"Who Shapes the Text?
Sherpas and Sahibs On
Mount Everest"

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<u>Introduction</u>

The question of representation has been defined as one of the
central problems of contemporary social theory. The question has
various manifestations. One of the most potent versions of it is
presented in Edward Said's <u>Orientalism</u> (1979). Said argues that
the "knowledge" we have about "the Orient" is largely shaped by
"Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring,
and having authority over the Orient"(p.3). Orientalism is
constituted as an internally consistent discourse whose order is
primarily given by the real-world structures of domination as
these are refracted through academic writing as well as popular
representations of "Oriental" cultures. Orientalism so defined
controls to an inordinate extent what can be said, felt,
understood about the Orient:
>...so authoritative a position did Orientalism have that I
>believe no one writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient
>could do so without taking account of the limitations on
>thought and action imposed by Orientalism. In brief,
>because of Orientalism the Orient was not (and is not) a
>free subject of thought or action.(ibid.)

At one level, Said is absolutely right, which is why his book had
such a powerful and widespread impact. It is not only a problem
of writing about the Orient; it is a problem of writing about any
people who have been dominated by the West, or even about
dominated groups within the west. As Western academics are
universally operating within the framework of bourgeois, post-
colonial culture, we are all in some sense Orientalists. But at
another level there is of course a great danger to Said's
position: it places in doubt the reality value of virtually
everything that is written. It suggests that we cannot capture
in our writing the reality of people's lives as it exists out
there, as they experience it; or that if we capture it this is an
accident; or that we cannot know when we capture it and when we
do not. Said recognizes this problem but sets it aside:
>There were - and are - cultures and nations whose location
>is in the East, and their lives, histories, and customs have
>a brute reality obviously greater than anything that could
>be said about them in the West. About that fact this study
>of Orientalism has very little to contribute, except to
>acknowledge it tacitly.(ibid., p. 5)

Said shows us the problem, then, but does not help us with the
solution.

A second version of the problem is posed by Gayatri Chakravorty
Spivak in a very provocative paper entitled "Can the Subaltern

speak?"(1988) Spivak is responding to a group of Indian social
theorists and historians called the Subaltern Studies Group who
agree with Said's critique on the one hand, but who set about
rescuing indigenous history and ethnography that somehow allow
one a kind of end-run around the Orientalism problem. Subaltern
Studies in effect says that there are ways in which the
subaltern's voice can be heard, through and around Orientalist
writing. Spivak ridicules this position partly on Saidian
grounds - Orientalist discourse is enormously controlling - and
partly on post-structuralist grounds - there is no subaltern, in
the sense of a single coherent subaltern voice, a unified
subaltern subject, anyway. Spivak takes on the question of
whether the Indian widow who throws herself on her dead husband's
pyre is a victim, or alternatively can be seen as a subject or
agent who chooses her fate: this is a metaphor for the poles of
the problematic in pure form. Spivak rejects both positions, or
rather accepts both but says they are inadequate, since "the
broader question of the constitution of the sexed subject is
hidden" (p. 303).

Finally, a specifically anthropological version of the problem is
set forth in the volume Writing Culture (Clifford and Marcus
1986). In the introductory essay, Clifford in effect generalizes
the Saidian position to all of anthropology, and argues that we
must take seriously the notion that ethnographies are "fictions":

> In this view, more Nietzschean than realist or hermeneutic,
> all constructed truths are made possible by powerful "lies"
> of exclusion and rhetoric. Even the best ethnographic texts
> - serious, true fictions - are systems, or economies, of
> truth. Power and history work through them, in ways their
> authors cannot fully control.(p. 7)

Yet Clifford specifically denies the implication that we cannot
get beyond the discursive constraints within which we work and
tell some sort of truth about the other. Praising Richard
Price's First Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American
People (1983), he says that the book constitutes "evidence of the
fact that acute political and epistemological self-consciousness
need not lead to...the conclusion that it is impossible to know
anything certain about other people"(ibid.).

In Clifford's view, the problem lies not so much in some set of
abstract constraints imposed by a large discursive field like
"orientalism", but in specific genre conventions that govern the
writing of ethnography, enhancing the authority of the
ethnographer's interpretation, and muting alternative voices and
interpretations. Clifford's solution is thus to restructure the
ethnographic genre in a variety of ways that will allow for
multiple voices and alternative "takes," not on The Culture of
the Soandso (a problematic concept), but on "a particular moment
of ethnographic production" (16).

In a broad sense I am in at least partial agreement with all of
these positions. I also have specific disagreements with each,
but I will not pursue them here. Rather I would like to create

my own version of the problematic, by translating it into a set of specific questions (for the moment, two) to which I would subject my own and others' practice of anthropology and/or history.

(1) To what extent must we accept the notion that the dominant text is shaped largely by discourse conventions (as in "orientalism") and by genre conventions (as in the notion of ethnographic authority)? Agreeing that the author has less control of the text than he/she might like to think, it nonetheless seems to me that there is a major point missed (evaded?) by all these theorists: that the text is partly shaped by those being written about. One does not need to resort to various forms of textual experimentation to allow this to happen; it is happening all the time. Of course there is variation in the degree to which different authors and different forms of writing allow this process to show, and it is certainly worthwhile to reflect - as the <u>Writing Culture</u> people do - on the ways in which this process can be enhanced. But it seems to me grotesque to insist on the notion that the text is shaped by everything but the lived reality of the people the text claims to represent.

As a side note I would suggest that this point indicates some of the limits of the literary model for anthropology and history. The literary model is very powerful in always forcing the interpretive stance, and we are all indebted to it to that extent. It is also the case that history and ethnography can be likened to fiction in their constructedness, their partialness, and so forth. Yet ultimately there is a crucial difference between a novel on the one hand and an ethnography or a history on the other: there is nobody on the other side of the novelist's text. The anthropologist and the historian are charged with representing the lives of living or once-living people, and as we attempt to push these people into the molds of our texts, <u>they push back.</u> The final text is a product of our pushing and their back-pushing, and no text, however "dominant," lacks the traces of this counterforce.

