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Stephen Slemon

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Abstract

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STEPHEN SLEMON

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It is 11.30 a.m. on May 29th, 1953; and though Europe now lies dormant in post-war exhaustion, although global decolonisation from the once great European empires is proving itself everywhere to be an unstoppable force, the paradigmatic moment in British imperial self-representation is about to go down. Two men stand roped together on top of the world's highest mountain. The first is a beekeeper from New Zealand: a citizen of the old, white Commonwealth of nations. The second proves a little more difficult to define. Ethnically, he identifies himself as a 'Sherpa' — by which he means in part that he comes from Mongolian background, via Tibet. Nationally, because born in Nepal but now living in Darjeeling, he calls himself Nepali, but sometimes Indian, and sometimes Nepali-Indian. Linguistically, he identifies Sherpa as his mother tongue — this language derives from Tibetan. His everyday language is Nepali. Because his work takes him across linguistically diverse mountain communities, he also speaks Hindi-Urdu, Garwhali, Punjabi, Sikkimese, Yalmo, Pasthu, and Chitrali. And because he works for explorers and mountaineers who come to the Himalayan regions from different European nations, he has a working capacity in English, French, German and Italian. To put this in numbers: he speaks eight languages with some competence, functions in four others, identifies in various ways with three separate nations. In a book that will be written two years later by an admiring American author, based on interviews carried on through an interpreter — *Man of Everest: The Autobiography of TENZING (Told to James Ramsey Ullman)*, and the source-book for all of Tenzing's 'first-person' statements I quote in this paper — this second man on the mountain will nevertheless define himself as 'unlettered' (Ullman 23). For Tenzing Norgay cannot read. Sherpa, he explains, has not a written form.

The first man, Edmund Hillary, pulls out a Retina camera he has stored under his clothing, to keep it from freezing. His momentarily bare hands bring the camera up to his eye, adjust the focus, frame the field of vision. Tenzing, the object of this compositional moment, unfurls four flags that he has tied together by string and wrapped around the handle of his ice-axe. He holds his ice-axe high in the air, and the four flags flutter. A shutter is about to fall. The paramount moment in British imperial self-fashioning is literally about to take place.

* * * * *

My project here¹ is to locate a kind of momentary agency within that framed, and then ventriloquised, object of photographic capture. It should go without

saying that the imperial archive does not simply provide evidence of how Empire's Others might have spoken otherwise. Postcolonial scholarship has largely abandoned subaltern historiography's search for the mind of the Other in the documentary trailings of the imperial Self (see Chaturvedi); and even had it not, the methodology that informs this paper falls well short of that bold, and hopeful, academic endeavour. My title is meant to echo, though in windy conditions, G.T. Stewart's resonant essay 'Tenzing's Two Wrist-Watches', which sets out clearly the imperial history that leads up to this moment of achievement. My argument is that certain kinds of postcolonial representation — however precariously they might find themselves standing upon the terrain of intentionality; however dependent they might remain upon a later close reading — also should make history. And so it is with Tenzing's summit flags.

A century and a half of concerted imperial effort leads progressively towards this moment of unfurling. Forty-five years of laboured measurement through the Great Trigonometric Survey of India have contributed to 'the British discovery', in 1847, of the world's highest mountain — one known elsewhere, already, as Chomolungma to the Nepalese, Sagarmatha to Tibetans (see Bilham, Edney, Krakauer). Another decade of internal squabbling within the British Royal Geographical Society has ratified the imperial decision to name this high mountain after an administrative agent in British India: Surveyor-General George Everest. Mountaineering itself has had to invent itself as a social practice — and this took place in Britain, in the 1850s, as a codified, professional, middle-class, club-based, rigorously masculinist activity which brought together the competing social discourses of athleticism, science, and Romanticism (see Hansen 1996; Robbins, 591–96). For this moment of photographic capture to happen, mountaineering has had to locate and deploy a vast structure of technological dependencies: ice tools, climbing boots, even the railways that will bring English climbers to the European Alps in the holiday season (Hansen 1996), and to have finessed prosthetic dependency into a discourse of natural, free-standing, individual heroic achievement. And more: mountaineering has had to construct the tourist infrastructure that will provide mountaineers with pack animals, porters, hostels, guidebooks, and local mountaineering guides, who now regularly plan the climbing routes, organise the support teams of animals and men, put up the expedition tents, cook the camp meals, and then professionally lead amateur enthusiasts upwards to the summits of other peoples' mountains, so that those amateurs can claim, through their access to writing in the first person, those summit achievements as their own mountaineering 'first ascents'.

