

Alpine Style Mountaineering as Performance of Masculinity in Messner's *Crystal Horizon*

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Abstract

This paper claims that alpine style mountaineering, undertaken as a solo exercise with minimal human support and no supplementary equipment, presents an instance of masculinity as performance. The study is based on the critical textual analysis of climber Reinhold Messner's narrative *Crystal Horizon* (1989). For the purpose, the study aligns itself with Judith Butler's assumption that gender constructs and manifests itself through performance (1988, 1999). Further, it borrows the ideas of the gradual construction and structural organization of Western masculinity, especially its essential and normative construction from R. W. Connell's *Masculinities* (2005). The study examines masculinity in relation to three structural modalities: risk-perception, recognition and mediation of lack, and Oedipal consideration that perceives the mountain as a mother figure. The study demonstrates that alpine style mountaineering perpetuates the West's essentialist conceptualization of masculinity as a risk-taking behavior, an identity position that enjoys negotiating the liminal space between life and death, and a dependent male that looks up to a mountain for spiritual and emotional refuge. Hence, masculinity in the context of alpine mountaineering is not always asserted through exemplary heroic standards; it is also asserted through performances that operate against vulnerability or a manifest lack or demonstrate dependence.

Keywords: Alpine Style Mountaineering, Masculinity, Performance, Exemplary Masculinity, Machismo

Alpine Style Mountaineering: An Introduction

Alpine style mountaineering is a soloist approach to climbing a mountain enacted with minimal external support from people and equipment. The term originates from Europe's Alps where the mountaineers of the 1800s ascended classic routes with "the pack on their back, used one tent and moved camp as they went up and down the mountain" (Szalay, 2001, para. 4). Heil (2009) defines it in a condensed expression: "Minimal oxygen, no Sherpas, no guide" (p. 104). The style stands as sharply different from conventional mountaineering that is executed with the help of high-altitude climbing auxiliaries like sherpas, and with equipment like rope, ice axe, crampons, bottled oxygen and mask, and anti-hypoxic drugs like dexamethasone. Messner's (1989) description of his own climb is self-explanatory: "This time there is no one to help carry; no one to prepare my bivouac; no comrade to help me break trail in deep snow and no Sherpa to carry my equipment. Nobody" (p. 218). Krakauer (1997) calls such alpinists "free soloists: visionaries who ascended alone, without rope or hardware" (p. 20). John Telford and Simon Beames (2015) call the practice a "pure style" because of the absence of external support, and complete reliance on one's physical and psychological efficacy and unmediated sportsmanship (p. 482). A more comprehensive definition of the style has been provided by Szalay (2001):

In its purest form, alpine style climbing is full of no-going-back commitments. This means climbing to the top, often with minimal gear, food and fuel, crossing thresholds, like severe overhangs where abseils are impossible, and sometimes sacrificing comfort, warmth, sleep and nourishment to obtain the objective. Walter Bonatti, Reinhold Messner and Steve House have all made such commitments on some of their most notable climbs. Climbers like House have even taken it to another level that some observers refer to as "fast and light" climbing. (para 5)

Several climbers have demonstrated their allegiance to the alpine style by adopting to climb without human or material assistance, exposing themselves to the elemental condition of the mountain all alone. Many have succeeded, while a few have failed, and have either retreated midway, or have lost their lives. When Messner emerged as the first mountaineer to climb Everest alone in 1978, and without supplemental oxygen, the cult of alpine style mountaineering got established not only as a possibility but also

as a fact. Several climbers followed Messner's path, and demonstrated that alpine style mountaineering is a choice for those who accept the unmediated challenge of high mountains.

This paper shall demonstrate how masculinity expresses itself not only through heroic and exemplary deeds as expected by essentialist masculine imagination but also through performances adopted to work through lack and vulnerability, and finally through the compulsive renunciation of conventional masculinity in the refuge of a mother figure substituted by a mountain.

Literature Review

There are thinkers who consider alpine style a manifestation of unmediated adventure spirit, while a few others consider it a demonstration of the climbers' physical efficacy. The motives accorded to such unconventional choices have also been differently explained. For Krakauer (1997), the choice is connected to prestige "earned by tackling the most unforgiving routes with minimal equipment, in the boldest style imaginable" (p. 20). Others connect it with concentration. Norgay (2001) quotes a unanimous climber to have considered minimal climb an enabler of uncommon concentration: "As one rock climber reportedly said when asked why he climbed high and extremely difficult vertical cliffs solo, without a rope: "It helps my concentration." (p. 218-19). Maurice Wilson, a British climber who adopted a similar style to try Everest in 1934—and incidentally died during the attempt—believed that ability to tackle the most unusual risk in mountaineering reflects the power of faith. His biographer Roberts (1957) foregrounds Wilson's subjectively-conceived connection between faith and mountaineering: "He believed that through faith, and faith alone, he could reach the summit. It is a magnificent philosophy, but an impractical one" (p. 11-12).

