely global news once again.

In the riot of condemnation, rumination and debate that followed May 1996 on Everest—in *Life* magazine, *Men's Journal*, *Vogue*, *Outside*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, on web sites, in townhall debates, and in Jon Krakauer's best-selling book *Into Thin Air*[16]— a central problematic emerges, and the general tenor of this problematic marks the moment at which mountaineering writing about Everest enters into the ambit of discursive *post*coloniality. "The commercialized trips and the overcrowding are what caused this thing," said Edmund Hillary: "it was inevitable"; it showed "disrespect for the mountain" (Dowling 1996:41; Krakauer 1997:34). Special condemnation accrued to the practice of

taking guided clients beyond the point of self-sufficiency—past the point where they were able to get down from the death zone if their oxygen ran out. Much was made of the fact that clients paying $65,000 apiece thought they were paying for the summit, not for the opportunity of doing the work that would get them there. Professional mountaineers pointed out again and again that clients who did not haul loads, did not prepare camps and did not *plan* not only became dependent on their guides but lost the enabling sense of teamwork. Much criticism focused on the cavalier attitude displayed by a Japanese team on the mountain's north side, which continued on to the summit without stopping to assist three dying climbers from Ladakh—"morality," said one mountaineer, "goes away when it becomes a commercial enterprise." Everest, it was agreed, had fallen subject to what one commentator called "Disney-fication." Blind, ambitious "me-firstism" had become the mountain's dominant mode.[17]

My argument to this point has been that what makes Everest the paramount object of mountaineering desire within popular culture is not simply its height but its history. In classic mountaineering mode, to climb Mount Everest is to enter the space of narrative—narrative that allegorizes colonial continuance and control. This is because the inaccessibility of Everest stands in for the paucity of information that can be captured for the imperial archive about a "last secret place" located in a power vacuum on the colonial frontier; and so to triumph on Mount Everest is allegorically to know this information and to deploy it in a structure of symbolic management for colonial anxieties about administration and control. But this is *only* symbolic management; the triumph of imperial revelation has to be anxiously staged, and it produces nostalgia for the place that triumphalism has transformed. The social role of classic mountaineering literature is to suture that nostalgia for the mountain to nostalgia for the mountaineer. Death on the mountain becomes the paradigmatic and paradoxical figure for the consolidation of imperial authority in a narrative of triumph and information. Since Everest climbers seek their triumphs at a point above human dwelling, in a place defined by its exclusion of cultural others, Everest travel writing also ensures that all transformations of the imperial traveller take place only within the contained and culturally unconnecting ambit of the self.

But when Everest gives way to "Disney-fication," a new climbing subjectivity emerges, and writing about Everest abandons the narrative of imperial allegory for the genre of critique. The old colonial ques-

tion—Who does Everest belong to?—becomes postcolonial, self-reflective and brooding: "Who belongs on Everest?" (Cahill 1997:17). Everest's paradigmatic inaccessibility, its figuration of otherness without cultural others, becomes violently translated—by commodification, by commerce, by the staging of postmodern nationalist arrival—into exactly its opposite: Everest becomes a main street, a traffic jam, a ship-of-fools party on the rooftop of the world. Triumphs remain stageable, but triumph allegorizes nothing: triumph on Everest is too easily staged. Unsurprisingly, a recent $65,000 Everest client is now suing for his money back because his expedition leader *failed* to get him to the summit (Krakauer, "Into Thin Air":23; "*Outside* Symposium on Everest"). Nostalgia for Everest also remains rampant—but it takes two forms, and they are incommensurable. The first is a nostalgia for Everest's return to the imperial archive: it was as though the summit was "like some children's storybook paradise," writes Tim Cahill (1997:17), "where only the pure of heart and the well-intentioned were admitted." The second is a nostalgia for an Everest *before* imperial history. But for mountain climbers, this second form of nostalgia is impossible and self-annihilating: it is nostalgia for a perfect, untravelled, non-signifying Everest—an Everest before mountaineering passed through its mirror phase into desire and the Symbolic order, before climbing consolidated its self into a "culture of ascent" (Krakauer 1997:20). Even death on Everest has lost its suturing power. The bodies of dead climbers now litter the standard assault routes on Everest, and climbers take photos; but dead mountaineers now can never quite *become* the mountain—mourning is trivial and the suture will not take place. Climbing Mount Everest still carries enormous symbolic capital— the capacity to consecrate—but only for those benighted national administrators and those calculating corporate entities sufficiently distant from contemporary Everest realities to know what climbing Mount Everest, now, really means. Mountaineering professionals are fast deserting Everest—not at the level of their labour, for there is still money to be made from guiding. Their desertion takes place at the level of meaning. Everest, as imperial allegory, no longer carries a capacity to transform.

