

## 12. FESTIVAL OBSCURA: GENDER IN FESTIVAL-DRIVEN MOUNTAINEERING DOCUMENTARIES

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Every year, mountain film festivals around the world show films that are difficult to see any other way, in formats that are very popular with audiences. These films, and mountain festivals in general, have not yet received much critical attention. In *False Summit*, I wonder why relatively narrow ideas about masculinity and heroism in climbing cultures persist (2021). This essay suggests that part of the reason lies with the influence of certain mountain film festivals, particularly large, influential festivals, on the content and reach of films featuring female climbers. Recent films featuring women can appear to make mountain film festivals more progressive than they were when Susan Frohlick lamented the hegemony of masculinity at mountain film festivals in the early 2000s, when women were rarely seen except as spectators (2005). Featuring a few more women in film and showing festival films by female directors appears to be a promising step. That step may not be as progressive as it may seem at first. Changes to the hegemony of heroic masculinity in mountaineering are tied to issues connected to the politics of representing minority climbers and climbing styles. These are linked to the popularity of mountain film festivals and the cultural norms that circulate there about mountains, mountaineering, and gender, because films represent the kinds of climbing that audiences want to see, and so representation sets standards for what climbing is supposed to be like.

Like other types of film festivals, mountain film festivals are central to maintaining and creating global audiences for their products, which means that they participate in making and representing mountain pursuits. Their influence

means that mountain film festivals sometimes contribute to considerable resistance to thinking about political issues in the representation of mountaineering and mountain life, particular with respect to gender politics. But at the same time, they do contain potential for representing gender differently to mountain cinema audiences. Film festivals are an important economic and social formation because they do not just show films: They help to create and distribute them too, making the general study of film festivals useful when considering mountain films and how the expectations of festivals result in relatively narrow ideas of diversity. Alongside the activities related to film production and distribution, mountain film festivals in particular have an appeal beyond film, and so they are also a marketplace for climbers and others who love the mountains and outdoor activities. And so, mountain film festivals are a place not just for film viewing, but for commerce: Outdoor products, such as gear or clothing, and other cultural products such as books or visual art, are commonly sold during festivals. In this way, mountain film festivals are occasions to celebrate mountains and mountaineering as a culture and an aesthetic, and they are an important way in which ideals about mountains and outdoor life circulate. Many of those ideals are connected to social norms in mountain climbing about who climbers should be, norms that include gender and racial norms, even when ideas about gender and race are not mentioned, or appear in relatively superficial ways. To show how gender issues are both highlighted and obscured in mountain film festival films as part of their participation in global film circulation, I will discuss *Pretty Strong* (Leslie Hittmeier, Colette McInerney, & Julie Ellison, 2020), a film by an all-female climbing and film collective, and *Cholitas* (Jaime Murciego & Pablo Iraburu, 2019), a film about the Aimara women of Bolivia who climbed Mount Aconcagua. Both films contain the promise of gender equity and the reality of gender politics as part of the conditions of their production and distribution.

#### OBSCURING GENDER IN PLAIN SIGHT: A PROMOTIONAL TRAILER

To show concisely how film festivals can highlight and obscure gender issues, I begin with a trailer for the 2021–2022 Banff Mountain Film and Book Festival World Tour, an event designed to encapsulate the aims and character of the festival and promote its latest curated collection of films (Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity 2021). The trailer is designed to delight and overwhelm audiences in equal measure with the wealth of material on offer. Soaring music plays as the video opens. A man in an orange nylon jacket reads his phone as urban scenes move in fast motion and social media emojis bubble around him. Suddenly the rapid images stop and we cut to the silhouette of a woman wearing a burka as she looks out at desert peaks. The alternation of fast and slow, active and passive, adventurous and contemplative continues

