

## Topographies of Desire: The Death and Disappearing of Alison Hargreaves

Bryanne Young

*This paper is sparked by the death of Alison Hargreaves, a British mountaineer who was swept to her death from the summit of K2 in summer, 1995. Leaving only pieces of gear scattered across a landscape of rock and ice, Hargreaves' bodily remains were never recovered. Beginning within the outline of what might be considered absence, this paper considers possibilities of continued presence: the kinetic, sensual and affective dimensions of (what) remains. Attending to the affective outline left open to us by the disappearance of Hargreaves' material body, I aim to disrupt the continuity of the gendered cultural teleology through which the details of Hargreaves' life, death and disappearance have been inscribed. In so doing, I hope to brace open a space of possibility between the binaries of presence and absence, repetition and singularity, endurance and destruction. It is my aim to argue that between these classically held binaries exist fields of possibility in which the figure of the falling female body performs both tropologically and as an embodied possibility suggestive of a realm of radical freedom within the everyday.*



*There is always something left over, something as untimely as subjectivity itself,  
that forms the basis of a new plan, perhaps a new flight.*

— Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*.

### Exergue

This paper is sparked by the death of Alison Hargreaves, a British mountaineer who was swept to her death from the summit of K2 in the summer of 1995. Beginning within the outline of what might be considered absence, this paper considers possibilities of continued presence: the kinetic, sensual and affective di-

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mensions of (what) remains. Attending to the affective outline left open to us by the disappearance of Hargreaves' material body, I aim to disrupt the continuity of the gendered cultural teleology through which the details of Hargreaves' life, death and disappearance have been inscribed, shifting from the register of the ontological, from the question of pure presence or absence, to the *hauntological*.<sup>1</sup> In so doing, I hope to brace open a space of possibility between the binaries of presence and absence, repetition and singularity, endurance and destruction. It is the aim of this paper to argue that between these classically held binaries exist fields of possibility in which the female body in flight/the figure of the falling female body begins to function both tropologically and as an embodied possibility suggestive of a realm of radical freedom within the everyday, daring to imagine what Mary Russo calls *an aerial female sublime*.<sup>2</sup>

Commencing the same way Jacques Derrida opens *Archive Fever*, with a play on/with citation, this introductory section, this exergue, "consists," as Derrida tells us, "of capitalizing on an ellipsis" (7): a movement that conjures what came before, picking up where the conversation left off and projecting a shared future, the fated end of an encounter whose dimension(s) my writing, here, will seek to shape. This is to say that the exergue frames a particular address, imagines a *who* who will read, while at the same time marking a repetition, evoking the feeling that (in some un-timely way) this has all happened before; that part of what now burns in the telling, the tropological force of this particular reiteration (both contained within and exceeding the death of the transgressive female figure), burns invisibly beneath the Western imaginary, so natural it appears always to have been there: *cinders for all time*.

I am informed in this work by Jacques Derrida's monograph *Cinders* (Its title in French, *Feu la Cendre*). As Ned Lukacher, Derrida's translator notes, "Derrida is interested in what persists within the "enigma" of mourning, of what still

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<sup>1</sup> As Derrida has it, in *Specters of Marx*, if the ontological question is some variation of Hamlet's "to be or not to be," the hauntological question, the question of the trace (that which traffics in the registers between presence and absence), aims to keep the indeterminate space of presence/non-presence and meaning/non-meaning open, keeping the possibility therein at play. See Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Russo interrupts classical notions of the sublime with the "aerial", a term she uses to designate a zone that is at once historical and imaginary. As imaginative, the aerial sublime suggests a realm of freedom within the everyday. This is a space that leaves room for chance, mistakes, noise, dissonance, possibility; it is not, Russo advances, "that limitless, incommensurable, and transcendent space associated with the Kantian sublime" (11). Most significantly, Russo's articulation of the aerial female sublime writes against the history and ideology of bourgeois exceptionalism which marks off categories of irregular bodies best left behind. The aerial sublime introduces a principle of turbulence as process and semiosis, as that which is predicated upon *movement*. See Russo, Mary. *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

“clings,” with what continues to burn and cannot be consumed” (12). It is language itself that burns in the telling of this tale, but it is also the immediacy of a particular figure whose death, a material happening that is personally wounding, woundingly captivating, impels this analysis. Alison Hargreaves, she, the figure whose death I find so affecting, persists in ways that are in turn elusive, fragile, enduring. Although this work centers on the labour of mourning, it turns on the possibility of a poetics of the spirit. “Who would still dare run the risk of a poem of the cinder?” Derrida asks.<sup>3</sup> Who would dare address herself to the smouldering impression of the other in flames—or ice? The answer to this question speaks to the powerfully interpolative, interpellative call of the cinder, that which burns within language—the burning itself—and the heat one *feels*: she that burns, the remainder within the remainder...the one one wants to write and in so doing to burn also, to remain, like-wise, alight. Beyond all notions of archives and dust, this is all to do with affect, with the place of affect (between the thinking and feeling) and the ontogenetic potential of absence (what we think of as *not there*): the suspicion that when one finds *nothing* and finds oneself moved nonetheless, that nothing indicates a place where the smouldering remains of *something* resides, the “incubation of the fire lurking beneath the dust” (Derrida 43).