(2) What is the status of ethnography within history? This is a version of the Subaltern Studies question. An early version of this question was taken up by the social historians (notably, E.P. Thompson) who sought to discover the folk bases and folk practices of resistance to the various historical forms of domination in the West. The more recent version appears in the writings of the Subaltern Studies group, who argue that other communities - social, cultural, historical - have some kind of integrity, identity, reality, apart from our constructs, and that it is our job to represent that.[1] Unfortunately, many social historians, as well as many Subaltern Studies writers, have got themselves into trouble for picking up a romantic concept of such

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1. A very thoughtful attempt to discuss the philosophical bases on which critical ethnographic description (in the richest sense) is possible is S.P. Mohanty 1989.

communities: cohesive, solidary, united in culture and in resistance to colonial oppression. (see, for example, Guha; for a good critique see O'Hanlon) It is against this that Spivak is reacting when she says that the subaltern cannot speak; her point, as noted a moment ago, is in part that there is no subaltern in this romantic sense of a coherent resisting subject. Clifford's solution is to complexify the subalternity, to break it up into multiple "voices" that rupture both an overly coherent view of "culture" or "community" and an overly authoritative ethnographic voice.

Clifford's solution moves in the right direction but does not go far enough. Other communities are indeed multiplex, and there are indeed many "voices" to be heard. But these voices do not exist in an unordered polyphony (to be represented as a "collage" or a "pastiche"): they exist within a complex politics of local structures of domination and resistance, and local structures of meaning ordered in good part by those politics. The role of ethnography, as I see it, is not only to inscribe and record ways of life that others may cherish (or hate), although that function is not to be despised. It is specifically to understand and record the complex orders of power and knowledge within which people enact their lives, <u>including</u> the ordering of their resistance to (or collaboration with) colonial authorities or other bearers of History with a capital H. The many voices we hear on the other side of the Orientalist text, and attempt to communicate across that divide, can only make sense, can only <u>not</u> be appropriated in an Orientalist way, if they are situated within their own local structures of domination, desire, or community. It is worth noting here that it is largely feminist scholars (of whom Spivak is a problematic example; see also Pathak and Rajan 1989, and C. Mohanty 1988), in dialogue with the Subaltern Studies school, who have been struggling with the question of the complex interrelationships between local structures of domination (in this case gender domination) and larger structures such as that of colonialism.

In the discussion that follows, I take up a consideration of the role of Sherpas in Himalayan mountaineering. I draw on three kinds of sources: general ethnography and social history of the Sherpas; sahibs' accounts of their own and Sherpas' roles in Himalayan mountaineering; and interviews with Sherpas about their perspectives on the mountaineering expeditions.[2] The period covered is most of the 20th century, from about 1907 to the present. I seek to answer the questions posed above: Is it possible to "read" the Sherpas through the sahibs' texts? What is the role of ethnographic "knowledge" in allowing us to read dominant texts such as those of the mountaineers? And perhaps most importantly, what is the <u>form</u> that ethnography must take to allow us to do such a reading?

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2. The interviews were just done last month and I have not really worked through them yet. They are used only selectively at this point.

A few introductory remarks.

First, Sherpas are one of those ethnic groups that seem to need little introduction. The person in the street may not know that Sherpas are actually an ethnic group, assuming that the word Sherpa simply means "mountain guide." But they generally know that people called Sherpas assist Westerners in climbing Mount Everest and other Himalayan peaks. Indeed, the Sherpas are so widely known as mountaineers that only an academic anthropologist, bent on pulling the Sherpas out of the realm of the popular and into the realm of the scholarly, could be so perverse as to write about the Sherpas for twenty years (as I have done) and not write about their involvement in mountaineering. I seek to rectify that omission here.

Second, I must explain my use of the term "sahibs," both in the title and throughout the paper. The term is meant to cover all the climbers who have come to the Himalayas and employed Sherpas to help them climb the peaks. The more (seemingly) neutral term might be "Westerners," but non-Westerners in a literal sense - Indians, Japanese, Chinese, Koreans - have been climbing Everest at least since the early sixties. More importantly, the term sahib signals the fact that Sherpas and sahibs are not simply members of two different groups, but are in a particular unequal relationship when they work together. The forms and degrees of inequality vary, but in any event it is central to the relationship in question. And finally there is the point that "sahib" is in fact the term that - until recently - the Sherpas themselves have most consistently used, both to address and refer to the mountaineers for whom they have worked. The fact that in the past few years they have begun to avoid the term is itself part of the story.[3]

Himalayan mountaineering and geopolitics.

The history of Himalayan mountaineering begins with expeditions of exploration in the late 19th century. Most of these were British, and although Himalayan climbing was eventually to become an international pastime, its early years were dominated by the British and were closely linked to the British colonial occupation of India. The Himalayan range contains the highest mountains in the world. There are only fourteen mountains on the earth over 8,000 meters high, all of them in the Himalayas, with 8 of them in Nepal alone. (A meter is a little over 3 feet; 8,000 meters is over 26,000 feet.) Of these, the tallest is Mt. Everest, at 29,028'. Once it was recognized that Everest was the highest mountain in the world, there developed an intense preoccupation - again particularly for the British - with its "conquest." In this paper I will concentrate largely on the

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3. Fisher (1990) notes this, and the pattern also emerged very clearly in my fieldwork, which has spanned the period from 1966 (when sahibs were universally referred to as "sahibs") to 1990 (when older Sherpas will still use the term, but younger Sherpas never will).

history of Everest expeditions, although I will occasionally fill
in the discussion with information from other climbs.