If Wilson relied on faith rather than supplementary equipment and human support, other soloists relied on their spirit of adventurism. One frequently cited alpinist is the British climber Sharp, who attempted Everest in 2006 in pure alpine style, and died en route. Heil highlights his "lifelong love of adventure...he had discovered climbing in school" as his motivation behind such choice (p. 229). Elmes and Frame call him "solo unsupported climber" (p. 231). The style has lasted across decades and continues to attract climbers even today. *Four Against Everest* (Satyr, 1964) and *Beyond the Mountain* (House, 2009) present a continuity of the cult across time

before and after Messner's maiden Everest climb. David Sharp's choice in 2006 to climb unsupported is another instance of the attraction alpinism has maintained (Heil 2009).

The style is most predominantly associated with adventure spirit, romantic ethos, and risk-perception. However, there are scarce readings that adopt gender perspectives and consider it a performance of masculinity. Nevertheless, scholarship has, on several occasions, demonstrated a possible link between not only alpine style and mountaineering but also between all kinds of mountaineering and masculinity. Bainbridge (2012) claims that mountaineering, in the nineteenth century, was "an important activity for all the major *male* Romantic poets" (p. 3; emphasis added). Saroldi (2024) claims, alpine mountaineering is not only associated with one gender, but also with one race – white: "Who do you think of when you think of an alpinist? Usually, a white man. This impression not only because of individual biases but builds on a tradition and a literature that have made this convention seem so obvious" (p. 147). There are scholars who think gendered discourse, with the investment of a long time, has tried to establish the sport as primarily masculine. Moraldo, as quoted in Saroldi (2025) claims, it has been "codified, thought out, and told mainly by men," and their comparative edge in mountaineering "was and is understood, conceived, and perceived as male" (p. 147). Ortner (1999) also points at male-dominance in mountaineering and alpine discourses: "By and large, however, I try to make sense of mountaineering by figuring out how it fits into other, or larger, games. One is a game of masculinity, of defining and enacting the masculine self" (p. 36). Scholars like Purtschert (2020) observe mountaineering as an exercise that at once demonstrates two ideologies at work: masculinity and colonialism: "[Popular] depictions of Himalaya expeditions in the mid-20th century draw upon and reproduce colonial imaginations of white masculinity" (p. 31). Statistics also affirm the predominant presence of men in alpine style climbing, although the racial predominance of the white climbers has now been destabilized by climbers coming from diverse racial pools. Nevertheless, there are sufficient grounds to establish a connection between mountaineering and masculinity, as scholarship has often underscored its connection with male climbers. However, studies that interpret performance on the mountains as informed by gender perception are scarce. Alpine style mountaineering has been rarely examined as performance from within a theoretical framework informed by Butler, Connell and other gender theories. It is, therefore,

academically tempting to seek connections between gendered discourses and mountaineering. Nuances of masculinity can lend a framework to unfold the connection of alpine style mountaineering, as underscored in Messner's (1989) *Crystal Horizon* with the performative aspects of masculinity.

Masculinity as a Theoretical Modality for Alpinism

This study regards the alpine style as a performance of masculinity and argues that the choice is informed by gendered overtones that perpetuate the assumptions of Western masculinity. The study is limited to Everest climbing, and is based on a climbing narrative, *Crystal Horizon* (1989), by the Italian climber Reinhold Messner. Messner is the first climber who climbed Everest without bottled oxygen, and completed the summit of the highest mountains in all seven continents—called the Seven Summits in the climbing fraternity—in the same fashion. Since then, alpine style has become a recognized style of climbing.

This study relies on theoretical assumptions on gender, performativity, and masculinity, especially those postulated by Butler (1988, 1999) and Connell (2005). It also relies partially on the analogical study of mountaineering and gender, performed by Patricia Pruchert (2020). It follows a trajectory of the gradual escalation of gender discourse from its the essentialist-normative understanding as exemplary heroism, through its formation in the face of lack and vulnerability, and finally to its relational ontology realized in relationship to its assumed antithesis: femininity, especially that of a mother as a dependable figure.

