

**Research article**

## Historicizing vulnerability: place-names, risk and memory in the Mont Blanc area

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**Abstract:** This research puts forward what has been achieved about the findings of a research I am currently conducting in the Aosta Valley, a francophone region in the North Western Alps of Italy, regarding the relation which links history, risk, disasters, environment and human vulnerability. The focus of this work, based on place-names, is to prove how social vulnerability is rooted into the landscapes, in its history, and in its memory-scapes.

It is common knowledge that the act of naming places is in fact a way to control and infuse space, with particular belief-systems and values. As Nash and Robinson argued, the specific context of place-naming came to be considered as an “essential human undertaking” to signify cultural or social meaning in the experienced world, and toponyms came to be understood as matrices of language and the various cultural elements, including landscape, which compose a society’s way of life.

Toponyms potentially are able to “transform the sheerly physical and geographical into something historically and socially experienced”, as Tilley states. Place-names are also depositories of the knowledge that ancestors had given to such places. For this reason, the information embedded in place-names can be used to implement the scientific understanding of such “natural phenomena”. Some ancient toponyms in the Valley of Aosta maintain a significance related to “natural hazards”, or to potential disasters. These ancient local toponyms used to connect people to the land, keeping relationships with ecology, geology, fauna, flora and material culture. Nowadays this connection has mainly been lost: people are still re-building and re-inhabiting the same “risk places”, avoiding history. To historicize vulnerability signifies to renegotiate the collective memory and the socio-spatial identities, by allowing the dialogue between past and future.

**Keywords:** anthropology; risk; disaster; vulnerability; memory; place-names; Alps; climate change

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## 1. Introduction

Although language and landscape are the audio and visual setting around which experience and perception of a place are made up [1,2], toponyms constitute a class of words, or names, that have long been overlooked in the anthropological debate. Socio-cultural anthropology has developed its reflection about the diverse forms humanity assumes through the social and cultural process that humans do. The discipline has assigned a great value to the study and comparison of terminologies and classes of names concerning kinship and the classification of “natural” and vegetal world—just think of Lévi-Strauss and his work on totemism [3]—, while place names have been largely neglected and confined to strictly linguistic studies. The “everyone’s else names” and the “everyone’s else words” make the anthropologist to investigate about the “sense of places” in which they live, and by them inhabited. Ethnography, as any other kind of written account about human life, has anchored to places and never managed without. The Italian writer Carlo Levi argued that “words” necessarily possess a significance: there is a magic power in them; a word is never only a convention or a “breath of wind”, but a reality, something that acts [4].

The anthropological endeavor can hardly overlook the places in which culture, or cultures, are incorporated. To borrow from Marc Augé, culture cannot but have place somewhere [5].

Over the last twenty years, going against the grain of the theoretical proposals of contemporary anthropology focused on flows, on non-places, on globalization, the debate grew rich of a watchful ethnography about places and landscapes, which is now enabling us to recognize the symbolic and social relevance of place-names within different cultural contexts.

This renewed interest seems to be a result of a very special conjuncture: on the one hand the shift of attention by the social sciences from the semantic-referential dimension and hermeneutic-referential of the meaning to the pragmatic-agentive one and, on the other, the worldly emerging “environmental question”.

It became clear how much names of place could be meaningful only when the social sciences started to reconnect words to their usage, to their context, and to their agency, and also to the sensorial and bodily experience (*embodiment*).

In the Anthropocene, a juncture of prevailing globalized economy and planetary ecological crisis, those landscapes, those places, and those lands where ethnographic practices have worked implicitly and unnoticed for a long time, came back to the research agenda through a different perspective. Now they are no more seen like exotic scenarios which became natural frames for the ethnographic undertaking or “space canisters” of cultural meanings, but as both social and symbolic constructs, that in turn are able to adapt forms of social life on local scale.

Landscapes and places are no longer an external setting—static and devoid of social interactions; they have become the results of a symbolic, social and political agency together with the ground that builds it because “ancestral territory”, “natural environment” or “economic resource”. So “everyone’s else words” become “ethno-graphic documents” on which to base any claim of theoretical autonomy of anthropological discourse [6]. To do ethnography on places and their related

names can certainly enlarge the horizons of knowledge and the meanings of the discipline, for example by focusing on some crucial and urgent themes, like the ecological and environmental emergencies.