As Derrida notes, while smoke takes to the air and is spirited away, cinders fall. This descent, through planes of signification, levels of intensity, towards the earth, this “letting go” (ibid 73), means everything. This notion of *letting go* is perpetually and personally haunting: both in my scholarly work and in my ‘other’ life as a climber/mountaineer. As Deleuze reminds us, “the active is in the fall” (80), in which the fall signals intensity, genesis, possibility, in which the fall has both less and more to do with a movement through space. What this opens here is a space both in theory and in everyday (gendered) categories of normalcy in which risk is rendered both positive and necessary and in which falling can be imagined/experienced without hitting the ground. This movement, this possibility, exists side-by-side with death and disappearance, insisting that while death is not foreclosure, risking to fall—though positive, powerful and perhaps necessary—sometimes does end in death.

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<sup>3</sup> One possible answer to this unanswered—at least not explicitly—question is Paul Celan, whose presence Derrida evokes throughout *Cinders*. Celan’s poem ‘Ashglory’ seems to leave its traces throughout the text. Derrida also makes reference to Celan’s ‘Death Fugue.’ The question of how we might speak/remember the Holocaust is integral to *Cinders*, a text that, in many ways stages an encounter with Theodor Adorno’s suggestion that we might synthesize a particular ethics of survival (the memory of a specific *almost* death) by summarizing the Holocaust as “Auschwitz.” Derrida’s response complicates this aphoristic rendering, indicating that there is no proper name for the “all burning,” otherwise called holocaust (43), there are only cinderwords—impossible to inhabit, they crumble under the weight of even the lightest touch.

As a final note before I allow the writing of this essay a place of its own, I draw attention to the writing itself, to the way words perform throughout this work. Performative writing—what Della Pollock describes as a writing that follows the body’s model, operating, she tells us, “by synaptic replay, drawing one charged moment into another, constituting knowledge in an ongoing process of transmission and transferal” (91)—is an attempt to write from a decentered place of irrecoverable loss, metonymically brushing up against moments in my own past that are gone, with the recognition that something within the experience continues to smoulder just beneath the surface. This writing, described by Peggy Phelan as “what philosophy wishes all the same to say” (11), refuses the scientific production of knowledge and resists, what Phelan characterises as, contemporary theory’s paranoid fear of connection. Performative writing, as I use it in this text, marks a moment/movement of both surrender and hope, excess and deficiency, writing with words that are, again, to borrow from Phelan, “all too conscious of what they are unable to convey” (8). As I said before, it is language itself that burns in this telling. *Cinders there are*, an ash-garden of unsayable, or almost unsayable, things whose burning is an elegy that cuts. *Before us and behind*, covering our very forms in ash—the only place you press into me.

### Of Falling

This essay begins with a mythic retelling, a story: in which a woman goes up a mountain and is lost, subsumed beneath the violent onslaught of a storm that rises out of nowhere, is swept away by gale-force winds...vanishes. This archival effort relies less on preservation than it does on conflagration; what is at stake is not the residue of lines in the dust but rather the embers, the cinders, the smell of smoke on the wind—those sensory-non-sensory impressions that remain after a burning. Providing the barest outline of form, here are some details: In 1995, British mountaineer Alison Hargreaves was swept from the summit of K2<sup>4</sup> following a successful twelve-hour push, unassisted by oxygen, to the mountain’s pinnacle—the first woman in history to do so. That Hargreaves gained the summit is known from transmissions received at base-camp moments before hurricane-force winds consolidated into a storm that swept invisibly upwards, consuming a summit that had, moments earlier, stood out in perfect relief, white and clear against an uninterrupted skyline. The next day, Pepe Garcés and Lorenzo Ortas, two Spanish climbers who had survived the storm in base-camp 4,

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<sup>4</sup> With a peak elevation of 8,611 meters, K2 is part of the Karakoram Range and is located on the border between Pakistan and China. K2 is remote from any human habitation, so much so that when it was first surveyed in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, no local name for it could be found and K2 retained its initial Survey of India tag: K for Karakoram and 2 for the second mountain in the range to be identified. In 1995, immediately before Alison Hargreaves’ death, there had been 113 successful ascents of K2 and 33 deaths.

reported sighting a blood-soaked anorak, a boot and a harness they identified as belonging to Hargreaves. However, exhausted and suffering from exposure and dehydration, neither climber collected these objects. Neither Hargreaves nor the scattered equipment was ever recovered.

When gale-force winds hit the bottom of a mountain, they are forced upwards, gathering speed, snow mixing with air. This turbulent suspension of snow particles then flows as a gravity current, which is a technical description of an avalanche. Snow, air, water and rock, combining under the force of these winds and travelling at high velocity, lubricating the layers of snow, diminishing the fricative capacity of crystals to stick together. Everything becomes suspended and the stable referent of a horizon is undone. This turbulence must be imagined in a moment of flight that goes on until it ends: layers of air and snow reconstituted with a suddenness of impact that forces air upwards—snow becoming cement, impossible to shift, lift, carry, prise apart. So, a boot and a harness minus a body suggests to climbers, and those acquainted with the power and potential of avalanches in the alpine, a body in pieces: the possibility of a boot containing a foot, apart from a harness absent a torso which, therefore, must be elsewhere. These scattered pieces of gear connote, immediately, a scattered and de-constituted body, the material remainders of a no longer present/unified form.