Masculinity, understood in the essentialist sense, perpetuates the conventional understanding of men as people belonging to a certain gender that “cannot change, so it is futile or even dangerous to try” (Connell, 2005, p. 45). The “mass culture” usually perpetuates uncritical stereotypes that assumes that “there is a fixed, true masculinity beneath the ebb and flow of daily life” and there are “real men, natural men, and the deep masculine” (p. 45). Such a “masculine ideal” or the concept of “deep masculinity” presents the “real men” as those possessing certain qualities including “domination of women, competition between men, aggressive display, predatory sexuality and a double standard” (p. 31). In metaphorical terms, masculinity understood as a fixed and exclusivist category by the West aligns with what Brannon, quoted in Connell (2005) defines as blueprints of manhood: “No Sissy Stuff, The Big Wheel, The Sturdy Oak and Give” (p. 70). Such

assumed, culturally assigned, or discursively defined attributions accumulate to give rise to what is called “hegemonic masculinity” (xviii). The conception results from both essentialist and normative considerations that tend to define masculinity as fixed and universal, and essentially explains it as a source of power, naturalizing its assumed right to subjugate others.

In the context of the West, several ideologies have come together to shape its theory of masculinity. One of them is the concept of ‘machismo’ initially conceptualized in a Latin American context: “An ethnographic debate about ‘machismo’ in Latin America has also given a lot of attention to the ideology – a masculine ideal stressing domination of women, competition between men, aggressive display, predatory sexuality and a double standard” (Connell, 2005, p. 31). All these, compounded with the West’s exclusive parameters for masculinity, have given rise to the concept of “exemplary masculinity” that inspires a male to take risks or handle unconventional exercises to assert his gender identity (p. 215). The concept is sustained by all the “cultural machinery” of the West that endorses the centrality of hegemonic masculinity (p. 241). Connell (2005) considers such exemplary masculinity culturally determined: “Part of the struggle for hegemony in the gender order is the use of culture for such disciplinary purposes: setting standards, claiming popular assent and discrediting those who fall short. The production of exemplary masculinities is thus integral to the politics of hegemonic masculinity” (p. 214). This necessitates two things: optimum performance, and avoidance of failure.

An instance of exemplary masculinity that presupposes heroism and optimal performance is mountaineering in difficult mountains where the climbers see themselves as heroes capable of extraordinary performance. The reason is that heroism has constantly figured as a part of Western masculinity: “The figure of the hero is central to the Western cultural imagery of the masculine (a point reinforced by the ‘warrior’ and ‘hero’ archetypes” (Connell, 2005, p. 213; emphasis in original). He enlists “higher exposure to many forms of toxicity and stress” and “higher level of participation in sport and other outdoor activities” as some of the performative symptoms the West defines as indicative of exemplary masculinity” (Connell, 2005, p. 248). There is ample probability of stress and sportsmanship in mountaineering considered one of the most demanding outdoor activities.

Even as structuralist ossification of gender as a fixed category was questioned, especially after the 1960s, the discourses of masculinity entered a deconstructive phase that destabilized the logocentric concept of ideal masculinity. Academic efforts to deconstruct hegemonic masculinity have been observed taking place through multiple post-structural theoretical postulations, one of them being the performative theory of gender. Building on earlier theoretical arguments that gender is a construct, scholars like Butler (1988, 1999), and West and Fenstermaker (2002) claim that gender manifests itself through performance, positioning themselves as a counterpoint to the idea of biological and essential reductionism. Gender's performativity, Butler (1999) argues, is not a "singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" (p. xv). What she implies is that gender constructs itself through performances that are repeated, and are endorsed by the culture in which the performances unfold. What is repeated in the construction of the "power regimes of heterosexuality and phallogocentrism" is "their logic, their metaphysics, and their naturalized ontologies" through which the "mechanisms of the cultural production of identities," including masculinity, is sustained (42).

Repetitive performance, however, consolidates itself through regulatory and punitive provisions legitimized by the culture in which the identities take shape, get stabilized, and become operative. The regulatory provisions Butler (1999) claims, often play a role in stabilizing gender identity: "[The] 'unity' of gender is the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality" (p. 42; emphasis original). Besides repetition and regulation, Butler (1993) also considers "citation," a significant discursive practice that enforced gender stabilization (p. 15). She defines citation as the "acquisition of being through the citing of power, a citing that establishes an originary complicity with power in the formation of the 'I' – that is self-identity (p. 15). Citation, thus, refers to a legacy through which a "contemporary 'act' emerges in the context of a chain of binding conventions" (Butler, 1993, p. 225; emphasis in original). Thus, in Butler's schematics of gender imagination, repetition of acts, their regulation through culturally endorsed punitive provisions, and citation of authority or similar acts from the past, work in tandem to constitute and stabilize gender.