As Tuan argued, a place begins to exist when people give it a name and a meaning, thus differentiating it from the larger, undifferentiated space [7]. The more significant body of literature on place-making deals with the meaning of places for large social groups (e.g., Brace and others [8]; Shinde [9]).

Anthropologist La Cecla writes about the cultural and intimate dimension of “felt space”; and there is no doubt that for a “settled culture” the perceived space doesn’t correspond to which is revealed within a photograph or a relief. And so no external observer is able to perceive an “indigenous space” if he doesn’t take into account the local “indigenous” space categories, and if he doesn’t get the perception and the wisdom which belongs to the native group. The specific form of a settlement is a cultural construction, a mind map which only the inhabitants are in the position to keep them alive [10].

This is even more true in order to understand the meaning of place-names.

## 2. Names of place in the Alps

Human attitude to space is also recorded in toponyms. They are frequently the reflection of physical environment, and as such represent a kind of a unifying link between the material, tangible world and our understanding of this space: In a fundamental way names create landscape writes Tilley [11]. As Berkes quotes names of places (toponyms) are essential communicative tools for all indigenous, aboriginal, and First Nations peoples. For these communities the names given to features in the landscape help them to share traditional ecological knowledge [12]. This function elevates indigenous place-names from being simply passive markers of space to being active makers of place [13].

According to Radding and Western [14], a place name often becomes opaque by the passing of time and historical occurrences, as its original meaning is lost, and the name becomes parted from the original reason of choice. While this seems to be widely the case in the Western world [15].

In some regions of the world, it is now common occurrence for the traditional ecological wisdom embedded in indigenous place-names to be valorized and drawn upon in contemporary efforts to build sustainable and resilient communities. This has been particularly effective where communities and their landscapes have been threatened by environmental change (e.g., Jones [13]; Inglis [16]). As Jones states this has not been true in the Western societies, where the environmental threat is no less serious, but where traditional ecological knowledge has been seen (if it has been seen at all) as a poor relation to modern scientific data. Increasingly, however, it is being recognized that science, technology, and engineering may not hold all the answers to cope with the main modern environmental challenges [13].

This is dramatically true for glaciers’ melting and its consequences (floods, water scarcity, avalanches, permafrost loss, rockfalls), one of the most meaningful threat now facing Alps and Mountain regions all over the world, as the result of rising global temperatures and climatic instability.

The environmental dimensions contained within ancient Franco-Provencal place-names have not yet been studied, and their value for reconstructing historical landscapes remains unexploited. Even less have they been recognized to carry value for the present.

By acknowledging the traditional ecological knowledge that place-names contain, a dense corps of ecological information, which we have lived with but which we have not exploited until now, could become available to us once more. In this report, that doesn't expect to be exhaustive on toponyms knowledge, I would suggest to consider the study of name-placing in the Alps, and in general in the West, as a way to better understand the ecological wisdom of ancient mountain communities, and to exploit it in order to implement the response to environmental challenges of the age.

What shall we exactly mean by “names of place”?

They certainly represent one category which broadly includes all the expressions referring to a place defined as a socialized space, and that may contain all a continuum of worlds from indexicality to onomastic, from the empty ones like the deixis, the adverbs (here, up there), to the full ones, topographic, provided of common sense, which remind to physical and spatial place, and to some objects like “valleys”, “plants”, “animals”, up to the very real “toponyms” which identify in an unmistakable way of well defined places like “Mont Blanc”, “Mont Rose”.

Place names belong to a net of knowledges playing a key role not only in the economic appropriation proceedings and cultural set-up of territories but even in the construction, organization, and representation of social relationship on the local scale: on one hand they record “historic and environmental memories” of the landscape by fixing knowledges and learnings that are necessary to the economic and symbolic ownership of an environment, on the other hand provide a space anchoring the social relationships, placing stories, experiences, values, emotions, biographies, both individual and collective. In this context, as Flaming states [17], the “cartographic silence” around the Alps and Mont Blanc looks significant. The “situated talk” of geographic landscapes, to which the anthropologist and linguist K. H. Basso referred, is an all-important resource to explore the local conception of the surrounding material universe: landscapes are always at the disposal of their expert inhabitants in terms far more than material. Landscapes are at their disposal in symbolic terms, and also throughout the variety of “agency” of the discourse, and can be detached from their fixed space anchorage and transformed into instruments of thought and into vehicles on intentional behavior [18]. Thus toponyms emerge to be like the most formalized and crystallized part of a “local communicative competence”, and native knowledge, which plays a key role in connecting human interaction to environment connections even from a historical point of view. Toponyms are also “proper nouns” of place, and, like proper nouns of person, they refer to a unique and only one subject: a referent.