It is worth noting at the outset how extraordinarily difficult a
task it is to climb an 8,000+ meter peak. At high altitudes
there is very little oxygen in the air and the difficulty of even
the smallest tasks becomes enormously magnified. As Eric Shipton
wrote in his diary in 1938, "a climber on the upper part of
Everest is like a sick man climbing in a dream" (quoted in Tilman
1983). Thus although the efforts to climb peaks over 8,000
meters began in earnest in the early 1920's, the first one -
Annapurna, in Nepal - was not climbed until 1950 (by the French
climber Maurice Herzog). To this day, only about 1/3 of the
expeditions that attempt peaks over 8,000 meters succeed. (Blum
1980:91)

The first major reconnaissance of Everest was in 1921, by a
British group.[4] This was followed by British expeditions - all
unsuccessful - in 1922, 1924, 1933, 1935, 1936, and 1938. All of
these went from Darjeeling in India, via Sikkim and Tibet, and
attempted to climb the mountain from the north. The whole
Everest effort was then interrupted by the Second World War,
followed by upheavals surrounding the Indian independence
movement, and there were no further efforts to climb the mountain
until 1950.[5] At that point, the regional politics had shifted.
Because of the Communist revolution in China, the Dalai Lama had
clamped down even further than in earlier years on visas into
Tibet. At the same time, as a result of various political
changes in Nepal, and possibly also because of the Chinese
revolution, Nepal decided to relax its own closed-door policy.
British reconnaissance missions approached Everest for the first
time through Nepal in 1950 and 1951, and it was during these that
the route that was ultimately to bring success was scouted.[6]

In 1952 there was a coup in Nepal, and the country was officially
opened to foreigners. The British expected permission for a full
scale attempt on Everest but "the sway of the great Raj had
ended," and the British received "a nasty surprise": the first
permission was given to a Swiss group (Unsworth 1981:279).
Luckily for the Brits, the Swiss failed twice, once before the
monsoon and once after. In the spring (always called "pre-
monsoon" in the Himalayan mountaineering context) of 1953, a
British expedition led by Sir John Hunt finally succeeded in
climbing the mountain, with a New Zealander - Edmund Hillary -
and a Sherpa - Tenzing - reaching the summit on [date].

This was a few days before the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth on
June 2. The <u>Times of London</u> was one of the sponsors of the

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4. Most of the general history of Everest is drawn from the excellent study by Unsworth (1981). Other
historical overviews include Cameron (), Mason (), and Kurz ().
5. There were two solo efforts in this period, one by the Englishman Maurice Wilson in 1934 (he died on the
climb), and one by a Canadian, Earl Denham, in 1947.
6. Another failed solo attempt was made in this period by a Dane, K.B. Larsen.

expedition, and their correspondent James Morris was at base
camp. In a feat of journalistic effort that some felt was almost
as impressive as the climb itself, Morris raced down the trails
to the radio at the Indian checkpost in Namche Bazar, and
succeeded in getting a coded message of the success to the Times
in time for the morning edition of the paper on the day of the
Coronation.

The conquest of Everest was a sensation for the whole world,
analogous perhaps to the first landing on the moon. For the
British in particular, it was supersaturated with meaning. There
was the coincidence with the coronation, as well as "the impact
upon a nation still weary after five years of war" (Hunt 1978).
Most importantly, there was the post-colonial high, the
compensation for the loss of the   glory of the Raj. But
this was clearly the substitution - one might even say the
desperate substitution - of the symbol for the substance. Steven
Marcus took this view in his article, "Everest and the British
National Spirit":
> In 1910, reaching the South Pole, or climbing a great
> mountain, or even discovering the source of the Nile, was
> still conceived as one of the appanages of national
> greatness, rather than as the fact of that greatness
> itself...It has come to pass, however, that such events as
> the ascent of Everest or a coronation have devolved into the
> principal facts of the national sentiment of greatness.
> (1975:84)

Following the British success in 1953, there were attempts in
1956 (Swiss), 1960 (Indian, Chinese), 1962 (Indian), 1963
(American), and 1965 (Indian). There was then another political
interruption. During the period between 1966-1969, the upheavals
of the Great Cultural Revolution were going on in China, and the
Himalayas, which form the boundary between Nepal and China, were
closed to climbing by the Nepalese government.

Since the mountains were reopened in 1969, there has been a
virtually uninterrupted snowballing of expeditions to Everest (at
least one per year)[7] as well as to most of the other peaks in
Nepal. Most the of teams were defined by their national origin:
Japan, Argentina, Britain, United States, Italy, Spain, France,
China, New Zealand, South Korea, Austria, Germany, Yugoslavia,
Poland, and others. Some had other distinguishing features:
There was an International expedition, a European expedition, a
Japanese Ladies Expedition (as it was called), a joint British
Army/Royal Nepalese Army expedition, a Persian/Chinese Training
expedition, and so forth. Some of these were successful and some
not. In any event, the accounts of the expeditions, from the
first in 1921 to the most recent in 1989, leave us a continuing

7. According to the Ministry of Tourism in Nepal, 9 Everest expeditions are scheduled more or less
simultaneously for the post-monsoon (fall) 1990 season alone. (The fees collected by the Ministry are
lucrative.) This is the highest number ever scheduled simultaneously on the peak, and most of the
mountaineering Sherpas I spoke to were expecting that there will be serious problems of overcrowding at Base
Camp, conflicting claims over access to different routes, etc.

vital record of Sherpa-sahib interaction over most of the twentieth century.

