

PLACE & SPACE

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Ego-tourism at 29,000 Feet: **Mt. Everest, May 1996**

In May of 1996 the world was shocked to learn that eight climbers had perished on Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world. Among those lost in a sudden storm which hit after they had successfully gained the summit were seasoned professional climbers Scott Fischer and Rob Hall, and three members of “tourist” expeditions who had paid as much as \$65,000 to have Fischer and Hall guide them to the summit. The tragedy received immediate and sustained attention from the media: wire service articles and cover stories in *Time*, *Life*, and *Outside*, and articles in sources as varied as *Newsweek*, *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *Men’s Journal*. Armchair mountaineers had been able to follow the progress of the expedition on web sites through Jon Krakauer’s reports to *Outside* magazine and, more controversially, on the web page of socialite Sandy Hill Pittman, an occasional contributor to *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*. Many had listened in on the final conversation between Rob Hall and his pregnant wife, Jan Arnold, which was patched through from his final bivouac near the summit and broadcast via satellite link across the world, and during which Hall told Arnold “Please don’t worry too much.” Within months, NBC’s “Dateline” had broadcast an hour special, and CBS provided a special on another expedition on Everest simultaneous with the Hall and Hansen expeditions, and in which a bi-racial climbing team from South Africa disintegrated due to poor leadership and desertion, and with the loss of one life.

Because these contemporary accounts of Everest will become the documents of future historians (are, perhaps, historical documents already), I am interested in exploring how the narratives used to tell the story of Everest were produced: How did the media make cultural sense of this tragedy? What story lines converge and diverge as various “authors” take a turn at making meanings? What stories, what incidents, what metaphors drive the text? What stories are not told, and what do these absences tell us about the cultural uses of this narrative? And, perhaps most importantly from a critical perspective, whose interests are served when particular stories are highlighted and others obscured? What do the particular narratives constructed around these events tell us about the cultural context of our times? What lines of power intersect on the top of Mount Everest, and what part do the articulations of power relations such as race, nationalism, class and gender play in the narratives?

Finally, I will discuss the theoretical benefits of making connections between historical discourses as they are being constructed at the intersection of public history

and critical social history, and narrative analysis which is developing within the cultural studies' camp of sport sociology. What particular methodologies, I wonder, can we offer another as we work to produce readings of cultural texts that explicate deeper cultural patterns?