Modern linguistic theory attributes great importance to the aspect of proper nouns for whose meaning is “semantically undetermined”.

Lévi-Strauss [3] in *The Savage Mind* noticed how proper names were a “special class of words” possibly to become for the ethnographer an integral part for his research.

Although Lévi-Strauss’ interest was mainly focused on kinship and totemic classification, — leading him to reflect on those proper names of persons that are made up of animals’ and plants’ names, or coming from kinship/relational terms—he had nevertheless already revealed, through his

studies, an interchangeability or possibility of exchange and interaction between proper names and common names which might work in the case of toponyms as well.

Lévi-Strauss noticed in fact how the difference within them was not just of linguistic nature, but rather in the way that each culture shapes the real and through the variety of limits which it [...] assigns to the work of classification.

Likewise place-names play a key-role in the classification and significance of the real and of the relations with the environment. The more or less “proper” character of the names cannot be determinable neither intrinsically (or *a priori*) nor by the comparison between them and the other words of language, but it depends on the moment in which each society declares its work of classification to be finished. The attribution of a name is for Lévi-Strauss the last act of a procedure of classification and signification achieved in a “space”, in a society of “named places”, which are real reference points just like among people inside a group.

If names of place and persons seem to be the point of semantic intersections among zoological and botanical ethno-taxonomies, ethno-geographies, and so on, and cover certain peculiar features, then toponyms linked on environmental risks and disasters may in fact be considered to be part of a system (or a ecosystem), a paradigm, through which—and within which—to read the territory and the environment.

Anthropologist Cristiano Tallè [6] in his book *Sentieri di parole* (Words Pathways) reminds us how, since 1912, Edward Sapir (a pupil of Boas, who had already contended that Kwakiutl place-names possess a strong descriptive transparency”), came to the conclusion that there was no direct correlation between language—as a phonetic, morphologic, grammar and lexical system—and the environment, but only a correlation mediated by a selective cultural interest towards some environmental aspects: in other words, concerning the language, every environmental influence is at last influenced by the social environment [19].

### 3. The “power” of naming a place

Taking a cue from Tim Ingold’s suggestions concerning some models about living and concepts about *taskscape* and *landscape*, we are likely to consider the name of a place as a “linguistic print” of a landscape as condensed form of related living procedures very much as the name of a person can be thought as the “linguistic print” of the individual since the “embedded form” of socially structured relations. We live and interact with the environment, while entering into relationship with everybody else; that’s why it should be impossible to separate the activity of naming places from that of naming people. One “theory about a proper name” implies a “counter theory about a place name”, being the building of a place the hidden aspect of the building of a person (and viceversa)<sup>1</sup> [6].

Behind any human (or not human) concept of a person, there should always be a “sense of a place”, and maybe, as Tallè argues, the former cannot be elaborated independently from the latter.

From this prospective, where living and social interacting converge, to assign a proper name to a referent and the flow of names among different referents in the world (humans, animals, plants, objects, minerals, places, etc...), it is likely an important hint of “sociability”, or, better, to recognize

<sup>1</sup> Translation by the author.

an edge of social inter-agency among different referents inside a social ground which include all of them, whose borders may vary considerably from one society to another [20].

Depending on the cases and the languages we are dealing with, we can find a lower or higher semantic transparency, in the sense of a bigger or a lesser flow of meanings.

The linguist Maurizio Gnerre claimed that transparency is a sign of continuity within humans, the world of non-humans living, and the places where all humans and non humans live, starting from water courses [20].

When this transparency and intelligibility goes missing for historical, political, or any other kinds of reasons, the consequences can be sometimes dramatic. To lose the ability of “reading” and “understanding” a place entails some risks; while losing the memory of places, people lose also the ability to remember and to understand the phenomena characterizing these territories. I have on some occasions gathered some symbolic and even tragic examples of such risks: it is the case of the Mont Blanc area of I will talk later.

Place names indicate in a more or less unequivocal way some very precise “places”, like boundaries, regions, or areas whether this points are able to restrict and limit the sphere of the possibilities to a unique space referent—but “social” as well. Naming a place can be part of a speech and of an act, be it cosmological, moral, magic, healing, political, identitarian, economic, biographical, or whatever else, but still remaining the linguistic expression of a surrounding landscape<sup>2</sup> [6].