Butler's emphasis on gender as performance is inspired by a deconstructive approach that tends to destabilize the idea of fixed gender-identity metrics. She conceptualizes gender as unstable and its performance as one contingent on several socio-political circumstances. For her, gender is a "strategy of survival" (Butler, 1988, p. 5). She explains how the strategy entails performance that also foresees punishment if the performance is not up to the socially pre-determined mark: "...as a strategy of survival, gender is a performance with cleanly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are parts of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (p. 5). The punitive consequences, Butler mentions, are rooted in regulative measures of gender estimation. People who assume themselves to be masculine are thus under pressure to perform in an optimal manner, or risk regulatory sanctions. Such pressure might as well lead to anxiety. The anxiety is rooted in a supposed lack or the fear of underperformance, in response to which a man often gets ready to over-perform a gender role:

If there is weakness...there will be anxiety which motivates an exaggerated emphasis on the masculine side of things. This 'masculine protest,' in Adler's famous phrase, is central to neurosis. It means over-compensation in the direction of aggression and restless striving for triumphs. (Connell, 2005, p. 16)

The manifestation of such anxiety, aggression or strife for trump occurs through the body. The body works through both comfort and fragility, depending on situations. Thus, masculinity operates not only through a moment of comfort but also through the moments of minimal or no comfort. At any rate, the performance necessarily unfolds through the body. Unlike moments of comfort, the fragility of existence challenged by the risks ahead employs the body to strive for enhanced performance through which a man not only tries to escape the regulatory sanctions but also affirms his masculine identity. Thus, the bodies become the tools or "machines" that act (Connell, 2005, p. 48). What drives such acts is both a personal will and those ideologies and conventions that define or shape gender. The significance of the male body, therefore, cannot be undermined in masculine discourse in moments of both comfortability and fragility.

The role of situational comfortability in enabling masculinist performance is obvious; however, the role of fragility defines it in a paradoxical manner. This is because, in the conventional sense, masculinity is understood to preclude physical fragility. Butler's (1988, 1999) reference to the punitive dimension of performance is rooted in such fragilities where the subject is likely to underperform, and invite indictment from the society. She explains overperformance in the face of fragility as an outcome of "punitively regulated cultural fictions alternately embodied and deflected under duress" (Butler, 1999, p. 178). This also means masculinity possibly becomes vulnerable "when the performance cannot be sustained – for instance, as a result of physical disability" (Connell, 2005, p. 54). The evaluation of a body's performance, however, is contingent on the dominant ideologies that define masculinity. What is defined as success or failure in high-altitude mountaineering constitute those ideologies in this case.

The body that has internalized compulsive masculinity but is rendered fragile by a pronounced challenge either overperforms or look for a real or a symbolic refuge to compensate its vulnerability and underperformance. One of the strategies for such replenishment suggested by the mountaineers' performance in high-risk mountains is the "renunciation of masculinity" before a feminine figure (Connell, 2005, 36). Most often, the exhausted mountaineers see a mother's figure in the mountain they climb, and in it, they not only seek refuge but also seek replenishment of their spent masculine acumen. This provides a psychoanalytical anchorage to explain a man's attraction toward a mountain. Differing from Freud's Oedipal explanation of a man's desire for his mother's proximity, Butler (1999) argues that "the maternal body" connotes "a relation of continuity rather than a discrete subject or object of desire; indeed, it designates that *jouissance* which precedes desire and the subject/object dichotomy that desire presupposes" (p. 105). Her conceptualization of a mother's figure not as an Oedipal subject but as a context in which cultural relations unfold and shape gender identity resonates with Kristeva's argument (2024): "The mother's body is... what mediates the symbolic law organizing social relations and becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*, which is on the path of destruction, aggressivity, and death" (25). *Chora*, a term Kristeva borrows from Plato, denotes "an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases" (24). The *chora*, thus provides a substratum where the primal relationships between men and a feminine figure unfold. Connell (2005)

discusses the theoretical link between masculinity the primal relationship with the mother, and by extension, with nature at large: “An emphasis on undifferentiated wholeness, especially where it is linked to a passive-receptive attitude towards an embracing Nature, is so strongly reminiscent of primal relationships with the mother that the point is noted in counter-cultural literature itself” (p. 35-36). By extension, it resonates with that Connells quotes Lindeman as calling “wonderfully clear, pure feeling of communion with nature” (p. 36). Such communion, Connell argues, resembles the “Oceanic feeling” that is derived from a mother since the beginning of life” (p. 36). Such relationship potentially provides primal pleasure for which men renunciate their masculinity (Connell 2005).

The relevance of Connell’s theorization of the affective link between masculine performance, its renunciation, and submission to the comfort a mother or nature at large promises, offers an explanation for the mountaineers’ tendency to imagine a summit as a feminine figure endowed with magnanimity before which they can surrender their erstwhile performative hubris. At such moments, complete absence or breakage of masculine standard defines an extreme and paradoxical form of performance that asserts identity through the absence of almost all of its pre-defined standards. Thus, surrender to a mountain, considered a mother-figure, constitutes an extreme case of gender constitution.