And if this were not enough: the Himalayan region itself has needed to be redefined into a terrain for nationalist competition. Situated as it is on the border zone between two European empires, the region is now charged with metaphor: it is a playing field for espionage in what Rudyard Kipling termed, in *Kim*, the 'Great Game'. Thomas Richards' book on *The Imperial Archive* explores just

how overwritten this territory has become within the larger, and anxious, project of imperial symbolic management. An entire discourse of mountaineering nationalism has to have arisen, consolidated, and then globalised itself into the Himalayan mountains: this now plays out as a twentieth-century version of the same organising logic that informed the late nineteenth-century's Scramble for Africa. Within mountaineering nationalism's Scramble for Altitude, Annapurna is now designated as a French mountain. Nanga Parbat goes to post-war Germany. K2 is claimed by the Italians. All such gestures of ownership, of course, are subject to challenge, and one reads a certain desperation in the ways in which British officials claim Mount Everest as symbolic British terrain. '[T]he English being the first mountaineering race in the world', writes Lord Curzon, in his speech to the Alpine Club in 1909, 'an Englishman ought to be the first on top' (Unsworth 18). 'It would be a national humiliation', writes Sir Percy Cox, a quarter-century later, 'were the final ascent [of Everest] to be allowed to pass to the nationals of any other country by reason of any slackening of interest on our part' (Conefrey xi–xii).

Mountaineering's Great Game necessitates social re-engineering on the sidelines. A heterogeneous group of Himalayan peoples, some of whose males are sometimes called 'Sherpas' (the same name as the language group) have been semiotically repositioned out of their local context — inhabitants of Tibet who migrated into eastern Nepal — into a taxonomic category now defined by its labour. The new signified for the term 'Sherpa' is this quasi-caste of men who will perform the work of high-altitude portering for European exploration in the Himalayan mountains.

Over the past thirty years, British climbers have made seven attempts on Mount Everest, these from the north, through Tibet. But Tibet has just experienced a political revolution, and British climbers are no longer welcome. Nepal, however, has also experienced a political revolution and now European mountaineers are suddenly permitted to approach Mount Everest from the south. Alarming, though, Nepal has proven itself deaf to Britain's discursive claims to symbolic ownership of Everest and in 1952 has given its Mount Everest climbing permit to the Swiss. And a Swiss team has come within 250 vertical metres of reaching the top. One of the two men from that team almost to achieve the summit is a former 'high-altitude porter' from three previous British attempts on Everest in the 1930s, a Canadian attempt in the 1940s, and a Swiss attempt earlier that same year, now designated by the Swiss a full expedition member: the 'Sherpa' Tenzing Norgay. He comes down to lower altitudes with practical, experience-based knowledge of a new, and viable, climbing route to the summit.

Gone, in the panic of competition, is the 1920 Royal Geographical Society's resolution that all members of any British Everest expedition 'be British subjects, and that no applications for the co-operation of non-British subjects be entertained' (Unsworth 23). It is a race against the Swiss. The 1953 British attempt on Mount Everest is fashioned as a full-on siege, including 350 indigenous porters, 35 'high-

altitude Sherpas', seven English climbing team members, two New Zealander team members, and one non-British team climber: Tenzing Norgay. To accommodate this changed principle for climbing team composition, the 1953 Mount Everest Expedition now must be named something other than simply 'British'. The new name — insufficient at the level of full inclusiveness, though no-one at the time seems to be troubled by this — is the British and Commonwealth Everest Expedition.