It is the work of mourning, Derrida tells us, to attempt to ontologize remains by *identifying* the bodily remains and by localizing the dead, fixing the dead within knowledge. For Derrida, “all ontologization, semanticization—philosophical, hermeneutical, or [perhaps most significantly] psychoanalytical—finds itself caught up in this work of mourning but, as such, it does not yet think it; we are posing here the question of the specter to the specter” (*Specters of Marx* 9). Nothing could be worse, Derrida continues, for the work of mourning than confusion or doubt. We speak to the specter and ask it *why*,<sup>5</sup> hold it to account. For Alison Hargreaves this takes the form of vitriolic social commentary by others following her death, the afterlife that was sparked by her disappearance, she, a young mother, the mother of two young children.<sup>6</sup> Following Derrida’s thinking, it is

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<sup>5</sup> Like the ghost in Hamlet: *Why* did you die, *why* did you come back? In the case of Alison Hargreaves: *why* did *you* risk death to summit K2? (the “you” of this address a mnemonic containing Hargreaves’ status as a mother); *why* was the achievement of this feat so all-consuming?

<sup>6</sup> Hargreaves biographers David Rose and Ed Douglas describe the public commentary that followed Hargreaves’ death during her descent from K2 as “a firestorm debate centered on motherhood, ambition and risk.” In the words of Rose and Douglas, “the indignant commentators seemed unable to look beyond whether, as a mother of two, Hargreaves had effectively abandoned her children by taking such extraordinary risks.” Rose and Douglas suggest that the vitriolic and pervasive nature of this debate robbed a woman, “one of the most gifted mountaineers of her generation” of her reputation. See

the further work of mourning to address the ghost, reaching towards her across the surface of the unanswerable question ...*why?*... All that can be had in response is the imagined sound of wind sliding across the mountain's snow-covered skin. Posing the question of the ghost to the ghost (*why did you go up the mountain? Why did you not come back? Why were you not satisfied with the level surface of the ground? Why...*), we are left with nothing at all, nothing but the work of our own mourning.

The next obstacle to this work of mourning, the un-locatability of a material grave, of a grave marker, is of (grave) concern. Its un-locatability signals the inescapable failure (a failure that precedes itself) to fix within meaning a unified remainder: the hermetically sealed fusion of signified (the material bodily remains) with the signifier (the name itself—which, the moment it is used, burns, attempts to stand in for, the real) along with the dangerously mythical, transgressive potential this body instantiates moving through the “high-risk” alpine space—her ability, and more importantly perhaps, her desire to move through fields of intensity, intensities of sensation, unknowable to most of us. The absence of a locatable grave in which to seal the tomb of the bodily remainders means that, however abstractly, something eternally escapable continues where it should not, destabilizing the Western mythology proper to bodies (bodies proper, the proper internment of bodies, the stable referent to a cenotaph in which the dangerous female body is properly interred.)<sup>7</sup> Alison Hargreaves left no such *tomb*, Derrida's word for a place for mourning to “take its time” (*Cinderella* 53). Instead, disappearing as she did, Hargreaves' bodily remains are perpetually un-locatable, un-fixable within the field of knowledge, within cultural teleologies of risk, failure, tragedy and/or ‘just deserts.’ Her body is evoked by what was reported to have been seen: a boot, a harness and a blood-soaked anorak, objects unable even to metonymically signify material remainders, affording us no monument, foreclosing all efforts to mourn (which we understand through Derrida to be the identification of bodily remains followed by efforts to localize the dead and to know what space the deceased body occupies—for, as Derrida tells us, *it must* stay in its place) (*Specters of Marx* 9 emphasis added). Because of the cataclysmic energy of the hurricane-force winds, the storm that swept Hargreaves from the exposed pinnacle of K2, her material remains remain inaccessible to the work of mourning. These remains burn in language but defy semantics: (a) being without presence. In the context both of this burning within language and the field of remembering (meaning-making and mourning), if a place is itself surrounded by fire (the conflagration/incendiary force of a storm, the pyrotechnic writing of falling snow and ice scorched onto the earth) it falls final-

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Rose, David and Ed Douglas. *Regions of the Heart: the Triumph and Tragedy of Alison Hargreaves*. National Geographical Press, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Derrida also discusses the tomb in “Fors” on Abraham and Torok, for whom it is a central concept.

ly to ash, into a cinder (subsiding now into the susurrations of wind whistling softly through an elegiac landscape of ice and rock), into a cinder tomb (a monument in language which crumbles away under the lightest of touch); it no longer is. This is the categorical “no” to the laborious work of mourning. What cannot be had—the material remainders that remain inaccessible even beyond poetic saying—goes up in smoke. But cinders fall, affective traces remain: *cinders*, pathways of energy capable of going where they want, capable of acting on other bodies and, in this contact, of sparking new flows of energy and associations. Thus, the affective outline left open to us by the absence of Hargreaves’ body operates as an ontogenetic site, a space of possibility from which a distinct kind of memory can be imagined, in which a certain kind of address is experienced. This contact puts forth a hauntology of particular dimensions, one that shifts the horizon of the ontological question perhaps simply from the *why* of mourning towards a more positive—and certainly more vertiginous—*how*. Such a shift aims to keep the indeterminate space of presence/non-presence and meaning/non-meaning open, keeping the possibility therein at play.

