

## **Embodied Causes: Climbing, Charity and ‘Celanthropy’**

This article investigates women’s involvement in the emergence of the charity climbing expedition. It maps key selective historical developments in the evolution of humanitarian, philanthropic and charitable works involving the climbing community from the 1960s to the present and the formation of the ‘climbing-charity-corporate-complex’. The special focus is on the evolution of the climber as ‘celanthropist’ (Rojek, 2014) – individuals that have come to public prominence on behalf of charitable causes through brand endorsement and philanthropic activism. By focusing on a range of prominent British women who have climbed Everest, including Rebecca Stephens, Annabelle Bond and retired Olympic cyclist Victoria Pendleton, the paper reveals the forms of emotional and embodied labour that have been essential to their ability to climb for a cause and their subsequent heroic reception as celanthropists. Their cases raise important questions concerning the gendering of ‘physical philanthropy’ and the nature of post-feminism in sport in its treatment of female individualism and the historically resilient ambivalences afforded to women’s climbing achievements.

**Keywords:** high-altitude mountaineering; celebrity; charity; post-feminism; Everest

## Introduction

A revised history of mountaineering needs to account of a keynote cultural development over the last twenty years: the rise of the celebrity-fronted charity expedition. There has been a substantial range of research on the celebrity-charity nexus over the last decade, particularly in the field of international development and humanitarianism.<sup>1</sup> Signature events such as Band Aid (1984), Live Aid (1985), Sport Aid (1986) and Live 8 (2007) remain important episodes in the evolution of humanitarianism and charitable fundraising. Andrew Jones has argued that Band Aid was historically significant for both reflecting and reinforcing a shift in the legitimacy for charity and welfare, from state-led welfare solutions towards more individualised and market-driven forms of action articulated through the realms of consumption and mass culture. Yet, viewed from a longer perspective, these initiatives were part of a steadily expanding series of humanitarian causes and interventions that had gathered pace in the post-war period, with westerners extending moral responsibility for the lives of the desperate and unfortunate in the global South, with events and forms of voluntary action designed to fundraise and maximise attention to pressing international causes.<sup>2</sup> Whilst the use of celebrities in fundraising and the marketing of charitable campaigns and causes is far from new, a more recent departure has been an upsurge in celebrity fundraising activities in extreme locations and undertaking 'life-or-death' physical trials.<sup>3</sup> These televised events, suggest Lim and Moufahim, amount to 'spectacularised suffering' and the use of visceral images of suffering celebrities, they argue, has banalised charitable causes almost to the point where sole attention rests on the celebrity and the commodified charity journey itself. However, other conclusions have been reached, for example, noting the symbiotic role that celebrities play in the strategies of fundraisers who use such events to elicit emotions as powerful tools to secure donations or participation.<sup>4</sup>

Although the relationship between charity and sport has been explored in other contexts, particularly running<sup>5</sup> where prominent Canadian athletes such as Terry Fox and Rick Hansen have raised money and awareness for cancer research charities and people with disabilities through long-distance feats of endurance<sup>6</sup>, there has been scant academic commentary on charity-branded extreme physical challenges in mountain environments and no coverage of women's particular involvement in the emergence of 'celebrity-suffering' in the mountains. This is despite the presence of flags bearing charity logos now regularly planted into the summit of Everest<sup>7</sup>, and the commodification of Kilimanjaro as the mountain of choice for charity-motivated climbers and trekkers.<sup>8</sup> Given the importance of charitable sponsorship, fundraising and promotion to the evolving business history of climbing<sup>9</sup>, the development of global mountaineering tourism and the commodification of high-altitude mountains, this is a curious state of affairs.

This paper extends the empirical terrain both of fundraising celebrities and the history of climbing by giving close attention to the rise of 'celanthropist' climbers. The term 'celanthropist', or celebrity philanthropist – was coined by sociologist Chris Rojek, to capture the forms of brand endorsement and charitable activism of the famous, and by which we, as the ordinary public, are encouraged to record an *emotional response* through consuming their compassion and caring and a *financial response*, through forms of donation and giving to the causes being promoted.<sup>10</sup> Rojek positions the 'celanthropist' as part of 'Big Citizen' solutions for welfare, reinforcing a view of a historical disjuncture between state-led welfare solutions and the role of private individuals and civil society organisations in purporting to offer state-less solutions to world ills. Specifically, the focus of the paper is upon one facet of the historical emergence of the celanthropist; the involvement of women climbers and female celebrity climbing novices who have combined the physical challenge of navigating high-altitude mountain terrain with a promotional strategy that uses their

expedition narrative and brand power to raise awareness of charitable causes. The focus is provided by the theme of the special issue, but also derives from a longstanding interest in the gendering of the heroic in British mountaineering, and the mediatisation of the physical deeds and emotional labour of women climbers. I have argued that despite the growth of women's climbing achievements at high-altitude the performances have been subject to intense public scrutiny and have been framed by the media in ways that establish ambivalent sets of cultural attitudes; celebrating mountaineering desires on the one hand, but also - through dominant discourses about femininity, motherhood and risk - erecting behavioural expectations that work to challenge the agency and legitimacy of women in the mountains.<sup>11</sup> The rise of 'celanthropy' in high-altitude climbing, its attendant mediatisation, and the corporate and philanthropic activisms being exercised by women climbers provides an opportunity to revisit this thesis.