My thesis for this paper is that this current moment of suspended allegorization—this moment that frames the question "What does it means to write about Mount Everest?"—is capable of lending unusual, and disturbing, clarity to the inescapably contingent but nevertheless oppositional concept of "postcolonialism" itself. What defines this

moment is its predicative stasis—for the genre of mountaineering literature, that is, but not for the many other modalities in which "Everest" can be thought about and represented. This predicative stasis rests on a structural opposition, one that seems unresolvable from within. On the one hand, it is impossible for mountaineering literature to ground a critique of present (neo-colonial) climbing practices on Everest without drawing on the discourse of classic mountaineering: to critique the present is implicitly to endorse the imperial allegory of Everest's colonial past. On the other hand, it is impossible for mountaineering literature in its current postcolonial moment to frame a critique of classic Everest climbing practices without implicity endorsing the neo-colonial discursive contract that underwrites the dominant idea of "Everest" in the present. Critiques of *present* modalities for being on Everest—that is, critiques of present forms of commodification, of postmodern nationalism and of privileged individual access on Everest—cannot help but reiterate the logic of a *past* colonialist discourse: a discourse of "Western" prerogative, of border patrolling, of exclusivist professionalism and the grand narrative of imperial meanings. At the same time, critiques of the *past*, high-imperial modalities for being on Everest cannot help but underwrite a narrative of presentist permissiveness, where cross-culturalism by individual volition, and by the wealthy, becomes definitive of travel in the contact zones, where nations join together in the making of freely negotiated but profoundly unequal commercial relations that produce overwhelming environmental damage and translate entire populations into service-industry providers and where a class-based identification with a surrogate, travelling self in the virtual community of Internet participation becomes foundational and normative in a new, postmodern pedagogy for engaging with the world.

In postcolonial critical theory, one of the terms now being used to identify a predicative stasis of this kind is the term "complicity/resistance dialectic" (see Gikandi 1996:123-25)—a schema in which resistance against a single and specific axis of domination within the multiple and interwoven axes that comprise a discursive formation (race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.) entails complicity with at least one other axis of domination within that discourse. And one of the most urgent debates within postcolonial critical theory is over how we are to understand the social productivity of writing that seems framed within this complicity/resistance dialectic—a zero-sum game, or an ambivalent but generative way to the production of social change? In closing this paper I want to suggest that this postcolonial moment of predicative

stasis, of complicity and resistance, in the genre of Everest mountaineering literature might itself allegorize the structure of at least one form of professional postcolonialism as it seeks its own triumphs in university institutions today. In this allegory, the "native guide" that Helen Tiffin (1978:147-48) places at the centre of the paradigmatic colonialist travel narrative—the journey from the "sick heart of Empire" to the transformative colonial frontier—has become translated by institutional postcolonialism into the "non-native" *academic* professional, whose job it is to client students up the slopes of cultural otherness, breathing theory as they reach for the top. In this allegory, the idea of marginality has been transformed into a mountain: it is marginality itself, says Spivak, that postcolonialism has commodified (Young 1995:163). Cultural difference, in this allegory, has been translated into a celebration of the borderless. Cross-culturalism has been made virtual on the Internet frontier. The pedagogy of cross-culturalism has surrendered into travel writing. And genuine, postcolonial encounter has frozen on the mountainside—a photo-opportunity for social and literary criticism, and then criticism climbs on.