This effort is not to do with revisionist history making. Nor is it an attempt to write the corporeal dimensions of Hargreaves’ body, her bodily remains, from the telling. It is not an attempt to colonize spaces that once stirred with the breath of a moving body with meaning imported from elsewhere. Rather, my aim here is to suggest that attending to the (affective) outline left open to us by the ‘absence’ of Hargreaves’ material remains might allow us to, in Phelan’s terms, “understand more deeply why we long to hold bodies that are gone” (ibid); to interrogate with greater nuance the desire to feel the heat, to brush our skin up against the possibility of fire lurking beneath the dust. *Cinders there are*, Derrida tells us. What guides this analysis, then, is the desire to understand our need to read the pyrotechnical writings, to see the cinders that both do and do not remain—and in so doing to prise the binaries of presence and absence apart, to allow their swirling flow in and out of the field of knowledge. This work, to do with archives and ash as well as the labour of holding close a body which is not here (nor, in Derrida’s terms, *there*) risks to suggest a space of possibility wherein a kind of ‘poesis of the spirit’ (of the *spirit* and not of the ghost) can be imagined. Such a poesis will/would have everything to do with fire, with failing, falling and—not least—with the structure of cinders.

The kind of question I aim, therefore, to put forth is not *where is Alison Hargreaves?* Instead I ask a question that at first seems to have more to do with the structure of spectacle/spectator, and with the kinds of excess generated in an event wherein a human body seems to vanish. Where do we position materiality in relation to this type of disappearance? Where are the boundaries of presence

drawn, and upon what surface are they inscribed?<sup>8</sup> In an attempt to understand the dimensions of disappearance/recognition/return, I approach the body as material and temporal possibility/accumulation, a moment/movement in time containing many others. From this alternative rendering, I argue a clearing can be made, a space of multivocal vibrancy in which the affective resonance of Hargreaves' remains might (possibly) be encountered—a dramatic saying that signals within itself a language beyond language which names neither truth nor its impossibility. A space into which truth or its impossibility might equally intrude: She the cinder, there, *there*, Alison Hargreaves...

### Her Fearful Asymmetry

To evoke the kind of language needed to render the dimensions of this particular hauntology is first to conjure into being a kind of visitation, a being looked at before looking that implicates self/subjectivity—implying a “who” who is seen. This kind of visitation, by an un-nameable or *almost* un-nameable thing, defies semantics and seems at first to be non-verifiable, non-describable. Flashing up on the surface of...*what?*, it comes into being not as something that either is or is not, but rather as/in opposition to a metaphysics of pure presence that would seek to hold it stable through the act of reciprocal looking/seeing. This flashing up, this entity-nonentity that visits, is characterized by the impossibility of looking it straight in the eye. “It” exists in violation of the laws of non-contradiction, looking at us, at the “who” who is seen, seeing us/we/me *not see it*, even when it is *there* (*Specters of Marx* 6, emphasis added). As Derrida argues, this “spectral asymmetry interrupts specularity” (*ibid*), recasting Debord’s definition of spectacle, “a social relation among people mediated by images” (qtd in Taylor 66), mediated by the visual field, into Diana Taylor’s articulation of the spectacle as “that which we do *not* see, the “invisible” that appears only through mediation” (*ibid*). Those objects that belong to the visual field, the material objects that are seen (or at least imagined to be seen: a blood-soaked anorak, a harness, a boot) mediate, and to a certain extent stand in for, what is not/cannot be seen: a unified body that can be held in signification within the visual field, held still, a fur-

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<sup>8</sup> The vitriolic social commentary following Hargreaves’ death was, and continues to be, a veritable vortex of inscription and re-inscription concentrated on Hargreaves’ maternal body. This kind of critique aims to write over Hargreaves’ body, seeking to shape its contours through language, shaping the way she is remembered. My aim here is not to encyst Hargreaves into meaning, to write her story or render a totalizing narrative of her death. This paper writes against such logocentric practices. Instead it writes the desire to climb, and in so doing aims to brush up against a stirring breath of wind that indicates a body in motion.

