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BEYOND CONQUEST: DECOLONIZING ADVENTURE SPORTS THROUGH OUTDOOR COUNTERSTORIES

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Abstract:
This paper explores decolonial outdoor counterstories written by minoritized adventure athletes, focusing particularly on Indigenous voices within the sports of rock climbing, (ski) mountaineering, highlining, and, marginally, white-water kayaking. Traditional adventure narratives have long been dominated by white, masculine figures who glorify conquest, reinforcing patriarchal, colonial, and anthropocentric ideas that marginalize diverse perspectives and contribute to environmental degradation. In contrast, contemporary decolonial counterstories challenge these exclusionary notions, reclaiming outdoor spaces and redefining success not as domination, but as a deep connection with nature, community, and personal well-being. By presenting Indigenous and other marginalized perspectives, these narratives critique and subvert Western colonial ideologies, promoting a more inclusive and ecologically mindful approach to outdoor sports. This paper argues that these counterstories contribute to the creation of a collective decolonial outdoor counternarrative that could inspire pro-environmental actions among adventure athletes who experience climate anxiety. The analysis highlights how these athletes are not only reshaping the cultural landscape of outdoor sports but also advocating for a shift from competitive dominance to collaborative coexistence, thereby supporting a more equitable and sustainable interaction with the natural world.

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Introduction

Writing about adventure and expeditions has always been intrinsic to the activities of Western adventure athletes. Traditional adventure narratives have shaped the outdoor sports and what constitutes success. Due to the long history of Western patriarchal domination, these narratives have excluded diverse voices, reinforcing narrow ideas of heroism dominated by white, masculine figures who have long predominated as cultural producers in the outdoor spaces.[1] By glorifying the trope of a strong, white male mountaineer who conquers the mountain, conventional adventure narratives perpetuate harmful ideas about masculinity, domination, and conquest. Stories of heroic deeds and mastery over oneself, others, and nature continue to be powerful in outdoor sports communities today, excluding many minoritized bodies, perpetuating the neocolonial patriarchal status quo, and upholding anthropocentric ideas about human place in nature.

Currently, via decolonial outdoor activism, minoritized athletes are reappropriating spaces that have been stolen, colonized, and commodified, challenging settler colonialism, patriarchy, and white and human supremacy. Their written, oral, visual, and embodied counterstories challenge the narrow ideas of belonging and what constitutes success in outdoor spaces. These modes of resistance range from written memoirs to spoken podcasts, which provide a modern platform to nourish the Indigenous oral tradition, to instagram accounts that create global networks of solidarity using the power of storytelling, to decolonial outdoor artivist photos and videos that effectively combine the art form with the outdoors to spread the activist decolonial message.

This paper will analyze selected written contemporary outdoor counterstories by minoritized athletes to show how they challenge the dominant notions about nature, and who belongs in it. It will explore how they contest Western anthropocentric narratives that perpetuate environmental destruction by presenting Indigenous perspectives on the outdoors and nature. The paper will

[1] Julie Rak, *False Summit: Gender in Mountaineering Nonfiction* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 2021), 5.

argue that these counterstories can contribute to the creation of a decolonial outdoor counternarrative which sparks pro-environmental action among adventure athletes who experience climate anxiety through their sports.

Nonetheless, a framework for decolonizing outdoor sports involves shifting the focus from individual connection to nature to a collective, justice-centered approach that respects Indigenous sovereignty, authority, and cultural heritage. By emphasizing these principles, outdoor sports can become a platform for genuine allyship and transformation, breaking away from colonial legacies to build relationships that honor the land and its original stewards. Decolonial outdoor counterstories can be the first step towards the creation of a decolonial outdoor counternarrative.

The analyzed counterstories are written by minoritized adventure athletes, mostly Indigenous, in the closely connected outdoor adventure sports of rock climbing, (ski) mountaineering, highlining (slacklining at heights), and white-water kayaking. By examining their experiences, the paper will identify common characteristics that collectively form a counternarrative, underscoring how they challenge traditional norms and inspire a rethinking of the adventure sports landscape. These athletes often confront and redefine the boundaries of what is considered as success in their disciplines, placing higher values on inner emotions such as joy and connection, rather than on external validation and preconceived ideas of conquest. Through their engagements with environmental activism and Indigenous knowledge systems, they can play a role in fostering a more holistic understanding of the human place in nature. The paper will thus demonstrate how these decolonial counterstories challenge dominant discourses and reshape the narrative around adventure sports. As such, they offer transformative visions for the future of outdoor sports and environmental stewardship, urging a shift from competitive dominance to collaborative coexistence, promoting a more equitable and ecologically conscious approach to exploring and preserving the natural world.

Geographically, this paper is predominantly, but not exclusively, located on Turtle Island, i.e., in the settler-colonial nations of United States and Canada as the primary context for examining the decolonial potential of outdoor counternarrative. This focus is not only because, at least in contemporary times, "North America is the home of the extreme sport phenomena... the spiritual base of many lifestyle sports," but also due to the recent surge in outdoor activism.[2]

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[2] Belinda Wheaton, "Introducing the Consumption and Representation of Lifestyle Sports," *Sport in Society* 13, no. 7/8 (September–October 2010): 1057, doi: 10.1080/17430431003779965.

Through inclusive initiatives such as Natives Outdoors, Climbers of Color, and women-only gatherings and expeditions, adventure athletes are actively diversifying adventure sports on Turtle Island and beyond, reappropriating spaces that were stolen, colonized, and commodified, thereby challenging settler colonialism, patriarchy, and white and human supremacy.

Decolonial Outdoor Counternarrative

Following decolonial scholars, such as Haunani-Kay Trask, Noelani Goodyear-Kaʻōpua, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, decolonization involves dismantling the structures of power and knowledge established by colonialism and reclaiming Indigenous sovereignty and epistemologies.[3] Trask emphasizes the political struggle for Indigenous rights and self-determination, focusing on the historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism on Native Hawai'ian lands and people.[4] Goodyear-Kaʻōpua expands on this by highlighting the importance of revitalizing Indigenous practices, languages, and governance systems as essential components of decolonization.[5] Decolonization is not just about rejecting colonial impositions but also about reasserting and practicing Indigenous ways of being and knowing in a modern context.

Understanding decolonization as a framework provides a foundation for exploring how counternarrative can support these efforts. Following the critical race studies scholar Benjamin Blaisdell, i understand counternarrative as a proactive practice that can inspire further activism and societal change. Blaisdell differentiates between a counterstory – individual stories that contrast with dominant narratives – and a counternarrative, which he defines as a "methodology, of which individual counterstories can be a part."[6] As a practice, it involves centering minoritized perspectives and epistemologies in one's everyday life.

Decolonial outdoor counternarrative thus entails actively working towards decolonization in outdoor spaces, a practice that can be undertaken by anyone, regardless of their identity. As a white climber, highliner, and scholar, I can

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[3] Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization, Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40, doi: 10.25058/20112742.n38.04.

[4] Haunani-Kay Trask, *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 1–20.

[5] Noelani Goodyear-Kaʻōpua, *The Seeds We Planted: Portraits of a Native Hawai'ian Charter School* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 3–25.

[6] Benjamin Blaisdell, "Counternarrative as Strategy: Embedding Critical Race Theory to Develop an Antiracist School Identity," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 36, no. 8 (2023): 1559, doi: 10.1080/09518398.2021.1942299.

engage in pursuing a decolonial counternarrative by following lessons learned from individual counterstories told by Indigenous and other minoritized peoples within the outdoor community. While I can tell counterstories about my experience as a woman in outdoor spaces, I must also acknowledge the privileges I possess from other aspects of my identity.

The first step toward creating a decolonial counternarrative in outdoor sports thus lies in actively subverting or challenging traditional colonial narratives – whether these are propagated through writing, film, or other forms of storytelling. By disrupting traditional colonial narratives, counternarrative creates space for stories rooted in relationality, respect, and Indigenous ways of knowing, moving away from conquest toward kinship. This paper will thus examine a selection of contemporary counterstories that reframe human relationships with the land and nature in ways that resist the colonial impulse and open pathways to decolonial practices.