It is conventional to end a paper that describes a problem by volunteering a solution, but in lieu of that difficult work I want to provide four very brief snapshots of how the complicity/resistance dialectic of climbing Mount Everest has actually been navigated. In what follows, I will draw only on Canadian examples—not simply "because they are there" but also because, collectively, they say something about the curious compromises that can attend a rhetoric of oppositional self-emplacement, and about the unexpected fissures that can fall out of a rhetoric of seamless compliance, when the locus of representation is that ambivalently positioned middle ground between the massive binaries of colonizer and colonized—a middle ground which currently supports many critical discussions of how Canadian invader-settler cultures might be positioned within the binaristic tropologies that are commonly used to articulate imperial relations. In what follows, one might trace the beginnings of my own allegory of disciplinary postcolonialism in its current seizure of narrative contradiction.

The first snapshot comes from 1997, and features two Calgary climbers—Jamie Clarke and Alan Hobson—who managed to fund their Everest expedition through sponsorship from a multinational real estate company and a U.S.-based computer firm. The "Colliers Lotus Notes Everest Expedition" of 1997 maintained a daily website that permitted "subscribers" to follow the climbers' progress towards triumph:

Clarke and Hobson summited on 23 May, two of twenty-two climbers to summit on that day. Twenty-five employees of the real estate firm holidayed at Base Camp as the Canadians reached the top. "Everest," said the Chairman of Colliers International on the promotional web page: "the teamwork, commitment and dedication it involves—is symbolic of the challenges we face day-to-day in our business. Overcoming obstacles, using weaknesses to find strength, operating as a team in pursuit of a grand vision—this is what the Colliers Lotus Notes Everest Expedition is all about." "Through team work," added the Everest project manager for Colliers International, "we are well positioned to provide our clients with first-rate commercial real estate services in markets worldwide" ("Colliers Lotus Notes"). After the climb, *Macleans* magazine did an exclusive feature of the Canadian ascent. "The story of the climb by Clarke and Hobson is one of determination, bravery, teamwork—and very high danger," wrote *Macleans*. Hobson and Clarke contributed a brief piece of their own to *Macleans*: "Our adventure safely concluded," they declared, "our goal will be to demonstrate how the lessons we learned on Everest can be applied to the world of business and the business of life" (Gikandi 1997:20).

The second snapshot comes from 1986, and it features the second Canadian to summit on Everest—Patrick Morrow. Morrow was also the second, after the Dick Bass and Frank Wells team, to climb to the top of the highest mountain on each of the seven continents in the world, and he wrote about it in a book entitled *Beyond Everest: Quest for the Seven Summits* (1986). In that book, Morrow argues persuasively that Bass and Wells bagged the seven summits first because they had no need to seek corporate sponsors. "Bass and Wells brought to the project the type of élan that had been lacking in the climbing world since the days of steam, when climbing was a rich man's sport," wrote Morrow. "[They] were able to take an important time-saving shortcut because they did not have to search for sponsors. They surrounded themselves with the best climbing guides available, who led them in safety up the mountains and prepared their camps and meals" (1986:96). Morrow also argues that Bass and Wells's *idea* of the seven summits was faulty. Morrow argues that, instead of climbing Australia's highest mountain, Kosciusko, Bass and Wells should have climbed the highest mountain in Austral*asia*—Carstenz Pyramid, on Irian Jaya. Morrow went on to climb Carstenz Pyramid: left to the vagaries of implication is the argument that Morrow's placement of "second" in the "seven summits" competition should retroactively now be upgraded to a "first."

The third snapshot features a 1997 novel by the Halifax writer J.A. Wainwright: its title is *A Deathful Ridge*. Wainwright retells the story of George Leigh Mallory and Andrew Irvine's famous 1924 climb, but this time with a difference. In Wainwright's retelling, the narrative of a glorious British failure on Everest explodes into a cluster of alternative narrative possibilities about what really happened on the mountain, each of them opening into new ways of thinking about colonial history and the "rock of Empire" (1997:30). The most interesting of these narrative possibilities, for my purposes, is the suggestion, made early in the book, that on Everest Mallory actually *didn't* die: instead, he went crazy with the mixture of ambition and elevation, whacked his iceaxe into Irvine's head and had to be squired away by his expedition leaders to a secret hideout in Wales.