To denominate a place is an act which encompasses a sense and a power much more complex than that of its topographic reference: suffice it to think of the symbolic dimensions that this act takes with it, and of all that mythological and “sacred geography” of which alpine areas are so rich. The meanings that the place names keep with them are not only to be investigated in order to denote and classify, but also in a more “dialogical perspective” to narrate, describe and indicate.

As Steven Feld reported, place names provide the most natural and daily linguistic expression concerning the social procedures of the living that on one hand “shape landscapes forms”, and on the other, embed “the sense of the place” [21].

The significance of a place name cannot be separated from the sensorial experience of the place itself. The landscape is both inside and outside of us, it is one of our emanations, and for this reason the culture of the landscape is crucial, because according to the landscape mental models we own, we are able to generate action on it. The interrelationship between mindscape and landscape is of great importance<sup>3</sup> [6].

About ethno-toponymies the literature has highlighted the possibility to note some links between “ways of environment appropriation” and “semantic properties of place-names”. T. Ingold, in regards to the “appropriation of the environment” to be understood as the economical, social, relational process by which each society seizes the land where to be settled in, has remarked how essential was for anthropology to reconsider the terms “territoriality” and “land tenure” as two separated but inter-connected dimensions of this process [22].

<sup>2</sup> Translation by the author.

<sup>3</sup> Translation by the author.

Territoriality, or territorial behavior, is to be considered as a communication device allowing to get information about the space position of people and resources to convey, while land tenure, or property, is a way of appropriation by which humans exercise their ownership over the resources located in the space the land tenure involves the nature within a system of social relationships, the territoriality involves society in a system of natural relationships [22].

Between space relocation, economic relations, procedures of environment appropriation and proper place names, a correlation emerges that is both of an environmental and demographic kind and of a symbolic and cosmologic one. What a place can, or has to be able to, communicate to its inhabitants may, or even must, pass through the linguistic transparency of the names are describing it.

The knowledge of a vocabulary, if “shared” by its community, has many chances to survive and, if we consider the “natural” risks and hazards which characterize a specific land, this relationship seems even more essential.

The “descriptive power” of place-names, their transparency and intelligibility, in a word this “iconicity”, is a feature nearly universally reported. Landscape can be focused through the use of toponyms depending on the society’s intentions which have created them. Toponyms can provide landmarks clearly marked in the space, hubs, passages, or borders limiting areas of different features. All these features produce a dense texture gathering social relations, historical memory and territory. Because place-names are “texts and texture of a people and their place” [23], their use can serve as a means of relaying ideological meaning about place, and can therefore play a role in the process of place-making itself. Toponyms, therefore, identify the knowledge that past generations have assigned to such places.

Inextricably woven with these different levels of the fieldwork (biographic maps, excursions on the territory, linguistic analysis), is the task of documenting the various kinds of speech, both formal and informal, which underlay place-names in the daily life: myths, historical memories, stories, geographical memories, and other types of speech with regards to the territory. Speeches that illustrate the wide range of representations and the diverse meanings of the names in the life of people who know them “by name”.

Then it can be useful to try to “look through the names” if we wish to find out what a landscape and which “sense of place” transpires from it.

We have to realize, whether we are aware of this or not, that landscape is the background without which all our actions, our speeches, perceptions, experiences of the world, or even our “presence in the word” would lose mostly of their “reason to exist”; It’ is precisely in sceneries of crises and changes—and mostly within environmental disasters—that we are able to perceive “by defect” its own essentiality.

Tim Ingold’s concept of ‘dwelling perspective’ attempts to reconcile the separation between man and landscape by imagining the landscape as a continually unfolding story. The landscape bears witness to the passing of time; it contains a living memory of all who have lived in it. To perceive the landscape is to carry out an act of remembrance—one is immersed in this unfolding, gathering details and impressions that can be related again.

In a “dwelling perspective”, the landscape is a sort of solidified form of dwelling. It is only the relative gap of speed in the metamorphic processes of the former towards the cycle of actions and transformations of life forms which inhabit in it, to create the illusion of its immobility and

permanence. The sense of being in a place [24]. Place-names bearing the impressed signs of a shared memory, can become a starting point to investigate the more and more vague and escaping relation among human action, landscapes forms, and the background which they act with.