The selection of counterstories explored here is motivated by several factors: the background of the authors – most, though not all, of whom are Indigenous; the contemporary context in which they are written; and the types of counternarratives they construct. Among these is *Flow: Women's Counternarratives from Rivers, Rock, and Sky*, a forthcoming collection that brings together voices working to redefine outdoor engagement through culturally and ecologically informed perspectives. Through analyzing these stories, this paper will illuminate how contemporary counterstories could contribute to decolonization, moving beyond critique to embody and explore relational, reciprocal, and sovereignty-respecting approaches to land and outdoor engagement.

However, a decolonial approach in this context cannot rely solely on promoting a connection to nature or wilderness, as William Cronon cautioned in his critique of the American wilderness ideal.[7] Cronon highlighted that the concept of wilderness, as celebrated in Western thought, often reinforces a colonial mindset by positioning nature as an uninhabited, pristine space separate from humanity – an idea that disregards and erases Indigenous relationships with the land that predate colonial interference. This idealized view not only excludes Indigenous histories and presence but also romanticizes a "return" to wilderness that aligns more closely with settler nostalgia than with genuine respect for Indigenous stewardship and sovereignty.

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[7] William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995), 69–90.

To be considered part of a decolonial counternarrative, counterstories must go beyond advocating for environmental connection. They should engage with a broader decolonial vision that upholds Indigenous governance, sovereignty, and relational epistemologies. Such stories challenge rather than replicate colonial narratives, recognizing that true decolonization in outdoor sports involves disrupting long-standing frameworks that commodify nature and ignore Indigenous land rights. This involves rethinking the language, images, tropes, and ideologies that have historically defined outdoor sports and addressing who is centered, whose knowledge is valued, and whose voices lead the movement, especially since non-white bodies have historically been excluded from both outdoor sports and environmentalism despite being most affected by environmental injustices.

Sarah Jaquette Ray's work, particularly in *The Ecological Other: Environmental Exclusion in American Culture* (2017), delves into how outdoor recreation and environmentalism intersect with issues of race, class, and ability in the U.S. context. Ray examines how environmental discourses and practices in outdoor sports often exclude marginalized communities, especially those affected by environmental injustices. She argues that a narrative of environmental purity and a romanticized wilderness often ignores or marginalizes Indigenous and non-white communities' experiences and relationships with nature, which are shaped by different socio-historical dynamics. Ray critically addresses how outdoor recreation ideals often "weaponize" nature as a tool for social control, reinforcing who belongs in these spaces and who does not, which in turn supports environmental narratives that ignore colonial histories and Indigenous sovereignty.[8]

It is thus useful to identify some of the major characteristics of "decolonial outdoor counternarrative" to help foster more conscious outdoor communities that respect both minoritized human practitioners of adventure sports and the landscapes, including their nonhuman inhabitants. To achieve this, I will examine selected counterstories written by predominantly Indigenous and female adventure athletes to identify common characteristics that collectively form a counternarrative that is inclusive and non-anthropocentric. However, the results of my findings should not be seen as a closed, definitive list but rather as an open, fluid set of some of the most prominent characteristics that I identified through a decolonial lens.

For my analysis, I have selected written counterstories from minoritized adventure athletes engaged in the so-called "extreme" sports of rock

[8] Sarah Jaquette Ray, *The Ecological Other: Environmental Exclusion in American Culture* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2013), 48–50.

climbing, (ski) mountaineering, highlining (slacklining at heights), and, marginally, white-water kayaking. This selection is motivated by my active participation in these sports, which enables me to provide a more nuanced and informed perspective as an insider. Research has shown that "insider" status can offer unique access to the lived experiences, norms, and narratives within specific communities, potentially yielding insights that are difficult for external observers to capture.[9] However, simply participating in these sports does not inherently result in the capacity to analyze them critically, especially through a decolonial lens. To build a more thorough perspective, this analysis thus draws on both lived experience and engagement with decolonial theory and scholarship. Additionally, recognizing the limitations of "insider" perspective allows for a more reflective and rigorous critique, one that actively seeks to disrupt and question the established narratives and structures within these sports.

At times, I will use the generic term "climbing" to refer to both rock climbing and mountaineering. Rock climbing refers to the sport of ascending rocks, usually with the aid of ropes and specialized equipment. Mountaineering involves the ascent of mountains and combines hiking, rock climbing, ice climbing, and sometimes skiing, often at high altitudes and over multi-day expeditions, and navigating a variety of terrains and weather conditions. Ski mountaineering involves the ascent and descent of mountains on skis. While both rock climbing and mountaineering share common elements and skills, their contexts and specific challenges can differ significantly. When relevant, I will clearly differentiate between the two.

The balance sport of highlining has its roots in rock climbing. It is a subdiscipline of slacklining practiced at great heights, where participants walk, balance, or perform tricks on a flat, stretchy, one-inch-wide nylon or polyester webbing anchored between two sturdy points, such as trees, rocks, or buildings. Originating in the 1960s among Ahwahnee (i.e. California's Yosemite Valley's) climbers, highlining requires not only physical skill but also mental fortitude and trust in one's gear and teammates. Although the sport involves some risks, especially during the rigging process, it is otherwise relatively safe compared to mountaineering or white-water kayaking.

White-water kayaking involves navigating a kayak through rivers with rapid currents and turbulent waters. It demands physical strength, precise control, and an understanding of river dynamics as kayakers tackle varying levels of rapids,

[9] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2012).

classified by their difficulty and risk, from easy Class I to extremely challenging and dangerous Class V.

All of the above activities fall under the category of adventure sports. They are also often labeled as "extreme" sports or risk sports due to their inherent dangers. However, both practitioners and researchers often prefer other terms, such as "alternative" or "lifestyle sports," which better reflect the cultural and social dimensions of these activities, emphasizing their counternarrative aspects that are frequently overshadowed by sensationalized media portrayals.[10]

Sports theoretician Belinda Wheaton suggests that the term "extreme" can be misleading, as it tends to focus solely on the risk and danger involved. Instead, Wheaton argues that "extreme" can also refer to other aspects of the sport, such as the practitioners' "extreme commitment" to their activities.[11] This commitment often encompasses a deep-seated passion, a lifestyle choice, and a community-oriented ethos that contrasts with mainstream sports culture. Many researchers of lifestyle sports consider them as "sites where norms and boundaries are transgressed,"[12] thus categorizing them as counter-cultural activities. For example, Wheaton, who coined the term "lifestyle sports" in the 1990s, observes that many scholars in sports culture see "such activities as having presented an alternative and potential challenge to traditional ways of 'seeing' 'doing' and understanding sport."[13] By analyzing adventure sports through the lens of alternative or lifestyle sports, we can better appreciate the dedication, culture, and values of their practitioners, which are crucial elements of the counternarrative they represent.

In their paper, "Dancing with Nature: Rhythm and Harmony in Extreme Sport Participation," Eric Brymer and Tonia Gray explore how extreme sports participants increasingly view nature not as a force to conquer but as a partner to engage with harmoniously.[14] Instead of pursuing danger or conquest, many athletes describe these experiences as fostering deep connections with the natural environment, where risk is secondary to a sense of unity with nature. This shift

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[10] Victoria Robinson, *Everyday Masculinities and Extreme Sport: Male Identity and Rock Climbing* (Oxford: Berg, 2008), 2.

[11] Belinda Wheaton, "Introduction: Mapping the Lifestyle Sport-Scape," in *Understanding Lifestyle Sports: Consumption, Identity and Difference*, ed. Belinda Wheaton (London: Routledge, 2004), 1–28.

[12] Robinson, *Everyday Masculinities*, 1.

[13] Wheaton, "Introducing the Consumption," 1057.

[14] Eric Brymer and Tonia Gray, "Dancing with Nature: Rhythm and Harmony in Extreme Sport Participation," *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning* 9, no. 2 (2009): 135–149, doi: 10.1080/14729670903116912.

highlights a perspective in which athletes see themselves as "dancing" with natural elements, moving in sync rather than exerting dominance or control. This reframe aligns with their emphasis on flow, immersion, and a non-adversarial relationship, which contradicts the mainstream depiction of extreme sports as thrill-seeking or inherently risky endeavors.

