
Risky Business: Contemporary American Women Writers and Extreme Adventure

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Abstract

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries adventuring women continue to challenge and be defined by gender norms. While the American ethos is defined in part by its adventuring spirit, (white) women's thrilling travel roles are quickly contained by associations with civilization or critiqued due to their association with unruly nature itself. This paper examines the gendered and raced roles risk plays in contemporary extreme outdoor adventure narratives by American women. Two themes emerge about the relationship between risk, gender, and race in the post-1970 nonfiction adventure travel narratives by and about American women the paper examines. First, physical risk or the fear of bodily harm in the form of injury, death, or sexual assault polices female adventurers in ways distinct from their male counterparts. Second, the gendered and raced nature of risk reveals colonial practices continue to shape women's travel beyond the authors' American homes. When looked at together, the two themes of fear and containment reveal little has changed in the ways American women adventurers are socialized to negotiate risk. Drawing from ethnographic research on American "edge work" or extreme risk conducted by Jennifer Lois and Laurence Gonzales, scholarship on contemporary extreme adventure travel by Jennifer H. Laing and Geoffrey I. Crouch, and postcolonial ecocriticism by Ursula K. Heise, this paper will extend the conversation of the previous papers' discussion of earlier traveling American women writers by considering the ways in which traveling women remain problematic subjects and objects.

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