On May 28th, 1953, two English climbers try for the summit, and fail. The expedition's 'A' team gives way to the bee-keeper and 'Sherpa' team, and the next day, that team summits. This, at last, is the moment of absolute completion: the conquest of mountaineering nationalism's most cherished object of desire, the capture of the ultimate summit photo. And so Tenzing unfurls his summit flags.

And here is the conundrum that will later trouble this celebratory moment of British mountaineering triumph. Both summit teams, the English first rope and the Commonwealth/Sherpa second team, have been given two flags to be used in the planned summit photo: a Union Jack, and below that, the flag of the United Nations. But before the expedition leaves Kathmandu, other nations have made unofficial gifts of their national flags to various individuals within the climbing party, and Tenzing Norgay has added to his ice axe two new flags of his own choosing: Nepal's flag, for this is the nation of his birthplace, and one of the homes of Chomolungma; and India's flag, for this is the national flag of the city in which he now lives. It is a small act of wilfulness from an 'unlettered' expedition employee, pragmatically made climbing-team citizen, about to turn imperial exemplar. And yet it will mark a seismic shift in mountaineering representations: the apex and the end of Empire. By what modality of social identification can these national citizens — of New Zealand and Nepal/India — manifest British imperial presence on the rooftop of the world? What is this form of group-member self-presentation — this 'Commonwealth' but then elided principle for the making of inclusions — for which there is no single summit flag?

This is the shot seen round the world: a Nepali-Indian, high-altitude Sherpa representing British, late-imperial, mountaineering paramountcy. News of this moment will be strategically timed to arrive back in London just as crowds are lining the streets to celebrate Coronation Day celebrations for Elizabeth II, the new Queen of the United Kingdom and Head of the Commonwealth of Nations (see Morris), and the English press will mobilise this coincidence of signifiatory overload as evidence — at last! — of genuine imperial restoration: 'Crowning Glory!' reads one headline. 'A great coronation gift for the queen.' 'A brilliant jewel in the Queen's diadem'. 'A new Elizabethan age!' (Hansen 2001 57; *Illustrated London News* 1). 'Seldom since Francis Drake brought the Golden Hind to anchor in Plymouth Sound,' will claim a *Times* editorial, 'has a British explorer offered to his Sovereign such a tribute of glory as Colonel John Hunt and his men are able to lay at the feet of Queen Elizabeth for her Coronation Day'



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(Stewart 170). 'The qualities displayed by Drake and Raleigh are triumphantly present in the Britain of today', will claim another report. 'We, the British, got there first!' (Hansen 2001 57).

For the human figure at the photographic centre of this late-imperial celebration, however, the really hard part of climbing Mount Everest is only now about to begin. One general principle in mountaineering circles warns that the real danger in any climb attends the descent, and not the ascent. A second holds that you cannot stay long upon a mountain top when you are also standing atmospherically in what high-altitude mountaineers like to call 'the death zone'. A third general principle is that members of an unguided climbing rope are understood to be climbing equals — members of what the French climber Gaston Rébuffat, in romantically androcentric fashion, has called 'the brotherhood of the rope' (Rébuffat 196). Although a photographic image of Tenzing in triumph can, by this convention, represent equally the triumph shared by all members of the climbing expedition, Hillary included, mountaineering nationalism and late-imperial rejuvenation enforce a narrative logic of their own — and in that world of symbolic management, the separable parts within mountaineering's brotherhood cannot equally be weighted. Social contradiction will pass down, and always to the lowest common denominator. After the shutter falls, for Tenzing it is all downhill.

Sir Edmund Hillary — for he is soon after knighted — will write his account of the Everest triumph in two versions: as a chapter in expedition leader Sir John Hunt's monograph *The Conquest of Everest*, and then in revised form in his own memoir, entitled *High Adventure*. In each version he will assert — though in the second with a qualifier (shown in italics) — that the summit photograph of Britain's mountaineering conquest depicted Tenzing, and not himself, as achieving individual because Tenzing lacked the technological skill required to make him a subject, and not an object, of representation. 'I didn't worry about getting Tenzing to take a photograph of me', Hillary writes. '*As far as I knew* he had never taken a photograph before and the summit of Everest was hardly the place to show him how' (Hillary 233). George Medal winner Tenzing Norgay, in the 'autobiography', will assert a differing distribution of technological competences: 'I motioned to Hillary that I would now take his picture. But for some reason he shook his head; he did not want it' (266).