In the following sections, I map the historical development of climbing and charity and then focus on specific illustrative examples of female climbing celanthropists. The discussion is chronologically ordered and covers different types of celebrity activism. What is offered here is a schematic historical mapping of moments and phases to help guide the historiography in this area. Philanthropic activity spans a range of causes and actions that encompasses anything from fundraising initiatives to media campaigns that seek to raise public awareness of a pressing social issue. Each initiative emerges at its own conjuncture, with a distinct trajectory and defining characteristics and involving both men and women and climbing combinations of different genders. Without in-depth historical study the analysis can only be partial and speculative. However, three phases are identified here. The first phase provides the necessary contextualisation for women's later involvement and includes commentary on the involvement of already well-known and established male climbers in humanitarian social entrepreneurship and advocacy. The proceeding section reveals these

early pioneers. The second phase sees the emergence of relative climbing novices whose corporate-backed climbing achievements were linked to a charitable cause or chosen beneficiary. British Everest summiteers Rebecca Stephens and Annabelle Bond are discussed. The third phase is the rise of charity-oriented and celebrity-fronted televised climbing expeditions in the first two decades of the new millennium. An overview is provided of prominent examples from the UK, with close consideration given to the ‘spectacularised suffering’ of retired Olympic cyclist Victoria Pendleton who in 2018 made an attempt to ascend Everest to raise awareness of the work of the British Red Cross. The paper’s primary analytical contribution is the consideration of the gendered politics and potential ambivalences that have emerged from the ‘celebrification of emotion’ and physical philanthropy exercised by women in mountainous environments and this is returned to in the conclusion.

### **Climbers and humanitarianism**

An early pioneer was Sir Edmund Hillary, remembered not only for being the first to summit Everest, but whose humanitarian efforts spanned four decades and delivered crucial forms of development and infrastructure in Nepal. Hillary helped to deliver over 30 schools, two hospitals, twelve medical clinics and two airstrips to the impoverished Nepalese people. These efforts commenced in 1961 and continued through the work of the Himalayan Trust, a charity founded in New Zealand the preceding year which was established to improve the health, education and general wellbeing of people living in the Solukhumbu district.<sup>12</sup> Hillary was prouder of these achievements than his celebrity status, once declaring: ‘I don’t know if I particularly want to be remembered for anything. I have enjoyed great satisfaction from my

climb of Everest and my trips to the poles. But there's no doubt, either, that my most worthwhile things have been the building of schools and medical clinics. That has given me more satisfaction than a footprint on a mountain.'<sup>13</sup> Many trekkers and climbers have been moved by the plight of Nepal's hill people. Doug Scott, the first Englishman to summit Everest in 1975, established Community Action Nepal (CAN) in order to help local inhabitants.<sup>14</sup> This followed his harrowing ordeal on 'The Ogre' (Baintha Brakk, 7,285m) in 1977 in which Scott broke both legs but was rescued by people of the village of Askole in the Shigar Valley of Pakistan, the final human settlement before the high Karakoram are reached.<sup>15</sup> CAN has helped to pipe fresh springwater into the village, with help from the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, and Scott has used his high profile to raise money for further development projects, including schools, health posts and porter shelters, as well as pipes for clean water.<sup>16</sup>

Raising money for Askole was one of the projects supported by the 1991 'Climb for the World' initiative. This was led by Edwin [Ed] Drummond and involved Doug Scott leading a climb of The Eiger. Scott urged that 'outdoor people should look beyond their immediate concerns to help those less fortunate than themselves.'<sup>17</sup> 'Climb for the World' was sponsored by the United Nations and was an exercise in internationalism. The hope was for thousands of people across the globe to become involved by reaching their local hilltops to raise money for UN environment programmes. This was achieved, in places, through the involvement of Scout groups, local UN associations, amongst others.<sup>18</sup> In Britain, on 21-22 September 1991 a reputed 50,000 people were involved, with 600 designated hilltops used as summit locations for successful climbers who had their 'World Passports' duly stamped; a recognition of their achievement.<sup>19</sup> On Mt Elbruz in the Caucasus, four adults with learning disabilities attempted an ascent of the 18,000 foot summit with the charity Mencap.<sup>20</sup> The centrepiece, however, was a multiple ascent of The Eiger in Switzerland with the aim that a

dozen climbers, both men and women, would converge on the summit from routes covering the main compass points. Forty-three climbers, able and disabled and representing every continent, converged on the summit, including Rebecca Stephens (see below) and John Dove, accompanied by Doug Scott, who was 'Blind Representative of the World's Unadvantaged'.<sup>21</sup> 'Climb for the World' was touted as the biggest international fund-raising event since Band Aid<sup>22</sup>, and was to be the first of an annual series of World Aid events, to coincide with the UN International Day of Peace (18 September).<sup>23</sup> Climbers reached the summit, but the enterprise was a financial failure<sup>24</sup> and its success was deemed more as symbolic in spreading a consciousness of a shared planetary destiny.<sup>25</sup> Questions were asked about the amateurish organisation, lack of media coverage and the tendency to report on The Eiger at the expense of the local, less spectacular, charitable achievements. There was a suspicion too that it was a political stunt and some climbers hesitated to be involved, preferring not to mix sport and politics.<sup>26</sup>