row in the snow. Yet, because these objects were never recovered, touched, felt, re-arranged, made re-present, and because Hargreaves' material remains were not recovered, this reliance on trope fails to stand, and, in falling away, leaves only an imagined outline in which there is no unified form/body (imagine a footprint partially impressed into the side of a mountain but slowly vanishing, covered over now by sifting drifts of snow). Hargreaves' body, then, in its fragmented materiality and non-recoverability, becomes that which Pierre Nora calls a figure *mise-en-abîme*, a term which, in French, means both *cast into an abyss* and the optical effect achieved by standing between two mirrors, seeing one's reflection *ad infinitum*.<sup>9</sup> This double-sided trope refers us to Derrida's articulation of *différance*, evoking for us here the process by which signifiers always slide, refusing to provide stable points of reference—much the same way the features of a landscape become unchained and unfixed under the obscuring energy of hurricane-force winds, the onslaught of darkness and the falling fury of snow. As Derrida has it, between the endless slippage of signifiers *something* is perceived: a trace, a ghost, a supplement, a kind of presence which exceeds difference, which sees a kind of being that perceives being seen but cannot see that which sees it. "We do not see who looks at us," (*Specters of Marx* 6) Derrida tells us, and calls this inability to recognize while being recognized (in which the failure follows the being recognized) the *visor effect*. This model of being looked at, of looking, of a recognition re-bounded (as the reflection of the self refracted in infinitum between two mirrors as Nora suggests, placed into an abyss, seeing in an endless repetition) happens out of time, suggesting a contact between body-non-body, sensuous-nonsensuous, a flashing up of the invisible or, more precisely, a flashing up of the *invisibility of a visible X* (ibid 7, emphasis added). "Haunting," Derrida notes, "is historical ... but not dated" (4). The visit sets its own time. This is another way of saying that the sudden recognition of an almost something, an entity-nonentity, looking right at us from a liminal space between thinking and feeling is powerfully interpolative and interpellative. We feel called to action, to speech, to conversation, hailed into a subject positions that, perhaps much as it did Shakespeare's Hamlet, holds us arrested and will not let us go. I risk, at this juncture, to venture that this might be the call of what some might call *justice*. "Justice for whom?" One may well ask, and in so asking one confronts in a most personal way, first: the destabilizing structure of the address (which contains both the precarious non-knowledge of exactly *what* one is/is not looking at, as well as what precisely one is meant to *do* on its behalf—on the be-

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<sup>9</sup> It is also worth noting that this articulation is a poetic description of Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of eternal recurrence, a kind of image in a mirror reflected into infinite time and space, in which, as Derrida phrases it: "our entire world is the cinder of innumerable living beings."

half of exactly *who/what?*) and second: the unique phantasmal dimensions of the *hauntological* question.<sup>10</sup>

### Speaking (of) Cinders

Among all the names Derrida has used to describe the mark of the absent present, the remains with no remainder, the cinder (*cendre*) provides the most generative way to begin to talk about a kind of *affective* trace. Like the supplement and the trace, a cinder is also that which “erases itself totally, radically, while presenting itself” (*Cinders*, 4). Yet, with close metaphorical connections with heat, burning, conflagration, cinders and ash evoke the *felt* effects of fire, even as the flames themselves remain inaccessible. In a discussion about cinders, near the end of the monograph so named (*Feu la Cendre*, 1987), Derrida invokes Nietzsche’s notion of “eternal recurrence,” his idea that “our entire world is the cinder of innumerable *living* beings” (Nietzsche qtd in Derrida 69). A cinder: that which marks the coming into being of heat, the dissipation of energy, the memory of burning (perhaps the burning of memory itself). No longer at stake is the symbolic/material rendering left scraped across the surface of dust. Following Nietzsche’s thinking, the world is not an imperfect translation or reflection of a more perfect original; in the words of Ned Lukacher, “it is not a finite copy of something better” (4). All signs (in a moment of combustion by which the unification of signified and signifier is incinerated) once burned/will burn/burn. We are no longer speaking of the documents inside (or outside) the archive, or of archive itself. Instead we are speaking of the impressions rendered in time and space, like the record of footsteps in the snow, the impressions in the air made by a body passing through, a stirring breath of wind. No longer the erotic simulacrum, we are now talking about *thanatos* writ large, the non-present incineration that burns within every experience, “this experience of incineration ... is experience itself” (ibid 6). *She the cinder*,<sup>11</sup> the pathway sculpted in time and space

<sup>10</sup> If the structure of the ontological question is articulated by Derrida through Hamlet’s existential “to be or not to be?”, hauntology suggests a coming into being, not simply of performance, but of the remains of performance. Post-disappearance, the remainders take on a life of their own, powerfully ontogenetic. This, according to Derrida, does not belong to the discussion of the Being of beings; it is irreducible both to the present and to presence belonging to the essence neither of life nor death (perhaps occupying a space somewhere between the two).

<sup>11</sup> For Derrida, *La Cendre*, (literally in French, “she the cinder”) speaks with a feminine voice, a female phantom *là*, (“there”). “There; someone vanished but something preserved her trace and at the same time lost it, the cinder” (33).

As Ned Lukacher suggests in his introduction to *Feu la Cendre*, evoking, for Derrida, Cinder as in Cinderella, the figure in Perrault’s Fairy Tale, she who remains with the remains of that which burned in the hearth. As Lukacher suggests, Derrida addresses *her* throughout, is addressed by *her* – like Blanchot who writes “Viens, et éternellement,

as energy passes through, in which heat might still be *felt*. This is the affective structure of trace. After the incineration recedes, the affective force (of) remains.