at a breakneck pace to the beat of furious drums and bells. Slackliners, BASE jumpers, skiers, kayakers, and paragliders perform breathtaking feats, a Tibetan woman uses a prayer wheel, and male and female bodies sweat during gym training, all timed to rhythms of the orchestral score. Briefly, there is a forest fire. Mountain bikers shred forest trails, a one-legged skier trudges up a snow slope, a man in traditional Arab dress filmed from above leaves a trail of footprints on a sand dune. A bearded white male climber grimaces as he climbs a difficult crack, and then a white male child delightedly climbs a tree as he is top-roped. A young white woman shot from below bridges a difficult chimney problem. Polynesian women in traditional skirts dance around a fire. One of them flaps her arms like a bird, and then we see a white eagle in a nest making the same movements. A deep, male voice with what could be an African or Caribbean accent tells us that "This is the Banff Mountain Festival World Tour" as a male mountain biker rides through a tight canyon, his progress dramatically lit by a red flare.

The trailer is a spectacle of equivalence in a global context, moving at a pace designed for maximum entertainment, because the montage unites Indigenous mountain people, white European athletes, adventurers, women and men, humans, a single ant, and even a couple of dogs all together in a celebration of mountain play on what looks like a spectacular, level playing field. Anyone can participate, and through film, anyone can be part of the celebration. The man in the orange jacket is supposed to be us, watching mountain films anywhere, on a phone, far from the mountains themselves. What he, and we, see is an immersive and seductive vision, meant to make us buy tickets and watch the films from which those clips came, either in a movie theater or online.

However, the trailer's politics of gender and race in the mountains should trouble us, and we should ask why the thrilling content masks a forgetting of the inequities present in outdoor mountain pursuits. The changing pace of the images is connected to persistent ideas about gender identity and racial politics that are dependent on neo-colonial stereotypes of agency and passivity. There are approximately twenty identifiable women in the 2:57-minute trailer; I counted as many men in the first fifty seconds. Men are depicted as the masters of the environments in which they move. The ideal spectator at the beginning is male, and the voice-over is male and non-European, a way of signaling the global intent of the festival. Women do appear in the montage, but only white, fit, younger North American or European women are having adventures. Indigenous women mostly look contemplatively into the distance or participate in ceremonies involving dance or prayer, conflated with the natural world, not doing any outdoor activity that requires technical gear. Male children appear as symbols of a bright future and of innocence in the outdoors. Female children are all Indigenous and engaging in traditional activities such as dancing or drumming. There are two physically disabled people, both male.

The gender logic of the trailer, and I suggest of mountain film festivals more generally, is the logic of substitution. We are meant to identify with the man at the beginning, and we are meant to share his experiences and imagine ourselves in his place, whether we share his identity or not. The same is true for the people we see in the films doing adventurous things: It is not supposed to matter what gender they are. We can participate vicariously in what they are doing, easily, through the magic of film that takes us to scenes of difficult physical feats and exotic locations. Gender issues—and related issues to do with other types of identity and difference—are represented everywhere in the trailer. But their complex meanings are obscured too, in the name of globalism and enjoyment. Stereotypical ideas about Indigeneity, gender identity, and fit bodies are the norm, but we are not supposed to notice that. The trailer asks us only to look, enjoy, and marvel. We are not asked to question or think critically about what kinds of bodies are represented and why they appear the way they do.

#### MOUNTAIN FILM FESTIVALS

The trailer shows us that gender politics and accompanying ideas about neo-colonialism and the politics of race are still relatively conservative in mountain festival films shown at Banff. Banff is only one festival (although it is highly influential), but its example is instructive. The power and influence of festival culture within the economies and social worlds of mountaineering and other outdoor pursuits means that it is imperative to know the economic and political basis of such representation, and why festivals about mountains have the power to influence what audiences think about gender in the outdoors. Before looking at the work of gender in mountain festival films, it is important to understand how film festivals in general, and mountain film festivals in particular, reflect and create fan cultures, and contain within themselves sometimes complex meanings and values.