Brymer and Gray's findings challenge the popular perception that extreme sports are motivated purely by risk-taking; instead, participants express a feeling of safety and belonging when immersed in these natural settings. They often describe nature as indifferent, a force that requires blending in rather than controlling. This interaction, metaphorically framed as a "dance," speaks to the participants' awareness of nature's power and their role within it, rather than an urge to dominate or subdue it.

However, as this paper demonstrates, the practice of adventure sports is deeply rooted in colonial histories. Their representation has been shaped by colonial discourse, and they still often perpetuate a masculinist culture and a conquest-of-nature ethos. For instance, in rock climbing, narratives frequently celebrate individuals who "conquer" challenging routes or "dominate" imposing landscapes, as seen in high-profile achievements like free soloing Yosemite's El Capitan. Such feats are often framed within language that emphasizes bravery, dominance, and the mastery of one's environment, characteristics traditionally associated with a masculinist framework. Similarly, in mountaineering, climbers often aim to "bag peaks" or "summit" as many high-altitude mountains as possible, reinforcing a goal-oriented, individualistic pursuit that sometimes overlooks the complex ecological and cultural significance of these landscapes. Even in white-water kayaking, phrases like "taming the rapids" imply a battle against nature, framing rivers as wild spaces to be subdued.

These examples illustrate how adventure sports, though evolving, often continue to reproduce a culture that privileges conquest and mastery over cooperative, place-based respect, often sidelining decolonial approaches that could offer alternative ways to engage with the land and waters on which these sports take place. Despite their counter-cultural veneer, these sports remain predominantly white, middle-class, male, and heterosexual spaces, with restricted access for minoritized peoples and other ways of being and practicing these activities. Moreover, its practitioners often perpetuate settler-colonialism by disrespecting Indigenous lands and culture, which highlights the urgent need for decolonization within these activities.[15]

[15] Robinson, *Everyday Masculinities*, 1.

Through the analysis of the selected counterstories, this paper suggests that outdoor adventure sports offer unique opportunities for decolonization due to their inherent closeness to nature. The environmental emotions experienced by practitioners – both anxiety about environmental degradation and a profound connection to nature – can serve as powerful catalysts for change. Practitioners of these sports, with their intimate relationship with natural landscapes, are well-positioned to lead the decolonization of outdoor sports and beyond. By engaging with and amplifying counterstories from Indigenous and other minoritized athletes, these communities can begin to dismantle colonial legacies and foster more inclusive and respectful outdoor practices by embodying a decolonial outdoor counternarrative.

The concept of embodiment emphasizes the interconnectedness of physical experience, identity, and place. Theoretical discussions of embodiment can be traced back to the works of scholars such as Merleau-Ponty, who highlighted the body as the primary site of experiencing and understanding the world.[16] In this context, embodiment is not merely about physical presence but encompasses a deeper awareness of how one's body interacts with and relates to the environment, culture, and community. This perspective aligns with Indigenous worldviews that emphasize relationality and kinship with the land, where bodies are seen as integral to understanding one's connection to place. By embracing embodied experiences in outdoor practices, minoritized athletes can share their lived realities and perspectives, allowing them to reclaim agency over their narratives. This reclamation is crucial for challenging hegemonic representations that often portray nature as a site for conquest rather than a sacred space of relationship and care.

Moreover, embodiment in this context also connects to movements for social justice, where physical presence and lived experience are critical to understanding systemic inequalities and colonial histories. The act of engaging with the land – whether through climbing, hiking, or other outdoor activities – can become a powerful form of resistance, fostering a sense of belonging and recognition of Indigenous knowledge systems. By centering embodiment in decolonial outdoor counternarratives, these practices not only highlight diverse ways of knowing but also create pathways for more inclusive and respectful relationships with the land and its original stewards. Through such engagement, the potential for healing and reconnection with the environment is realized, allowing for the emergence of practices that honor both individual and collective experiences rooted in place.

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[16] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962).

Colonial Adventure Narrative

Traditional adventure writing has played a significant role in shaping and perpetuating ideas of conquest, mastery, and dominance. This is most clearly visible within the context of mountaineering. Classic texts often celebrate the act of summiting as the pinnacle of achievement, framing climbing as a metaphor for human control over nature. Works such as Maurice Herzog's *Annapurna: First Conquest of an 8000-meter Peak* and *Into Thin Air* by Jon Krakauer exemplify this narrative.[17] Moreover, they have defined who belongs in the outdoor spaces, historically excluding other-than-white bodies.

Contemporary exemptions of non-traditional writing by white male athletes that challenge or expand these dominant narratives exist. For instance, Kilian Jornet, in his book *Summits of My Life*, shares his experiences not just of summiting but of deeply connecting with the landscapes he traverses, emphasizing the joy of movement and the importance of the journey rather than merely the destination.[18] Similarly, Alex Honnold's narratives, particularly in *Alone on the Wall*, while showcasing impressive climbing feats, also highlight the mental and emotional aspects of climbing, pushing against the simplistic notions of conquest.[19] Moreover, the historical practices of certain mountaineers, such as Mark Twight, reveal alternative values in climbing that transcend mere summits. Twight, known for his work in the European Alps, often chose routes for their technical challenges rather than their elevation, promoting the idea that climbing can be an artistic expression and a personal journey rather than solely a quest for summits. This ethos resonates in the rock climbing community, where many climbers prioritize the difficulty and style of ascents over reaching the top of a particular route.

Despite these examples, most of the traditional adventure memoirs celebrate conquest and individualism. In her book-length study *False Summit: Gender in Mountaineering Nonfiction*, Julie Rak conducts a detailed analysis of traditional mountaineering narratives, showing how they glorify the image of the heroic, fearless male climber, embodying physical strength, mental fortitude, and a "never give up" attitude. This portrayal has perpetuated the view that climbing is merely a masculine activity, sidelining climbers who fall outside this

[17] Maurice Herzog, *Annapurna: First Conquest of an 8000-meter Peak* (Paris: Arthaud, 1956), and Jon Krakauer, *Into Thin Air* (New York: Villard Books, 1997).

[18] Kilian Jornet, *Summits of My Life: Daring Adventures on the World's Greatest Peaks* (Boulder, CO: VeloPress, 2018).

[19] Alex Honnold and David Roberts, *Alone on the Wall* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018).

hyper-masculine mold as mere spectators or "unwanted others," invading masculine territory.

Moreover, Rak demonstrates that adventure narratives have historically been used as political and nationalistic tools. The climbing of previously unclimbed peaks has been portrayed not only as personal or scientific achievement but also as a demonstration of national prowess, cultural superiority, and symbolic authority over nature. As Rak notes, "since the eighteenth century, the act of climbing the highest mountains has played a central role in the way that much of the world has imagined conquest, human achievement, and the place of wilderness in social life."[20] This political dimension has further entrenched the idea that mountaineering is a domain of Western dominance, reinforcing a narrow and exclusionary view of success and heroism.

Traditional adventure writing has been instrumental in reinforcing these notions. Bruce Barcott notes, "mountaineering is the most literary of sports" because of its centrality in shaping and maintaining ideas about climbing, identity, and the human place in nature.[21] Writing about climbing has often emphasized themes of conquest and mastery over nature, mirroring broader societal values of individualism and domination. This literary tradition has both reflected and perpetuated Western ideals of superiority and control.

Rak further underscores the importance of narrative in defining climbers' sense of self and purpose, and in establishing the norms of a "successful" climb. Traditional Western narratives have created a skewed valuation system where "the belief that mountaineering is about reaching the highest point (and not about the experience of getting there, the difficulty of the climb, or even the identity of the climber) creates the idea of a lesser climb, or one that does not count."[22] This focus on the summit as the only true achievement has perpetuated a narrow and hierarchical understanding of success in climbing. It has fostered a dominance of certain narratives and marginalized others, reinforcing a singular vision of what constitutes an "authentic" climbing experience.