Which brings us of course to the Sherpas. The Sherpas are first of all an ethnic group that live in northeast Nepal, in the mountains and valleys surrounding the Everest massif. They migrated from eastern Tibet in the 16th century, and remain closely related ethnically to Tibetans. In the last quarter or so of the 19th century some men began migrating (for the most part seasonally) to the Darjeeling region of India in search of economic opportunity with the British, in the form of both petty and grand enterprise, and of wage labor. (Ortner 1989a) British Himalayan exploration began in the last decades of the 19th century, and the Sherpas quickly presented themselves for this work. As early as 1907 some climbers were marking the Sherpas as being particularly well suited for the support work involved in mountain exploring and climbing.

Exactly what such work involved has gradually changed over time. Minimally, it has always involved portering as well as what might be called domestic support - setting up the camps, fetching wood and water, cooking, serving, and so forth. There was always less of a notion of "guiding" than was apparently true of European Alpine guides. But as we shall see, the minimal definition of the task was constantly expanded over time, to the point where most present day expeditions make at least some Sherpas members of the actual climbing party.

The category of Sherpa too kept undergoing changes. Originally referring to members of an ethnic group who happened to be good at high altitude portering and generalized sahib support, it eventually became both a role and a status term, meaning essentially a specialized high altitude porter with at least some (and sometimes a lot of) climbing expertise. It was then distinguished on the one hand from "porters", i.e., low altitude porters (who might or might not be ethnic Sherpas),[8] and on the other hand from "members", i.e., the climbing party itself. If an ethnic Sherpa, who had been functioning "as a Sherpa" (i.e., a high altitude porter), was picked to join an assault team for the summit, then he was no longer "a Sherpa" for those purposes.

The social backgrounds of the sahibs.

Almost universally, the sahibs have been drawn broadly from the middle classes. On the one hand there are very few upper class climbers, and they are generally held in deep suspicion unless they can prove themselves to be unsnobbish and socially egalitarian. For example, concerning the 1922 (check date)

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8. Nowadays the "local porters" are generally Tamangs, carrying loads until the party reaches the Sherpa town of Namche Bazar at about 12,500'. From Namche to Base Camp (at 18,000') almost all the porters are ethnic Sherpas, with a large complement of women - the wives and sisters of all the Sherpas on the expedition. On the other hand it is worth noting that some Tamangs and members of other Nepali ethnic groups are making it up into the ranks of "Sherpa".

Everest reconnaissance, we are told that the "neosocialist"
George Mallory couldn't stand the elite leader, Howard-Bury, who
was "an old Etonian, descended from the illustrious Howard
family, Earls of Suffolk, ...[and] also High Tory" (Unsworth
1981:24). Fifty years later we hear similar sentiments from one
climber concerning another, again apparently too elite: "'We
didn't think much of him at first...I suppose he was too much of
the posh private school type, but when we got to know him, we
realised he was a good bloke.'" (quoted in Bonington 1976:37)

On the other hand, there are also very few working class climbers
(although middle class climbers sometimes affect a working class
style). The mountaineering historian Unsworth has a good sense
of the class factor in British mountaineering. Writing of the
1933 Everest expedition he says:

> Socially there was little to distinguish the members of the
> 1933 expedition from those of its predecessors. The
> climbers came from the same class that had traditionally
> provided the membership of the Alpine Club for three
> quarters of a century: the well-to-do middle classes, with
> a background of Oxbridge and a decent sprinkling of Army
> officers and Government officials. Ruttledge recalled that
> applications to join the expeditions were received for
> 'pugilists, a barber, and a steeplejack' - thereby
> implicitly inviting his readers to scoff at such notions as
> preposterous....In any case, no working class climber could
> afford to take the time off to go to the Himalaya. So the
> gulfs were practical as much as social." (1981:163)[9]

It is also important to note that, until recently, virtually all
climbers were men, and expeditions were all-male events. The
gender issue is quite central to the climbers' notions of what
they were doing, and why, but is too large to be taken up in this
paper. I plan to write a separate paper on the subject.

The bourgeois discourse of climbing.

The middle class backgrounds of the climbers is central to
understanding their thinking about what they are doing.
Himalayan mountaineers write of their climbing in terms of some
of the central concerns of bourgeois culture - concerns about

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9. Expeditions can also often be costly to the members, who may be asked to contribute a share of the
expenses. Even when the members are not asked to contribute their full shares, funding has to be raised, as
expeditions, at least those from European countries and the United States, are not sponsored by the
governments of these countries. Funding sources include news media (a common strategy, from early times to
the present), as well as commercial companies, the sale of T shirts, and so forth. Even the American
Bicentennial Expedition in 1976 received no support from the U.S. government or the Bicentennial Committee,
and chose the name only because their fundraiser thought (correctly) that it would make for a more
attractive fundraising device. (The fundraising was initially so difficult that the person in charge
characterized it as "like trying to raise money to put a statue of Karl Marx on the White House lawn" [quote
inexact]). On the other hand, the various political and commercial interests that had a stake in the
Bicentennial festivities were quick to capitalize on the excitement when the expedition did in fact succeed.

"the meaning of life," and about "the discovery of the self."
These discursive patterns, which I will illustrate briefly here,
show up across the whole historical era in question. Moreover,
they are not limited to Westerners - Europeans and Americans -
but are heard among climbers of all nationalities. The
discourses of mountaineering are thus parts of a very broadly
delineated discourse of middle-class, male-gendered, modernity.[10]

The issue of "the meaning of life" may be opened with the most
famous statement of all concerning why climbers sought to climb
Everest: George Mallory's enigmatic line, "Because it is there."
There have been various debates concerning what Mallory meant by
this. One writer calls it "a fatuous answer, made in a moment of
exasperation, to get rid of a persistent journalist" (Cameron
1984:197). But Unsworth argues that the word "there" had a
specific meaning for Mallory, referring to a kind of intensity of
experience that one sought in life:

> ...Mallory seems to have acquired the habit of using the
> word <u>there</u> to indicate anything which had a mystical
> quality. It occurs first in a letter which A.C. Benson
> wrote to him in 1911, urging him to read a certain book
> which achieved high quality 'by being there'. And during
> the war Mallory had written home describing the sight of men
> digging trenches and how he would like to be able to draw
> them like figures from Millet, only 'more there'. To him
> the word <u>there</u> seems to have gained an all-embracing meaning
> for mystical feelings which he could not put exactly into
> words - and this certainly applied to the climbing of Mt.
> Everest.(p.100)

That Mallory was seeking a certain experience that rendered life
more intense, more meaningful, also comes through in one of his
diary entries, here specified as the notion of "joy:"

> Mallory wrote: "If you cannot understand there is something
> in men which responds to this mountain and goes out to meet
> it, that the struggle is life itself, upward and forever
> upward, they you cannot see why we go. What we get from
> this adventure is just sheer joy. And joy is, after all,
> the end of life." (quoted in Morrow 1986:63)

Earl Denman, the Canadian who made a (failed) attempt on Everest
in 1947 with only himself and two Sherpas, said of the three of
them: "...we were just three men who were striving to give some
meaning to a life which otherwise remains meaningless. What <u>were</u>
we striving for if not immortality?"(1954:222)

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10. In the first half of the 20th century, roughly in the period between the 1920's and 1950's, there was a
strong tone of nationalism attached to mountaineering. That is, there was the notion that a successful
ascent was somehow a reflection of the glory of the nation from which the climbers came, as seen in the
earlier discussion of the British frenzy over the conquest of Everest. These sentiments occasionally show
up in a few of the climbers' accounts (e.g., Bauer 1937:xviii), but in general they were expressed more by
the politicians and the media than the climbers themselves.

A half century later, an American similarly argues that one seeks
an experience like climbing Everest to provide meaning and
purpose to life, though he phrases it in terms of "adventure:"
> ...one of the principal reasons people today engage in
> dangerous, risk-taking sports like mountain climbing is to
> fight boredom. Overcoming boredom is one of the main
> challenges to many people who find themselves in a world
> where it is nearly impossible to find real adventure
> (Ridgeway 1979).

This question of intensity, of "joy," "adventure," heightened
meaningfulness sometimes makes it hard for the person to go back
to the real world. Norman Dyhrenfurth had had what would look to
most of the people reading this paper as a choice job: He was
founder and Head of the Motion Picture Division of the Department
of Theater Arts at UCLA. But after participating in the failed
Swiss expedition of 1952, he walked out of that job:
> To help create a new department within a large university,
> devoted to the development of a new and better generation of
> film makers, had once offered a great challenge. But now,
> suddenly, it seemed terribly stale and uninspiring. The
> initial impetus was gone; someone else could take over,
> someone content to spend the rest of his days in the
> academic world. (in Ullman 1964:xvii)

And the leader of the Canadian expedition in 1982 wrote in his
diary:
> "You realize you're quite a privileged person, a really
> privileged person to be here with these men engaged in this
> undertaking. It's something that only happens maybe once or
> twice in a lifetime. Whatever is going on down there in the
> world and whatever people think and feel...up here is
> reality. Up here is comradeship, sharing, danger, careful
> judgment, hard work, and perhaps the answer to what life is
> all about." (B and P 1983:147)

The other major discourse of mountaineering concerns the
discovery, exploration, and improvement of the self. Again this
discourse may be heard from the earliest expeditions to the
present, and across a wide range of nationalities. One German
mountaineer wrote in 1937: "...it was an opportunity for us to
test those qualities which had become superfluous in everyday
life, but which to us were still the highest qualities in the
world: unshakeable courage, comradeship, and self-
sacrifice."(xiv.) In 1934 an Englishman, Maurice Wilson,
attempted a solo climb of Everest and died trying. Wilson had
certain fanatical beliefs about self-improvement, and thought
that if he successfully climbed Mount Everest, this would
publicize his ideas.
> He believed that if a man fasted almost to the point of
> death then all his physical and mental ills would drain out
> of him; and if he also had faith in the powers of God, then
> God would renew him in body and spirit, and he would emerge a
> stronger, better person.(Unsworth 237)

Wilson's solo climb represents one extreme pole in a debate that goes on to this day in mountaineering circles over the appropriate level of technological and human support to use in climbing a mountain. Insofar as climbing is a voyage of self discovery and self-improvement, then a whole set of questions is raised concerning how much a mountaineer should rely on external and artifical supports: Whether or not to use oxygen (see especially Tilman 1983:505-6); whether or not to use Sherpas; how many porters is too many,[11] how much equipment is too much, how much creature comfort there ought to be at Base Camp,[12] and so on and so forth.

If one general line on mountaineering and the self emphasizes the value of the discipline involved in improving the self, another emphasizes the point that, because mistakes are always very costly, the climber must therefore own up to his own weaknesses. The leader of the 1960 Indian expedition wrote:

> The mountains are ruthless teachers! A man can hide his inner-self by putting on a cloak provided by so-called modern education - soft talk, polish, outward good-manners and an artificial smile. Thus, he can often fool even the cleverest people. But, in the mountains this camouflage mysteriously drops off and he stands naked in front of everyone. He cannot hide the awkward bulges and deformities in his mental make-up and character. What is more, he finds himself in front of a life-size mirror, as it were, and he can himself see what he really is." (Singh 1961:140)

This notion of facing the self, of finding out who the inner self really is and what it is made of, shows up as well in the writings of the Austrian Reinhold Messner, probably one of the most driven of climbers, and the first to climb Everest without oxygen. The epigraph of his book reads: "I wanted to climb high again in order to be able to see deep inside myself." He goes on:

> I don't climb mountains simply to vanquish their summits. What would be the point of that? I place myself voluntarily into dangerous situations to learn to face my own fears and doubts, my innermost feelings. (1979:9)[13]

The Japanese leader who organized the ill-fated Ski Expedition of 1970 spent most of his free time writing haiku about testing himself to the limits [quotes to be added].