The fourth and final snapshot comes from 1947 and features Earl Denman, a Canadian engineer who made his way to Rhodesia and then, with no real climbing experience behind him, nonetheless decided to climb Mount Everest, alone and in secret (Unsworth 1989:246-50). "[I]t was always the distant heights which fascinated me and drew me to them in spirit," wrote Denman in his 1954 book *Alone to Everest*. "[I was] determined to see at least one major dream through to fulfilment" (cited in Unsworth 1989:246). And so without a permit and with scarcely any credible climbing equipment, Denman made his way to Darjeeling, hired just two Sherpas—one of them the young Tenzing Norgay himself—and actually managed to climb with them to the foot of the North Col, before being driven back by the inevitable storms. Denman set out to climb Mount Everest again the next year, but this time the authorities were on to him about his lack of permit and none of the Sherpas was willing to risk another maniacal run at the mountain, even though Tenzing Norgay, it is said, still found the idea of an unofficial attempt deeply attractive. Walt Unsworth, author of the book *Everest: The Ultimate Book of the Ultimate Mountain* (1989), describes what happens next. "He returned home to Rhodesia," writes Unsworth (1989:250), "wrote a book about his adventures, and was planning to attempt the mountain through Nepal in 1953 when the news came through of the British success. He turned his back on the mountain for ever."

Notes

1 This paper was originally given at the "Commonwealth in Canada" Confer-
ence, sponsored by the Canadian Association for Commonwealth Literature
and Language Studies, and held at Wilfrid Laurier University, November
1997. My thanks to Rowland Smith and Gary Boire, organizers of that con-
ference, and to Guy Beauregard, Alan Lawson, Ian MacLaren, Nima
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lace for helpful commentary along the route. The paper was subsequently
published in a special issue of *Canadian Literature* (58 [Autumn 1998],
15-41), edited by Neil Besner and dedicated to Bill New, who always sum-
mits. For guidance into the practice of mountain climbing, and thus into its
literature, I owe enormous thanks to two extraordinary mountaineers,
Kerry Best for introducing me to climbing and to David Cockle for there-
after being my mentor and guide. The phrase "the culture of ascent" is Jon
Krakauer's (1997, 20).

2 The definitive document on the Great Trigonometrical Survey is Edney
(1997). Bilham (1997) provides useful information on the technical mea-
surement of Mount Everest's height. Jon Krakauer's chapter "A Mountain
Higher than Everest" (in 1990:116-29) offers background information on
the Everest legend (much of it repeated in Krakauer, 1997:13-14); see also
Unsworth 1989:especially 2-24, 541-50). Hopkirk discusses the political
background. Baber (1996:147-51, 246-49) provides a history for trigono-
metrical survey in India going back to the early eighteenth century, and
explains the relation of this practice to topographical and statistical surveys
in the building of an empire of science for British India. Bayley (1996:
307-309) discusses the "extraordinary bureaucratic chaos and conflict" that
attended the Great Trigonometrical Survey and points out that it did little
to serve utilitarian aims in British administration in India—instead, accord-
ing to Bayley (1996), the Survey was "a huge exercise in Newtonian tri-
umphalism."

3 Krakauer (1990) points out that the height of Everest was "pegged" in
1975 at 29,029 ft. by a Chinese team; Bilham notes that an Italian/Chinese
team in 1992 corrected this to 20,023 ft.

4 Edney makes clear that this narrative of Everest's "discovery" as the world's
highest mountain is indeed legend, and that Radhanath Sickdhar's role in
this "discovery" was not as Krakauer, Bilham and others have described it.
"[T]radition incorrectly describes the computations which established
Peak XV in the Himalayas as the world's highest mountain," he writes
(1997:262).

5 Morrow mistakenly reports that Sagarmatha means "Churning Stick of the
Ocean of Existence" and that Chomolungma means "Goddess Mother of the
Wind" (1986:62-63). Unsworth concludes that "the evidence rather sug-
gests that the Survey of India knew all about Chomolungma [as the moun-
tain's name] but chose to ignore it" (1989:548); he further notes that the
name Sagarmatha is a very recent invention, promoted by the Nepalese
government.

6 Irwin notes that the British Alpine Club was formed in 1858, and that "the growth of a literature of mountaineering was contemporaneous with the growth of the sport." He also notes that the association of mountaineering with scientific study, which begins with the natural philosophers in the early nineteenth century, continues to prevail in the literature: "*The Alpine Journal* has retained its original subtitle, 'a record of mountain adventure and scientific observation'" (1950:xv-xvi).