The discussion provides a framework to examine masculinity as manifested in mountaineering as a cultural construct that surfaces in at least three distinct modalities of performance: mountaineering as exemplary masculinity, as negotiation with vulnerability and lack, and as a man’s dependence on a mother-figure for the reformulation of his masculine identity. The section below examines Messner’s (1989) *Crystal Horizon* on the aforementioned three modalities of performance that manifest masculinity.

Crystal Horizon, Masculinity, and Performance

Viewed from the theoretical perspectives of masculinity, Messner’s (1989) *Crystal Horizon* presents a paradoxical knot of heroism, vulnerability, and surrender. Heroism, usually understood as one’s physical and intentional preparedness to handle risk or put the preparedness into action unfolds in his climb, survival, and descent. Vulnerability, to which masculinity is contingent in extreme environments, becomes visible in his performance against his own anxiety, fear, and death-perception. Even if

there is success, it is most often followed by complete surrender to nature, leading to a circumstantial surrender of agentic masculinity. Such absence also paradoxically constitutes gender identity.

Exemplary Masculinity in Action

Seen as a physical act, Messner's climb represents a typical case of alpine style climbing and a display of the several modes of masculine expressions including heroism, transcendence of vulnerability, and renunciation of masculinity to a feminine refuge. His *Crystal Horizon* chronicles his solo ascent of Everest in August 1980. What makes the decision exemplary at the very outset is Messner's decision to undertake the climb in the "unfavourable weather conditions of the monsoon" (p. 6). His purpose is not to show the world what achievement he has made but to enact a compulsive drive to act that is essentially masculine: "Not the flags on the summit, the document—I don't mean these proofs. They are only superficial. What stops me from enjoying life is the compulsion to prove to *myself*, to *everyone*, that Mount Everest can be climbed *alone*" (p. 155; emphasis added). The words 'myself' and 'everyone' also entail a social-perception of masculinity: the self performs; the society affirms. The word 'alone' indicates a purification drive—a tendency to reject support—that Messner chose by renouncing Sherpas or other personal assistants against the conventional norms of mountaineering.

By working though the dangerous mountain alone, Messner (1989) intends to execute his faculties to their extremes. "Men," he believes, "cannot resist exercising and stretching to their fullest extent the faculties and aptitudes with which they each happen to be specially endowed" (p. 6). The ideal of 'special endowment' pertains to the idea of assumed heroism. Such heroism is always performed against a danger, and in Messner's context, Everest supplies the necessary danger, the ground to test, demonstrate, and affirm heroism. Everest also symbolizes the antithesis of heroism — the demon figure that heroism necessarily calls for to make itself manifest, operational, and meaningful.

Messner's (1989) consciousness of the special endowment is possibly a factor that motivates him to risk those actions whose probability is under erasure. His deliberate preparedness to tackle dangers becomes manifest on several occasions in his Everest summit. He is aware that procuring a permit to summit Everest in summer is unlikely; moreover, trying Everest from its west ridge would be demanding. However, he risks both:

“Naturally I know that the prospect of getting to the top by way of this long, difficult route, exposed to the west wind, is *poor*. Nevertheless, I carry on as if I *must* try it above everything else in the world” (p. 28; emphasis added). The acknowledgment that the prospect was poor sets a stage to argue that Messner pushes himself to the prospective danger by choice, while the modal verb ‘must’ is indicative of a compulsive impulse for responsibility that men are likely to assume voluntarily.

Such self-imposed “responsibility”—a characteristic of Western heroes—appears consistently as a part of Messner’s personality (Connell, 2005, p. 68). More, it is a part of his bodily employment, and thus, his masculinity in performance. He quotes *Quick*, a newspaper, as describing him as a “tremendously clever utiliser of the human body” who may bring “nothing back to the valley other than the enhancement of his own dubious fame” (p. 262). What is significant here is his enchantment — an affective realization heroic masculinity often highlights to justify its deliberate plunging into the territory of danger. Simultaneous with the feeling of such enchantment is an embedded desire for pleasure that escalates towards a sublime realization with the rise in the degree of risk, danger and vulnerability.