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11. The American expedition of 1963 had over 900 porters. This was universally considered to represent both too much human support and too much equipment. Subsequent expeditions reacted against this.

12. The leader of the 1973 Italian expedition had at Base Camp a five-room tent with leather furniture. This expedition also used helicopters to ferry supplies part way up the mountain. Hillary called this expedition "the height of the ridiculous" (Unsworth 1981:462).

13. Messner's climbing career is one of great irony. On the one hand all his books emphasize this question of learning about himself and confronting his real self with great honesty; on the other hand he has had a series of major and highly publicized conflicts with Sherpas and he is widely disliked. There are no indications in his books that he is aware of either of these facts, or that he would have the slightest insight into his own role in provoking these situations.

In 1975 John Hunt, who had led the great British expedition of 1953, speaks about the process in terms of inner essences or qualities that a person needs to have in order to succeed:

> I would like to say more about determination, for the urge to press on pervades the whole of this story [of the successful Boningon expedition on the ?southwest face]. The will to get up Everest must be there in large measure in every Everest climber before he sets out, if he is to reach the top. It is a necessary reserve of inner strength...It is a peculiarly personal thing, for which the word "ambition" in its conventional sense is quite inadequate to explain the motive power needed for this kind of high endeavor.(in Bonington 1976:ix.)

One may say that this is the British version of individualism, turned into a moral quality that motivates the person. It contrasts with the American notion of "achievement" or, as he calls it, "ambition." These are negative terms in the British vocabulary, since they are associated with "jumping up" in class terms. But they are all versions of this inner quality that a person must have, in order to climb the mountain, and will indeed find out when he tries to climb the mountain whether he has enough of it or not. Here is the American version, a few years later:

> ...if these people had one thing in common it was this: they were all motivated to high achievement. Almost every person on the expedition had some compelling drive to score as many accomplishments in his life as time and talent permitted. (Ridgeway 1979:150-1)

In sum, mountaineers are generally middle class people who are prone to be particularly reflective (if sometimes awkwardly and self-consciously so) about things like the meaning of life and the discovery/testing of the self - quintessential preoccupations of what is now a kind of global bourgeois culture. These and other aspects of their class-based outlook will help us make sense of their views of the Sherpas. But their understanding or misunderstandings of the Sherpas cannot be attributed only to their perspective. The Sherpas themselves play a role in what the mountaineers will see and represent about them.

READING DOMINANT TEXTS: MAKING SENSE OF SAHIBS' VIEWS OF SHERPAS

Himalayan mountaineering texts would seem to be eminent examples of a kind of popular Orientalism. There are endless observations about Sherpa character, the Sherpa mind, and so forth, that are often based on nothing more than two months or so of co-participation in enterprise that has been totally defined by the interests of the sahibs, and in which the sahibs have authority over, yet are totally dependent upon the cooperation of, the Sherpas who work for them. But of course there is great variability in these texts. Some mountaineers are clearly better ethnographers than other. Nonetheless my general sense is

that, at least in certain areas of observation, the
mountaineering texts in general are in certain arenas of
observation surprisingly ethnographically accurate - which means,
I suppose, that they support my own readings of the Sherpas based
on a great deal more time in the field and fancy
intellectualization afterwards. The question is thus what are
the conditions under which certain arenas of style, activity, and
so forth of The Other are rendered accessible to this kind of
relatively perceptive observation.[14]

My general point is quite simple: that the sahibs tend to be more
ethnographically astute when there are significant parallels
between sahib culture and Sherpa culture. The point here, which
I will expand upon in the conclusions, is that we need
ethnography for both sides in order to understand the ways in
which any text is shaped. For present purposes, I will take only
one example for discussion: the almost universal depiction of
the Sherpas as cheerful and good humored.

Merchant culture: the cheeriness of Sherpas and sahibs.

When sahibs climb in the Himalayas, there are always two "others"
against which they define themselves - the mountains, and the
Sherpas. That is, there is a mountain that they are trying to
climb, which presents them with difficulties, challenges, and so
forth. But there are also these other people, the Sherpas, who
are basically there to help them climb the mountain, but who are
themselves seen as in some sense part of the mountains - they
live there, they are pre-adapted to the conditions, and so forth.

In general, sahibs tend to have an extremely positive reaction to
the Sherpas. Fisher calls it "a love affair"(ref).[15] While
there are instances of sahibs who do not respond positively to
interaction with Sherpas, this is fairly rare. This has been
true from the earliest expeditions to the present, and is one of
the reasons that Sherpas came to occupy the central position they
have in Himalayan mountaineering.

One aspect of the sahibs' reaction derives from being impressed
with the Sherpas' physical strength and endurance. Most Sherpas

14. There are certainly arenas in which the sahibs are clearly way off the mark. One of these concerns the
Sherpas' reactions to deaths on expeditions. Space constraints forbid including a discussion of this in the
present paper, although such a discussion would have been useful for the overall argument. I plan to write
a separate paper on the subject.
15. I want to take this opportunity to say a few words about Jim Fisher. Fisher had been in the Peace
Corps in Nepal and worked with Sir Edmund Hillary building schools for the Sherpas (Hillary's gift to the
Sherpas for the Everest success). Fisher then went on to the University of Chicago, arriving when I was a
third year graduate student. He showed slides of the schoolhouse expedition including slides of a village
in Solu that he described as very beautiful, and as being the place in which he would like to do fieldwork
when he went back to Nepal. Robert Paul and I, on the verge of leaving for fieldwork with the Sherpas but
with no site yet chosen, later wound up choosing that village for our own fieldwork site. I have always
felt guilty about "stealing" that village from Fisher, although he has always graciously said that he did
not hold it against us.

can carry heavier loads for longer periods of time and to greater heights than most sahibs. Since the sahibs are typically men who pride themselves on their strength and fitness, this impresses them immensely, and indeed often shocks them as well. More on this in the paper on mountaineering and gender.