The dominance of traditional adventure narratives has rendered the experiences of other-than-white-male adventure athletes invisible, fostering the false belief that only male Western adventurers have historically participated in these pursuits. In *In Her Nature: How Women Break Boundaries in the Great Outdoors*,

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[20] Julie Rak, *False Summit: Gender in Mountaineering Nonfiction* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 2021), 5.

[21] Bruce Barcott, "Cliffhangers: The Fatal Descent of the Mountain-Climbing Memoir," *Harper's* (August 1996): 64.

[22] Rak, *False Summit*, 6.

Rachel Hewitt challenges the mistaken belief that women's involvement in outdoor sports is a fairly recent development.[23] Despite societal barriers, women have long engaged in mountaineering and other outdoor activities, though their narratives were often unpublished and hidden from the public, much like their accomplishments.

Hewitt documents numerous instances of women participating in significant mountaineering expeditions throughout history, illustrating that their contributions have been systematically underrepresented. For example, Hewitt highlights the story of Fanny Bullock Workman, an American geographer and mountaineer who, in the early twentieth century, set several women's altitude records and published detailed accounts of her climbs. Yet, despite her impressive feats, her stories were overshadowed by those of her male contemporaries.[24] Similarly, the accomplishments of women like Annie Smith Peck, an American suffragist who was part of the first expedition that summitted the northern peak of Mount Huascarán in Peru, were frequently downplayed or ignored in mainstream mountaineering literature despite fulfilling the culturally constructed standard of reaching, technically hard, summits.[25]

Hewitt addresses how these narratives were not just ignored but actively suppressed. She explores how women's mountaineering achievements were dismissed as anomalies or attributed to the assistance of male climbers, thereby reinforcing the notion that mountaineering was inherently a masculine pursuit. This historical marginalization has contributed to the persistent invisibility of women's contributions to the sport. Hence, Hewitt argues for the importance of reclaiming and celebrating these lost narratives to provide a more inclusive and accurate history of mountaineering and outdoor sports. She emphasizes that acknowledging the diverse history of these activities is crucial not only for recognizing past achievements but also for inspiring future generations of women adventurers. As she writes, "it is therefore important not to be fooled by how the *his*tory of outdoor sport has been hitherto presented. Despite persisting claims that 'few' women walked, ran, hiked or climbed, a wealth of evidence attests that the hills were alive with the sound of women."[26]

Just like Rak, Hewitt calls for the inclusion of diverse voices to challenge the entrenched norms and expand the understanding of what it means to be

[23] Rachel Hewitt, *In Her Nature*: *How Women Break Boundaries in the Great Outdoors* (London: Vintage, 2023).
[24] Hewitt, *In Her Nature*, 63–69.
[25] Ibid., 95.
[26] Ibid., 95, emphasis in original.

a successful adventure athlete. Moreover, "it is worth paying attention to the voices of these women, because they show the pleasures and pitfalls, the meanings and values, of the natural world and the capabilities of the human body, in far greater and more astonishing variety than we are used to hearing."[27] Yet, as Victoria Robinson's book-length study *Everyday Masculinities and Extreme Sport* suggests, "although many women are involved, the sport [of rock climbing] retains a particularly male image and culture."[28] Listening to diverse perspectives in outdoor sports is imperative to challenge the dominant narrative that has traditionally shaped these activities. In the era of climate change, these voices can also enrich our understanding of our place in the natural world and help instill the values needed to safeguard it.

Similarly to women, Indigenous peoples have long participated in outdoor activities, both before and after European colonization. Their engagement with the land through climbing, canoeing, kayaking, and snowshoeing is often rooted in a relationship with nature that emphasizes respect, survival, and stewardship rather than merely achieving the highest or fastest performance. Indigenous people played a key role in the mapping of the continent and acted as guides to European explorers. Many summits on the continent, including the most difficult ones, carry marks of Indigenous presence that has been omitted in traditional colonial accounts. As Whittle notes, "the erasure of Indigenous people from the history of North American mountaineering likewise supported the illusion of a terra incognita."[29] The construction of the landscape as empty and/or its inhabitants as passive has served as the main justification for colonization.[30]

Indigenous climbers have traditionally used climbing as a means of accessing sacred sites or conducting ceremonial activities rather than pursuing summit goals, reflecting a profound spiritual relationship with the landscape. For instance, in the southwestern United States, the Navajo (Diné) as well as the Hopi and Zuni peoples have historical connections with cliff dwellings and sacred rock formations. In the northwest, the Blackfeet Nation has historically used rock formations for spiritual and cultural purposes and continues to do so. Recently, the Blackfeet Nation has enforced a decades-old closure of the sacred

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[27] Ibid., 95.

[28] Robinson, *Everyday Masculinities*, 1.

[29] Joe Whittle, "Adventures on the Turtle's Back," *Alpinist*, June 13, 2018, https://alpinist.com/features/adventures-on-the-turtles-back/.

[30] Val Plumwood, "Decolonizing Relationships with Nature," In *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-Colonial Era*, ed. William M. Adams and Martin Mulligan (London: Earthscan, 2003), 51–78.

Chief Mountain used for traditional fasting rituals and home to a newly reintroduced bison population. The closure aims to protect the area, its human and nonhuman inhabitants and the preservation of cultural and spiritual practices.[31]

Similarly, Devils Tower in Wyoming, located on land traditionally inhabited by the Lakota, Cheyenne, and several other nations, is a significant site where climbing intersects with Indigenous cultural practices, prompting ongoing discussions about access and respect for its sacredness. Devils Tower attracts thousands of rock climbers each year who are leaving a significant environmental mark in the local ecosystem. Since 1995, there has been a voluntary climbing closure in June that respects Indigenous cultural and spiritual practices, particularly the Lakota Sun Dance. Despite a 75% reduction in climber traffic during this month, some climbers still ignore the ban.[32]

This disrespect from climbers reveals deeper issues related to settler-colonialism in outdoor sports. As Dustin et al. note, "the climbers' disregard for the voluntary ban during the summer solstice can be seen as an extension of a settler-colonial mindset that ignores or undermines indigenous cultural practices and beliefs."[33] Settler-colonialism is characterized by the ongoing displacement and marginalization of Indigenous peoples.[34] This is evident in the outdoor sports community when climbers prioritize their climbing goals over Indigenous cultural practices. The climbing ban at Devils Tower, which honors Indigenous ceremonies, is an essential act of respect and recognition of the sacredness of the land. Hence, the climbers' resistance to the ban underscores a failure to acknowledge this historical and cultural context, reflecting a continuation of colonial attitudes.

By disrespecting Indigenous lands, climbers are exercising their settler-colonial privilege and perpetuating the settler-colonial dynamics that have historically shaped their sport. As the climber Chris Kalman writes, "While the Oglala Lakota of the Pine Ridge Reservation are one of the most disenfranchised groups in the U.S., climbers have got to be one of the most privileged. They

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[31] Taylor Inman, "Thinking of Climbing Chief Mountain? Think Again as Blackfeet Enforcing Closure," *Hungry Horse News*, June 19, 2024, https://hungryhorsenews.com/news/2024/jun/19/blackfeet-enforcing-chief-mountain-closure-glacier-park-concurs/.

[32] "Devils Tower Voluntary June Closure: An Opportunity to Show Respect," *Access Fund*, May 2024, https://www.accessfund.org/latest-news/news-and-events/news/climbers-honor-the-june-closure-at-devils-tower.

[33] Daniel L. Dustin et al., "Cross-Cultural Claims on Devils Tower National Monument: A Case Study," *Leisure Sciences* 24, no. 1 (2002): 83, doi: 10.1080/01490400252772845.