Mountain film festivals are connected in some ways to the history and development of film festivals in general. From their beginnings in the European 1920s context of film societies and clubs formed in opposition to mass-produced films like those made in Hollywood (“History of Film Festivals,” n.d.), film festivals generally have become an important aspect of global film industries, far beyond their original goal of showing films not available to mainstream audiences. Along the way, some film festivals have begun to produce films themselves. According to Dina Iordanova, “today, it has become the norm that film festivals not only show films but also engage with film production and distribution” (2015). Film festivals have therefore become part of the business of filmmaking, whether they are large industry-driven festivals such as Cannes or the Toronto International Film Festival, “identity-based festivals” created

to appeal to audiences within a specific community or nation (Valck 2016b, 3), or festivals dedicated to a certain genre, such as crime thrillers (Stringer 2008) or documentary (Vallejo & Winton 2020). Even festivals dedicated to activist causes have the potential to be places of commerce, where like-minded filmmakers meet each other, pitch ideas to producers, and learn to make films (Bowles Eagle 2021). Mountain film festivals reflect a desire to present a specific set of films to a fan base, much as identity-based festivals do. They also, like activist festivals, become occasions for people to meet who have a specific interest, and to participate in creating and nurturing a subculture. They are part of the business of providing opportunities for leisure.

Like activist film festivals, some mountain film festivals combine business aims with counter-cultural ideology. This is not as contradictory as it might seem. As the growing critical discourse on the business and culture of film festivals shows, festival cultures tend to be diverse and complex, with sometimes conflicting aims (Iordanova 2015). For instance, festivals can be business ventures made to benefit local communities and audiences as I just discussed, but these ventures have the potential to also be counter-publics for non-mainstream audiences beyond a local audience or community, professing values which may be at odds with the business of filmmaking, pitching, and distribution (Stringer 2008). Their potential for conflicting aims and their diversity leads Cynthia Hing-Yuk Wong to call festivals “loose structures with many components that allow a great deal of flexibility of production, text, and audience” (2016, 85). This is true of mountain film festivals too, as we shall see.

Regardless of their political aims or even their diversity in topics, size, and reach, film festivals tend to share two features. First, they are not merely neutral distribution systems for films, because “film festivals both *make* and *mediate* film history” (Vallejo 2020, 166). They do this because unlike commercial theaters, festival “films are not screened as part of a business undertaking, but because they are considered important or worthy to be shown ... festival screenings typically serve a cultural purpose, not an economic one” (Valck 2016a, 104). Films are curated, screened, and promoted by festivals as part of the specific culture that the festival addresses, and the festival itself helps to make that culture thrive. The aim of film festivals to *create* an audience culture is connected to their aim to *mediate* between film and audience, sometimes within a business model, and sometimes not. Second, as Iordanova points out, film festivals are “innately transnational” (2015) because of the centrality of curation and pedagogy of their structures and because many such festivals understand themselves to encourage and even create opportunities for the global art cinema market. Therefore, within the practices of global cinema, “festivals are transnational hubs, where filmmakers experience the globalization of the film industry in daily international social interactions and cultural negotiations” (Peirano 2020, 34). Many festivals have “international”

in their names to signal this kind of commitment to filmmakers, audiences, and vendors. Mountain film festivals participate in this kind of transnational community building.

However, like other kinds of documentary film festivals, mountain film festivals do a second thing, which is to convert transnationality into a very specifically curated aesthetic, designed to present films as windows into the world, and into a way of learning about different cultures. This is why it makes sense to think about mountain film festivals as part of documentary film festival systems. Documentary film festivals often understand themselves as promoters of the global in the name of what Michael Renov has called the “pleasurable learning” found in documentaries as a genre (2016, 755). Festivals devoted to documentary curate their offerings as examples of internationality or globalism, because “curating this type of cinema contributes to film festivals’ prestige as genuine international hubs that promote cultural diversity” (Peirano 2020, 35).