What is the “so what” of this ontological shift/the shift of the horizon of ontology? Why do this work, lay this foundation? Why talk of cinders at all? In the opening section of this essay, I spoke of a visitation, of a “who” who is seen. I spoke of an address by which the “who” who is looked at feels herself recognized and entreats the specter to stay, wishes through this address to conjure some form of contact, to arrest it through the act of address (an act containing both speech and looking), making it stay present. The address: “Do not fall away to ash! Stay alight, stay burning and in so doing, let me continue to burn also, for I cannot prevent my own combustion.” A remarkable thing to imagine, a remarkable kind of address; a remarkable thing to perceive in an imagined pathway of ash left imprinted in the air, falling gently on the skin, a susurration that sounds like the crackling of fire or perhaps of wings: *thanatos*. So, what is the materiality of Hargreaves’ remains? What is meant by materiality, and what is meant by remains? What does this excess suggest to us? What, through the address, would I ask of it? Perhaps, after all, what I am impelled to say, recognized, seen, *visited* as I am, is this: Long before I encountered *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* I knew what the death drive was. Before I read about it, I understood it perfectly (some things perform poorly as an exegesis). Freud tells us what a disaster it is to repeat, to be compelled to repeat. The drive to repeat what is painful, he says, is all about the death drive. So, repetition, the desire to do it again and again and in so doing to disintegrate into the smallest possible parts (which, differently stated, is the desire for the originary movement/moment, that which always and already escapes) is a drive towards death. This movement whose movement seeks a moment just *before* before: the originary movement from which all movement sprang, after which all movement is repetition. After which all movement is an elegy that mourns as it carves, yearns as it ignites. It is not so impressive, knowing what this death drive is, is as common as movement in fact. But death drive needs a surface, a stratum upon which to inscribe itself. This life-giving death, this energetic being-towards-death, it needs a field of freshly fallen snow on which to write itself, or a mountain, or the earth. It must be written. All the death drive means is that what nourishes us destroys us. Except it also means this as well: that what destroys us nurtures us, while what is *in* us outlives us.

Ice climbing, a kind of mountaineering at a ninety-degree angle, with crampons, ice tools and rope, is a kind of being-towards-death that exceeds morbidi-

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elle est là” (“Come, and eternally she is there”) (See Lukacher’s Introduction to *Cinders* pp. 10). This is first time Derrida’s articulation of the trace is placed within structures of gender. This flashing up and receding again (at times Derrida describes the cinder as androgynous) but leaving a material remainder of particular salience to my analysis of, what are in essence, *gendered* remains.

ty. It is part of what Phelan, quoting D.A. Miller, calls a “culture of morbidity” (Miller qtd in Phelan 3). It is blue depth that explodes into tiny fracture-lines illuminated by your headlamp. Imagine yourself so transfixed by this, at this beauty, that your feet cut and your breath cuts and you are hanging by your hands looking straight into the heart of a frozen waterfall. In the eerie silver suspension of breath that is early morning: biting your lips, you are crying and you yank off your boots. Cold steals the world. Beautiful fingers reach upwards. This scripted encounter with destruction, with self-annihilation, goes on and on, hypnotic becoming, moving towards the sky.

I started ice climbing to create a distance between myself and the backdrop of someone else’s slow death. I could not out-pace it, this other death, and so I ran straight into the possibility of my own, as fast as I could, like trying (not) to drown, this desperate movement away from and towards death. Cultivating this kind of being-towards-death means shaking off the sometimes unbearable weight of the twinned questions: how? When? This kind of relationship with death is anything but reckless—though that is what others accuse you of. Climbing ice means facing the possibility of your own death and the death of your partner every time you leave the ground; it is a deconstruction through movement which lays bare what it creates to the swirling forces of annihilation that are bigger than the world. It is movement that cuts—but perhaps this is not as unique as it may, at first, seem. As Foucault reminds us, knowledge is made for cutting. Meaning is made by cutting.

### **Cinders and Smoke**

The logic of repetition, indeed the repetition compulsion, remains, according to Freud, indissociable from the death drive. Operating in silence, by silent vocation, death drive eludes perception. It makes no monument and is never present in person. For Freud, the compulsion to repeat is always at odds with real memory, with some originary moment/movement located elsewhere, at the place of the originary and structural breakdown of the said memory. This is why the death drive must always require a surface upon which to inscribe itself, why it is only perceptible if it disguises itself as something else. “This impression of erogenous colour,” Derrida explains, “draws a mask right on the skin” (*Archive Fever* 11). It leaves no monument of its own, this death drive, as an inheritance leaves only its “erotic simulacrum,” its “pseudonym in painting” (ibid): foot-steps/furrows in the snow.

Alison Hargreaves had every opportunity to stop mountaineering: after standing on the pinnacle of every North face in the Swiss Alps; after becoming the first woman to summit Everest without the aid of sherpas or bottled oxygen; after climbing the Eiger pregnant. But she did not stop. Instead she announced plans to summit the three highest mountains in the world (Mount Ever-

est, K2 and Kanchenjunga) unaided. And, after reaching the summit of K2, known to climbers as “the savage summit,” she died. Died, vanished, but by no means went away. What this does, this inertia within the story-line linking the fact that she *did not stop* with the fact that she later died in the liminal space between summit and base, within a *between* space that is neither heaven nor earth (but perhaps the absence of both) and of course spilling over into the fact that her material remains (by which I mean her body, her body parts) were never recovered is to enact a challenge, a deferral, to what Fred Moten calls, “some inevitable return to the ontological ... that seem[s] to indicate that the impulse or activity could never have ended up in any other way” (196). Of course, suggesting that she *could* have stopped is also to suggest (and this is the ghost that always already haunts the mountaineer) that she *should* have stopped. By not stopping, she was already *mise-en-abîme*. The leap had already happened; all that remained was the fall.