[34] Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Settler Colonial Studies* 2, no. 1 (January 2012): 388, doi: 10.1080/2201473x.2012.10648834.

can afford to buy thousands of dollars of equipment and travel far and wide to engage in a sport that introduces them to heightened risk of injury or death."[35] Kalman's observation emphasizes that for climbers, risk is a chosen and often celebrated aspect of the sport, involving voluntary engagement with danger for personal achievement and thrill. This choice is facilitated by financial resources and mobility, underscoring a privilege not universally accessible. Conversely, marginalized groups face involuntary, often life-threatening, risks imposed by systemic inequities and historical disenfranchisement, including economic hardship, lack of healthcare, and environmental injustices. Climbing, as a sport, operates within a framework of privilege that often overlooks the involuntary struggles faced by Indigenous and marginalized communities. Hence, climbing on stolen land necessitates an awareness of and respect for the cultural, historical and natural significance of these sites.

Another stark example of climbers disregarding Indigenous cultural sites is the incident at Sunshine Wall in Utah, where Richard Gilbert illegally bolted a route on a rock face adorned with ancient petroglyphs of the Fremont people. Native Hawai'ian climber Skye Kolealani Razon-Olds emphasized the emotional pain caused by such acts of desecration, noting that similar problems have plagued climbing areas in Hawai'i for years.[36] The former executive director of Access Fund, Chris Winter, attributes such incidents to the traditional colonial narrative that has sidelined principles of sustainability and inclusivity and prioritized individualism and nationalism. He explains, "It was about attaining the summit and doing first ascents, drawing people to the sense of accomplishment that comes with these feats."[37] His acknowledgment of the need for decolonial approaches marks a significant move towards creating a more equitable and respectful engagement with the lands and people who have been historically marginalized and dispossessed.

The dominant masculine colonial narrative is also evident in the naming of climbing routes. This tradition of route naming aligns with the broader colonial strategy of (re)naming geographical places to assert dominance and mark territory, often disregarding a visible Indigenous presence. The vast majority of

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[35] Chris Kalman, "It's Time to Rethink Climbing on Devils Tower," *Outside Online*, July 25, 2018, https://www.outsideonline.com/outdoor-adventure/climbing/why-its-time-rethink-climbing-ban-devils-tower/.

[36] Cody Nelson, "Defaced Petroglyphs Force Rock Climbers to Reckon with Sport's Destructive Past," *The Guardian*, May 4, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/may/04/rock-climbing-native-american-indigenous-people.

[37] Nelson, "Defaced Petroglyphs."

climbing routes have been named by white men due to both patriarchy and settler-colonialism, as naming rights are typically granted to the first ascensionist – a position historically inaccessible to women and people of color because of systemic barriers. As a consequence, many climbing route names are oppressive to marginalized groups, including women, racial minorities, and sexual minorities, and they "serve to maintain the masculine sporting space of the mountain."[38] Additionally, these names perpetuate a colonial mindset of "conquering" the land. For instance, in Canada, the route name "She Got Drilled" reflects an intersection of misogyny, racism, and an anthropocentric and feminized view of nature.[39]

Today, the settler-colonial tradition of first ascent naming rights remains widely accepted globally, often going unchallenged even when route names are discriminatory. Research indicates that "most participants are frustrated by the overt objectification and sexualization" found in these oppressive names.[40] Since 2020, a grassroots movement advocating for the renaming of oppressive routes has gained momentum in North America, with organizations like Climb the Gap leading efforts to compile lists of misogynistic, racist, or homophobic route names. Ultimately, renaming these routes and lands presents an opportunity to challenge colonial practices and reframe relationships with the land and its Indigenous inhabitants. As such, it is an important part of the decolonial outdoor counternarrative.

Decolonial Outdoor Counterstories

In recent years, scholars have increasingly recognized the significant value of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), also known as traditional knowledge (TK) or Indigenous knowledge (IK). These knowledge systems have been developed over countless generations and are rooted in the experiences and observations of Indigenous communities. TEK is based on a deep understanding of the natural world, verified and enriched by the wisdom of elders, and passed down through oral traditions, experiential learning, and other forms of record-keeping. It encompasses a holistic understanding of ecosystems, species interactions,

[38] Jennifer Wigglesworth, "The Cultural Politics of Naming Outdoor Rock Climbing Routes," *Annals of Leisure Research* 25, no 5 (2022): 608, doi: 10.1080/11745398.2021.1949736.
[39] Wigglesworth, "The Cultural Politics," 614.
[40] Ibid., 607.

and environmental changes, making it an invaluable knowledge in facing the impacts of climate change.[41]

In his work, Len Necefer (Navajo) blends TEK with modern conservation practices, advocating for the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in environmental discourse. Necefer is also the founder and CEO of Natives Outdoors, a company that seeks to elevate Indigenous voices in the outdoor industry and increase their participation in adventure sports.[42] Through Natives Outdoors, he highlights the contributions of Native peoples to land stewardship and conservation, while also promoting outdoor recreation as a means of cultural expression and connection to ancestral lands. The company also raises awareness about Indigenous issues.

Necefer promotes decolonial outdoor counternarrative through his adventure counterstories published in prominent outdoor magazines like *Alpinist*. In "Water is Life," he centers the four sacred Navajo mountains as the primary characters, fostering a profound relationship with them through mountaineering and skiing. This connection has also deepened his ties to his ancestral roots. Necefer reflects, "For many years I did not realize that the places referenced in ceremonies actually existed. Now I understand that my disconnect from the sacred mountains was in large part due to histories and policies that formed the context that I was born into as a Navajo."[43] He further reflects on how assimilation policies, which prevented him from learning Navajo, "stunted my relationship with my grandparents just as it did my relationship to the mountains."[44] For Necefer, mountains are viewed as relatives, as "living beings ... that the tribes and their members have a duty to protect."[45] This perspective emphasizes the spiritual and cultural dimensions of the land, contrasting with Western views of nature as a resource for recreation or conquest.

The perception of mountains as inanimate objects that can be conquered enables settlers managing dispossessed Indigenous land to exploit it, for instance, by building ski resorts that harm local ecosystems. An example recounted by Necefer involves Arizona Snowbowl, a ski area on sacred land for thirteen tribes. The resort uses artificial snow made partly from recycled wastewater, which

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[41] Fikret Berkes, Johan Colding, and Carl Folke, "Rediscovery of Traditional Ecological Knowledge as Adaptive Management," *Ecological Applications* 10, no. 5 (October 2000): 1251–1262, doi: 10.2307/2641280.

[42] Natives Outdoors, "Natives Outdoors," https://www.natives-outdoors.org/.

[43] Len Necefer, "Water Is Life," *Alpinist*, October 5, 2020, https://alpinist.com/features/water-is-life/.

[44] Necefer, "Water Is Life."

[45] Ibid.

contaminates plants and other living entities on the mountain. It also harms the local Indigenous communities directly as they rely on the waters from the melted snow. This example highlights cultural differences in environmental management and underscores the need for decolonial approaches to land use.

In response to the environmental and cultural impact of traditional Western skiing practices, Necefer reflects, "For years, I thought of skiing only in relation to the desecration of this sacred space."[46] However, he eventually discovered a decolonial approach to skiing and being outdoors which involves engaging with the land in a way that respects and honors its cultural and spiritual significance, rather than exploiting it for recreational purposes. By doing so, Necefer found not only a "a refuge and anchor" in his life but also a deeper connection to his ancestral roots and the sacred landscapes of his people. As he writes, "I didn't fully realize the sacredness of the mountains until I experienced the stillness brought by snow ... I began to understand the power of this form of water – the immense respect and diligence it requires and the fragility of the climate that fosters it."[47] His experience highlights the potential of outdoor sports to inspire deeper connection to the environment.

Necefer also acknowledges the interconnectedness of the mountains and the rivers in the valleys, observing, "Below my feet, the water on that peak would go on to the Colorado River – which provides our community life in the desert – in just a few months."[48] This recognition emphasizes that snow on the mountains is vital not only for outdoor enthusiasts but also for sustaining both human and nonhuman life. However, Necefer's story illustrates the urgency of preserving these environments not only for their ecological importance but also for their cultural and spiritual heritage. As he writes, "Some elders say that when we lose connection with the land, the land will die and so will we."[49] This dire prediction fuels his desire to document the sacred mountains, imparting their teachings to future generations. Necefer poignantly likens his journeys over rapidly receding snowfields to "doing final rounds of visits with my elders who are sick and soon to walk on into the next world."[50] This metaphor emphasizes the deep sense of loss and ecological crisis. He terms this phenomenon "an impending dispossession," reflecting the profound connection between Indigenous people and their land.