'Climb for the World' was the brainchild of Britons Edwin Drummond and Michael Hollingsworth. Drummond had earned a reputation as a climber-protestor who championed a range of social and political causes through stunts such as climbing Nelson's Column to protest apartheid in 1978, and the Statue of Liberty, to express solidarity with the civil rights movement.<sup>27</sup> In 1992 'Climb for the World' returned, this time sponsored by the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF). Plans were made for willing members of the public to make ascents of peaks around Britain in order to raise money and awareness for the developing world to create a 'network of concern' for environmental and human rights. Drummond and Tess Burrows climbed the West Face of Sugar Loaf mountain in Rio de Janeiro – to coincide with the Earth Summit - and unfurled a banner which read 'Climb for the World – Help Street Children'. Their 11-day vigil on Sugar Loaf was designed to draw attention to the plight of Rio's street children.<sup>28</sup>

The 'Climb for the World' events straddled activism that attempted to unite climbing on behalf of humanitarian causes, mobilising responsibility and support for specific social and environmental issues, with targeted forms of climbing-as-resistance. The events were important for constructing new symbolic connections between mountains and causes, new embodied causes, that displaced the ideology of state nationalism for an internationalist politics. The focus in this conjuncture of charity and climbing is less upon the individual climbers per se than on the media coverage generated: the climber is servant to the message and the 'projects' emerge from private actions, from civil society, eventually garnering support from (non)governmental organisations and business. Unlike other forms of celebrity philanthropic activism<sup>29</sup>, this is not about a heightened status for the individuals involved nor a culture of personal display central to the fashioning of fame but the generation of meaningful connection and collaborative action on behalf of a cause.

The year 1991 seems to be a signal point for the birth of the charity-climbing relationship. This was the year when the first fundraising 'stair climb' of Toronto's CN Tower was held (in aid of WWF) and was also the year when the first acknowledged climb of Everest for a charitable cause was mounted. 'The Climb for Hope' was a Canadian expedition, led by Peter Austen, and supported by the Canadian Rett Syndrome Association (CRSA) which used the climb to raise awareness of this neurological disease.<sup>30</sup> The team attempted Everest in a particularly difficult year and managed to reach 26,000 feet but were eventually repulsed by raging jet-stream winds. Not reaching the summit, Austen writes, 'was merely a symbol for the continuing struggle to find a cure for the Rett Syndrome.'<sup>31</sup> Two applications to join the team were received from women, out of two hundred received from interested participants across North America, and whilst the climbing team was all-male, the expedition included a Canadian woman, Hilda Reimer, as cook.<sup>32</sup>

'Climb for Hope' is important in this narrative because there are elements of what Dan Brockington calls the 'celebrity-charity-corporate complex' that are beginning to coalesce; a web of sophisticated organisational relationships between development actors (in this case, climbers), corporate sponsors, publicity machinery, the celebrity industry and charity sectors.<sup>33</sup> The association with the CRSA was fortuitous and followed aborted attempts to gain sponsorship from (at the time) leading blue-chip companies such as Kodak, Chrysler and National Geographic, and stuttering efforts to engineer positive enthusiasm from local and national organisations.<sup>34</sup> As Thomas Barcham has shown, despite the growth of corporate sponsorship for high-altitude mountaineering from the 1970s, big name sponsors could be somewhat tentative in their support, hoping to realise the branding opportunities that came with being associated with an enduring international symbol such as Everest, but they remained wary of negative publicity should events turn sour and concerned too about the potential for poor financial return.<sup>35</sup> The 'Climb for Hope' team eventually gained modest support from corporate sponsors, including Cathay Pacific Airways, which provided free flights for the team in return for twice daily mentions of the brand via satellite relay from Everest and the display of the Cathay logo on the team's 'Everfitness Program', a scheme designed to encourage youth sport participation across Canada.<sup>36</sup> What was beginning to coalesce was a balancing of climbing goals with philanthropic motive, alongside the management of corporate interests in maximising media exposure for corporate partners. Pieces of the 'climbing-charity-corporate complex' were coming together.

### **Women on top: corporate brand endorsement and charity advocacy**

Women so far have been marginal to the story, but the situation begins to alter as we see the emergence of climbing neophytes whose corporate-backed climbing achievements

were more firmly linked to a charitable cause or chosen beneficiary. In the UK context, the first prominent example came in 1993 with the ascent of Everest by Rebecca Stephens. Stephens was the first British woman to climb Everest, doing so as part of the British 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Everest Expedition; an expedition sponsored by the packaging and logistics company DHL and which aimed to raise £1m for the Himalayan Trust.<sup>37</sup> Stephens was a financial journalist with only four years' climbing experience.<sup>38</sup> She ascended Everest in a strong year for summiting. *The Times* commented, 'She may have been the sixty second person this year, the seventeenth woman and the fifth woman that day but as the first British woman to reach the summit of Everest she looks set to become our darling.'<sup>39</sup> Yet, from a mountaineering standpoint this ascent was unremarkable and one of a very high number - 90 ascents - during the spring of 1993.<sup>40</sup> The climbing fraternity 'broadly ignored'<sup>41</sup> Stephens' achievements and offered lukewarm praise as it was felt that her choice of route to the top (following the 1953 South Col standard route) was 'easy' owing to her being part of an experienced team that helped provide support. Her use of supplementary oxygen, sherpa assistance and fixed ropes to help with difficult sections were evaluated in the same light. As such, the ascent was 'more a test of determination and stamina than climbing ability.'<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, important narrative orthodoxies of courage and perseverance were celebrated in the press coverage, with resonances to traditions of heroic white male adventuring on Everest.<sup>43</sup> *The Times* reported that 'it is often sheer grit that counts on Everest'<sup>44</sup> and Stephens was called 'gutsy and resourceful'<sup>45</sup> for being determined to complete the climb when other expedition members' efforts began to deteriorate.<sup>46</sup> The theme of endurance was repeated as an admired quality; a quality which put women on an equal footing to men.<sup>47</sup> Yet, the charitable cause was barely acknowledged in the reports, with one climbing magazine noting a 'tidal wave of hype' and publicity for DHL which almost eclipsed Stephens' fine achievement.<sup>48</sup> The summit photo showed Stephens holding