To encourage the kinds of films that they want to curate, documentary film festivals include significant pedagogical opportunities aimed at teaching audiences about global cinema connected to the festival’s theme, and teaching filmmakers to make the kinds of documentaries that global audiences want to see. It is unsurprising therefore that documentary film festivals feature learning opportunities for filmmakers in addition to other content. These types of events teach filmmakers from developing countries with small markets how to “be global,” that is, how to make films that film festivals want to screen, so that small market filmmakers can “learn the ways in which global cinema is produced and exchanged, and to train themselves to perform in the international market” (Peirano 2020, 36). The result of learning to be global means that filmmakers from small markets operate in a cosmopolitan filmmaking environment. The effect of this pedagogy is to make small market producers from non-Western locations fit into the expectations of Western documentary filmmaking. The pedagogy of filmmaking and curation also present in festivals have the effect of encouraging some difference, but not too much:

Despite these national and regional categories that serve to identify, promote, and lend some “exotic” flavor to these films (particularly the non-Western ones), the type of films selected by festivals is consistently a form of global art cinema, understood as a form of a somewhat delocalized, cosmopolitan “auteur cinema.” (Peirano 2020, 39)

In the case of mountaineering films, auteur cinema is not the point, but global cinema is. The need to curate “global” films encourages the screening of films that have a common look, accompanied by “exotic” features to take audiences to wild, even inaccessible locations in the name of adventure. The viewing

experience is meant to be immersive. In order to achieve this, mountain film festivals feature workshops that teach amateurs how to become filmmakers and how to be in the business of marketing films, too. The result is that films about climbing screened in festivals have many common elements, and, as we have seen in the 2020 Banff film trailer, the result can be a relatively rigid depiction of masculinity, gender issues, and Indigenous identity. It is likely that the workshops about filmmaking offered through film festivals create this common international look, and the politics which accompany it, just as they do in other kinds of documentary film festivals. As Aida Vallejo and Ezra Winton point out, documentary film festivals are organized around all aspects of making documentaries as well as watching them:

Documentary festivals play a crucial role in documentary production, curation, distribution, reception and scholarship, and therefore the study of their more recent challenges and developments is key to critically assessing contemporary documentary film. (2020, 3)

The same holds true for mountain films and their aesthetics. As a genre, documentary carries within it tension between its nonfictional intent and its aesthetics, Renov's pleasurable learning, which involves elements of recording, revealing, or preserving an aspect of reality, but also involves persuasion, analysis, and expression (2016, 744). Mountain film festivals, like other kinds of documentary film festivals, therefore have similar pedagogical and curatorial aspects to them, which have the effect of welcoming certain types of difference while encouraging the production of films that subscribe to similar aesthetics and themes—for instance, the frequent use of Kathmandu's temples in establishing shots about the Himalayas—which have the potential effect of domesticating some of that difference and relegating culture as an exotic background to nature, where the adventures are to take place. But the purpose of such domestication is different from the aims of many other documentary festivals. The intent of mountain film festivals, as we shall see, is pleasurable learning for a very specific purpose, and it is to this purpose we now turn.

#### PLEASURABLE LEARNING

As I said at the outset, mountain film festivals remain an important way to access films about the mountains, particularly films that are not shown in commercial theaters or on online platforms such as Netflix. Festivals are very popular with general and niche audiences worldwide, from the venerable Banff Mountain Film and Book Festival in Canada, to Telluride's MountainFilm in the United States, to festivals in the United Kingdom, Australia, Nepal, Columbia, Poland, and many other locations. In this, mountain film festivals

are both like and unlike other kinds of festivals: They share the commitment to commerce and industry, as large festivals such as TIFF and Cannes do, but most of them do not feature arthouse cinema or experimental filmmaking, and they do not tend to promote auteur cinema. How then to understand these festivals and their politics? Mountain film festivals share features with other kinds of cultural festivals, such as book festivals. Book festivals, in the words of Beth Driscoll and Claire Squires, “have been analyzed as worlds, as games, as tournaments, as fields, as events, as microcosms, as situations, as institutions, as networks,” each within their commercial and cultural traditions. They are connected to what Driscoll and Squires call “serious fun,” which emphasizes the interconnectedness of leisure activities at book festivals such as listening to book talks, drinking wine and gossiping, and the business deals which take place in the same spaces (2018).

