2.1: Mountain Modernity
Lead scholar-producer: Ryan McDermott

I. Introduction - What Climbing Sounds and Feels Like Now [0.00-5.20]

Sound: "Close-up" of Nina Williams climbing

Ryan McDermott: That sound is somebody in the zone. It's the rock climber Nina Williams climbing a very tall, very difficult boulder without a rope.

James Lucas: She's on two really tiny holds and she jumps her feet. It's just this little hop… jumping… forty-five feet off the ground without a rope.

Nina Williams: For me it's not about feeling like I need this adrenaline rush; it's actually the opposite. I just want to reach this state of action of my body and tranquility in my mind.

Ryan McDermott: That music and dialogue is from "The High Road," part of the Reel Rock climbing video festival. The short film documents Williams's effort to climb several daunting boulders in Bishop, CA. Two of the boulders get the grade of V12, which is four grades more difficult than any move Alex Honnold did on his famous free solo of El Capitan. And if Williams were to fall from the top of one of these climbs, she would likely die, or at least be very seriously injured.

After trying and failing many times before, the climber is now finally going to get to the top without falling. And when this kind of music starts, you know it's gonna happen.

Nina Williams: *Being in tall places… I love that feeling of absolute certainty and control and confidence in a situation that seems totally dangerous… Yes! . . . Oh, I'm so psyched...But I can say with certainty, "I've got this."*

Yeah, I wanna be the first woman to climb that trifecta on that boulder. I don't want women to limit themselves… It's this primal instinct that overcomes me. It's just like, you can't fall. You cannot fall right now.

Ryan McDermott: There seems to be something very timeless about this endeavor. It's a "primal instinct" that drives Williams. There's no ropes, no harness, no elaborate 21st-century gear helping her make the climb – just her own body. And she's reaching after a timeless, transcendent, perhaps even spiritual unity of bodily action and inner peace. Nevertheless, some people would claim that what she's doing and expressing is a uniquely modern phenomenon.

For the past few centuries, people from the poet William Wordsworth to the scholar Jakob Burkhardt have claimed that the love of seeing and climbing mountains is something that humankind only developed in the "modern age" – roughly since the 18th century. As we'll see, though, archaeological evidence suggests that humans from many, many centuries ago also took pleasure in climbing mountains. So what does this idea really mean, that there's something "modern" about mountain climbing? Well, the climbing itself isn't new – even the enjoyment of climbing isn't new. What's new is that many people think that climbing makes us different from the generations that came before – that climbing makes us modern. And because of this, mountain climbing is an illuminating way to approach the very question of what it means to be modern.

Welcome to *Genealogies of Modernity*. In this series, we will take up familiar stories about how we became modern and see how cutting-edge research challenges those stories and reveals new, unexpected histories behind the present day. What we'll find is a series of alternative pathways to our modern moment, and overlooked resources from the past that can help us flourish in the present.

II. **Petrarch, or, The Man Who Climbed Up A Mountain And Came Down A Modern [5:20-11:32]**

The word "modern" is used in many ways. In this episode alone, you'll hear scholars placing the dawn of modernity in the 14th century, the 18th century, and the 19th century. Your high school history books probably had a range of stories about how we became modern. Modernity is sometimes said to begin in the 17th century with the Scientific Revolution and the establishment of colonial powers in the New World. Or sometimes with the Enlightenment and the consolidation of nation states in the 18th century. Or sometimes modernity takes off with the 19th-century Industrial Revolution and widespread capitalization of financial markets.

What's going on here? In the next episode we'll dig deeper into what it means to call something modern. For now, we can notice that in all these cases, the word "modern" marks a sharp contrast between now and what came before. In a stronger sense, "modern" can indicate a world-altering rupture from the past. Most importantly, to say "modern" is to adopt a particular way of thinking about history and about the present. We can call this kind of thinking and speaking "modernity talk."

Climbing is a great way to understand how modernity talk works because, according to a very influential story, the first modern man became modern by climbing a mountain.

