

## **Mountains, Mobilities and Movement**

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## Mountains, Mobilities and Movement

Edited by Christos Kakalis and Emily Goetsch. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. xxi + 290 pp. Hardcover: US\$ 119.99, ISBN 978-1-137-58634-6. E-book: US\$ 89.00, ISBN 978-1-137-58635-3.

The alliterative, murmuring “m”s in the title of this fine collection of essays aurally signal the pleasures that await readers as they consider mountains from new critical perspectives. Editors Christos Kakalis and Emily Goetsch, each of whom contributes an essay, have gathered a wide range of scholars and practitioners to consider mountains using critical tools new to mountain studies. The compelling title is not only verbally appealing, but also intellectually intriguing, further reflective of the content of the collection. Two words in the title—“mobility” and “movement”—appear to contradict the third word: “mountains.” Is the reader being tricked, invited to an easy child’s game of “which one of these things does not belong”? What could be more *immobile* and *immovable* than mountains? Only faith can move mountains (at least before the advent of mountaintop removal coal mining in the Appalachian Mountains of the United States). Contributors to the book challenge readers to question their assumptions about the cultural stability of mountains formed in a post-Enlightenment understanding of these geological features, to rethink their sensory relationship to mountains, and to reevaluate mountains in the context of play, performance, aesthetics, and religious expression.

The collection is divided into 3 sections: performativity, changing perspectives, and mobility. Anchored by a foreword from social anthropologist Tim Ingold that, in a cautionary vein, calls upon readers to

recognize that mountains have long-term stories of their own, independent of humans’ desires to “conquer” them through climbing, the essays in these 3 sections coalesce around humans’ complex and evolving relationships to the physical products of orogenesis. Goetsch and Kakalis follow Ingold’s foreword with an introduction that, in the best tradition of introductions, positions all the essays on common (uneven) ground, the collective purpose of which is to deploy “concepts of *performance, practice, and mobility*,” concepts not traditionally called upon to explain human/mountain connections, “in order to demonstrate and explain the non-static nature of mountains, as realised through inhabitation, interpretation and communication” (p 4). Goetsch and Kakalis conclude their introduction by staking a claim to new (mountain studies) territory: “Exploring mountains through the lenses of performativity, hermeneutics and mobility, the chapters of this book draw out tensions between peoples and their environments, which have not been discussed previously and which can only be deeply analysed through interdisciplinary exploration” (p 11).

While it is tempting to focus exclusively on the ingenuity and creativity of using “lenses of performativity, hermeneutics and mobility” for knowing mountains as this collection’s primary contribution to the field of mountain studies, the value of a particularly robust and inventive practice of interdisciplinarity in this collection should not be overlooked. *Mountains, Mobilities and Movement* approaches its subject from the perspectives of architects, a theologian, an artist, and a scholar of theater and performance. This innovative cast of characters joins forces with a more traditional set of interdisciplinary academics: historical and cultural geographers, art historians, and philosophers of art. This fresh expression of interdisciplinarity is the power at the

heart of this collection, resulting in a radical reimagining of the ways of knowing mountains that, nonetheless, never loses sight of the good work that undergirds past understanding of human-mountain connections.

For example, the first essay, Jonathan Pitches’s “Deep Play and Dark Play in the Alps: Daring Acts and Their Retelling,” encourages readers to view the emergence of the almost suicidally dangerous sports of BASE jumping and wingsuiting as “recent developments in the wider category of dark play” while remaining aware that the “so-called postmodern desire to *mediate* or retell the extreme experiences provoked by mountain landscapes is far from new” (p 17). Pitches cites connections between contemporary social media users’ performed narratives and Albert Smith’s performed lectures in mid-nineteenth-century London. Complementing Pitches’s theater- and performance-based approach, Anja-Karina Nydal’s “A Difficult Line: The Aesthetics of Mountain Climbing 1871–Present” employs concepts from architecture to analyze how experienced mountain climbers “identify complex linkages of features on the mountain that are otherwise indistinguishable to the casual observer” and use those visual skills to execute successful climbs on progressively dangerous, new routes (p 169). Nydal argues that “[t]hese combined experiences give the mountain an irresistible aesthetic value to climbers” (p 169), a layering of architectural “line” and rope line predicated on seeing the mountain as simultaneously physical object and emotional object. Artist and scholar Kim W. Wilson’s essay “Untimely Mountains | Entangled Matter” pushes this collection the farthest, perhaps, from the traditional academic investigation of mountains. This essay is part memoir, part narrative installation (with supporting images from her art installation in Dundee and sculpture workshop in Edinburgh), and part argument for the utility of New

Materialism in artistic practice. It problematizes the very nature of the “mountain,” positing a new orogenesis of man-made, industrial waste as “mountain,” a new type of mountain that can be (re)structured, (re)formed, and (re)moved as art.

In its new formulation of mountain movement and mountain mobility, this collection of essays could spin out of control, the center refusing to hold, mountain studies so changed that they become unrecognizable. That is not the case. At the collection’s core is a cadre of solid, thought-provoking, engaging essays steeped in the concepts that have proven effective for understanding mountains pre-movement, pre-mobility: the picturesque and the sublime, the

importance of Mont Blanc, cartography as an organizing system. A minor disappointment is that the essays from Bernard Debarbieux and Veronica della Dora, prominent and influential mountain studies scholars, have already appeared in other versions in other publications. However, their scholarship on the “montagnard” and mountains as visual elements of landscapes, respectively, contributes to the thematic concerns of the collection, fits nicely with the other essays in the collection, and is pleasurable and valuable to (re)read in this new context.

*Mountains, Mobilities and Movement* brings together scholars, arts practitioners, and other professionals to help readers see mountains in new ways. The picture on the cover is of

the Matterhorn, an iconic, unmistakable mountain steeped in mountaineering history. If any mountain is unmovable, unchangeable in readers’ minds, it is this one. It is a testament to the innovation of this collection of essays that, for some readers, the Matterhorn may now appear moveable.

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