The association of enchantment with dangers makes risky climbing a source of dynamic sublime (Kant, 1989, p. xx). This lends the entire enterprise a romantic dimension. This category of the dynamic sublime pertains to an object we judge “by the magnitude of the resistance;” however, it also entails an object of fear if we find that “our ability to resist it is no match for it” (119). The romantic notion of mountaineering evidently presupposes both the notions of such sublime and fear. It is related to the “immeasurable greatness of the mountains in all spheres: physical, emotional, spiritual, metaphysical” that draws the observer to “pleasurable horror” (Telford & Beames, 2015, p. 484). The persistent association of climbing with such horror and the associated sublime, in spite of the danger and the struggle involved, thus, makes climbing an aesthetic act. The West conventionally associates mountaineering, embedded struggle, and sublimity with its aesthetic traditions predominantly defined by its romantic ethos. Messner (1989) emerges as the cross-section between mountaineering, the dynamic sublime, and romanticism:

In spite of the slightly low pressure, of the deathly hush of nothingness, up here is something like life to me. Something like spiritual strength. Without being able to hear it, without seeing it, without measuring it, I know it is there. Sometimes when the thunder of an avalanche releases my senses again, I am reenergized, as if this sudden explosion which comes from nowhere like a shock wave is absorbing the vacuum. I am becoming crazy. (p. 200)

The assumed connectivity of masculinist performance in mountaineering with sublimity is informed by the tradition of romantic masculinity invented and perpetuated by the West. This romantic mode of mountaineering stands as different from the technical mountaineering mediated by pre-reflected interests: “The new form of mountaineering was not motivated by the prospect of new scientific knowledge. Indeed, the visceral, embodied, quasi-mystical relationship of the poets with mountains...was in many ways antithetical to earlier rational, humanistic experiences” (Telford & Beames, 2015, p. 484). Romanticism is closely associated with an affective engagement with nature, one of the intentions being direct exposure to the sublime. This nexus between mountaineering, romanticism, and masculinity echoes in Telford & Beames’ (2015) conceptualization of the triangular link:

[The] major *male* Romantic poets were active and dedicated mountaineers, and most of those that were not at least attempted to present themselves as such. The Romantic poets developed something of a symbiotic relationship with mountains, the literary expression of which was then publicly communicated. As a result, their perspective has provided an enduring and highly influential lens through which mountains are perceived. (p. 184; emphasis added)

The desire for sublimity embedded in Messner’s (1989) craze for unconventional mountaineering points to a similar romantic expectation from exposure to nature. It is not his creation; it is rooted in an inherited Western discourse that is transmuted into a craze. That said, Messner executes the dual job of “citing of power” engaged in the formation of his identity (*Bodies that Matter*, p. 15) and the “repetition of their logic, their metaphysic, and their naturalized” (*Gender Trouble*, p. 45) to consolidate his masculinity. By doing so, Messner imagines himself in a continued

masculine relay that has persisted through almost a century. The first consorted manifestation of such craze in mountaineering, to which Messner alludes, was seen in Francis Younghusband, who approached Everest through Tibet in 1904, but failed. Messner refers back to the same effort as his inspiration:

It stands to reason that men with any zest for mountaineering could not possibly allow Mount Everest to remain untouched. The time, the opportunity, the money, the ability to make the necessary preliminary preparation might be lacking, but the wish and the will to stand on the summit of the world's highest mountain must have been in the heart of many a mountaineer. (Messner, 1989, p. 6)

The wish and the will, Messner mentions, call for an essentialist definition of Western masculinity that delineates certain attitudes and actions that are usually daubed as masculine: “risk-taking, responsibility, irresponsibility, aggression, [and] Zeus energy” besides what Lionel Tiger calls “hard and heavy phenomena” (Connell, 2005, p. 68). The qualities entail both thoughts and actions.

The desire and the urge, Messner talks about, entails a masculinist tilt in mountaineering, entailed by a desire for “over-compensation in the direction of aggression and restless striving for triumphs” (Connell, 2005, p. 16). One of Younghusband's declared motives behind his Everest expedition was to ensure that the “spiritual” — the human— has its “ascendency over them, the material”— the mountain (Heil, 2009, p. 55). He believed, climbing a mountain would “elevate the human spirit” even if I may not bring any other tangible return (Heil, 2009, p. 55). Younghusband's pipe dream was taken to the high altitude by the British climbers George Mallory and Sandy Irvine in 1922, and later by Canadian climbers Earl Denman in 1947 but to no significant success. Though Everest was climbed in other modes, the dream in the alpine sense remained unfulfilled up to Messner's days. Therefore, Messner (1989) authorizes himself to receive the pipe-dream and relay it ahead, demonstrating a case of repetition and citation: “Sometime this mountain will also be climbed alone and with simple means, prophesied the anti-materialistic Canadian. Since then, more than twenty-five years have passed. Denman's dream has remained alive, come to life in other minds, in other hearts. Now it is *my*

turn” (p. 85; emphasis added). At once, he resolves to repeat the efforts, and cites his forerunners as his motivation.