James Morris, the *Times* reporter assigned to the climb, will write a self-congratulatory memoir entitled *Coronation Everest*, explaining in detail how he cleverly stage-managed the timing of the news of this achievement, so that the story of ultimate British mountaineering triumph would reach London before everywhere else, and exactly on the day of Elizabeth's coronation. As the front cover on the paperback edition of his memoir puts it, it is 'the scoop that crowned the Queen'. Tenzing's 'autobiography' will assert a differing understanding of what this specific stage-managing of information might mean. 'For the British', Tenzing 'writes', 'the timing was perfect, and there was a wonderful celebration.

But for many Easterners it was quite the opposite, for they did not receive the news until a day later — and then from the other side of the world. This was true even for King Tribhuvana of Nepal, in whose country Everest stood' (Ullman 273).

Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru will honour Tenzing with a sinecure, prompting Nepali claims of national betrayal. Nepali crowds will celebrate Tenzing as the first person to have set foot atop Mount Everest — not Hillary — which will prompt the British to bray out their complaint of nationalist betrayal against Tenzing. Tenzing's 'autobiography' will defend him: 'They put answers in my mouth and made me sign papers I could not read' (Ullman 278). In a press conference in Kathmandu, the British expedition leader will assert that Tenzing was but an 'aide' on the mountain, that Hillary did all the lead climbing, that in fact Tenzing 'wasn't technically even a very good climber' (Ullman 281). To ameliorate fractured relations, Hillary will author a joint Hillary-Tenzing statement to the press, stating: 'we reached the top almost together' (Ullman 282). 'Almost' is a meaningful qualifier here, for it goes without saying within the principle of 'the brotherhood of the rope' that a roped-in team that climbs together summits together, not in sequence. In his 'autobiography' Tenzing will provide a double answer to this semiotic finesse in the Hillary 'joint' statement. First, he will claim full and equal position within the brotherhood principle for mountaineering representation: 'Who got there first? ... It is a foolish question. The answer means nothing' (Ullman 263). But brotherhood equality cannot in itself mean everything in this time of narrative overload, and so in his 'autobiography' Tenzing will modify — or more accurately, multiply — his rebuttal. It is not the principle of the mountaineering brotherhood that organises the final truth claim, 'Tenzing's' document will suggest. Instead, it is the absolute logic of the mountain itself: '[I]t is not for my own sake that I give [this answer],' he 'writes'. Nor is it for Hillary's. It is for the sake of Everest... We went on slowly, steadily. And then we were there. Hillary stepped on top first. And I stepped up after him' (Ullman 263).

Years later, Tenzing's son Jamling Norgay will write that what Tenzing really desired, in allowing this egregious admission to be published in the 'autobiography', was the direct subordination of nationalist and imperial-resurgence insistences on meaning to a higher principle for mountaineering representation.

[M]y father told me that he made this concession ... to relieve the mountain and mountaineering from a growing political legacy... It was his final offering of respect for a mountain that he knew could never be conquered. Indeed, to claim that one had conquered it would be arrogant, if not sacrilegious. Humans are granted no more than an audience with Everest's summit, and then only rarely and for brief moments.

(Norgay 272)

Perhaps it is in the space between Tenzing's two strategic answers that a kind of subaltern human agency might be said to have found a voice.