The scene is Mt. Ventoux—the "Windy Peak"—in the French Alps. Picture a cone-shaped mountain with a summit that looks as barren as Mars. Today it's a famous destination of the Tour de France bike race, with a road leading up to the very top. But in 1336, Mt Ventoux was remote and forbidding enough that the Italian poet and humanist scholar Franceso Petrarch thought that nobody had ever climbed this mountain to the top.

This is Peter Hansen, a historian at Worcester Polytechnic Institute who writes about the history of mountaineering:

Peter Hansen: Petrarch wrote that in 1336 he climbed Mt. Ventoux, taking a very circuitous route to the top, and he reached the summit. Petrarch admired the view, looked all around, could see the rivers, the ocean. And then he thought to open up Augustine's *Confessions* intending to read at random, and when he opened, he read a passage that said, "And men go to admire the high mountains of the huge waves of the sea, the broad flow of rivers and the expanse of the ocean, orbit of the stars, and they pass themselves by." Petrarch was stunned, closed the book and then decided that "having seen enough of the mountain, I turned my inner eye toward myself." He descended from the peak and wrote to his mentor to tell him the story of this ascent."

Ryan McDermott: In the 19th century, scholars seized on this scene as an exemplar of the discovery of the modern individual man. Two details caught their attention: First, Petrarch had climbed a mountain that his ancestors had never dared to climb (or so they thought). And second, at the top of the mountain, communing with nature, Petrarch turned inward to discover something even more magnificent than the mountain: the human self.

One of those scholars was Swiss historian Jakob Burckhardt, whose 1860 book *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* was profoundly influential on how later scholars thought about modernity.

Peter Hansen: "What it represented for him was man discovering himself in nature and this was the Birth of Modern Man. Jakob Burckhardt popularized that kind of modernity talk. For Burkhart, the birth of individualism, discovery of man in nature, decline of superstition had created the Renaissance, a civilization which was the mother of our own."

Ryan McDermott: It was no accident that Burckhardt zeroed in on mountain climbing as the scene of the birth of modern man. He was writing his groundbreaking book in Basel, Switzerland, surrounded by a burgeoning culture of mountain climbing.

[09:43]

Peter Hansen: In the foothills of the Alps, Burkhart could see all around him climbing of mountains in the 1850s. Mountaineers from Switzerland and Germany and the rest of the of Europe are going to the Alps really in numbers that had not been seen before. People looking around then said about the mountaineers, "Really, this shows there is something new under the sun," that there is something new. It makes it modern for people to be climbing mountains. Nobody in 1336 thought Petrarch was modern because he – least of all himself – by climbing the mountain. But go forward several centuries and in mid-19th century because people then were climbing mountains, they would look back for their antecedents, their ancestors, the people who were like them, who they could point to as being the precursors or the first."

Ryan McDermott: The climbers themselves were pushing this narrative. One Englishman was particularly influential because he was both an Alpine mountaineer and a well-known Victorian writer.

Peter Hansen: Leslie Stephen was a man of letters who was a scholar of 18th-century writing, and he looked at people's accounts of mountains, and he said there's a dividing line in 1760 where people like Horas Benedict de Saussure–he was like the Luther of the mountains or the Robespierre of mountaineering. He was a transition figure that marks a change from people before and after. Steven said, "It's the old school and the new school. This is something new. This is modern."

Ryan McDermott: Leslie Stephen's and Jakob Burckhardt's ideas were profoundly influential in the twentieth century and continue to shape the way we think about both climbing and modernity. But as we will hear shortly, recent scholarship has challenged this history of mountain climbing–and that challenge opens up new ways of thinking about what it means to be modern.

III. Mountain Gloom, Mountain Glory [11:32-21:05]

Ryan McDermott: In a general way, the term "modern" designates a split with the past, a point in time where some change occurs that's radical enough to usher in a new era. But what "modern" means more specifically depends on what kind of change we've identified. 19th and 20th-century scholars focused on a change in people's attitudes toward mountains as evidence of a broader shift in humanity's relationship to nature and, in particular, individuals' feelings of control over their environment.

In 1959, scholar Marjorie Hope Nicolson published *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*. The tension expressed by Nina Williams, between feelings of fear and feelings of control, is central to Nicolson's thesis about pre-modern and modern attitudes to mountains.