Alongside the inherited dream relayed through repetition and citation, Messner's chosen path—his alpine style climb—that neither suggests repetition, nor citation. He appears nerved to try something never tried before—climbing Everest without oxygen—and push himself to the limits between life and mortality. He does so, and posits himself as successful in the liminal space interstitially positioned between the two. His musings at the interface of death and life bring forth his typically masculine view about life:

Death, the inevitability of death, has played no leading part in my sensations. And yet perhaps it is that too which determines my behaviour. Never have I come so near my limit, the limit between this side and that side, between self and other. Never has a mountain expedition influenced me so enduringly as this one. Perhaps I have crossed the Rubicon and made a leap which I have still to absorb. (Messner, 1989, p. 254)

He posits life in his ability to “become master” of his fears (p. 89). Every single ascent for him is an opportunity for “a piece of life lived to the full, a small death” and every descent for him is “less a return to life” (p. 89-90). In other words, risks offer an opportunity for him to assert his masculinity in the extreme conditions.

Several unconventional climbers have aggrandized the risk, the danger ahead. Messner stands out in the stress he lays on danger as opportunities for recognizing one's limitations, and for making them up through efficacies acquired during the process, and thus extend one's self. The extension of self resonates with the idea of place identity that assumes that one's self-identity is extended also to a place which the person considers congruent to his or her personal identity. The consideration of place as a part of one's identity is, according to Knez and Eliasson (2017), a “cognitive” aspect, and it can sometimes “be incorporated, at the most personal level, into one's self-definitions” (p. 3). What Knez and Eliasson (2017) call “self-definition” is comparable to self-identity, and recognition of place as a context that allows personal identity to extend itself to place dimension is a revision on personal identity theory (p. 3). The idea of comparing self-identity and place-identity, as a corollary, leads to the assumption that personal self gets extended to the environment, and self-

identity expands to incorporate place identity. When the place that concerns is a risky mountain, the climber's self-identity resonates with the mountain's identity only in a precarious condition of limitations and vulnerability that start to unfold when the physical and psychological strengths have met their limits.

Masculinity Working through Limitations and Vulnerability

Messner (1989) confesses that limitations brought to light by a difficult mountain gives a climber an opportunity to enhance his identity. In the realizations of such limitations, he sees his self-congruent continuity with the mountain becoming functional: "I see the usefulness of climbing not in the further development of technique, rather in the development of the instinct and proficiency of man to extend himself. Learning about his limitations is just as important as his claim to be able to do anything" (p. 231). Such confrontation with one's limitations usually emerges in what is called Death Zone, a zone above 8,000 meters in a mountain where oxygen concentration is only one-third of the normal. How the negotiation of such a danger associates itself with the assumption of masculinity has been captured by Purtschert: "[Reports] on the so-called death zone enable the creation of heroic white masculinities struggling with the pure elements and the forces of nature" (p. 40). The mention of the struggle entails that failing it would lead to the possible problematization of masculinity. Alternatively, climbers struggle through their limitations to reclaim their endangered masculine identity.

Knowledge of one's limitations as an opportunity to redeem them, however, occurs only when one pushes her/himself to that extreme where the limitations start to unfold. Even more essential for that is the intention – the psychological preparedness to maneuver that push, and Messner, incidentally, has it as a part of his personality. His own description of the mountaineer inside him is indicative of his risk-perceptions: "I achieve the bounds of human possibility, and attempt to push these bounds still further...I can endure my loneliness better when I am far away from other people" (p. 51). The stress on 'loneliness' and the desire to stay 'away from other' people constitute a situation where the limitation undermines all possible support, and thus, motivates itself to over-perform the acts assigned by essentialist masculinity.

Masculinity, Femininity, and Renunciation

Alongside the engagement with the liminality that separates life and death, masculinity also entails an innate desire to stay close to a feminine refuge, like that of a mother figure. As most of the gender scholars agree, masculinity is also a relational term that always hinges on an opposite—that is femininity—to define itself as an ontological category. Masculinity, Connell (2005) argues, “does not exist except in contrast with femininity” (68). This binary is typical of the Western culture that treats women and men as “bearers of polarized character types, at least in principle” (p. 68). Thus, for masculinity to assert itself, the imagination or actual assortment of a feminine figure sometimes becomes essential.