aloft a small white flag which bore the famous red logo of DHL. The ascent created a wide amount of publicity, leading to the release of a book and lucrative opportunities on the lecture and motivational speaker circuits.<sup>49</sup> Fellow climber Chris Bonington, presaging future developments, was quoted at the time that he thought Stephens might struggle to capitalise on endorsements following her success, commenting: 'If she had got out a famous lipstick on the summit she would have made lots of money. But I'm sure she didn't do that.'<sup>50</sup> Stephens has subsequently gone on to become a trustee and chair of the Himalayan Trust UK.

In 2005, the Singapore-born Brit Annabelle Bond became the fastest woman to conquer the Seven Summits. This is a climbing challenge first achieved by American businessman Richard Bass in 1985, and which includes the highest mountains on each of the seven continents: Everest (Asia), Aconcagua (South America), Denali (North America), Vinson (Antarctica), Elbrus (Europe), Kosciuszko (Australasia), and Kilimanjaro (Africa). Bond completed this challenge in 360 days and received widespread press coverage in a range of international media outlets.<sup>51</sup> On 15 May 2004 she stood at the top Everest, the fourth British woman to do so, and unfurled a flag for The Eve Appeal, a charity fighting ovarian cancer. She gave a prayer for Lone Vagn-Jensen, a family friend who had died of ovarian cancer the previous year. Bond herself had suffered a cancer scare prior to setting off for Everest. A scan showed an abnormality in her uterus during training and she had what turned out to be a benign tumour removed four weeks before the trip. She said: 'I made two decisions - that I would climb Everest irrespective of the results and that I would do everything in my power to teach women about ovarian cancer, which is a silent killer.'<sup>52</sup> Her patronage of The Eve Appeal, maintained during the Seven Summits challenge and subsequent well-publicised adventures, helped to raise over £1m for the charity and boosted its media profile. Bond was awarded an OBE in 2006 in recognition of her services to mountaineering and The Eve Appeal.<sup>53</sup>

Consistent with many attributions of heroic reputation, it was Bond's extraordinariness that was emphasised by the media. This was not only in terms of athletic prowess – setting the fastest time for a female, taking over a year off the time set by the previous record-holder - but her mediated female subjectivity as an upper-class 'British socialite' and 'It' girl', linked to eligible bachelors including Prince Andrew. Bond is the daughter of (now retired) HSBC chairman, Sir John Bond, a wealthy heiress, who possessed wrote *Hello* magazine, 'the sort of self-assurance that comes from a privileged background'.<sup>54</sup> She had ditched a high-flying career in Hong Kong real estate to take on a life of adventure; a solace, she later confided, to a failed relationship. Bond was a keen endurance runner and completed the tough MacLehose trail in Hong Kong and the Inca Trail in Peru. Her involvement in an Everest climb came about through the networks of privilege that weave together transnational financial elites, in this case a chance conversation Lady Bond, her mother, had with Chilean Banker Andronica Luksic at a party in London, mentioning her daughter was a keen climber – she had some experience climbing in New Zealand and South America – and would be keen to join the Chilean team on their 2004 Everest attempt.

Alongside her demonstrable capacities to endure, Bond also possessed another important physical attribute: beauty. It is revealing that one national newspaper, Spain's *El Mundo*, nicknamed her the Anna Kournikova of climbing.<sup>55</sup> This connection is telling. The media image of Bond reproduced many aspects of former tennis player Kournikova's positive image and heterosexual appeal.<sup>56</sup> When photographed during her Seven Summits year (2004-2005) Bond was shown not always dressed in insulated climbing gear, but frequently in full length poses that emphasised her slender tone and supermodel physique, or in close-up of her striking blue-eyes, brilliant white smile and smooth tanned complexion. In the hyper-masculine environment of high-altitude mountaineering, Bond self-deprecatingly referred to herself as the 'ditzzy blonde'<sup>57</sup>, positioned as 'out-of-place'; an interloper. She was described

by a Discovery Channel documentary - *Ultimate Survival: Everest* - that filmed her ascent of Everest, as not fitting the stereotypical image of a 'grisly Mount Everest assaulter'.<sup>58</sup> One commentator wrote: '...as dizzyingly out of place she felt on the catwalks across the icefall's crevasses, the Hollywood-polished blonde would have looked right at home on a fashion runway'.<sup>59</sup>

