

## **Pluralizing the Sublime in the Post-Romantic American Memoir: From the Visual to the Haptic**

As a critic of the sublime and of its salvageability as a concept in literary criticism and the environmental humanities, ecofeminist literary critic Patrick Murphy (2012, 81–82) points out that the romantic sublime was mostly experienced by tourists who had time and opportunities to go on pleasurable and edifying excursions in the mountains, a privilege that most “women of their social class or men and women of lower classes or individuals too physically challenged” could not enjoy. In his critique, Murphy (82–83) refers to the sublime, or more specifically the mountain sublime, as the product of a white European masculine and able-bodied elite that does not engage with mountain materiality but, rather, seeks to (re)appropriate nature as a symbol of transcendence. According to him, it is this “*transcendental*” dimension of the sublime that is mainly problematic, and it should thus become more “*participatory*” or “*integrational*,” and promote contact with the material world (2016, 185, emphasis in original). John G. Pipkin (1998, 599) proposes what he claims to be an antagonistic version of this masculine and transcendental sublime: the “material sublime.” “The material sublime” of women Romantic poets such as Mary Tighe and Dorothy Wordsworth, he writes, “transforms fear and anxiety into feelings of commiseration or identification with the material world, resulting in a moment of personal defiance, empowerment, or self-realization” (600–601). In the same fashion, Paul Outka (2011, 31) revisits the Romantic sublime as the “organic sublime,” and argues that the mountain sublime marks, in Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), a distinction between the subject and the material world, but that the character of Frankenstein itself acts as an “organic”—both “material” and “immaterial”—incarnation of the natural sublime whose “dominant materiality produces a representational crisis for the viewer.” Unlike the crisis of representation posed by the mountain or natural sublime which positions

the human subject as a spectator who visually contemplates nature from afar and therefore separates humans from nature, the crisis of the organic sublime is solved by “unifying the self and nature under the sign of materiality in a way that aligns the (post)human with the natural and material” (39). Despite their commendable efforts to reconcile the subject with materiality while avoiding gender bias, these two examples still rely on a literary sublime that is not itself the result of a physical experience of or contact with the material landscape. While Pipkin suggests that the female poets/speakers he analyzes can feel empowered in their contemplation of nature, Outka claims that Shelley imagines a metaphorical bridge—her posthuman character—between the individual and the material world. The *physical distance* between the subject and the landscape is still there, it seems, and what these critics interpret as accomplishments that counter the narrative of sublime Kantian transcendence, still rely on imagination. Consequently, it could be argued, although the relationship and differences between reason and imagination in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* is still being debated, that these two instances promote what they seek to counter or debunk, that is an imaginative sublime or sublime of the mind.

Like the Kantian sublime, the material or organic sublime can be considered as products of the imagination, be it of the poet who experiences the natural scenery from afar or of the writer who imagines an alternative experience of the sublime through fiction writing without having herself been in contact with the physical landscape. An updated version of the sublime, which actively involves the body in its contact with the material mountain environment could respond to Murphy’s call for a “participatory” or “integrational” version and narrative of the sublime (2016, 185). Besides, such an approach would take into account and possibly critique materiality and the socio-political motivations or connotations—be they imperialist, colonialist, nationalist, ethnocentric or misogynic—of our engagement with it, but it may not, at least not yet, have been found in the work of the Romantics.

My paper turns to an updated version of the mountain sublime as a manifestation of its viability: the haptic sublime. In his recent study called *The New Mountaineer*, Alan McNee (2016, 1–59) shows that there was a radical change in the mountaineers’ approach to climbing in Victorian late nineteenth-century Great Britain, which produced a “new genre of mountaineering literature.” The middle-class “new mountaineer” looked for risk-taking and adventure and was interested in the physical and material dimensions of climbing, “in the physiology of effort and fatigue,” as well as in the taxonomy of mountains (McNee 2016, 2). This new concern, McNee (4–159) argues, gave birth to “a new version of the sublime” that he terms “haptic sublime,” which is “qualitatively” distinct from the Romantic and Ruskinian sublimines in that it focuses “on direct physical experience and [on an] embodied understanding of mountain landscapes.” This experience results in several affects and emotions commonly seen as negative ranging from “fatigue, cold, exposure to danger, and discomfort.” Such negative feelings, McNee (127) explains, were, however, often described as pleasurable when associated with “physical sensations,” which challenges existing theories of the sublime inasmuch as the new mountaineer experiences pleasure without horror (as opposed to Burke’s “delightful horror” [[1757] 1998, 66]) while introducing new affects such as satisfaction and fatigue that are produced thanks to or despite physical efforts.