But the other major point that contributes to the sahibs' positive reaction to the Sherpas is best summed up as "good humor," which includes a tendency to smile or laugh easily, a willingness to enter into joking and teasing, and a general good natured and affable manner which makes interacting with them pleasant and enjoyable. The Sherpa style in this respect is quite similar to that valued by Americans, and particularly the style that was represented in World War II movies as so engaging about American GI's. The climber who wrote the introduction to Tenzing's autobiography commented on

> ...the tolerance and good humor, spontaneity and lack of prudery that characterises the Sherpas and for which they are renowned. They are indeed a happy people, as anyone who has travelled with them will know, tolerant and good-humored to a high degree, finding enjoyment in almost anything they do, interested in everything and with a strong sense of fun...(Tenzing 1977:20)

The notion that the Sherpas are cheerful, good natured, good humored, and so on takes a number of different forms. Sometimes it takes the form of a near-racist discourse that casts their good humor as child-like:

> They came by the hundreds, with their broad grins and their good-natured pranks, their babies and belongings, their laughter and tricks.(Dias 1965)

> These cherubic men of the mountains, stocky and sturdy, happy and gay, dependable, friendly and ingenuous, were our friends and companions.(Kohli 1969)

Partly it links up with the point about the Sherpas' physical strength and endurance: after a hard day's climb at high altitude, or after a late night with little sleep, when the sahibs themselves are exhausted, they are astonished to find the Sherpas in good moods, laughing, joking, singing, and so forth. As Sir Edmund Hillary said:

> I admired the Sherpas. Singing as they worked, and cheerful when most of the foreigners could barely raise an excruciating grin, they were slow to complain about their lot. (H & H 1984:208)

Or from a Canadian:

> [The Sherpas] seemingly weren't affected by the heat or the sun [which the Canadians found very debilitating] and were sunbathing, drying out their double-bootliners, drinking tea, laughing and joking...(Burgess and Palmer 1983:135)

Partly it is a major dimension of the Sherpas' value as "support" structure for the expeditions. That is, for the most part the

Sherpas tend to be agreeable and willing about doing what they are asked to do; they cooperate with a smile and have a general "can do" attitude (again one is reminded of the image of the GI in WWII). I stress here "for the most part;" sometimes the Sherpas do not willingly do what they are asked to do; they resist; they go on strike; and so forth.[16] But when they are not in a resistance mode, they not only do what they are asked to do, but they do it cheerfully, willingly, and in a positive spirit that seems to identify with whatever the task or enterprise happens to be. The Swiss explorer Toni Hagen wrote of his

> ...Sherpa, Aila, who normally in the most critical situations invariably said with a cheerful grin, 'all right sir'...(Hagen 1963)

And Edmund Hillary wrote of Tenzing:

> ...I was impressed with his strength, his sound technique, and particularly his willingness to rush off on any variation I might suggest. (Hillary 1975)

Specifically concerning the Sherpas' tendency to identify with the aims of the project, let me add here a quote from the Himalayan Club Service Record Book of Nyima Chotar, my own field assistant in 1979, concerning a botanical expedition for which he was the sirdar, head of the porters and of the support structure of the expedition:

> I must put on record that in addition to his normal duties, Nima took a very active interest in the scientific aspects of the trek, helping very effectively with the handling of photographic equipment, plant specimens, etc. He even went out on his own up to the Tibetan border to collect for me and brought back no less than 18 plant species which did not grow in the region I was able to study...at all times Nima is friendly [and] cheerful...[17]

I myself dedicated my recent book to Nyima Chotar (who was killed in an accident after my fieldwork), precisely because - as I said in unconsciously replicating this same theme: "...he helped me in innumerable ways, including...identifying with the project and making it as much his own as mine."(Ortner 1989a:xiii)

At this point we have several interpretive possibilities, of which the two poles are this: the Sherpas really are cheerful and friendly in some essential sense, or the Sherpas are totally different and the descriptions of them are projections of one kind of sahib fantasy about the Other - childlike, innocent, cheerful because lacking the reflexivity that pushes sahibs to contemplate the meaning of life. And of course there are many intermediate possibilities, including perhaps the most obvious: that the Sherpas behave this way (only) because it pleases the sahibs - it is the practical adaptation of people trapped in a service occupation.

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16. This too will be the subject of another paper.
17. Nyima Chotar allowed me to copy his service record book in 1979.

In order to get a handle on this question, we need to move in several directions at once. On the one hand we need to look at sahib culture, and the push to do this must be credited in part to the writings discussed at the beginning of this paper. And on the other hand, we need to look at Sherpa culture, not in some essential sense, but as a historically evolved configuration related to, as Raymond Williams put it, their "whole way of life."(ref) Since space is limited, these considerations must be brief on both sides.

I should start by saying that my personal sense is that the Sherpas are in fact generally good-humored and friendly. They are also (like most people) a lot of other things, and indeed I tended to emphasize those other things rather more in my own ethnographies, partly in reaction to the first Sherpa ethnographer who described them much as the mountaineering sahibs do.(von Furer-Haimendorf 1964; see also Ortner 1989b) The point here is not so much to deny the reality of either the sahibs' or the ethnographers' observations as to make the move that is common to both anthropology and history: to de-naturalize those observations, to place them within those two great contexts of de-naturalization: "history" and "culture."