Mountain film festivals can be understood within the context of serious fun because some of them are combined with book festivals and so have much in common with them. The Banff Mountain Film and Book Festival is the best known of these, but is not the only example: The New Zealand Mountain Film and Book Festival, for instance, sees the media of film and print to have common content and runs a single event (NZ Mountain n.d.). Festivals like these are not meant to be elite, because the culture of outdoor pursuits is not allied with highbrow cultural activities such as attending art galleries, museums, theatrical performances, or poetry readings. Instead, they screen films, organize author readings and signings, and run workshops about filmmaking, writing, and photography, within what can broadly be termed a realist aesthetic emphasizing the production of nonfictional representation of mountains and outdoor pursuits.

Judging from the types of films they typically screen, mountain film festivals largely cater to an audience of people who enjoy the outdoors and want to see their lifestyle reflected or idealized in films and books, not film buffs who go to see arthouse cinema and want to see experimental films. The focus, for the most part, is on leisure, although there are environmental films too that call attention to environmental change and catastrophe. But the bulk of films screened at mainstream film festivals, as the 2020 Banff trailer shows, are meant to be fun, awe-inspiring, and uplifting. To this end, festivals have given rise to a cottage industry in creating documentary-style films about those places that can lead to the consumption of outdoor goods and mountain tourism, as well as a way to vicariously live through the activities shown on screen. They are the main arena for prizes and awards, which is another way that the culture celebrates its values and consolidates its norms. These festivals feature their own grammar of adventure, including the performance of heroism, breathtaking scenery (often, as the Banff World Tour trailer shows, with a frisson of Indigenous presence as the background to outdoor pursuits), and an allegiance



to showing action, with soundtracks to match. The commitment to leisure means that realism is paramount: Films themselves are rarely experimental and are meant to be immersive, so that audiences lose themselves in them.

For their part, the audiences of mountain film festivals constitute a subculture that identifies with what it sees on screen. Viewers turn up in mountain clothing and boots, which shows their commitment to outdoor culture. That level of commitment is the point: The films they come to see are meant to reflect and confirm the audience's lifestyle choices, sometimes expressed as values. As the quotation from David Charles Rodrigues on the welcome page for the 2022 Mountainfilm festival at Telluride states, "I love documentaries because they teach us critical thinking, but Mountainfilm takes that a step further and transforms the critical thinking into critical living" ("Festival Welcome Screen" 2014). That quotation connects mountain films to Renov's idea of documentaries as "pleasurable learning" that entertains as it teaches. Enjoyment and ethics can be imagined together in such an environment.

Mountain film festivals make a further connection to serious fun through an understanding of commerce as community responsibility. Major sponsors such as North Face or Black Diamond are central to mountain festival offerings, which, similar to other film festival events, are meant to highlight the presence of filmmakers and provide a learning and gathering space for them. These can include author presentations, and workshops that teach the basics of outdoor filmmaking, pitching, financing, project management, and distribution. In return, sponsors sell their wares at the festival in a marketplace environment, which constitutes another mix of commerce and audience enjoyment, because mountain festival attendees who are active participants in outdoor life can afford to buy expensive gear, and many celebrity outdoor athletes who appear in mountain films and books are also sponsored by these companies ("Festival Marketplace" n.d.).

In their own way, mountain film festivals provide an arena for commerce and community in a loose commitment to the idea of the public sphere, but they do so within a relatively narrowly defined distribution system regulated through the IAMF, the International Alliance for Mountain Film, which allows filmmakers to submit their films to many festivals at once. Filmmakers, the IAMF states, need to adhere to local rules, which generally govern exhibition during the festival, but not afterwards (IAMF n.d.). This is why so many films are hard to see outside of a festival. As Peirano points out, small film festivals embody the promise of a community coming together to watch films they would never normally see. Film festivals promise access and community cohesion as people sit in a darkened room to watch films connected to a common passion. But film festivals are also presentist, which means that each season brings new films, while it is difficult to see what was shown before, or to compare films to each other. There are no mountain film retrospectives,

for instance, and so the opportunity to evaluate and discuss how issues to do with inequality are represented over time is lost. It becomes difficult to assess whether the promise of community in small festivals is realized. Mountain film festivals, like other small festivals, have this problem.