The intertextual meanings of the 'Bond Girl' sobriquet are not lost. We shouldn't underestimate the importance of glamour and a hero(ine)'s sexuality within British culture.<sup>60</sup> But critical feminists have argued that glamour sits uneasily with the status of sporting heroines; with women judged either to be not heroically masculine enough, or unglamorous, and so not quite feminine enough to boot.<sup>61</sup> The suggestion must be that women are expected to appear feminine in ways that preclude the heroic whereas the expectations on men are less well defined and do not preclude the cultivation of a rugged heroic style. This is where the Kournikova label is misleading. Perhaps more telling are the references Bond made to herself as a 'Bridget Jones of the Mountains'.<sup>62</sup> As sociologist Angela McRobbie and others have commented, Helen Fielding's literary creation Bridget Jones is a post-feminist icon; defined by a complex and ambiguous femaleness and femininity so that female empowerment and femininity co-exists.<sup>63</sup> Bond's social background fits well: a glamorous high-achiever, who worked in real estate, single, [at the time] childless- though searching for that elusive and satisfying lasting relationship - ill at ease with a world of patriarchal constraint, though strongly assured in her femininity. She told journalists, in a comment picked up by several newspapers and broadcasters (and echoing Bonington's prescient remark), that she applied Chanel lipstick as a way of retaining her femininity: 'you have to wear something on your lips to stop them chapping so it might as well be coloured'.<sup>64</sup> Such comments led *The Sunday Times* to note a naivety in allowing herself to be portrayed as 'the blonde who brought her lipstick to the summit of Everest'; the double-edged price of fame for maintaining

femininity.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, her Everest diary – kept as a blog on her website – bore a canny resemblance to Bridget Jones’, replete with comments on her fluctuating weight, and wild changes in tone, notably when she casually segues from recounting an evening briefing of the risk of death in high-altitude climbing, to the need to colour-coordinate her outfit for the next day’s climbing.<sup>66</sup> Her journal disrupts the hyper-masculinity of climbing as she performs an embodied female subjectivity, sharing both her mortal fears of falling into a crevasse on Everest’s Khumbu icefall and her post-feminist struggle to preserve a modicum of femininity. As Stephanie Genz notes, the post-feminist woman (PFW) is ‘both a source of confident autonomy and of disempowerment in its unstable oscillations.’ She writes:

“... the PFW navigates the conflicts between her feminist values and her feminine body, between individual and collective achievement, between professional career and personal relationship. She inhabits a nondualistic space that holds together these varied and often oppositional stances and thus, she provides multiple opportunities for female identification. The PFW wants to “have it all” as she refuses to dichotomize and choose between her public and private, feminist, and feminine identities. She rearticulates and blurs the binary distinctions between feminism and femininity, between professionalism and domesticity, refuting monolithic and homogeneous definitions of postfeminist subjectivity.”<sup>67</sup>

There are curious tensions in Annabelle Bond as a climbing celanthropist: her patronage of charitable cause is positioned from humanitarian concern, extending love and care to those close to her. That she should undergo a gynaecological cancer scare on the eve of her Everest climb is described by Bond as a part of human existence, a potential personal setback to an empowering moment, but one to be shouldered and overcome. On the mountains, as she trembles with fear and experiences moments of weakness she exposes a vulnerability and emotional side that challenges gender stereotypes that have been prevalent in the constructions of the mountaineer hero, particularly steely resolve and unfaltering willpower. At another level, Bond is conscious of her marketability, her looks, strength and uniqueness; conscious too of her professional responsibilities to corporate sponsors that subsidised the expedition and which made fundraising and advocacy possible. Her journals

reveal a shifting roster of allegiances from her corporate and charitable activisms, with sponsorship deals requiring her to take logo-emblazoned flags to mountains.<sup>68</sup> On Mount Elbrus she flies the flag of Hong Kong's Li and Fung, a supply chain management company; on Everest her main sponsor, HSBC, sees its logo also gain summit exposure and the image is reproduced in many newspaper articles that follow. Reading her journals, these endorsements are necessary evils; part of the deal. Yet, returning to Rojek's notion of the celanthropist, Bond has evidently become the 'Big Citizen', able to mobilise resources and opportunities ordinary people would find difficult to achieve, putting her confidence, looks, and social networks to good use in service of a charitable cause close to her heart. On these grounds it is an entirely defensible proposition to state that she is the archetypal post-feminist climber.

### **Celebrity, charity fundraising and 'spectacular suffering'**

Over the last decade there has been a widening roster of celebrities seeking to complete climbing challenges for charity fundraising and awareness, with women prominent among them.<sup>69</sup> In 2009 a team of British celebrities, a combination of pop stars (Alesha Dixon, Cheryl Cole, Kimberley Walsh, Gary Barlow and Ronan Keating), DJs and television presenters (Denise van Outen, Fearne Cotton, Ben Shepherd and Chris Moyles) undertook an eight-day trek to the top of Kilimanjaro, on behalf of UK charity Comic Relief. Their exploits were filmed by the BBC for a one-off documentary that aired the night before the biannual telethon called 'Kilimanjaro: The Big Red Nose Climb'.<sup>70</sup> The team, sponsored by BT, raised £3.5m for Red Nose Day and, at the time this was considered to be the highest ever amount raised for a charity expedition.<sup>71</sup> The cameras provided access to the suffering celebrity. They exposed the emotional and physical trials and shared intimate details of sickness, medical conditions and phobias. The documentary recorded pained faces scrambling up vertical rock face, with close-ups of human willpower as the climbers gritted teeth and plodded stoically onwards.<sup>72</sup> Even though the climb required military-style logistics to support the 'Kili 9' - recruiting 33 climbers to assist with the route, 100 porters to carry supplies and half a tonne

of broadcasting equipment, two doctors to assist with medical emergency, and two runners to relay film/reports down the track – it was presented as a heroic journey with the potential for death, bearing the hallmarks of modern celebrity: ‘[f]rankness, incident, emergency and excitement’.<sup>73</sup> The celebrities were presented as ordinary heroes with a ‘can-do’ attitude. Pop singer Cheryl Cole reflected on the physical and mental conditioning required:

“Looking back, I don’t think I appreciated just how taxing it would be. You can only prepare so much, and there’s no way of knowing what a climb like this is going to do to you until you’re actually out there and going through it. I felt like I was pretty fit anyway because I’d been busy with *Girls Aloud*. We’d been promoting the new album, *Out of Control*, and not long before I was due to go to Tanzania we performed at the Brits so I was in really good spirits. I definitely felt strong enough and fit enough for Kilimanjaro.”<sup>74</sup>

The emotional labour of the celebrity wasn’t just focused on the mountain. The trip combined humanitarian visits *and* climbing action. Three stars – all women – were profiled in the documentary visiting malaria victims. Fearne Cotton visits a hospital in Uganda and witnesses a seriously ill child convulse in a resuscitation room. Fearne passes out. Alesha Dixon visits a village potted with fresh graves; the result of a community lacking mosquito nets. Denise van Outen consoles a mother whose child died from malaria that morning. Tears are shed. In these moments of contact with the victims of malaria, the celebrities display care and compassion and the experience is converted into the emotional strength to climb onwards. With the band of celebrities nearing the summit, Cotton reflects: ‘Just meeting the people that I met in Uganda and thinking of the people and how this money is going to change their lives has definitely been helpful, I had to use that, that was my back-up, I really pulled that out of the bag when I needed to and it really helped.’ Dixon ponders: ‘Cos even walking the mountain, you know, we still have more luxuries than what they’ve got here. I

feel like if I moan on that mountain I have to slap myself around the face.’ The moving stories and images act as a resource for their philanthropic activism. Following Chouliaraki, we might class such scenes as post-humanitarian for offering an intimate connection between victim, hero and public that could translate into ethico-political action, but which also triumphs in communicating a voyeuristic altruism of the suffering celebrity, with a narrative focused upon the transformation and willpower of the celebrity self.<sup>75</sup>

Further celebrities have followed the route to Kilimanjaro. A New Zealand team completed the task in 2010 on behalf of Christian humanitarian aid organisation World Vision. In the same year MTV documented the efforts of Hollywood stars Jessica Biel and Emile Hirsch on their Kilimanjaro ‘Summit on the Summit’, led by US mountaineer Melissa Arnot, to raise awareness for clean water access.<sup>76</sup> And tennis legend Martina Navratilova was forced to abandon her efforts to climb the same mountain, on behalf of the Laureus Sport for Good Foundation, following altitude sickness, though this was completed by her teammate, former British badminton Olympic medallist Gail Emms. In the UK, Welsh comedian Rhod Gilbert tackled the mountain in 2013 to raise money for a cancer centre in Cardiff, with hand-held footage used for a one-off BBC television programme.<sup>77</sup> Alex Jones, presenter of the popular BBC evening programme *The One Show* scaled the 1,200 feet vertical Moonlight Buttress in Utah’s Zion National Park in 2014 on behalf of Sport Relief and in 2019 the BBC returned to Kilimanjaro again for Comic Relief, with celebrities that included popstars from the girl group Little Mix, and Shirley Ballas, head judge on the popular dance contest *Strictly Come Dancing*.

The most high-profile recent female climbing philanthropist has been the former world leading track cyclist Victoria Pendleton, who attempted to ascend Everest in May 2018. Her case is worthy of scrutiny as it mobilises another configuration of the celebrity climber heroic, through a public persona that operates in accordance with ideals of gendered

neoliberal individualism alongside post-feminism's affective and psychic life of pathologised vulnerability.<sup>78</sup>

In many ways Victoria Pendleton embodies a historically resilient mediated image of a sportswoman as 'highly physically skilled and (hetero)sexually attractive.'<sup>79</sup> Pendleton was a highly decorated track cyclist, winning the World Championships nine times, with two Olympic gold medals and a silver in sprint events. She was part of a highly successful series of champions produced by British Cycling. She also cultivated a glamorous image, appearing in nude and semi-nude photoshoots in men's magazines such as GQ and FHM<sup>80</sup>, and telling interviewers of the importance of her beauty and grooming rituals to her sporting performance. Frances Smith argues that Pendleton was not wholly complicit in her sexualised commodification as a sport star as she has embraced beauty and 'girliness' as a way of distancing herself from an alienating performance regimen. By telling interviewers of the importance of her beauty regime to her sporting performance, Smith argues that Pendleton was reasserting control over her body by resisting the cultural construct of the muscular female body produced by sprint cycling.<sup>81</sup> Pendleton has attracted media interest for this mixture of femininity, sexuality and sporting ambition. Following her retirement from track cycling she has indulged her penchant for glamour by competing in *Strictly Come Dancing* and advertising Pantene shampoo. However, Pendleton's choice of other brand endorsements in her post-cycling career has hinted at more complex gender positionings. In adverts for a range of vintage bicycles for Halfords, she has cultivated a wholesome girl-next-door image, pictured in pretty dresses with bikes designed for shopping not competition. These are images, argues Smith which 'reassures that despite the weight training and endurance that have secured her sporting success, she retains a "traditional" feminine appearance and aspirations.'<sup>82</sup>