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[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.

Experiencing the impacts of climate change firsthand, Necefer faces strong climate anxiety, admitting, "A feeling of fear overcame me as I thought about what would be left to share about this place in my lifetime."[51] This anxiety is shared by his Indigenous expedition partner, who poignantly asks, "What if I'm the last skier?"[52] These sentiments drive a sense of urgency to act, compelling them to ensure the sport's legacy and spark environmental action. Their subsequent expeditions are motivated by a desire to raise awareness about climate change through adventure sports, as Necefer clearly states, "We're headed up the mountain to tell a story about climate change."[53] His decolonial outdoor counterstory highlights the intersection of cultural heritage, outdoor sports, and environmental activism, illustrating the need for immediate action to preserve these landscapes.

In another story in *Alpinist* titled "Adventures on the Turtle's Back," Indigenous rock climber Joe Whittle (Hasinai and Lenape) echoes Necefer's perspective on venturing into the mountains. He states, "There is no more goal attached to my efforts on cliffs or mountains than there is on a trip home for a holiday. The purpose is simply to be with your relatives and to be present."[54] Like Necefer, Whittle views the mountains as relatives, a source of wisdom that "can teach us humility and acceptance of our role in the natural order."[55] He believes outdoor sports can serve as medicine, helping "heal from the traumas of colonialism and rebuild [Indigenous] identities."[56] This healing, however, is contingent on perceiving wild places not as a possession, underscoring the transformative potential of outdoor sports when approached with reverence and respect for nature.

Whittle contrasts the colonial mindset of domination and control with the Indigenous approach to nature: "feelings of recognition, humility and remembrance mark our time in wild places – rather than fantasies of 'discovery' and 'conquest.'"[57] He critiques the practice of Western mountaineers placing their country's flag atop mountains, "that we view as a sacred relative," and claims of first ascents as acts of settler-colonial dispossession.[58] He mocks traditional colonial ideas of success by asking "*Would an Indian ever measure the height of a mountain that he could climb?*" and by stating "*IT'S NOT LIKELY any Native*

[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Whittle, "Adventures on the Turtle's Back."
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.

people ever died of summit fever."[59] He concludes the story by highlighting the irony of writing for *Alpinist* without reaching the alpine zone due to bad weather, while underscoring that the journey's value lies in the experience and connection to the land, not in summitting. His story thus invites a reconsideration of how success and accomplishment are defined in outdoor activities, advocating for a decolonized approach that honors the land and its significance to Indigenous cultures.

In her story "Rematriating Our Lives: Indigeneity and What it Means to Climb," Piikani Blackfeet rock climber Micheli Oliver also reflects on how rock climbing helps her connect with the land, her ancestors, and her Indigenous culture. Like Necefer and Whittle, Oliver views outdoor sports as a form of healing, describing climbing as "a means of bringing joy to our own bodies and minds."[60] She writes that rock climbing is "the only time my brain quiets."[61] Oliver politicizes this joy as a form of decolonial resistance, suggesting that by focusing on joy as the primary goal, traditional Western ideas of success, such as reaching the summit or sending a route, become secondary.[62] This shift allows climbers to prioritize building connections with the land and protecting it for future generations.

Oliver emphasizes the importance of seeing oneself as a "future ancestor," which naturally leads to caring for the land. She urges non-Indigenous climbers to "learn to develop a less antagonistic relationship with nature; decolonized mentalities are for everyone."[63] Oliver sees climbing as a potential means to adopt this decolonized behavior, contributing to the creation of resilient, decolonized communities. Using an Indigenous metaphor, she acknowledges that while "climbing is only one piece of the woven basket," it is "part of larger strands that bring together a resilient community" that fosters decolonized societies.[64] Outdoor sports can thus serve as a pathway for decolonization, providing a space where Indigenous and non-Indigenous people can meet, understand, and connect with each other and the land. By prioritizing joy, connection, and future responsibility, climbers can transform their practice into a form of environmental

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[59] Ibid., emphasis in original.

[60] Micheli Oliver, "Rematriating Our Lives: Indigeneity and What It Means to Climb," *Alpinist*, May 6, 2022, https://alpinist.com/features/rematriating-our-lives-indigeneity-and-what-it-means-to-climb/.

[61] Oliver, "Rematriating Our Lives."

[62] "Sending a route" means successfully climbing a route (a designated path on a rock face) from start to finish without falling or resting on any gear (in the case of sport climbing).

[63] Oliver, "Rematriating Our Lives."

[64] Ibid.

and cultural stewardship, ensuring the preservation of the land and its stories for future generations.

However, Oliver underscores that access to the outdoors is a privilege, influenced significantly by socioeconomic status. She highlights that the intersection of gender and race further dictates the level of risk individuals face in today's society. This is supported by Hewitt's research that reveals alarming statistics on street harassment: 65% of women in the United States have experienced street harassment, with 58% of women under 30 facing it while running, compared to only 4% of male runners. In the San Francisco Bay Area, for example, 68% of women of color encounter sexually suggestive speech daily or often, versus 55% of white women. The rising risk is also evident in the tragic statistic that more female runners were murdered between 2016 and 2022 than in the previous 28 years combined. In total, 65–99 per cent (depending on the study) of all women have reported male violence in the outdoor spaces.[65]

Oliver is acutely aware of the broader societal dangers she faces due to her gender and race. Her parents' protective upbringing instilled in her a heightened awareness of the exoticization and objectification she might encounter because of her looks: "They taught me to be continually aware that there are those who don't see me as the human I am but as an object."[66] Oliver highlights the persistent vulnerability that follows her everywhere: "Yet even in nature, as in any setting, we are not safe."[67] This acknowledgment underscores the reality that the risks she faces are not solely confined to urban environments but permeate all spaces, including the ostensibly neutral terrain of the outdoors. Various studies and reports highlight the unique challenges and dangers faced by people of color in outdoor recreation.[68] Historical segregation in national parks and other outdoor spaces has left a legacy of exclusion, contributing to the underrepresentation of people of color in these activities. For instance, between 2014 and 2018, 95% of visitors to national forests were white, while Black visitors made up only 1.2%.[69]

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[65] Hewitt, *In Her Nature*, 189–191, 218–219, 368.

[66] Oliver, "Rematriating Our Lives."

[67] Ibid.

[68] See Emma Gosalvez, "Nature Gap: Why Outdoor Spaces Lack Diversity and Inclusion," *College of Natural Resources News*, December 14, 2020, https://cnr.ncsu.edu/news/2020/12/outdoor-diversity-inclusion/, or Leah Asmelash, "Outdoor Recreation Has Historically Excluded People of Color. That's Beginning to Change," *CNN*, December 14, 2021, https://edition.cnn.com/2021/12/14/us/national-parks-history-racism-wellness-cec/index.html.

[69] American Trails, "Historical Perspective on Racism in the Outdoors and Looking Forward – American Trails," https://www.americantrails.org/resources/the-arch-of-history-is-long-but-it-bends-towards-justice.

Oliver also highlights the stark disparities in how missing persons cases are handled based on race. She points out that when white individuals go missing, their disappearances often attract significant media coverage and public attention, including community-driven fundraising efforts that can generate substantial financial support for search and rescue missions. In contrast, the disappearances of Indigenous people typically go largely unnoticed outside of Indigenous communities, reflecting the broader issue of racial inequities in outdoor spaces. The public lands enjoyed by climbers, hikers, and skiers are traditional Indigenous lands, yet the systemic racism faced by people of color, including Indigenous peoples, extends into these outdoor spaces.