Dawn Hollis: It's probably the book that she's most famous for, and it's called *Mount Gloom and Mountain Glory: the Development of The Aesthetics of the Infinite*. It's like she's setting up this distinction between us modern people and not modern people.

Ryan McDermott: That's Dawn Hollis, a classical historian at University of St. Andrews, in Scotland.

Dawn Hollis: So I'm Dawn Hollis and I would describe myself as a historian of mountains and a historian of people's experiences in mountains.

Ryan McDermott: Nicholson associated the feeling of fear with premodern people's experiences of mountains. Here's Hollis reading from the Introduction to Mountain Gloom, Mountain Glory:

Dawn Hollis: "For hundreds of years, most men who climbed mountains had climbed them fearfully, grimly, resenting the necessity, only on rare occasions suggesting the slightest aesthetic gratification." (Nicholson, Introduction)

Ryan McDermott: I want to put a pin in this, this contrast between necessity and aesthetic gratification—it will be a thread that runs throughout the story we're examining here. Is it possible to climb mountains just for the sense of delight and beauty and excitement that Nina Williams described? Or are you only climbing the mountains because you need to – because you need to access a high-up cache of food stores, or attack a neighboring group on the other side? What's the real motivation for the impressive feats of climbing humans have done throughout history?

Marjorie Hope Nicholson drew a very stark contrast between utilitarian and nonutilitarian reasons for rock climbing and for going up into the mountains. This stark contrast was something Dawn Hollis wanted to probe further. She was obsessed as a teenager with the 1920s Everest expeditions. When she went to college she joined the Oxford University Mountaineering Club, and then found herself taking mountains as her research topic in graduate school.

Dawn Hollis: And so yeah, I definitely came from that perspective of, "I love mountains and I want to climb them," and to me it was like, "Wow, that's so weird that people used to not like mountains." I want to find more out about that.

Ryan McDermott: Because Marjorie Hope Nicholson seems to have thought premodern people could not have taken pleasure in mountain climbing.

[14:58]

Dawn Hollis: But then when I came to it and actually started reading it more and more, I was like, hmm. Even the bits where you could read it as them not liking mountains, I think that's us applying sort of modern standards to early modern attitudes. And then there are also times when it's definitely, they're definitely enjoying being in the mountains.

And that for me is sort of what the whole *Mountain Gloom, Mountain Glory* discourse, which extends way beyond just Nicholson, is all about when you really get down to it. It's about saying "Us today, us modern people, we are better than those people back then because, and one of the reasons why we're better is because we realize that mountains are great and they didn't." Nicholson and other writers of the era are implicated sort of, almost unconsciously in these sort of implicit narratives of modernity.

Ryan McDermott: As we'll see, premodern people felt all kinds of things about mountains and climbing, including, probably, the flow state that climber Nina Williams described at the top of the episode. So Hollis got to thinking: How is it possible that Nicholson and I read the same things and heard them in completely different ways? Where were those ideas coming from? What was creating the thought space that allowed Nicholson to see what she saw and not to see the other things that I'm seeing?

Dawn Hollis: So she talks about someone called Thomas Coriat, who's climbing in the Alps in the 17th century. He's crossing various Alpine passes. And there are these chair bearers who are going up the same pass and they make their money by carrying people up mountains on a chair suspended between two poles. And he doesn't want to, he prides himself in being a walker. He wants to do it himself. But he doesn't know the way, so he's trying to follow these people and they keep going faster and faster to try and tire them out. And eventually he gives up and he's like, "Oh, I was so exhausted that I had to pay them to carry me," because they sort of, basically, they beat him. And so he's saying that he's terrified of the swaying of being on this chair. And he gets to the top and he sort of looks out at the pass and he's like, "Oh, it's so amazing. I'm above the clouds." But he also quotes Virgil in this quotation, which can roughly be translated as "One day it will be a pleasure to look on even this."

