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Review of *The Everest Effect: Nature, Culture, Ideology* by
Elizabeth Mazzolini

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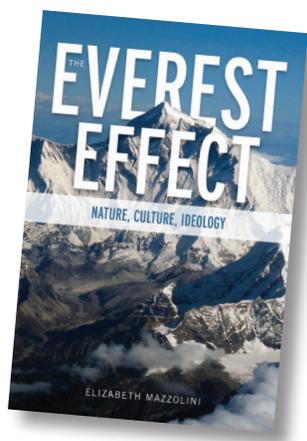
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The Everest Effect: Nature, Culture, Ideology.

Elizabeth Mazzolini. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2015. 183 pages. ISBN 9780817318932.

Reviewed by Jolynna Sinanan

Elizabeth Mazzolini's *The Everest Effect* takes everything iconic about Mount Everest mythology in popular imagination: colonial pursuit, mountaineering adventure, nature and environmentalism, and commercial climbing and capitalism to argue that culture as a set of worldviews may be more "natural" than a natural site such as Everest itself.

The numerous books available on Everest make up distinct genres in non-fiction and fiction, from historical account and biography to thriller, but Mazzolini's exploration is one of a different kind, she delves into how Everest has been made symbolic through imaginative and commodified processes. Her argument is made all the more compelling by combining an astounding knowledge of Everest history, facts and trivia with theoretical agility, written with visceral and intellectual appeal.

The narrative that follows is two-fold: a chronological history of Everest mountaineering, beginning

with mountain exploration in the early twentieth century and closing with commercial expeditions in the 1990s and early 2000s, while each chapter covers a central theme embedded in the contextual moment of events in Everest's history. The thematic overlays of each chapter: authenticity and supplemental oxygen, utility and food, individuality and communications technology, extremity and visual technology, and ability and money, which are intimately connected to the Everest experience and industry historically, have also been chosen astutely for how avenues of theoretical and narrative dexterity open up new ways of thinking about, seeing and understanding the significance of Everest in contemporary, albeit Western culture.

Each of these themes contributes to a culturally constructed idea of Everest, where the (highest) mountain becomes symbolic to different stakeholders and whose regimes of value shift through different time periods. Most effective is how Everest is historicized throughout modernization in the twentieth century, from periods of nationalism to individualism to consumerism. Mazzolini's disciplinary home is in English and rhetoric, and she seamlessly links characters and episodes in the modern Everest timeline to historical precedents, and contemporary social and cultural theory.

Mazzolini begins by establishing how the privatization of mountaineering that has paved the way for commercial expeditions, increased commodification and exploitation of the mountain as a natural resource introduces the problem of authenticity. The "easier" it has become for clients to ascend Everest, through supplementary oxygen, financial access and moral

justifications of exercising will to master the impossibility of the elements reinvents the authenticity of the ability to reach the summit. Drawing on feminist scholarship, the first chapter presents a history of oxygen to frame the limits of the body and how the difficulties of overcoming these limits has authenticated the achievement of high altitude climbing.

The following chapter continues the theme of limits of extreme physical challenges by exploring food and waste: how "social and bodily boundaries on Everest have changed since the early twentieth century" (page 49). Mazzolini's areas of expertise in ecocriticism and environmental rhetoric with a focus on ideologies of waste are brought to the fore by bringing together expenditure and conservation, food, bodily waste and surrounding moral discourses, employing Bataille's notion of the general economy. An overarching concern is the resource management of bodies, from deaths to how the value of food transformed from being a luxury afforded to gentlemen mountaineers to being a good for efficiency and sustenance.

The second half of the book broadly explores technologies of Everest: communication, visual and financial, and how the rapid developments of the second half of the twentieth century have intensified Everest's symbolic value to new consumer markets. As Reinhold Messner is inseparable to any discussion on Everest and oxygen, similarly, Jan (James) Morris is inseparable from the first ascent in the media. Tenzing Norgay and Sir Edmund Hillary's historic summit conquest in 1953 is a well-known story to many, and images that appeared in *The Times* of London still endure today. But journalist (and later, author) James Morris' remarkable response

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to challenges in reporting the breaking story involved innovating a configuration of communication technologies including airwaves, encoded language, and topography, from Everest Base Camp to the Himalayan gateway hub of Namche Bazaar to London. This ostensible beginning of Everest's media history is located within Kittler's perspective on media power and Foucault's biopolitics to elucidate how, with the advent of media technologies, Everest as a subject is produced and constrained by new technological regimes.

Most influential in shaping views of Everest are quite directly views of Everest in technologies of visual cultures: "Visual culture surrounding Mount Everest has rendered Mount Everest's significance increasingly abstract, light, and portable by constructing subjects in relation to the mountain's extreme enormity" (page 96). Arguably, Everest has always been mediated through scientific and then media technologies. Most individuals' encounter with Everest is through the popular imagination of Everest, rather than through knowledge or scholarship on Nepal, Tibet, India or the Himalayas. Coincidentally, the film *Everest*, an account of the events that were the subject of Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* and the landmark IMAX film *Everest*, directed by David Breashears and Greg MacGillivray, was also released in 2015, completing a trifecta of the 1996 disaster in popular culture. Mazzolini references

Into Thin Air and IMAX's *Everest* to commentate on the consequences of the commodified experience of Everest expeditions and likens the IMAX film to the role of panoramas of the eighteenth century in middle-class homes. These viewpoints, which depict the sheer size of mountains, but from a perspective that renders the viewer the central owner of nature that is being viewed, "enact an Enlightenment ideal of universal subjectivity" (page 92), a narrative of Everest tourism that is persistent today.

Mazzolini's Everest story ends where another era of Everest culture begins: Everest through smartphones and social media, an area of inquiry that has generated much interest, but little research to date. Indeed, Nirmal Purja's viral image of the 'traffic jam' approaching the Hillary Step during 2019's summit season has reinvigorated debates around the impossible sustainability of Everest climbing and the risks of Khumbu Sherpa and less prominent ethnic minorities Rai and Tamang whose livelihoods and own future aspirations depend on the tourism, trekking, and climbing industry. While *The Everest Effect* focuses on the Western cultural imagination, retaining its fidelity to Mazzolini's areas of expertise in English, critical, and social theory, the depth of analysis she brings to persisting themes of labor, exploitation, and waste invites further investigation to several ramifications of the commodification of the fragile alpine

ecosystem and for the people who live and work in the region.

The book is clear that it does not seek to provide an overall explanation of what drives personal desires to "conquer" Everest, a topic that is explored at length in other accounts of Everest expeditions. The strength of drawing on these personal stories however, is that they are historicized and contextualized, effectively presenting a socio-cultural, structural perspective, rather than a psychological one. For scholars and enthusiasts of Everest geography and industry, *The Everest Effect* provides a theoretically and historically rich cornerstone for culturally and regionally comparative thought on Everest effects.

Jolynna Sinanan is a Research Fellow in Digital Media and Ethnography at the University of Sydney. She has an interdisciplinary background in anthropology and development and her current research focuses on the impact of mobile media infrastructures on work and tourism in the Everest region, Nepal.