Oliver finds a powerful sense of agency in climbing, where she chooses to face and survive risks on her own terms. She writes, "in a world in which I can't always control the hazards I face, when I climb, I am choosing to survive. I am taking my own life into my hands."[70] Climbing becomes a form of resistance and empowerment. It is an assertion of her autonomy and strength in the face of societal and personal dangers. By interweaving her personal narrative of connection to the land, the outdoors, and climbing with documented facts about outdoor access, Oliver's counterstory is a powerful call to decolonize outdoor spaces to make them safer and more welcoming for all individuals, regardless of their background. Her affirmation that "decolonized mentalities are for everyone" calls non-Indigenous people to embrace the decolonial outdoor counternarrative by rethinking their relationship with nature.[71]

Decolonial outdoor counternarrative permeates the forthcoming anthology *Flow: Women's Counternarratives from Rivers, Rock, and Sky*, edited by Denisa Krásná and Alena Rainsberry.[72] *Flow* is a collective effort of women who love spending time outdoors to make visible the often underrepresented female experiences in the male-dominated adventure sports. *Flow* is a collection of nineteen counterstories by women writing from a wide range of perspectives. From diverse countries from across the world, races and ethnicities, ages, sexual identities, and from new athletes to experienced women athletes. The book is to be published in spring 2025 by the Canadian outdoor publisher *Rocky Mountain Books* (RMB) that strives to promote minoritized voices and environmental consciousness through their publications.

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[70] Oliver, "Rematriating Our Lives."

[71] Ibid.

[72] Denisa Krásná and Alena Rainsberry, eds., *Flow: Women's Counternarratives from Rivers, Rock, and Sky* (Victoria, BC: Rocky Mountain Books, forthcoming).

Flow embodies decolonial principles by centering women's experiences in outdoor adventure and highlighting their connection to and care for the natural world. The transformative power of this decolonized relationship with nature is vividly depicted in these counterstories, including by non-Indigenous women. For example, the Czech highliner Anna Hanuš Kuchařová writes on her profound connection with the landscape that she sees from a different perspective when highlining: "When I encounter the landscape in my human smallness, she breathes on me with her eternity. She embraces me with an invisible force and remains in me as a gentle calmness."[73] Similarly, the Indian climber Kavitha Mohan reflects on her connection to the Himalayas: "I felt so tiny in front of the mighty Himalayas, but I knew I still belonged there. This is a place where I could be completely still as I gazed at the beauty and magnificence of the Himalayas."[74]

The repeated trope of feeling small in the face of vast natural landscapes represents a significant departure from traditional narratives of male mountaineers who are portrayed, both in writing and in visual imagery, as central, dominant figures "conquering" the landscape, embodying notions of control, power, and human triumph over nature.[75] In contrast, the recognition of "human smallness" in nature signifies a sense of humility and respect as described in the above counterstories by Indigenous climbers. The trope of human smallness emphasizes the landscape's enduring presence and our own transient, respectful existence within it. Interestingly, this sense of "human smallness" does not lead to existential anxiety but, rather, provides a profound comfort rooted in a sense of belonging to something much larger and more enduring than one's life. This interconnectedness fosters a deep-seated respect for the environment and reinforces the idea that human lives are part of a greater, ongoing narrative, which echoes Oliver's idea of seeing herself as "future ancestor."

The intimate and spiritual connection to nature is a recurring theme in *Flow*. The 14-year-old Indigenous kayaker from Ecuador Rafa Sanchez portrays the river as a living being capable of extending a welcoming embrace: "When I entered the river, it felt so beautiful, it was like nature was welcoming you, like it was saying, come, come, come, come, come closer."[76] This personification underscores the Indigenous perspective of nature as a sentient, relational force, inviting a respectful and intimate relationship rather than seeing it as an impersonal resource. Sanchez's profound connection to the river is reflected in her

[73] Krásná and Rainsberry, eds., *Flow*, chapter 16.
[74] Ibid., chapter 8.
[75] Rak, *False Summit*, 36.
[76] Krásná and Rainsberry, eds., *Flow*, chapter 6.

environmental activism, which remains a central part of her life despite facing physical violence from illegal miners in Ecuador. As she recounts, "There have been many times in a row when they have thrown stones at us when we were only going down the river."[77] Yet, even threats and violence are insufficient to deter those who view the environment as a relative. Sanchez's counterstory thus highlights the strength of the Indigenous decolonial view of nature, which fosters a deep, respectful connection that transcends fear.

All Indigenous authors in *Flow* emphasize a profound connection with the landscapes they inhabit. The Mayan climber from Chiapas, Mexico, Sofia Tapia, describes her engagement with nature as a dialogue: "I like to feel the places, to arrive and ask for permission to climb the rocks. Because for me, everything has life. Everything around me, including the rock."[78] Asking for permission is a common practice among Indigenous peoples, as Whittle explains in his *Alpinist* story: "The wild offers medicine to all people who know how to receive it as a gift, rather than claim it as a possession. This is why Native people ask permission to climb a mountain, dig a root, or catch a fish."[79] Furthermore, the landscape is seen as a timeless space where one can reconnect with ancestors, as the Mexican-American Indigenous climber Janel Chávez describes: "As we stood there, I felt our ancestors among us; I felt their stories of struggle, hope, and love."[80] This perspective illustrates a deep respect for the land and acknowledges a continuous, spiritual relationship with the natural world and those who came before.

Many authors in *Flow* reflect on how adventure sports provide an embodied experience of nature that goes beyond intellectual understanding. Sanchez's counterstory illustrates this vividly through her kayaking experiences: "I entered the river and felt such a beautiful energy, such a pure energy, which I could enjoy in its entirety."[81] Similarly, Anna Hanuš Kuchařová describes how highlining enhances her sensory awareness: "My senses seemed to become more sensitive. I realized how much life pulses around us unnoticed. I heard new sounds, smelled new scents."[82] This heightened sensory experience underscores how engaging in these sports can sharpen one's perception of the environment, revealing the subtle, often overlooked elements of nature. These accounts highlight

[77] Ibid., chapter 6.
[78] Ibid., chapter 12.
[79] Whittle, "Adventures on the Turtle's Back."
[80] Krásná and Rainsberry, eds., *Flow*, chapter 7.
[81] Ibid., chapter 6.
[82] Ibid., chapter 16.

that adventure sports, regardless of cultural background, can foster a deep sense of interconnectedness with nature.

The Canadian highliner Mia Noblet notes the supportive and understanding energy fostered by all-women highline events, suggesting a departure from traditional competitive and male-dominated outdoor spaces: "It was intriguing to observe and be part of an environment that felt so different, in a way more cooperative and communicative in its approach."[83] The Indian kayaker Naina Adhikari also notes, "The strength of a community is measured by the selfless actions of each individual member towards the wellbeing of the whole," echoing the concept of interconnectedness.[84] She also underscores the importance of environmental stewardship, noting that during all-female kayaking expeditions, women organized sessions on topics like menstruation hygiene and the principle of "leave no trace" in the wilderness. This emphasis on collaboration, community, and care for the environment aligns with the Indigenous decolonial values.

Furthermore, the *Flow* athletes reflect on success in their sports and uniformly emphasize the journey, learning, joy, and connection over mere measurable achievements. Mia Noblet, who is a multiple-world-record holder across all genders, says, "Success, to me, is not just about breaking records. It's about relishing the journey, learning, and being safe."[85] Noblet's emphasis on safety, especially in a sport that many consider dangerous, resonates deeply throughout *Flow*. This conceptualization of risk echoes Oliver's words that women seldom feel entirely safe in any environment, so taking charge of their own safety in these high-risk activities is empowering.

This focus on safety and risk is a recurring theme in many of the stories. Like Oliver, women in *Flow* see the process of confronting "chosen fear" as essential to their growth. Czech climber Anna Šebestíková captures this sentiment, writing, "It is in the face of fear that we discover the depths of our resilience and the boundless potential within."[86] These athletes do not shy away from fear – they embrace it, recognizing that learning to live with it is an ongoing journey. Sanchez echoes this, saying, "I learned to distinguish if it's just fear or if it's me protecting myself from danger. And if it's fear, I say, Rafa, breathe." However, she assigns the same importance to being able to walk away from a risky situation: "When I really see that it's a danger, that something can happen to me, that I'm not ready for that, I say no. And I say to my coaches, 'I'm sorry, I'm not ready for

[83] Ibid., chapter 19.
[84] Ibid., chapter 2.
[85] Ibid., chapter 19.
[86] Ibid., chapter 11.

this.'"[87] This focus on staying safe sharply contrasts with "the hegemonic masculine ideal that men 'tough through' situations rather than ask for help."[88] In a decolonial outdoor counternarrative, success includes making wise choices about risks, trusting one's instincts, and understanding that there is no shame in stepping back from a climbing route or a lap in kayaking if it means prioritizing safety.