In Jon Krakauer’s memoir *Into Thin Air* (1997), for example, in which he recounts the disastrous 1996 Mount Everest expedition during which eight mountaineers passed away, the author accounts for an experience that echoes the haptic sublime in its conversion of pain to euphoria and relief, and I quote:

The ratio of misery to pleasure was greater by an order of magnitude than any other mountain I’d been on; I quickly came to understand that climbing Everest was primarily about enduring pain. And in subjecting ourselves to week after week of toil, tedium, and suffering, it struck me that most of us were probably seeking, above all else, something like a state of grace. (140)

The repetitive, tedious, and painful movements and physical efforts, here expressed by means of the rhetorical device of amplification through the dramatic repetitions of “week after week of toil, tedium, and suffering” are significant components of the climb. They echo McNee’s understanding of the haptic sublime, although they involve not only the haptic but all of the “lower” sensory systems such as the kinesthetic and the vestibular. A weakness in McNee’s theory is therefore his omission of these sensory systems—that the term “haptic” fails to fully represent—which complicate and enrich Krakauer’s embodied experience and the experience of the visual romantic sublime.

To some extent, McNee’s use of “haptic” is similar to philosopher Arnold Berleant’s notion of “aesthetic engagement,” that is an aesthetic experience of a landscape that “involves the dynamic presence of the body with its full range of sensory awareness” and thus a variety of sensory systems—among which the “haptic,” “kinesthetic,” and “vestibular” (2012, 55–56). Only by undertaking such a participative and multi-sensorial approach, Berleant (55–56) argues, can the human subject hope to achieve “aesthetic engagement” in landscapes and live “an experience so vivid that it ma[k]e[s] a permanent impression.” Berleant’s approach shows both the limits and affordances of the haptic sublime. On the one hand, the term “haptic,” since it does not explicitly refer to other sensory systems such as the kinesthetic and vestibular, does not render the intricacy of Berleant’s multi-sensorial experience but, on the other hand, it creates affective responses that are absent in Berleant’s theory but emerge in the haptic sublime experiences described in nonfictional works such as in Krakauer’s. More generally, McNee’s use of the term “haptic” could be interpreted as a rhetorical move to counter Ruskin’s claim that the mountain sublime should remain a strictly visual and objective experience by suggesting that “the visual experience [is] heightened by physical experience” without being completely dismissed (153–54), which could solve the gender and racial bias that scholars such

as Barbara Freeman, Meg Armstrong, or Paul Gilroy, among others, have associated with the traditional, visual sublime theorized by the likes of Kant and John Ruskin.

Indeed, McNee's assumption of a heightened environmental knowledge or awareness provided by the haptic sublime moves beyond the distant, spectatorial positions suggested by the scientific observer, the Romantic tourist or poet, and traditional theories of the sublime, positions that tend to separate the dominant, white Western subject from the other that is beheld in a way that ultimately neutralizes the possibility of a relationship with it. In other words, the new mountaineer somehow materializes the sublime insofar as its achievability is dependent on the direct experience of materiality, whereas the romantic or traditional sublime suggests that it can only be experienced as an 'idea,' that is the idea of an overwhelming threat that never becomes real because the scene is observed from a safe distance.

While the experience itself and its theorization by McNee convey an approach that is more direct and physical as opposed to the distant and disengaging sublime, they contain four main bias that are worth discussing before affirming it can become a viable version of the sublime. First, the haptic sublime still suggests that, as Patrick Murphy claims the sublime does, the subject is able-bodied and must be capable of using his entire body to commit to intense physical efforts, a *disability bias* that McNee does not address. Second, the haptic sublime that McNee (128) theorizes was exclusively experienced in the context of recreational mountaineering by "a relatively wealthy middle-class" that was bored by "the comfort, safety, and convenience of their own lives," so it could be understood as an elitist activity, at least in the nineteenth century, which would constitute a *class bias*. Third, McNee (37–38) acknowledges that, although there were many female climbers even before climbing became a sport, the discourse of mountaineering and of the haptic sublime have been mainly expressed by male climbers. There is also, consequently, a *gender bias* that has been historically associated with the haptic sublime and, more largely, mountaineering. Lastly, the writers-