This brings me to the brink of two things: One is the desire of the body for the body—which for me, female ice climber, rock climber, mountaineer, is the desire to burn but also to stay alight, to leap and to remain in flight. “This honest thing,” writes Nietzsche, “this ego—it speaks of love and it still wants the body, even when it poeticizes and fantasizes and flutters with broken wings” (21).<sup>12</sup> This expression of desire, the psyche for the body, the body for a more perfect rendering of its own corporeal projection,<sup>13</sup> is made manifest in the desire to occupy a space of risk while remaining culturally legible, to breathe air in the alpine which the flat surface of the earth cannot imagine, and after to return safely to the nest. This is brings me to my second insight. Clinging to the unstable surface of a frozen waterfall by my hands (*your feet cut and your breath cuts...*) I recall myself surviving, un-willing to stop, yet, likewise, unwilling to believe entirely in the telos culturally written onto the missing skin of Hargreaves’ body—which is that the performance of “risk” by a female body can end in no other

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<sup>12</sup> In a phrase just prior to this passage, Nietzsche writes: “Believe me, my brothers: it was the body that despaired of the body and touched the ultimate walls with the fingers of a deluded spirit. Believe me, my brothers: it was the body that despaired of the earth and heard the belly of being speak to it.” Evocative of Mary Russo’s insistence on the interruption of the aerial into the smooth, transcendent space of the sublime, Nietzsche’s statement returns the body to conversations of the ego and begins to point to Freud’s description of a bodily ego. The ego at stake in this phrasing of Nietzsche’s ought not be conflated with Freud’s articulation of the ego. What Nietzsche here calls the ego is more roughly equivalent to that which Freud would call the subject.

<sup>13</sup> This articulation of the body follows Elizabeth Grosz who argues: “the body functions not simply as a biological entity but as a physical, lived relation” (27). Elsewhere in the same monograph (*Volatile Bodies*) Grosz states: “the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego: it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface” (33). See Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994.

way but failure or re-incorporation. This is the same precarious liminality inhabited by Aviatrix Amelia Earhart who, as Mary Russo rightly points out, had she survived might have settled down, grown older and merged, with that aging, into gender roles more appropriate. But instead, just when the line she seemed to be walking through the air was pulled its most taut, she “disappeared” (Russo 25). The enervating passage of time through which the mad ecstasy of the suffering that, dangerously, carries with it the possibility of imagining and inhabiting other worlds, was forestalled, and the event of the dangerous female body continues, remains open, powerfully ontogenetic.

What remains salient to me now, after Hargreaves’ disappearance, the phonic substance I detect a few decibels under the howling of the wind, as I look into the mirror afforded me by the oblivion of the other, I (similarly *mise-en-abîme*, similarly cast as “reckless”) recognize the shadow, the embers that, although scattered, remain alight. *Thanatos*, the burning, the remainder of energy that did not disappear or cease to be: the sensuous-nonsensuous, the supplement, the beauty of the beautiful, the memory of a not-yet death. *There*, where cinder means the difference between what remains and what is: abandoning the terrain of repetition for memory, a desire for origins that burns with the very violence to re-turn, at last, to the beginning. Death drive itself goes up in smoke, cinders fall, covering our very forms in ash.

Re-remembering Alison Hargreaves: a process that implicates a “who” who remembers, this is an investment, a particular labour in which presence is carried through time and space, brought forth, heard, questioned, conjured, conversed with. Alison Hargreaves. For Derrida, the name is ontologically a cinder because, the instant a name is used, it stands in place of, obliterates, burns the real—whose identity is “so fragile” (53). The combustion of the body by the name, essence by identity, signified by signifier, or differently stated, the coming into being of material remainders of a non-material event: incineration. What in the structure of *Alison Hargreaves* do I remember? What of her essence remains present in the haunted sounds of rope sliding through frozen metal, in the crepitation of snow under rubber, in the elegiac structure of a landscape bare of anything other than air, and snow, and wind and rock? What is lost? What is mourned? What returns? As Jane Blocker points out in her meditation on the loss of Ana Mendieta, “there is no essence, only the search for essence; there is no identity, only the name” (35) (the empty signifier); there is no origin. There is no event other than the body—which once had material dimensions—and the movement of the body through a space that most of us will only ever imagine. The body is no more substantial than any other event.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> As Derrida writes, in an interview titled “Artifactualities”: “the event is another name for that which, in the thing that happens, we can neither reduce nor deny (or simply deny). It is another name for experience itself, which is always experience of the other. The event cannot be subsumed under any other concept, not even that of being. The

A becoming in the periphery of the world, mountaineering is carefully scripted and practiced, invested in, an artfully, painfully rehearsed spatial practice that is at once resistance (or at least the imitation of it) and rigid conformity to structure. The cycle of kick, swing, pull, step, kick, swing...it is a formalized pattern of repetition. Systems of rope management, communication, performance and response are codified and followed with very little possibility for improvisation—until things go wrong. Then all is improvisational; structure is cast into the abyss.