Flow is a testament to Oliver's statement that "decolonized mentalities are for everyone," as it demonstrates how even non-Indigenous athletes can adopt and embody the principles of a decolonial outdoor counternarrative. *Flow* highlights this inclusive approach by showcasing stories of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous athletes who are actively reshaping their relationship with nature, moving away from a mindset of domination and conquest to one of respect, reciprocity, and stewardship.

Conclusion

Despite their growing popularity, outdoor spaces and adventure sports remain exclusionary environments, often perpetuating the legacies of settler-colonialism through cultural practices and narratives that marginalize Indigenous and other minoritized groups. Despite the diversity and evolution of these sports, significant inequalities persist, rooted in historical patterns of racism, sexism, and systemic barriers that have predominantly positioned men as the cultural producers and gatekeepers. As a result, access to these outdoor spaces and sports has been limited for minoritized groups, further reinforcing these exclusionary practices. These inequities are further entrenched by colonial adventure narratives that glorify conquest and domination over nature, maintaining a framework that prioritizes competition, exclusion, and control over inclusivity and environmental respect.

This paper has outlined the concept of a "decolonial outdoor counternarrative" as a means of transforming outdoor spaces and adventure sports from their colonial foundations toward a more inclusive, equitable, and environmentally conscious paradigm. A decolonial outdoor counternarrative focuses on actively working towards decolonization in outdoor spaces, promoting values and practices that center Indigenous perspectives. This approach challenges the dominant narratives that have historically shaped outdoor sports and seeks to reshape

[87] Ibid., chapter 6.
[88] Wigglesworth, "The Cultural Politics," 609.

the culture of adventure sports, that, with their countercultural characteristics and intrinsic closeness to nature, have a unique potential to drive this transformative change. The term "lifestyle sports" thus better captures the decolonial approach to adventure sports, as it reflects a holistic approach that encompasses not just the performance of the activity but also the values, community, and ways of living that surround it.

Decolonizing the discourse surrounding adventure sports involves cultivating decolonial outdoor counterstories which can inspire a proactive approach to reshaping the culture of these sports, fostering a shift from competitive dominance to collaborative coexistence. The analysis conducted in this paper of various decolonial counterstories demonstrates how integrating Indigenous values and practices that emphasize a deep cultural and spiritual connection with nature can transform outdoor activities into acts of cultural reclamation and environmental stewardship. Furthermore, the counterstories redefine success not as reaching the summit, but as cultivating community, cooperation, and a holistic relationship with both human and non-human elements of the natural world. They also highlight the importance of recognizing our own limits, valuing safety and well-being, and approaching risk in a way that empowers rather than objectifies the practitioners by reframing walking away from dangerous situations as a sign of maturity rather than weakness.

Moreover, the counterstories analyzed in this paper reveal how adventure sports can intensify a sense of environmental responsibility because of the environmental emotions that its practitioners experience. As Petr Vaškovic discusses in his paper, "Philosophical Perspectives on Climate Anxiety," climate anxiety is a future-oriented emotional state tied to uncertain environmental threats, which can lead to feelings of meaninglessness.[89] However, Vaškovic also notes that this anxiety highlights the dependence of meaningful activities on humanity's and the planet's survival, fostering a sense of responsibility for the wider human and non-human community.[90] Adventure sports, by provoking a unique intersection of emotions – joy, empowerment, calmness, and climate anxiety – can foster a deep sense of connection to the environment, motivating positive environmental actions. These emotions create a balance, preventing climate anxiety

[89] Petr Vaškovic, "Philosophical Perspectives on Climate Anxiety," in *Handbook of Philosophy of Climate Change,* ed. Gianfranco Pellegrino and Marcello Di Paola (Cham: Springer, 2023), 20, doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-16960-2_144-1.

[90] Vaškovic, "Philosophical Perspectives," 20.

from escalating to a point of despair or "climate denialism," instead encouraging a proactive and engaged response to environmental issues.[91]

As a result, many adventure athletes today are expanding their roles beyond their sporting achievements to become advocates for environmental and social justice, increasingly incorporating decolonial Indigenous principles into their work. This shift is evident in the efforts of prominent figures like Alex Honnold, a well-known white male climber, and Jeremy Jones, a renowned mountain snowboarder and founder of Protect Our Winters (POW), an organization dedicated to addressing climate change.[92] These athletes, through their platforms and influence, are championing causes that intersect with both environmental sustainability and Indigenous rights. The Navajo climber Len Necefer collaborates closely with both Honnold and Jones, serving on the board of the Honnold Foundation, which works with Indigenous communities globally to provide access to solar energy for marginalized populations.[93] Their cooperation highlights the significant convergence between Indigenous leaders and non-Indigenous allies in the outdoor community.

The involvement of influential figures like Honnold and Jones in spreading a decolonial outdoor counternarrative is particularly significant. As privileged men in positions of power, they possess a unique ability to amplify messages of social justice and environmental responsibility to a broad audience. Their participation can help bridge the gap between mainstream outdoor communities and the decolonial movements led by Indigenous and other marginalized voices. Moreover, as noted by Wigglesworth, when powerful figures use their platforms to highlight social injustices, their actions "will be seen as less self-interested," lending greater credibility to their advocacy efforts.[94] This perception can be instrumental in reaching audiences who might otherwise be resistant to these messages.

Nevertheless, while the involvement of prominent figures like Alex Honnold and Tommy Caldwell with Indigenous athletes and activists is notable, it does not necessarily signal a shift toward decolonial practice. Although environmental protection efforts by Honnold and others contribute to important conservation goals, these efforts largely align with a mainstream narrative in adventure sports that prioritizes sustainability over systemic change. While this environmental

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[91] Ibid, 7.
[92] Protect Our Winters, "POW International – Protect Our Winters," 2019, https://protectourwinters.org/.
[93] Honnold Foundation, "Honnold Foundation," n.d., https://www.honnoldfoundation.org/.
[94] Wigglesworth, "The Cultural Politics," 610.

stance is commendable, it often lacks a radical critique of the outdoor industry's structural entanglement with colonialism, failing to address how dominant narratives continue to marginalize Indigenous governance, sovereignty, and cultural practices. Their involvement thus highlights a critical tension in contemporary outdoor sports: the difference between supporting decolonial counterstories and actively engaging with the structures of power and knowledge established by colonialism.

This tension reveals an essential inquiry within decolonial work in outdoor spaces: How do power players within the industry, such as athletes with broad influence, understand and address colonial legacies compared to scholars and activists like Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, who explicitly foreground the need for dismantling colonial structures? Tuck and Yang call for a decolonization that does not merely reform but fundamentally shifts power and recognizes Indigenous self-determination and land relations. By comparison, the approaches of figures like Honnold or organizations like Patagonia may reflect an environmentalism that, while progressive, often remains within the framework of settler ideologies of conservation. Hence, there is a need for further, more "radical" counterstories that engage with this gap, resisting colonial structures and exploring the potential for a truly decolonial outdoor practice that upholds Indigenous sovereignty, governance, and epistemologies rather than simply endorsing sustainability within existing paradigms.

By embracing decolonial outdoor counternarrative, we can work towards rectifying the historical injustices that continue to shape our interactions with the natural world and Indigenous peoples, promoting a more inclusive and ecologically mindful future that is urgently needed in the time of climate change. This narrative underscores the importance of acknowledging past harms while advocating for a shift toward a more respectful, inclusive, and sustainable engagement with nature through the outdoor sports – one that recognizes the rights, values, and voices of Indigenous peoples and other minoritized practitioners. In doing so, we can redefine the culture of outdoor sports, creating spaces where all individuals can experience the connection, joy, and empowerment that these activities offer.