7 Bayley elaborates the concept of the "information order" for British India, and he examines the processes by which "information" about India— "observations perceived at a relatively low level of conceptual defini- tion"—was transformed under various colonial modes into units of "knowl- edge"—"socially organised and taxonomised information" (1996:3-4, n. 9). Bayley argues that in India between 1780 and 1870, the British "could not count on an inflow of 'affective knowledge' and so were forced to manipu- late the informational systems of their Hindu and Mughal predecessors" in order to manage their crisis of authority: this involved a range of proce- dures for gathering information and translating it into knowledge, such as the creation of "a new type of native informant." "The statistical move- ment, which gathered pace after 1830, had a powerful impact" (Bayley 1996:7-8) on the making of that "information order."

8 Sir John Hunt, leader of the successful 1953 British expedition to Everest, writes: "It was as if an agreement existed in those years, by which it was tacitly understood that certain of the big peaks were the special concern of climbers of a particular nation" (1954:6).

9 This was code for the message: "Summit of Everest reached on May 29 by Hillary and Tenzing" (Morris 1993:117).

10 Although I have attempted in note 1 to map out the trajectory of this paper's progress, I want at this point to acknowledge, and to thank, the two anonymous readers who refereed this paper for its first publication in *Canadian Literature*. I have found their comments extraordinarily helpful. These readers located a number of alternative routes by which this paper might have attempted its theoretical assault on Everest writing: specifically, through a meditation on melancholia and mourning (in the footsteps of Freud and Lacan); through an examination of the generic affinities between mountaineering writing and both "the wider stylistics of explo- ration" and the "production of visual images through sketching and photog- raphy"; through a consideration of masculinities and homoerotics in mountaineering and exploration writing (see Lisa Bloom's excellent mono- graph *Gender on Ice* [1993]); and through the "complex spaces of transcul- turation involved in portering" (see Butz 1995). One reader, accurately I think, argues that the concept of "symbolic management," in the paper, needs belaying: "for Bordieu symbolic power is to be taken as seriously as administrative or bureaucratic power." Clearly, the troublesome and power- ful relations between productivity and constraint within narrative acts of symbolic management, and between narrative representation and broader modalities of social management, remain very big questions for critical theory, but my own thinking on symbolic management—thinking which has yet to summit—has been advanced by Mary Poovey's examination of

the structure of "corrective substitution" in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*. Poovey considers the ways in which social anxieties about financial instability and race, for example, are addressed through symbolic stabilizations of "woman as other," and she argues that at a certain point the "neat parallelism" of Dickens's narrative founders in productive contradiction. Exactly how such forms of narrative contradiction are to be read as productive is not so clear, and the elaboration of this problematic obviously needs to be grounded and theorized. Homi Bhabha's speculations on the productivity of narrative contradictions through their circulation in the "time-lag" of social-symbolic ordering" (1995:337ff.) may provide a useful place to begin this theoretical work.

11 Unsworth argues that Mallory's insistence that Irvine accompany him in the summit bid, rather than Odell, cannot be accounted for in the logic of climbing. "Mallory," Unsworth claims, "chose Irvine partly on aesthetic grounds" (1989:124).

12 Everest is a changing text; its stories submit to constant rewriting. In May of 1999 a commercial expedition, led by the U.S. guide Eric Simonson, and sponsored by the BBC, the PBS television show *Nova* and Lincoln-Mercury, climbed to 27,000 feet on Mount Everest's northeast ridge in order to follow up on a clue, dating to 1975, on the location of Andrew Irvine's body. Instead, climbing guide Conrad Anker found the astonishingly well-preserved body of George Mallory. The discovery scarcely provided comfort to Mallory's surviving relatives, especially after photographs of Mallory's frozen corpse, its head fused into the mountainside, appeared in *Newsweek*. Mallory's seventy-eight-year-old son John excoriated the climbers; Sir Edmund Hillary voiced his disgust. Simonson is reported to have responded as follows: "We all think this is a totally cool picture. . . . We were kind of surprised people were bummed" (Burrough 1999:284-95, 347-50; see also the special issue of *Climbing* Magazine [1999]).