Pierano calls this situation a memory loss, which means that festivals themselves “have complicated relationships with their own pasts” (2020, 171). Pierano refers here to the difficulty of conducting research on smaller film festivals, in part because films shown at the festival often cannot be seen anywhere else. This is the case with mountain film festivals too, because films screen in that eternal present, and it can lead to political problems. Festival films depend heavily on the festival circuit for distribution, a situation that the Banff World Tour program was designed to address. The World Tour allows a curated collection of films to be shown online or in other locations than Banff for a fee. *Cholitas*, for example, can be seen online as part of the “Coral Program,” which shows films from the 2020–2021 World Tour. Banff’s solution is an attempt to remedy the problem of access with a creative use of streaming technology, but problems with curation remain. The Coral Program is a list of only five films from the World Tour, and viewers do not get to choose what they see: The festival is still in control of curation and determines how the films will be related to one another. Online viewing requires a computer and internet connection capable of streaming films as well, which limits the kind of audience.

#### GENDER AT THE FILM FESTIVAL

What then is the role of gender in mountain film festivals and how do its films address gender? The pressures that Peirano says cause small-market filmmakers to become cosmopolitan “global” filmmakers in the industry operate here too. The insistence in mountain film festivals on a specific type of mountain globality means that hierarchies of race, class, and gender remain largely intact in the aesthetics of the films. Some films featuring women are shown, but not many. Masculinity in festival films goes unchallenged too. Mountain film festivals therefore contain normative ideas about gender that do not challenge the status quo. This situation is similar to the representation of mountaineering in many nonfictional accounts. As I have discussed elsewhere, the logic of gender politics in mountaineering nonfiction depends on Romantic ideas of corporeal sovereignty over oneself and one’s environment. These ideas privilege white male concepts of heroism and fitness in anachronistic ways, because they are claimed to be a way to connect more closely with the “natural” order of things and they ally with ideas of adventure and thrills in a way that masks their politics. A secondary logic of substitution found in representations of mountain climbers in film, painting, photography, and written accounts invites

the audience to imagine themselves as substitutes, who can take the place of the heroes we see in stories and on screen. This logic is the basis for claims that expectations for what a good or authentic climber is supposed to look like or act like do not need to change: One can simply substitute one body for another.<sup>1</sup> The same logic presumably structures most of the films shown at film festivals around the world, either through the International Alliance for Mount Film application process, or through the jury selection processes at individual festivals, given the relatively few films that take gender as their subject or seek to problematize the representation of gender in mountain festival films. I will turn now to two films that try to contest those rules of representation in different ways, to see how, in a festival context, films by and about women can and cannot work against the hegemony of gendered adventure.

*PRETTY STRONG* (2020)

*Pretty Strong* premiered at the Vancouver International Film Festival online in 2020. It is an unusual climbing film in terms of its production and distribution, but as we shall see, its participation in the extreme sport discourse makes it relatively traditional, too. Produced by the Never Not Collective, an all-female climbing and film team, the intent of this film was to make a way for women to produce their own films in their own way. The reason is that “for decades, climbing media has fortified this scaffolding of male design. Of the 91 main segments in high-production climbing films produced before 2017, only 11 even showed a woman climbing” (Athena 2020). The male-dominated culture of climbing films motivated the collective to change that, with a “classic dosage-style film, packed with try-hard moments” in order to emphasize how capable female climbers and filmmakers are (Athena 2020). The collective therefore decided to make a film that operates on a substitutive logic, proving that women can climb as well and as hard as men can. *Boulder Weekly* calls this “an apolitical decision that’s resonated with some, and infuriated others.” Nina Williams, who is featured in the film and is part of the collective, responds that “we just needed more representation on the screen. We just needed more numbers,” adding that she considers the film to be a small first step for women in climbing that should be followed by more intersectional approaches (Athena 2020).