In the context of mountaineering, the femininity referred to here is also offered by a mother figure that emerges when the mountain is considered a secure base, or a source of security, delight, and comfort. This lends a psychoanalytic dimension to the entire discourse of masculinity. Male mountaineers have oftentimes articulated the feeling of love and care they derive from the mountains. Jamling Tenzing Norgay (2002), for example, confesses having felt motherly compassion on the top of Everest: “The mountain itself came alive for me, as it had done for [Tenzing] ... it changed from a lifeless, uncaring, and dangerous mound of rock—a rock that had with indifference taken the lives of many—into a warm, friendly, and life-sustaining being. Miyolangsangma. I felt her embracing both of us” (p. 256). The refuge and the assumed maternal dependence compensate for the challenge masculinity had been subjected to during the physical efforts to negotiate the dangers and the ordeal of climbing.

Against the several shades of semiotics a mountain is associated with, its position as a source of love and care also underpins several mountaineering narratives, especially by male climbers. Messner is not an exception: “I am a fool who with his longing for love and tenderness runs up cold mountains” (p. 155). For people who look at the mountain for love and tenderness, like Jamling and Messner, the mountain takes the position of a mother-figure that enters the identity structure of an individual as a source of comfort. A climber of Reinhold's physical and psychological efficacy and declared mission to climb Everest alone, confesses that his security on the trail lies in the company of Nena, a woman climber who accompanies him through the lower heights: “I am accustomed to silence and loneliness. Since I have been living with Nena in the mountains a sense

of security, that grows out of the silence, begins to calm me. Nena too has learned not to let her emotions always take over, to enjoy the silence” (p. 173). The security or comfort of this order is, therefore, more psychological and less physiological.

Mountaineering history mentions several male climbers who have looked up to the mountain for similar comfort, replenishment of their exhausting spirit, and for the restoration of their fragmented self. For example, John Taske, an Australian climber had been to Everest in 1996 when his marriage “fell apart” and he realized that he could not “really speak to civilians” (Krakauer, 1997, p. 137). Once a member in the Australian Air Service, Taske says, he was “woefully unprepared from the flat pitch of life out of uniform” and saw nothing but “dark tunnel closing in, ending in infirmity, old age, and death” before he climbed Everest (p. 137). The mother figure the mountaineers look for as a source of emotional replenishment is replaced by the mountain. The belief that the mountain can replenish emotional and spiritual dryness, therefore, makes it analogous to a mother, whose company a child usually seeks. Viewed as psychological reality, the idea offers an alternative explanation to the assumption of essential masculinity. Connell (2005) discusses the theoretical link between masculinity and the Oedipal inclination toward a mother: “An emphasis on undifferentiated wholeness, especially where it is linked to a passive-receptive attitude towards an embracing Nature, is so strongly reminiscent of primal relationships with the mother that the point is noted in counter-cultural literature itself” (Connell 2005, p. 35). Bill Lindeman, as cited by Connell, calls this feeling of dependence “wonderfully clear, pure feeling of communion with nature” that is reminiscent of the “oceanic feeling” a child derives from its mother since the beginning of life (p. 36). A desire for passivity expressed in renunciation of masculine striving is also likely to be based in the pleasures of this relationship (p. 35-36). The idea of the renunciation of masculine striving emerges as antithesis of the conventional norms of exceptional masculinity. Seen as renunciation, masculinity as performance emerges as a composite category, simultaneously shaped by heroism and surrender, and by masculinity and femininity exerting their influence on the same body.

What is evident is that masculinity does not always operate as an absolute category of identification. Many times, it calls for relational femininity—real or imagined—to make it stand and manifest itself. The male climbers seldom associate a mountain with a masculine figure when

they mention its affective and spiritual benefits; however, they may give it a masculine metaphorization when they conceive of it as a challenge to their masculine existence. The association of the mountains to mother figures not only lends a pre-Oedipal psychological explanation to masculinity but also manifests a dimension of man-nature symbiosis.

Conclusion

The discussion arrives at three important conclusions. First, various actions that characterize Messner's (1989) *Crystal Horizon* align with the essentialist and normative definitions of masculinity, the West perpetuates. Such actions, to a great extent, explain the physical dimension of unconventional mountaineering, like alpine style, as a masculinist performance. The tendency to take risk, push through the threshold of limited prospects, and pine for victory on the summit demonstrate the continued functionality of the concept of exemplary heroism that aligns with the essentialist-normative nexus of gender imagination. Secondly, the consciousness of one's physical and psychological vulnerability and lack emerges as a factor that also governs Messner's performance on the mountain, and redefines his masculinity, not from presence but from the absence or relative scarcity of the parameters associated with an ideal man. Finally, Messner demonstrates a psychoanalytic dimension of performance that mediates masculinity through meanings perpetuated through a feminine figure—usually that of a mother—metaphorically imagined in a mountain considered a source of emotional and spiritual comfort. Thus, the alpinists present masculinity not only as strength but also as anxiety posed by a state of tension between conventional manhood and a contingent identity that emerges through vulnerability, lack, and dependency.

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