And that whole passage, Nicholson interprets it, she says, you know, "Coriat was terrified every second that he was on his mountain." Whereas the way I read that is, actually he's sort of making this physical effort. He's then defeated. He doesn't particularly like the experience of being on a chair swaying between two blokes, and then he gets to the top. And I think that that sort of quotation he makes of "One day it will be a pleasure to look on even this." Exactly what an awful lot of, I think mountaineers would say in the moment of being in a snowstorm, aching, hungry, tired, that, you know, it's only in the aftermath that you can look back and, and really experience it as pleasure. You can't experience it as pleasure in the moment because there's other haptic experiences going on, which are not necessarily pleasant in the moment.

Ryan McDermott: Right. Yeah, it's Type Two Fun.

Dawn Hollis: Yeah. Type Two Fun. Exactly. Yeah. But Nicholson, she has this passage very early on in the introduction where she says that people see in nature what we've been taught to look for. We feel what we've been prepared to feel. But I think that's also true of history. You know, she's reading these early modern and she's expecting to find negative attitudes to nature, and so she finds them.

Ryan McDermott: In her research, Hollis has come across numerous examples of premodern people who loved mountains. In fact, loving mountains seems to have been so commonplace that people didn't write books about it.

Dawn Hollis: So if you look on the Wikimedia page for Ben Nevis, that'll say that the first recorded, the first ascent of Ben Nevis was sometime I think in the 1770s.

Ryan McDermott: Ben Nevis is the highest peak in Scotland.

Dawn Hollis: And I was in the archives in Edinburgh and I was reading this sort of series of letters from the 1600s. And there's this dude who's writing to his friends and he's like, "Oh, I'm visiting Fort William, and I went to the top of Ben Nevis yesterday and I found a piece of ice the size of my hat. That was interesting. And I came down." And I'm like, "You don't write about it like that if climbing to the top of Ben Nevis is not something that is commonly done."

Ryan McDermott: Dawn went on a climbing trip of her own to the Alps. High in the mountains she found a seasonal village where locals would take their animals to graze in the summer. Here she came across more evidence of premodern mountain climbing – evidence that dated from even further back in time.

Dawn Hollis: It's a high sort of glacial basin, and you see the sort of glaciers coming down and the peaks sort of immediately around you. And there's all of the houses that have the buildings that they have lived in. But then the church, the chapel, for that settlement is a bit of a walk away and you have to walk up and out of the base over to the lip of the basin to the edge of the valley.

[20:08]

Ryan McDermott: This was a very old church. Hollis afterwards went and dug into the archives, as historians do. And she found records of repairs being made on the church in the 1500s. So we're talking about a medieval church.

Dawn Hollis: And I was standing there and I looked out and I'm like, "This view is absolutely beautiful. It is a view of mountains, of glaciers, of peaks, and this is where they deliberately decided to build a church." They could have built the chapel much, much closer to the settlement, far away from these mountains if… And I was like, "There is no way that people who thought the mountains were horrible and distasteful and the wreckage of the world, there is no way they would've built their chapel right here."

Ryan McDermott: Well it was also probably much more difficult to build it up there.

Dawn Hollis: Yeah, exactly. And to me I was like, if you are, you are walking to worship God and then you're stepping out and you're like, "Ah, here is why we are worshiping." And to me, so that was like a real kind of moment of like, "aha."

IV. Keet Seel [21:05-29:36]

Ryan McDermott: I had my own "aha" moment on a solo road trip through the American southwest when I was seventeen. I got a rare pass to hike in and spend the night under the Anasazi cliff dwellings at Keet Seel, in northern Arizona. This was a site older than even Hollis's late-medieval church in the Alps. And when I visited, scholars believed that this site represented the last, desperate gasp of the Anasazi civilization, which had been brought to ruin by famine and war in the 14th century. The theory was that the Anasazi people had been driven into the cliffs by brute necessity to escape their attackers: fear of their enemies, the theory went, overcame their fear of heights. It was a theory that fitted perfectly with Marjorie Hope Nicholson's view.

But my adolescent romantic mind resisted that thesis. It couldn't be an exhaustive explanation, I thought, because I loved climbing and these people clearly knew how to climb, and I looked up at those cliffs and I thought, "Surely they loved climbing, like me!"