That production background and political orientation affect the content: The film’s opening features Collette McIrney, the lead filmmaker of the three-woman collective, who downplays her abilities and emphasizes her passion rather than her aptitude for filmmaking, claiming in the segment that she does what she loves because she is committed to climbing as a pursuit. This point is underscored during outtakes that show she is capable of making mistakes and laughing at herself (Never Not Collective 2020). The making of the film

immediately becomes part of the film's content, and women are presented as producers and not just the focus of production. The opening segment therefore establishes McIrney's humble origins as part of the climbing community to make her point: "we could use a few more climbing films about women." The seventy-four-minute film is a series of short segments about eight very strong female climbers, many of them internationally-known: Nina Williams, Katie Lambert, Daila Ojeda, Hazel Findlay, Isabelle Faus, Fernanda Rodriguez, Anna Liina Laitinen, Jessa Goebel, Alma Esteban, and Larissa Arce. *Pretty Strong* is therefore meant to be inspirational for filmmakers and climbers, to show its audience that women can do both roles as well as men can.

But the experimental nature of the film's production and distribution does not extend to its treatment of gender or other ideas about power. Most of the climbers are professional, from the United States, Spain, Mexico, Finland, and the United Kingdom—some, like Hazel Findlay or Katie Lambert, are famous. As its website description says,

Putting badass ladies front and center, this isn't a film about gender imbalance, or the sexualization of women, or what it's like to have your period at the crag ... *Pretty Strong* is a climbing film about women, by women, and for everyone. (Never Not Collective 2020)

Therefore, this is a climbing film about adventure, and not a documentary about gender. Its logic is that of substitution, where equivalence is shown as the resolution of the problem of marginalization and representation. Here the equivalence is imagined as sameness: The camera angles on the crag from above and below, shots of climbers gearing up, camping on a portaledge, or summiting are conventional—the only difference is that locations change. There are no shots, for example, of climbers at home. There is no mention of what things cost. Men appear in the film, but only in helping roles, because the film for the most part treats gender as a crux problem that has already been figured out. Everyone appears to be white. After the opening scenes, the filmmakers themselves are invisible, as they are traditionally in films of this type.

#### CHOLITAS (2019)

This 2019 documentary is about the "Cholita" climbers of Boliva, Aimara women who are Indigenous people in Bolivia and who do cooking and other support work for the climbing industry. The word Cholita is a derogatory term for them, and so they have, like the Cholita wrestlers and other Aimara women in non-traditional professions, reclaimed it for themselves, to prove in their own terms that they can do anything they want, including wearing their own Indigenous clothing as they pursue passions from which they were

once excluded (Leal 2018). In the film, this group of Cholita climbers (Dora Magueño, Lidia Huayllas, Cecilia Llusco, Elena Quispe, and Liita Gonzales) decides to climb Aconcagua, the highest peak on the South American continent, where they have often done support work on expeditions.

The film, which has won several mountain film festival prizes, including the Diable D'Or prize at the International Film Festival Alpin des Diablerets in Switzerland, Best Feature at the 2020 Banff Mountain Film Festival in Canada, and the 2019 Judge's Prize at the Bilbao Mendi festival in Spain, is made by Jaime Murciago and Pablo Iraburu. It has been praised for its sensitive editing, which seeks to foreground the women on and off the peak (Rivera 2020). Since the tradition of mountain films is to show women like them as exotic background, usually at the beginning of a sequence, it is a significant intervention to foreground who these women are, and to show them taking their values and their bodies into places where they are not expected to be. *Cholitas* makes extensive use of close-up shots to do this, showing the women's faces as they struggle, and celebrate at the summit (Murciago and Iraburu 2019). The filmmakers, as is common in cinema vérité, are off-camera, but this strategy is used to make the women themselves the center of the narrative as climbers, and not just as local color or a supporting cast for the "real" climbers. When one of them, Lidia, consults a fortune teller to see if the climb is going to go well, there is a close-up of her face as she reacts negatively to the fortune teller's dire prediction. We see close-ups of women crying as they say goodbye to their families, because what they are about to do is dangerous. The voices of the women are what we hear, including Dora's explanation for climbing, which includes the problems of labor and the need to provide a better life for her daughters: "I've always worked so my daughters don't suffer what I had to go through. That's the real challenge. In the mountains I forget everything. In the mountains I'm happy."