The crux climbing move on Everest's south col route from Nepal is a forty foot mixed ice and rock crack now known as the 'Hillary step'. Hillary's memoir

will tell of how he managed the difficult lead climbing through the rock crack, and then pulled Tenzing Norgay up behind him:

I cramponed backwards up the crack ... as Tenzing paid out the rope. Finally I reached over the top of the rock and dragged myself ... onto a wide ledge... I took a firm stance and signalled to Tenzing to come on up. As I heaved hard on the rope Tenzing wriggled his way up the crack and finally collapsed exhausted at the top like a giant fish when it has just been hauled from the sea after a terrible struggle. (Hillary 204)

Tenzing's document will tell a different story of how the team climbed through this, one that again asserts a difficult dual emplacement: *within* the discourse of the mountaineering brotherhood, but alongside a postcolonial insistence on a right to voice dissent:

I have heard plenty about that 'fish', and I admit do not like it... [N]o one pulled or hauled me up the gap. I climbed it myself, just as Hillary had done; and if he was protecting me with the rope while I was doing it, this was no more than I had done for him. ... Hillary is my friend. He is a fine climber and a fine man, and I am proud to have gone with him to the top of Everest. But I do feel that in his story of our final climb he is not quite fair to me: that all the way through he indicates that when things went well it was his doing, and when things when badly it was mine. For this is simply not true. Nowhere do I make the suggestion that I could have climbed Everest by myself; and I do not think Hillary should suggest that he could have, or that I could not have done it without his help. All the way up and down we helped, and were helped by, each other — and that was the way it should be. But we were not leader and led. We were partners. (Ullman 261–62)

And so it is with Tenzing's flags. In this present moment of difficult self-positioning — at the rising climax to a grand narrative of a belated imperial achievement, before the inevitable descent into *petit récit* and an over-written life — those flags flutter in hierarchic series, top to bottom, smallest to largest unequal partners in the power to represent. I read them in their collectivity as a sign of a social identification that reaches at once backwards towards a discourse of mountaineering's brotherhood-based partnership among equals, and there seeks inclusion, and as a forward-looking gesture towards an unflagging — and unflaggable — desire for representational difference. 'It is the indeterminacy of meaning', Homi Bhaba writes in another context, '[that] produces an ... "abyssal overlapping", of too much meaning and a certain meaninglessness' (Bhabha 334). Later, Tenzing will consider the fluttering signs of indeterminate human agency that inhabit this wild moment of signifiatory self-presentation. Or so it may be gathered from the document that speaks through his name. 'On Everest', the 'autobiography' will say for him, 'I was not thinking about politics. If I had been, I suppose I would have put the Indian or Nepalese flag highest... As it is, I am glad that the U.N. flag was on top. For I like to think that our victory was not only for ourselves — not only for our own nations — but for all men everywhere' (Ullman 266).

There can be no one flag for the complex order of identifications that this human figure momentarily inhabits — roped-in, posing, masked — beneath the triumphant ice axe. There is no simple designation for this postcolonial way of being in the world. My argument is that the intrinsic difficulty in Tenzing's gesture remains, for today's socially dominant peoples, a mountain we have yet to summit. We persist within another capture, but capable of reading signs like these of a future in which genuine cross-cultural reciprocity and partnership can at last find continuance, a future in which social identifications beyond the frame of settled identities and their designations can themselves find place. For now, there can only be too many triumphant summit flags. Or maybe not enough.

NOTES

¹ A festschrift, claims Wikipedia, can sometimes serve 'as a convenient place in which those who are invited to contribute find a permanent resting place for their otherwise unpublishable ... papers'. I hope not to have fulfilled that dire definition here. I thank Anne Collett for her very handsome invitation to publish in this collection: *Kunapipi* is a foundational journal for postcolonial thought, the site of my first academic publication, and in this volume it celebrates one of postcolonial scholarship's most persistently vibrant intellects, and one of my dearest friends.

This paper has followed a long approach route. It is in part an extension of an argument made in my Anna Rutherford Lecture, given at the 2007 ACLALS Triennial conference, and sponsored by the European Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies. Until her death in 2001, Anna Rutherford was one of only two people to have attended every ACLALS Triennial conference — ongoing since 1968. The other stalwart is Helen Tiffin, who continues that tradition of persistence. A later version of this paper was given to the graduates of the M.A. in English and Cultural Studies at the University of Mauritius, in 2010. I thank my great intellectual mentors, and my many interlocutors.

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