The commitment to competition, training and physical hardship has also continued, seen in her progress to becoming a national hunt jockey supported by the Switching Saddles initiative sponsored by online gambling firm Betfair. This led to her competing in the Foxhunter's Chase at the Cheltenham Festival 2016. That same year she met the broadcaster and adventurer Ben Fogle at the Goodwood Festival of Speed and with support from Fogle's former Bryanston schoolfriend Princess Haya Bint al Hussein, daughter of King Hussein bin Talal of Jordan and her Anything is Possible foundation, they embarked together upon a quest for Everest for the British Red Cross to highlight the environmental challenges faced by mountainous regions.<sup>83</sup> The media response to their plans showed it was not the risks, route, technical means, or their ability that made the climb newsworthy, nor even the charitable cause, but an interest in Pendleton's post-Olympic transition and plans for motherhood. Pendleton's choice to climb was discussed in the shadow of traditional homemaking. Pendleton's riposte to *The Daily Telegraph* is given below:

“I think that guilt, rightly or wrongly, would stop me doing it if I had kids. I'd probably want to go in my heart, and I'd resent the fact that I couldn't. As a female of a certain age, there's one thing I should be doing, apparently, and that's staying home and having kids. I feel an immense pressure. But if I'm being true to myself right now, I'm not there yet and maybe I never will be. I want to be that person who goes, 'no I don't conform'. I'm giving you another option here, why don't you do what I do instead?”<sup>84</sup>

To be fair, a similar line of inquiry was pursued with Fogle, a father of two, who spoke of his difficulties reconciling a past adventurous life with a burning desire to conquer Everest. He wished his children to see him as a man of action, having rowed across the Atlantic and having walked across Antarctica to the South Pole prior to their birth.

The climb occurred in the pre-monsoon season in May 2018 and a documentary, 'The Challenge: Everest' was filmed for CNN which aired in three 30 minute episodes.<sup>85</sup> The coverage of the climb followed a formulaic narrative of celebrities in televised charity campaigns, adopting an orthodox template of the heroic journey as a series of challenges of endurance, physical hardship and survival, requiring bravery and a battle with Nature as the hostile opponent, with the journey bookended by scenes of departure from and return to home.<sup>86</sup> The first episode sees the intrepid duo visiting medical facilities in Nepal that have benefited from Red Cross monies and occasional flashes of Red Cross insignia are seen on the fleeces and jackets of Fogel and Pendleton throughout the programme, but in the final episode the charity is not mentioned. The celebrity journey takes centre stage.

With assistance from veteran British Everester Kenton Cool, the team make steady progress. The second programme captures Pendleton, Fogle and Cool in moments of emotional distress throughout the journey. Cool is moved to tears when visiting the Climbers' Memorial on the approach to Base Camp, telling the camera 'for me it actually represents how fragile the thing we're embarking upon is'. He informs the audience of the tragic loss of leading climbers who have died on Everest, raising the spectre of the jeopardy of the mission. Fogle sobs frequently when thinking of his children back home. An introspective Pendleton stresses the uncanny emotional atmosphere of base camp, which reminds her of the Olympic Village. The climbers cross the terrifying Khumbu Icefall with an eye on the prize ahead. Pendleton reaches the mountain's second base camp at 21,000 feet but failed to get higher. Very low readings of oxygen saturation lead to Pendleton's evacuation from the mountain as advised by experts in high-altitude sickness in order to prevent a deadly cerebral oedema. Fogel reminded the audience of the risks: 'Anything lower than 95% oxygen you would probably find yourself in A&E.'<sup>87</sup> Victoria registered a 21% - that's nearly dead. To see her in such a state was something I never wanted to experience.' This was celebrity suffering par

excellence. An upset and tearful Pendleton breaks down into the arms of guide Kenton Cool, who gently calls time on her efforts. It is a moment of realisation that her post-Olympic transition involves confronting the limits of her ageing body. She tells us: ‘The first time in my life my body is failing me. I’ve always felt so strong and capable and now I’m feeling, you know. It’s difficult to accept your limits, isn’t it? I used to feel like a superhero’. A self-sacrificial narrative also emerges as she admits to Fogle she is a liability to the team and to his chance of summiting and so regretfully bows out. Her vulnerabilities are laid bare. In the final episode Fogle makes the ascent, overcoming repeated failures of his oxygen regulator. Blubbering into the camera at the summit he tells us to find our own Everests: ‘This is for all those people who were told they couldn’t, they wouldn’t, they shouldn’t’.<sup>88</sup>

Pendleton received praise for her achievements. She was seen as an unfortunate victim of her own physiology, unlucky in her attempt as her sprinter’s body could not fully acclimatise and cope with the harsh conditions.<sup>89</sup> It was later reported that Pendleton had been diagnosed with depression following the climb, feeling ‘psychologically and physiologically damaged’ and ‘so overwhelmed with illness.’<sup>90</sup> Her poor health was catalysed by hypoxia. She won praise for her candour, showing some of the vulnerabilities and mental challenges ex-sporting champions go through.<sup>91</sup> Following Everest, Pendleton appeared at an event for Head’s Together, a mental health charity, and spoke candidly about her experiences with depression, anxiety and previous history of self-harm, revealing during her cycling career how coaches advised her to keep her conditions a secret while she was training for the Olympics.<sup>92</sup> She later confided that she contemplated suicide following Everest. Her process of recovery has included working with The Wave Project, a UK-based charity that uses surfing as a form of therapy and she has subsequently become patron of the charity. But she has not escaped the craving for new physical challenges that has haunted the lives of other retired sportspeople. A self-confessed adrenaline-junkie<sup>93</sup>, the final scenes of