What must be said too, is that *Cholitas* participates in the circuits of globalized filmmaking, much as Peirano describes Chilean films that "go global" in an auteur-driven festival context (39). The financing of the film includes Oxfam, a world relief organization, the equipment maker La Sportiva and the Government of Navarra in Spain, a combination of corporate and non-corporate funding quite unlike the Kickstarter funding structure of *Pretty Strong* and reflective of the Indigenous and Bolivian content of the film, which a government and a major nonprofit wished to support. The filmmakers are not, however, Aymaran and are not even from Bolivia: The presskit describes Jaime Murciago as a freelance filmmaker from Spain who read about the Cholita climbers and traveled to Bolivia to film them. Pablo Iraburu is a Basque filmmaker and producer who has worked on international distribution for his films (Murciago and Iraburu 2019). *Cholitas* is about Aymaran women and it works hard to respect what is important to the climbers, but the film remains

within the aesthetics of European documentary. It uses establishing shots of the mountains, the filmmakers are invisible behind the camera, and there is heroic music. The women are shot in a heroic mode, and the film has a happy ending (they reach the summit) and a simple moral (they can do anything).

The discourse of adventure in mountain films exists in *Cholitas* in its soaring musical score and story of overcoming odds. But the film also contests the terms in which Indigenous women are usually seen in mountain films. Unlike the Banff trailer, in *Cholitas* we see the women talking on cell phones, using technical climbing equipment together, and enjoying an airplane flight. In other words, we see them being themselves in ways which do not make use of Indigenous stereotypes that assume Indigenous people only do traditional, non-technical things. We hear their voices rather than simply see them as the mute background for other adventurers. Therefore, *Cholitas* makes use of adventure discourse not as gender's substitutions, but as a way to put Aimara women in the frame as adventurers themselves, climbing Aconcagua in the style of their choosing. The formula of *Cholitas* has been successful: It won international film awards and, as mentioned previously, is part of the Banff World Tour Coral series, but part of the reason why the film circulates well is that it is a more traditionally "global" film about minority people by filmmakers who do not share a culture with their subjects. And so, like *Pretty Strong* but for different reasons, *Cholitas* is a small step for the representation of female climbers on the festival circuit, not a large one.

#### CONCLUSION

What then can be said about the state of festival-driven climbing films with women in them? Things are better than when Frohlick interviewed female festivalgoers, who lamented the lack of female representation. But the politics of the film festival circuit continue to contribute to the slow rate of change in mountaineering circles, where a very narrow idea of white masculine heroism persists and works to resist many kinds of difference, even as it slowly becomes more diverse. The festival distribution and audience systems mean that the discourse of adventure remains the primary way to tell stories, and that the logic of substitution, especially in films about traditional or big wall climbing, occurs at the level of style in filmmaking as well as climbing. The female bodies we see in *Pretty Strong* are strong, and so they conform to the stereotypical association of male climbing bodies with strength. Even in *Cholitas*, with its climbers occupying the center of the frame and not the exotic margins, the heroic mode is simply transferred onto the bodies of the Aimara climbers. Some climbing narratives are challenged in both films, but the discourse of adventure, performed for festival audiences, is still with us. Mountain film festivals therefore both invite and close down the possibility of difference, at

least, for now foregrounding enjoyment and adventure, while harder questions about the terms of gender representation and film production by and for women remain.

## NOTE

1. For a more in-depth discussion of substitution and sovereignty, see *False Summit*, 34–40.

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