Concerning the sahibs, first, it does not take a great deal of ethnographic acuity to suggest that the sahibs' tendency to remark upon, and especially to appreciate, the Sherpas' cheerfulness, good humor, upbeat style, and so forth is in part related to their own cultural style of cheerful friendliness. In Habits of the Heart, Robert Bellah et.al., briefly discuss the historical emergence of "friendliness" in the cultural style of the American middle class. They speak of the strains placed upon people by the emergence during the 19th century of, on the one hand, a less locally based social system, and on the other hand, of the emphasis on individual achievement:

> In the new, mobile middle-class world, one autonomous individual had to deal with other autonomous individuals in situations where one's self-esteem and prospects depended on one's ability to impress and negotiate. Social interactions under these conditions were often intense, but also limited and transient. 'Friendliness' became almost compulsory as a means of assuaging the difficulties of these interactions...(Bellah et al 1985:118)

While Bellah and his colleagues see this as a dimension primarily of American culture, I would suggest that it is more general to the middle classes in many countries of the world. Friendliness, a kind of impersonal cheerfulness and positive demeanour, is one possible successful style to arise out of an essentially mercantile origin, in which anyone can be a customer or a client and should be treated accordingly. As a kind of ethnographic tidbit on this point, we may note some lines from the 19th century (but still in print) children's book Farmer Boy, by Laura Ingalls Wilder. The father of the central character says to his son, "Son, I am always civil to people, but I don't go around

smiling at everyone like some kind of merchant." [quote is
inexact; to be fixed]

The mountaineers, as I said earlier, are almost entirely drawn
from the middle classes. They would thus be inclined to both
extend such friendliness to the Sherpas (as to everyone else),
and to recognize and appreciate it in the Sherpas. But this does
not mean that the Sherpas are not friendly and cheerful. On the
contrary, as I said a moment ago, I think their cultural style is
very similar, at least in certain respects, to that of the
sahibs. But here we must be careful, for if we historicize the
American style, we must historicize the Sherpas' as well. We
must not fall into the trap of giving the sahibs "history" and
the Sherpas "culture" (the charge against anthropologists leveled
by Richard Fox in particular).

In the first place one must note that the Sherpas working for the
constantly changing personnel of moutaineering expeditions are in
precisely the situation described by the authors of <u>Habits of the
Heart</u>, having \to/ in effect) sell themselves to new customers and
clients with each new expedition. But there is a deeper analogy
here.

At least since the Sherpas came into Nepal in the 16th century,
they have been centrally engaged in trans-Himalayan trade,
bringing salt down from Tibet, and bringing rice up from the
lower altitude regions of Nepal. Almost every man did a certain
amount of small scale trading, though only certain individuals
were able to succeed in this enterprise on a large scale.(Ortner
1989a) These men became the politically dominant actors of
Sherpa society, and their style, I suggest, became the culturally
dominant style. It is essentially the style that the father in
<u>Farmer Boy</u> spoke of disparagingly: "merchant culture," a culture
of generalized cheerfulness and friendliness.. The climber-
turned-anthropologist Mike Thompson also relates the outgoing
Sherpa style to the centrality of trade in their social and
economic order:
> Man, they have always felt, does not live by [potatoes]
> alone, and their individualistic, exuberant, risk-taking,
> reward-enjoying trade has formed the basis for a cheerful,
> convivial, easy-going, open and hospitable life-style that
> has endeared them to generations of Western
> mountaineers.(Thompson 1979:46)

It is this deeper <u>historical</u> parallel, I would argue, that
renders Sherpa cheerfulness and good humor at least reasonably
intelligible to the sahibs. We have not only an intersection of
style, but an intersection of meaning, meaning given in good part
by similar historical trajectories. One could certainly imagine
situations in which the sahibs encounter members of another
culture in which the liberal use of smiling and laughing in
social exchange has quite a different ground, meaning, history.
These are precisely the kinds of situations in which the worst

sorts of racist representations are made: of chronic duplicity, of "inscrutableness," and so forth.

Conclusions

I have sought to make a few general points. Perhaps the first is that nobody owns ethnography. Colonial authorities, novelists, or mountaineers, as well as certified historians and certified anthropologists, can all be good - or terrible - ethnographers. But ethnographic acuity is not simply a matter of empathic abilities, of verstehen. It is always structured by the relationship between the shape of the ethnographer's culture and that of the ethnographee.

Second, the cultures in question must always be actively understood as historical products on both sides. The critique of the culture concept as a-historical and therefore essentializing is now widely accepted in anthropology. Here I seek to add another dimension to this point. History is one of the sources - perhaps the major source - of meaning. Cultural symbols, styles, practices acquire and lose their meanings over time, in the context of other shifts - social, economic, political. The production of good ethnography depends on intuiting (in the case of "naive" ethnographers like the mountaineers) or actively sorting out meaningful parallels and differences.

And finally, I have attemped to address a piece of the Orientalism problematic. Writers like Said, Spivak, Clifford, and others have importantly alerted us to the questions of racism, orientalism, and so forth, in the representations of the "other" by those in positions of power. When we read sahibs' characterizations of the Sherpas, we are aware of the degree to which those characterizations are conditioned by both the social position of the writer and the discourses within which the writer is writing. At the same time I have argued that it would be absurd to suppose that what is written is unaffected by the actual characteristics of the people being written about, or to turn the point around, that the people being written about are unable to affect what is written about them. Thus I have taken the position that there is always some reality embedded in any characterization, no matter how distorted that characterization might be. As Althusser has said about all ideological formations, they always contain both illusion and allusion.

I have thus discussed ~~some~~ one of the patterns of description about the Sherpas that appear in the mountaineering literature on the assumption that the question is not so much, "is there any truth here?" as "what are conditions under which certain forms of cultural and historical truth can be produced, or recognized in the production of others?" My answer, utterly inadequately developed here, revolves around the role of the cultural meanings behind surface observations, and the role of history in the evolution of those meanings.

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