Larry Coats: Well. Yeah, the, the one thing that I would say that that becomes clear as you study, you know, the Anasazi or the, or Fremont or anybody else, is that life was pretty grim; that you were very hungry and thirsty and likely cold or hot a lot of the time. It was very, very rugged, you know, difficult life that you were carving out.

Ryan McDermott: That's geographer Larry Coats bursting my bubble of teenage enthusiasm.

Larry Coats: So, I'm Larry Coats. I'm a professor in geography at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City.

Ryan McDermott: Larry reminded me that, yes, life was hard and utilitarian concerns would have been top priority for the residents of Keet Seel.

But the more I talked to Larry and his colleague Shannon Boomgarden, the more it became clear to me that this stark divide I had been operating under – between utilitarian and nonutilitarian reasons to climb, between work and leisure, necessity and aesthetic gratification – that divide was itself a modern way of viewing things. These contrasts map onto Marjorie Hope Nicholson's belief that premodern people feared mountains while modern people enjoyed them. If you are afraid of steep cliffs, the only reason you would scale them would be if you absolutely have to. But the more I talked with scholars of the Fremont and Anasazi peoples, the more examples I encountered to show that people in all times and places could do scary things for fun, or find enjoyment in useful work, or blend business and pleasure.

Shannon Boomgarden: I'm Shannon Boomgarden and I've been working in Range Creek Canyon over twenty years now, first as a grad student and now as the director. The field station is managed by the University of Utah and the Natural History Museum of Utah.

Ryan McDermott: Shannon and Larry study the Fremont people who inhabited East-central Utah in the 12th century, far north from and a couple hundred years earlier than the Anasazi who had built the cliff dwellings at Keet Seel. But what they have been discovering has really helped me wrap my head around what those premodern climbers did and did not have in common with modern climbing.

Shannon Boomgarden: So Range Creek runs through the center of Range Creek Canyon, and it's a perennial creek. And then the cliff sides are 900 feet above that and rising and kind of winding along the creek.

[25:06]

Ryan McDermott: Up inside those cliffs the Fremont built probably hundreds of granaries to store corn, and more than a hundred are still there, perched in the most improbable places.

Larry Coats: It's actually completely constructed out of wood and it's cantilevered off the cliff. There are these beams that have to actually support the structure of the thing sticking off the cliff below. It all looks like it should just fall off the cliff immediately, but it's been there for at least 900 years.

Ryan McDermott: Now, these crazily located granaries clearly had utilitarian purposes. But Larry Coats thinks there's more to them than just functional storage for food.

Larry Coats: There's much more going on than just putting it somewhere visible. There's also some level of what I always think is kind of like, "Let me show you where I can build one of these things." So maybe social expression or just bragging rights, I don't really know. But there's, there's definitely, the siting of these, of these granaries is really off the charts in some places.

Ryan McDermott: One of those places has been given a very modern name, Locomotive Rock.

Larry Coats: It's actually a freestanding pinnacle, Locomotive Rock is. And so we did the first post-Fremont ascent of it and found a bunch of sites on the pinnacle, all around the pinnacle, tucked around it.

Ryan McDermott: Did I mention that Larry is an accomplished rock climber and that he's headed up the exploration of these granaries, most of which require modern technical rock climbing methods and technology?

Larry Coats: It's actually one of the few somewhat pleasant climbs in the canyon, that it sort of protects and the moves aren't bad. So it was about 5,7ish. So it was – it's kind of pleasant. We've done it a few times now, but, but then we were blown away by what we found up there because immediately, like ten feet below the summit of this thing, the first thing I saw was this beautiful deeply dish matate. So some grandma was sitting up there grinding corn next to the summit of this thing at some point. And it's just the craziest thing imaginable.

Ryan McDermott: But it actually gets crazier. Because Locomotive Rock features some pictographs - images carved into the cliff itself. These cultural artifacts are definitely not there for pure survival. In fact, chipping these images into the cliffside was very dangerous.