‘The Challenge: Everest’ showed her training to become a boxer, eyes fixed with determination, and it was reported in January 2019 that she had agreed to take part in a series of Channel 4’s ‘SAS: Who Dares Wins’, in which ex-Special Forces soldiers recreate the physical and psychological trials of the SAS’s secret selection process.<sup>94</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Climbers have played a role in promoting charitable causes, philanthropy and fundraising and phases of charitable activism have been mapped. Through the individuals and campaigns discussed it is possible to detect a coalescence of the ‘climbing-charity-corporate-complex’ over time, through the pioneering work of both men and women, and the opportunities afforded for women to take part in high-altitude climbing and to promote charitable causes. Though in many of the cases discussed the media interest in their ‘embodied causes’ seems weak, and in some instances being a good corporate ambassador has trumped the charity marketing potential, we should not underestimate the significance of the exposure given to charities by gaining the all-important summit photo, with new intertextual meanings forged that align the self-confident authority of women climbers and the determination to raise a cause, with the commercial value of the mountain icon. Admittedly, the examples mainly derive from the UK and anglophone context and further historical work is needed in order to fill in the gaps and for further comparative contextualisation. There are numerous non-famous individuals who have gone to mountains on behalf of charitable causes, though this phenomenon has not been subject to scrutiny by either sport sociologists or historians. Thoughtful questions need to be raised about the political economy of charitable climbs and treks and their role in the commodification of mountains. The business history of mountaineering needs to be updated in order to account

for supply-side growth in the range of companies and organisations involved in facilitating these ventures, including the role of trusts and foundations in the non-profit sector. Exposés are required too of the market demand from individuals of all walks of life, including women, whose desires to challenge themselves physically, psychologically and emotionally in mountain adventure align with all kinds of causes, personal and professional, of which this paper has barely scratched. Fresh questions can then be asked about the charity fields being supported by men and women climbers and trekkers, and whether it is possible to detect a gendered pattern of concern.

Celebrities have played their part in the promotion of charities and this has continued through adventure in mountainous environments. Even though the impacts and strategic use of celebrities in communicating and marketing charities' values and missions has been criticised and there are strong signs here that the celebrity cause is tangential to other motivations and narratives that compete for attention<sup>95</sup>, this does not diminish the fact that the 'physical philanthropy' exercised by climbing novices, what I term 'embodied causes', has become a prominent means through which the ordinary British public have engaged with mountains and mountain climbing. It has also been a unique hook needed for the press to take an interest in women's climbing achievements over the last decade and a half and one that positively disrupts more tragic episodes where risk discourses have been mobilised to undermine the legitimacy of women climbers to be undertaking high-altitude adventure.<sup>96</sup> The focus on women raises important questions about the gender roles being performed and the ambivalences that emerge for the public acclaim of climbing achievement when the 'celebrification of emotion' through mediated physical trials becomes a standard part of the narrative format of televised documentaries that invariably have followed the charity challenges.<sup>97</sup> This paper has revealed historically resilient ambivalences afforded to women's climbing achievements at high-altitude, affirming and extending my earlier work by

highlighting the discursive complexities and tensions that have appeared in philanthropic climbing activities involving women (and men); complexities complicated by the affective and psychic features of post-feminism in neoliberal society of the autonomous and determined woman who can seemingly ‘have it all’. The cases discussed throw light on the problematic idealisation of women’s individualism being exercised through ‘embodied causes’. Whilst women climbers have made choices seemingly without gender boundaries through moments of empowerment related to professional opportunity enabled through the social networks in which they are positioned, gender power has pervaded the commodification of difference and acclaim for these climbing neophytes, as seen in the media framing of their emotional labour, physical trials and sexualised bodies. These amount to further ambivalent and complex renderings of women who mountaineer as charities scale new heights.

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Jones, ‘Band Aid Revisited: Humanitarianism, Consumption and Philanthropy in the 1980s’, *Contemporary British History* 31, no. 2 (2017): 189-209.

<sup>3</sup> Ming Lim and Mona Moufahim ‘The Spectacularization of Suffering: An Analysis of the Use of Celebrities in ‘Comic Relief’ UK’s Charity Fundraising Campaigns’, *Journal of Marketing Management* 31, nos. 5-6 (2015): 525-545.

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<sup>6</sup> Leslie Scrivener, *Terry Fox: His Story* (Toronto: McLelland & Stewart, 2000); Rick Hansen and Jim Taylor, *Rick Hansen: Man in Motion* (Vancouver and Toronto: D&M Publishers, 2011).

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- <sup>17</sup> Joanna Merz, 'The Environment in 1991', *Alpine Journal* 97 (1992): 4-5.
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- <sup>19</sup> Rebecca Stephens, 'Tea & Biscuits on Top of the Eiger', *The Association of British Members of the Swiss Alpine Club Journal*, 1992, 12-13.
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- <sup>22</sup> David Rose, 'Thousands Back World Climb', *The Observer*, September 8, 1991.
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- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.
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- <sup>53</sup> O.B.E., or Officer of the Order of the British Empire, was established by the United Kingdom in 1917 as an award recognising contributions to public service.
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- <sup>68</sup> Annabelle Bond, 'Seven Summit Journals', <http://www.annabellebond.com> (accessed June 8, 2008; site now discontinued).
- <sup>69</sup> The *Look to the Stars* website is a comprehensive listing of celebrities involved in philanthropic giving and supporting various charitable causes. It includes information on physical challenges undertaken. <https://www.looktothestars.org>
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- <sup>80</sup> GQ, formerly *Gentleman's Quarterly*, is an international monthly men's magazine; FHM, or *For Him Magazine*, is a men's lifestyle magazine, owned by the Bauer Media Group.
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