



## Book Review

***Other Everests: One Mountain, Many Worlds*, Paul Gilchrist, Peter H. Hansen, Jonathan Westaway. Manchester University Press, Manchester (2024), 344 pages, £19.99 paperback, e-book.**

Mount Everest has long been framed through the narrative of heroic conquest, defined by colonial ambitions, national prestige, and extreme endurance. *Other Everests* challenges such narratives, arguing that the mountain is not just a geographical landmark but a contested space shaped by historical, economic, and cultural forces. The editors have assembled an interdisciplinary group of scholars to present this sixteen-chapter book, offering a 'plurality of perspectives' on Everest (p.3). Drawing on history, anthropology, media, and performance studies, the contributors explore themes ranging from colonial legacies and gender dynamics to economic exploitation and environmental change. The book follows a progression, guiding the reader through Everest's past, present, and evolving future. It provides an alternative reading of Everest, foregrounding the voice of 'diverse communities on and beyond the mountain,' and reshaping how it is understood (p.2).

A central thread in *Other Everests* is the examination of colonial and postcolonial entanglements, particularly how imperial knowledge systems, mapping practices, and expedition hierarchies have shaped Everest. The opening chapters reveals that the mountain's naming and cartographic representation were not neutral acts but tools of colonial authority, transforming Everest into a symbol of European scientific and national achievement. Yet, Everest has never been a blank slate onto which outsiders project meaning; Tibetan (*Chomolungma*), Nepali (*Deodunga*), and indigenous Himalayan perspectives have always shaped its identity, often in ways that remain obscured within dominant narratives. Everest's multiple names reflect its layered histories and sacred geography, underscoring that its naming was a debated process rather than an undisputed colonial imposition. However, global visibility often necessitates an uneasy acceptance of the name 'Everest' (Chapters 1, 2). These foundational discussions foreground the complexities of identity and power that ripple through the rest of the book.

Drawing from expeditionary archives, the contributors challenge dominant mountaineering narratives and reframe Everest as a contested space rather than a site of singular triumphs. It advocates for a more ethical and inclusive historical interpretation by revisiting colonial-era archives through ethical and inclusive approach (Chapter 3). These records reveal how British social norms and consumer culture shaped expedition material realities, reinforcing inequalities in provisions and embedding Everest within broader global power structures, where the logistics of mountaineering became entangled in the commodification of high-altitude exploration (Chapter 4). The chapter on racial and gendered divisions within expeditions highlight the hierarchies beyond material conditions to labour dynamics. Indigenous climbers like Tenzing Norgay (1914–1986) and Ang Tharkay

(1907–1981) struggled for recognition in a system that marginalised them, while Sherpa women were largely excluded from this hierarchy altogether (Chapter 6). Beyond archival records, the critique of Western literary imagination exposed how works like *Lost Horizon* (1933) romanticised Tibet,<sup>1</sup> projecting European fantasies while erasing local agency and pre-existing mobilities (Chapter 5).

A key strength of this book is its critical interrogation of gender in mountaineering, revealing how Everest has long been a space of exclusion, shaped by race, class, and masculinity. Women mountaineers from the Global South have faced systemic barriers, their achievements often overshadowed by gendered and racial biases (Chapter 7). Beyond climbing, women historians have challenged these exclusions, such as reframing Andrew 'Sandy' Irvine's (1902–1924) role in the 1924 expedition (Chapter 8). The case of Wanda Rutkiewicz (1943–1992), whose 1978 ascent defied gender norms, illustrates these tensions. Despite her skill and ambition, she faced hostility and exclusion, reflecting the broader struggle for women's recognition in Everest's history (Chapter 9). These exclusions are not just historical but continue to shape contemporary representations of Everest. The chapter on media narratives reveals how digital media reinforce gendered and racialised expectations, particularly in how climbers craft their public identities. While male climbers often frame their achievements through discourses of professional mastery and extreme resilience, women are more frequently positioned within narratives of domesticity and cultural respectability (Chapter 14).

Everest today functions as a site of economic extraction, shaped by commercialisation, tourism, and precarious labour conditions. Despite the improved conditions for High Altitude Workers (HAWs), commercial climbing remains profit-driven, often prioritising industry profits over worker welfare, as seen in how the 2014 disaster exposed systemic risks yet failed to drive meaningful reform (Chapter 11). The HAWs face challenges tied to the transformation of Himalayan mountaineering into a neoliberal industry, shaped by ethnic politics, weak governance, and unchecked economic liberalism. The division of labour within expeditions reveals how climbing Sherpas have leveraged their expertise to secure lucrative roles yet still face precarity. Although significant revenue is generated by Everest expeditions, issues of overcrowding, environmental degradation, and inadequate regulation persist (Chapters 12, 13).

The book also interrogates how Everest is mediated and performed. Everest has always been more than a physical space; it is a cultural symbol, continuously reconstructed through literature, theatre, and digital platforms. The contributor examines how contemporary theatrical performances engage in rigorous research, critically evaluating the vast literature on Everest to decolonise it's

<sup>1</sup> James Hilton, *Lost Horizon* (New York: Pocket Books, 1933)

narrative (Chapter 16). In contrast, the discussions on social media and Everest's digital visibility reveal how commercialised adventure narratives persist. Rather than dismantling dominant representations, social media platforms often reinforce Everest's image as an elite playground for extreme athletes. At the same time, the environmental crisis facing the mountain – melting glaciers, overcrowding, and pollution – complicates these representations, making Everest both a site of aspiration and visceral and urgent reminder of climate change (Chapters 14, 15).

*Other Everests* capture the 'multiple-ways-of-being,' offering a multifaceted account of the mountain's history and meaning (p.3). Everest remains significant in national narratives, exemplified by the 1979 Slovenian expedition, which became a symbol of national pride and a site for geopolitical identity formation (Chapter 10). The volume opens up further lines of inquiry into the historical role of women in expedition management, the evolving relationship between mountaineering and media, the rationale behind expedition material culture, and the contributions of non-Sherpa ethnic communities to the Everest labour economy. While touched upon, these themes invite deeper engagement, paving the way for other collections, inviting fresh perspectives,

innovative methodologies, and deeper reinterpretation, and thereby opening up new ways of thinking about Everest and other mountains.

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