13 The most comprehensive, and most interesting, account of the 1996 Everest "tragedy" is Krakauer's book *Into Thin Air* (1997), which contains important corrections to his 1996 article of the same title. Beidelman (1996), Dowling (1996), Kennedy (1996) and Wilkinson (1997) tell different facets of the story, and I have drawn the information in the following paragraphs from all of these sources.

14 The GlobalNet Foundation's webpage—"Linking Kids Around the World!"—is "a virtual meeting place where people of all ages and backgrounds can collaborate, interact, develop, publish, and discover resources." Its main objectives are to promote Internet use in schools, with a view to teaching "students to become active learners and information managers" and to "encourage business, government, school, higher education, and community partnerships for on-going collaboration" (http://www.gsn.org/who/gshistory.html). "Education today," claims the GSN web page on the GSN Program Vision, "is severely missing the mark. We suspect that one solution to having a more effective school lies in a more advanced communications system, including the use of electronic tools." The GSN is a "non-profit consortium comprised of educators around the world," and it "provides its services to all schools *free* of charge." Its "Executive Sponsors" are Advanced

Network & Services, Cisco Systems, MCI Corporation, Microsoft and Network Solutions; its "Associate Sponsor" list includes Canon Communications, Eastman Kodak and Pacific Bell (http://www.gsh.org/who/partner/spon.html). The GSN KidsPeak web page offered "a real-time, day-by-day virtual web adventure of climber Sandy Hill Pittman and her team as they try to ascend Mount Everest along the same route of Sir Edmund Hillary (http://gsn.org/past/kidspeak/index.html). The list of the Virtual Field Trip activities for Kidspeak included the following: "Imitate the distance of Sandra's trek: track how far Sandra Hill Pittman has trekked, round trip, and translate that to a number of times around the school track"; "Develop a [web] page that tells how you are using the information you learn from Sandy's reports"; "Have students research the cost of an expedition. Who are the Sherpas? What are the costs associated with feeding all the trekkers? Where does the food come from? Does it generate revenue for the local merchants?"; "Tell students to consider the amount of money put into the local economy as a result of the expeditions" (http://www.gsn.org/past/kidspeak/procon.html).

15 Sandy Hill Pittman was attempting to be the first woman to claim the "seven summits," and had a contract with Chronicle Books (Mitchell) for a book entitled *Seven Summits of My Soul.* In the debate about what went wrong in May 1996—a debate carried out almost entirely by men—Hill Pittman became "a lightning rod for criticism" (Mitchell): the "Susan Lucci of the continuing Everest soap opera" (Wilkinson 1997:101-103). Wilkinson correctly points out that the debate was—and is—inflected with "more than a hint of sexism" (1997:101). I have not engaged with the dynamics of gender in this paper; but in anticipation of the allegorical relation this paper later posits between Everest in May 1996 and the field of postcolonial studies, I cite the following from Gikandi: "students of colonial discourse and postcolonial theory do not know what to do with the women of empire—whether these women are European or native. They don't know how to read them within the project of the Enlightenment and colonial modernity, nor do they know how to explain or rationalize female subjectivity and institutional function beyond the existence of women as objects of male discourse of desire" (1996:121).

16 See Wilkinson 1997:43. An ABC "docudrama" on the climb aired on 9 November 1997. The *Edmonton Journal T.V. Times* writes: "It was the deadliest ascent of Mount Everest in history—claiming eight lives, including two renowned mountaineers. The 1996 saga is now chronicled in *Into Thin Air: Death on Everest,* a TV movie based on the book by Jon Krakauer (1997). The drama teams *Veronica's Closet's* Christopher McDonald (as Krakauer) with Peter Horton (*thirtysomething*) and Nathaniel Parker (*David*), as ill-fated expedition leaders Scott Fisher and Rob Hall. An IMAX film entitled *Everest,* shot by David Breashears and narrated by Liam Neeson, has made the 1996 Everest "tragedy" one of the best-known international stories of the 1990s. The film has become the most popular IMAX movie ever made.

17 The information in this paragraph is drawn from the "*Outside* Symposium on Everest," involving climbers Alex Lowe, Charlotte Fox, Ed Visteurs, John Cooley, Al Reed and Todd Burleson, and moderated by Mark Bryant.

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