Larry Coats: There's also an incredible rock art panel at the very top of this thing. So it's the famous one that everyone cites for the canyon. It's actually our Range Creek logo for the research project, and it's carved onto this face that has an undercut under it that's at least fifteen feet and that's ninety feet above the ground. And I was the first one that rappelled down to it to really get a close look. And I actually found a couple of footholds and a little crimp on the left hand that you could have stood there and pecked this very elaborate petroglyph . However, I don't know how you'd get out from under the overhang, so I think they must have built some sort of scaffold, since we know that they could do that, to get the person out there. But then I think they actually kind of hung from the cliff and pecked these very beautiful, elaborate petroglyphs, and that's mind-blowing.

Ryan McDermott: A pictograph carved over a rock overhang where only the gods could see it – that doesn't seem like something done for purely utilitarian purposes. It's hard to see how the "brute necessity" that supposedly drove the Fremont to these cliffs could have motivated these improbably-placed images. But maybe this isn't a story about brute necessity after all. Maybe this ancient people also took some pleasure in scaling the cliffs and showing off what they could do there.

In other words, maybe what they felt about climbing was very similar to what has been felt by many so-called "modern" climbers.

V. What Makes Climbing Modern? [29:36-42:01]

Ryan McDermott: So we've seen evidence from the 16th century, from the middle ages, and from very early peoples in the Americas, all suggesting that people climbed cliff faces and mountains for more than just base necessity. They found enjoyment and wonder in high places. Even the activities we associate today with necessity–like grain storage–could be blended with completely unnecessary undertakings like rock art.

So how did the idea get started that the love of mountains was a uniquely modern phenomenon instead of a universal human experience? That was an idea that didn't originate with Nicholson in the 20th century. Dawn Hollis traces it to what is sometimes called the Romantic period in England, in the late seventeen and early 1800s, and particularly to the poet William Wordsworth.

Dawn Hollis: William Wordsworth, the inaugurator of this romantic, of this new style of poetry, as he puts it, is then in his later life living in the Lake District, very famously: “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” and seeing the daffodils and stuff like that. And there's this proposal for a railway running into the Lake District so that more people, particularly poorer people, can access the Lake District. And he writes these letters to the editor of the *Morning Post* to sort of argue against the way this should be. And it's really interesting because he's sort of arguing that – he says, well, there's no point letting poor people come here because they won't appreciate mountains. And so he's having to make an argument that the appreciation of mountains is not innate to human nature.

Ryan McDermott: The implication is that it is only certain humans—modern, enlightened humans—who developed the capacity to appreciate mountains.

Dawn Hollis: He's trying to make an argument that it is something which is developed and developed only in the upper classes and in particularly in William Wordsworth. So he rests his argument on the assertion that “the relish for choice and picturesque natural scenery is of quite recent origin.” And so he writes, talks about a various whole list of writers from the 17th century, and he says that until the late 18th century “there is not a single traveler whose published writings disprove the assertion that where precipitous rocks and mountains are mentioned at all, they're spoken of as objects of dislike and fear, not of admiration.” So he's basically saying, well, those people in the past didn't appreciate mountains because they hadn't yet developed the taste for mountains.

Ryan McDermott: Now Wordsworth himself was not what I would call a great mountaineer. I mean, the guy liked to hike. He liked to compose poetry while he was hiking. But it was really in the next century that English outdoorsmen and women started to embrace mountaineering. As we heard from Peter Hansen, in the late 1800s, people like Leslie Stephen were taking on challenging peaks and climbing cliffs that today would be considered dangerous without ropes.

In 1871, Stephen wrote a book called *The Playground of Europe*, which describes his and his friends’ Alpine exploits. This book became a kind of ideological handbook of 19th- and early 20th-century European climbers.

Dawn Hollis: He makes this comment towards the end of his article that “my readers will agree that the love of mountains is intimately connected with all that is noblest in human nature.” And he then says that “It should be the purpose of the following pages to prove that whilst all good and wise men necessarily love the mountains, those love them best who have wandered the longest in their recesses and have most endangered their own lives, and those are their guides and the attempt to open out routes amongst them.” So he, Leslie Stephen, definitely identifies himself, and that to me is the key to his whole article in the old school, in the new school is he is saying, I really, I love mountains so much. I love mountains so much. And the love of mountains is one of the pinnacles of human development. And this is where I'm at.