In his description of what he calls “hinterworlds,” Nietzsche’s nomenclature Zarathustra says: “I carried my own ash to the mountain, I invented a brighter flame ... it was suffering and incapacity that created all hinterworlds, and that brief madness of happiness that only the most suffering person experiences” (20).<sup>15</sup> This phrase is compelling because it collapses the binarisms between madness/sanity, suffering/happiness, and possibility/incapacity in a way that evokes the lived experience of mountaineering perfectly, perfectly rendering the affective dimensions of its contradictory structure and the bizarre temporality it imposes on the climber’s awareness of self and time, agony and ecstasy, self and other. In my own past as an ice climber, I identify strange moments of excess, a kind of thrown projection in which my own subjectivity was exceeded, in which a kind of melancholia of ecstatic dimensions intercepted my body. This disruption flashed up and then was gone, but a remainder lingered, lingers. Like the scent of smoke on the wind it curls around me, an invisible presence, I am sometimes drenched in it. What kind of hauntology *is* this, if not the desire to look back at the specter and to summon forth the space of longing, fear and self-recognition its presence marks, in so doing bringing it tenderly forward? “Do not fall away to ash!” says the woman *mise-en-abîme*. “Stay alight, stay burning and in so doing, let me continue to burn also, let me create a brighter flame, for I cannot prevent my own combustion.” She closes her eyes and sees the outline of a footprint in the snow, watches as this lovely impression seems to burn, erodes and falls away—mourning, in advance, its disappearance.

I do not know how to be any clearer about this, that this hauntology is everything to do with the burning outline in the air of *thanatos*, whose smoldering presence crystallizes for me around one Winter, days after nearly falling to my death, when envious silver fingers broke and I hung suspended above leagues of air, the weight of my body hanging from the excess fabric of one finger of my left glove. Then I, not insensible to my own distress, but unable to resist the magnetic force channeled through the lean tungstenite lines of those frozen wa-

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“there is” [*il y a*] or the “that there is something rather than nothing” belongs, perhaps, to the experience of the event rather than to a thinking being”. See Derrida, Jacques. “Artifactualities,” in Derrida, Jacques and Bernard Steigler, *Echographies of Television*. Trans. Jennifer Bajorek. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, Nietzsche himself, as we know, loved to mountain-climb.

terfalls, like a creature *native and indued unto that element*<sup>16</sup> continued climbing, always climbing (always desiring climbing, even while climbing). This recognition of the inertia in the story-line, the point at which I could have stopped but did not stop (a mnemonic containing the *should have stopped but did not*) evokes the writing of an awkwardly phrased letter that sat, folded and unread, in a drawer in a box in my bedroom for the whole of that winter. This folded paper bore forth words to my family, of remorse and of mourning (in advance) an event which did not occur. The embers remaining when these words were finally burned away created a material rendering of memory; an erotic simulacrum, memory of a death that did not occur—at least not in the way we usually speak about death. The dimensions of this other death can be felt but not looked at, and what we cannot look at arrests the gaze. This is the address, the asymmetry in which the entity, the specter (perhaps the outflow of energy that flew from the site of some other death—call her “Alison Hargreaves”) sees before she is seen. As Lukacher phrases it, “we think the otherness of the other’s inaudible voice, but our thinking about it is always inseparable from poetic saying, from the audible song, prayer or hymn that would bring us close as possible to the silence in which the other burns” (14). The spectacle (that which cannot be seen but is implicated by the visual field in the space between anorak, harness, boot) arrests the gaze and it rebounds. The climber, *mise-en-abîme*, sees only herself. This might be called the aesthetics of erasure, but I am tempted to call it something different, recognize it as the affective contrast of white on white, the sonic vibration of the wind across cheeks that burn and fingers that pulsate, seeming to burst from their casing of skin with the pain of cold and heat. I am tempted to call this the *revenant*, the haunted specter, but instead I call it the burning spirit, consumed by fire, aflame with cold. “Spirit is flame,” Heidegger writes (*On the Way to Language* 181). *Isn’t it beautiful*, I add, *how it flickers and darts, the way it seems to leap?* As Jane Blocker has it, “how beautifully it [seems to] disappear!” (134).

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<sup>16</sup> See Gertrude’s announcement of Ophelia’s death in *Hamlet* (4.6.95). What this reference connotes for the reader is the space of ambiguity that exists around the death/disappearance of women marked as “risky” (women *mise-en-abîme*.) In Gertrude’s announcement it is implied that Ophelia’s death was suicide, however this remains unclear and, indeed, persists as a space of indeterminacy for the remainder of the play. The accident/suicide narrative is also a feature of the discourse surrounding Hargreaves’ death and has been particularly prominent in online forums following the release of certain details pertaining to Hargreaves’ marriage (almost definitely to a physically abusive and much older partner) and her financial situation (Hargreaves’ mortgage had been foreclosed on months before her efforts to summit K2). These features of Hargreaves’ life are outside the scope of this analysis but ought to be noted.

...In the final account, the remains of a body, a pile of cinders unconcerned about preserving its form, a retreat, a retracing only without any relation with what, now, through love, I did and am just about to tell you —

— Jacques Derrida, *Cinders* (77)

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