climbers that McNee discusses are all European white men, which suggests another *racial* or *ethnic bias*, which is itself connected to a narrative of conquest and imperialism. Although McNee (22) chooses to move beyond the well-documented critique of imperialism in mountaineering, he recognizes that the new mountaineer was inspired by “the imperial project” because of his yearning for the exploration of the untrammelled. The experience of the haptic sublime in the context of mountaineering—the only context to which it is applied by McNee—is therefore entangled with a larger narrative of imperialism and patriarchy from which the contemporary haptic sublime would have to be distinguished to become viable.

More recently, life-writing scholar Julie Rak (2021, 6–7) has termed this mountaineering narrative based on reaching the summit the “narrative of achievement” or “the heroic narrative of climbing.” As Rak (5) argues, the narrative of achievement and its possible counter-narrative are best articulated in nonfictional media such as the memoir mainly because the nonfictional “tale” (10) or narrative that is told after the climb matters as much as the climb itself. As a result, I would argue that the rhetorical choices made by the author in this nonfictional narrative matter even more, and that these choices also entail either supporting or debunking the narrative of achievement, whether there is summiting or not.

A good example is Silvia Vásquez-Lavado’s *In the Shadow of the Mountain*, a form of *Bildungs*-memoir centered on the author’s psychological growth and her journey through personal and collective trauma. This journey is represented by means of a dialogue between her traumatic past and her self-empowering, multi-sensorial experience of climbing Everest, first with a group of other victims of trauma to which she feels personally and spiritually connected throughout the book, and then with a Sherpa and a team of professional Euro-American white male mountaineers, with whom she has trouble identifying. Since I will not have time to discuss this memoir in length, I have chosen one extract in which the author exploits the reconnection

with the present moment that her haptic ascent of Everest provides, one that merges self with environment and heightens her own senses of self- and environmental awareness, and I quote:

Adrenaline shuttles through my veins, my heart palpating as a cold sweat prickles my skin. Under my arms, my base layer is soggy with sweat, but on the surface, I'm freezing. [...]. It's like my whole body, my entire sense of self, is adapting to this environment. Soon, I hope, it will all be second nature. (239–40)

In this passage, her haptic sublime experience, which involves her entire body, her “skin,” heart, muscles, and blood, arguably culminates in what Stacy Alaimo terms “trans-corporeality,” that is a moment when the human subject becomes intermeshed with materiality. In addition to her spiritual connection with her community of trauma victims, she now explicitly identifies with her surrounding material—and not spiritual—mountain environment. Her affective epiphany goes beyond the narrative of achievement that she at times expresses in other chapters focused on her own personal trauma. Healing from sexual trauma for the author then becomes a gradual, collective process that is best represented by the demanding, slow, and painful, haptic experience of climbing, but that ultimately culminates in constructive affects of awe and relief.

If, as Rak argues, “mountaineering writing [...] is central to the idea of climbing as social, rather than as an individual pursuit,” and “to building and maintaining ideas about climbing, identity, and the relationship of human beings to the natural world” (2021, 11), then there is a need for narratives that counter the narrative of the mountain sublime. This counter-narrative would be a testimony to the viability of the haptic sublime, that is its suitability for representing a sustainable and ethical relationship between self, other, and environment. The two authors that I have briefly discussed today show how the haptic sublime can be entangled with other narrative topics such as trauma but it would be interesting to see it deployed in a setting that does not require an able-bodied climber to achieve its affective epiphanies, and that

does not focus so much on what life-writing scholar Leigh Gilmore critiques as the normativization of the process of overcoming grief, which a lot of self-help or misery memoirs have done in the past decades. Ultimately, the haptic sublime and these two examples portray romanticism itself as migrant and viable. Neither of these two works nor McNee's theory rejects the Romantic visual sublime, but they showcase how it is constantly being complicated and enriched when physically experienced in a wider array of environments, expressed by a wider diversity of writers, and mobilized in a wider diversity of genres.

### Works Cited

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