Ryan McDermott: So if we have all these examples of pre-modern people clearly relishing being in the mountains, wanting to go up high to build things on top of peaks, what do we make, then, of this idea that there's a real difference between the modern experience of mountains and the pre-modern experience? Well, there’s a few pieces to the answer. One is that 18th- and 19th century Europeans found pleasure in climbing for a genuinely new reason. Here’s Peter Hansen:

Peter Hansen: From the 18th century onwards, many people looked at the mountain as something that they could climb to show that they were modern men, that they get triumph over nature.

Ryan McDermott: According to Hansen, one aspect of climbing that definitely emerges after the 18th century, especially in the 19th century, was the vision of climbing as an assertion of the individual will over nature. Mountain climbing let people discover themselves in nature, as Petrarch was said to have done. Yet they discovered themselves not through inward, philosophical or spiritual reflection, but by proving to themselves that they could conquer the nature around them.

But there's a tension here, because climbing is hard. Climbers fall. People die on mountains.

[35:13]

Peter Hansen: The idea that what you're going to do by climbing the mountain is to demonstrate your mastery, your individual will over nature is something that's… you know, you don't control the game.

Ryan McDermott: Perhaps the best example of this tension is the Oscar-winning film *Free Solo*, which documents climber Alex Honnold's ascent of Yosemite's El Capitan without ropes.

Peter Hansen: I mean the *Free Solo* film in some ways is the embodiment of this myth of the individual climber doing something completely on their own. They're not tied to anyone else. The notion that you're doing a climb, I mean, that is almost the highest expression of this longer tradition of the individual exerting their will to climb the peak.

Ryan McDermott: Of course, Alex Honnold couldn't have soloed El Capitan without a huge community of people: the partners that he went up there with on ropes, year after year, to dial in the moves. Even the camera crew helped bail him out one time when he got scared. But the fiction of the individual self mastering nature is what dominates the film. And I think what we see when we start to peel back the layers is a tension that Hanson says has always been there in modern climbing.

Peter Hansen: So there's something that's more fundamental or foundational that I would relate to our experience of modernity. So that this experience of partnership with other people, but the desire to assert the notion that you were doing it by yourself, that tension emerges in mountaineering and in other fields and other places. And it remains with us.

Ryan McDermott: This 19th-century notion, that climbing represents the triumph of the individual will, obscures the actual, collective activity involved in climbing. But it does demonstrate an important point that we'll see over and over in this series. Humans can undertake what looks like the very same activity generation after generation. But the meaning of what they're doing – what it represents to the people doing it – that meaning can change.

Peter Hansen: I mean there's differences of practice, differences of what people are doing when they're at the top. So you might see a continuity of what seems from a common sense point of view to be the same: people went to the top of the mountain. But what that meant at different times could have been very, very different. What it meant to go to the top of the mountain for some acts of religious devotion was a different attitude than someone who's going there to say "I'm conquering the mountain," if I'm literally putting my foot on top in order to express my dominance over it. That's very different from the people say, who went to Mt. Ventoux as Catholic pilgrims in the 19th century, or the, we'll call them pilgrims who were going to celebrate some kind of a sung cult at an earlier era.

Ryan McDermott: Remember Mt. Ventoux? That's the same mountain Petrarch climbed, the one that 19th-century scholars said made him the first modern man – but he was far from the first to climb it.

Peter Hansen: And there are archeologists who've gone to the top of Mt. Ventoux and they've found circles from rituals of some kind on the summit from antiquity that date to celebration of gods of the sun. And there's items of religious devotion that date from before and after Petrarch. And of course, the summit becomes the place where crosses are erected. After Petrarch, but in the 17th century, 18th century, 19th century, they put a big iron cross on the top. And there's a television tower now, erected sometime in the 20th century. And you can see some places like that, that are accessible to communities that have been occupied for literally centuries or millennia, that even if we don't know about it, they were there, people went to some mountain tops like that.

[39:46]

Ryan McDermott: However similar or different the contemporary act of climbing may be to what was done before, we are divided from past peoples by the meaning we attribute to the climb – including, sometimes, our sense that our climbing exemplifies our modern identity.

And this brings us to one of the most fundamental notions of modernity we'll explore – more fundamental than the notion that being a modern person means being able to discover yourself in nature or conquer nature. For some generations of climbers, mountain climbing did not represent a difference from the generations that had come before – think of that letter casually referencing a climb up Ben Nevis as though this were a totally ordinary thing to do. But for other, later generations, climbing a mountain did represent a difference. Accurately or not, they told themselves that by virtue of scaling mountains, they were acting, thinking, feeling differently than humans had done before. And it's that *assertion of radical difference* that really made them modern. People in the past climbed mountains and apparently enjoyed it, just as people do today. But people long ago did *not* think that climbing made them different from the people who came before them; these 18th- and 19th-century mountaineers, though, did. When that started happening – when people started saying, "Aha, here I am the first at the top of this mountain, and that makes me different, and modern" – well, saying *that* is what makes them modern.

This is one of the key ideas we'll explore in this series: that the claim to be modern is a claim to have made a radical separation from the past. Climbers in the 19th century made this claim, but historical evidence shows that it wasn't entirely true. And that's often the case with such claims, as we'll see in later episodes. So that leaves us with the question – what narratives about the past work better? Not just about climbing, but all the other parts of our lives? What stories from the past will really help us understand what it means to be modern? And what is at stake when we adopt the language of modernity?

VI. Conclusion [42:01-46:50]

Dawn Hollis: It's about saying, "Us today, us modern people, we are better than those people back then because, and one of the reasons why we're better is because we realize that mountains are great and they didn't."

Ryan McDermott: One of the things at stake in using the language of modernity is precisely this implication, that not only are we *different* from the people in the past, but this difference is one of

superiority—we are *better* than the people of the past—more enlightened, more moral, more cultured—what have you.

And this carries the further implication that, since we are better than those people, we couldn't possibly be made any better by attending to and learning about them – they couldn't possibly have anything to teach us.

But as this episode shows, there is still a lot to learn about the past. Once we start looking around the world and across world history, we can find alternative stories and images of what it might mean to be modern – what it means to live in the present world, where our world came from, and how *else* we might live in it. When we really dig into this history, we will often be surprised by the inspiration and wisdom we discover for new ways of living in the present.

Here's Peter Hansen again:

Peter Hansen: It's that the idea that that's the only way where there are these alternate paths. There's not just that one way of being or relating to the mountain. And that these alternate ways of doing it, those are still available to us from traditions from the past. And they're available to us in ways we haven't yet described and haven't yet created. So there's ways to build new worlds, new forms of connections with nature and with the mountain that will be right for our time or for this next generation.

[43:56]

Ryan McDermott: The past is not an inert background to the present. The past is alive, and our relationship to the past changes as our times change.

Imagine being that person who claimed the first ascent of Ben Nevis in 1771. He may well have thought, as Wordsworth wrote, that the appreciation of mountains is not innate to human nature, and that it took a truly noble soul like himself to dare to conquer the summit. Now we look back and smile, recognizing that people had been climbing Ben Nevis for ages; they just didn't think it made them nobler or more fully human than their ancestors.

Those so-called modern mountaineers weren't just wrong about the past. In so many ways, they were also wrong about the future of climbing. Because they considered themselves so radically different from their ancestors, and because they prized the individual's conquest over nature, they missed glimpsing in the past the feelings that would arguably become the driving force of contemporary climbing – that peace and union with nature that Nina Williams described, and also the sense of community among climbers that has made climbing gyms some of the most popular gathering places in present-day America.

As we venture into the past in this series, I invite you to a deeper experience of our common humanity and to a richer sense of the resources that the past offers for imagining new ways of flourishing in the future.

In the next episode, we're going to take up the problem of modernity by going back more than a thousand years to ancient China. There, perhaps surprisingly, we'll find modernity talk that sounds strikingly similar to recent ways of relating the present to the past. We'll also learn why that modernity talk failed in ancient China and why it's still such a risky move to try to deploy it today.

End