#### 4. Shared experience and vulnerability

Shared experience from a critical event can also be transformed into knowledge. Yet, it is also situated—extremely so in a sociological sense—and can create, distort or mask the forms of social vulnerability extant in the community. Knowledge of the local (anthropological or otherwise) can limit the distorting effects of local knowledge itself, but, if it is used carelessly, it could also work in concert with expert knowledge to undermine local initiatives and participation. In employing expert knowledge in the logistics of aid delivery, disaster relief professionals (such as categories of alpine guards, geologists) ignore other knowledges at their peril. Disasters and crises are also often viewed as opportunities to collectively learn from experience and thereby improve the capacity to cope with similar events in the future [25]. Such events can thus be seen to enhance resilience, that is, to enable communities to adapt in a way that decreases vulnerability and improves responses to future catastrophes it is also shaped by various interacting social processes [26]. For this reason, social memory is considered of vital importance [27]. Yet what constitutes social remembering and how it works is largely understudied. To expand our understanding of how vulnerability and resilience to disaster are produced, we need to explore how past events and experiences are remembered, even on “the experience of the place-names”. Vulnerability, however, is not just concerned with the present or the future but it is equally and intimately a product of the past. A proper appreciation of the construction of vulnerability is still often hampered by the lack of an adequate historical perspective from which to understand the contexts and roots of disaster causality (Oliver-Smith [28] and Lees and Bates [29]).

As Anthony Oliver-Smith so eloquently states: “a disaster is a historical event—and the aftermath of disaster is process coming to grips with history” [30]. Asking why disasters happen is essentially a political question but understanding how they occur is a fundamentally historical one [31].

Almost the totality of those who carry out researches about onomastics in the field, in some way and despite the different accentuation, have to face inevitably both the ethnological and connotative meaning of proper names.

In the specific case of toponyms, to define the reason behind the basis of certain toponymic designation, means to get back to its original appointing designative aim. It is thus possible to recognize an etymologic transparency to regain a range of historical and linguistic information.

When territorial mobility plays a key role, as pointed out by Maurizio Gnerre, it is most probable to find in use transparent names of place, that is to say intelligible to native speakers according to their knowledge of the language. The realism of names implies different degrees of adherence to the worlds in the word [20].

What is the referent of a name? Places are not necessarily already assumed as “given and delimitated referents” having the right to a proper name, but they become proper, they “earn their own name”, only as a consequence of the active intervention of human awareness of their existence.

The issue about how place-names have been created is mainly concerning the cognitive traits selected as points of reference, the focus being placed from time to time according to the needs of the societies which have given them a name. Places are the conceptual achievement of the sedimentation of practices, uses and knowledges, they are created through human speech and presence.

## 5. Study area and methods

In the area of Mont Blanc there is a widespread and multifaceted risk. In addition to some certainties—we have knowledge of the forms of this risk: avalanches, rockfalls, landslides, and mainly mud slides, and we know the places in which they occur, and will occur—still coexist some incertitudes of temporal order and intensity. In fact we don't know about the time this phenomena will appear, we can only assume about which intensity they will keep. They could appear simultaneously and amplifying the consequences the ones on the others, or to appear in different moments or ages.

For sure the outgoing climate change makes less predictable future scenarios, and therefore be less manageable and more impacting.

Within the Italian contemporary anthropological frame of research, which is engaged with the study of the emergencies and disasters still represents an “emergent ground”. The delay accumulated regard other international contexts is undoubtedly due to a plurality of factors: primarily a lack of syntonization and sharing of matters and of problems within the world of research and public debate. Moreover, as Benadusi notes, due to institutional deficiencies concerning the prevention of disasters because of a misconception of “social nature”, more than the “physical” one, of catastrophic events. Among other causes of such delay we have to consider certain aspects related to risk alert which become misleading, that are partially caused by an underestimation of social and cultural ranging involved, and partially to the close transactions of political nature and business exploitations proceedings following the reconstructive steps. All these problematic aspects would deserve a more attention and a better accurate interpretation by the national press as Benadusi states [32].

The research was carried out with the peasant communities of the Mont Blanc area. The involved local communities of Morgex (2.090 inhabitants) and Lavanchey (87 inhabitants), have experienced a transformation of livelihoods due to “mountain's urbanization” since late 60s and 70s, cementification, building speculation, massive tourism, motorway construction, ski resorts, and the construction of the Mount Blanc tunnel between France and Italy. The passageway is one of the major trans-Alpine transport routes, particularly for Italy, which relies on this tunnel for transporting as much as one-third of its freight to northern Europe, with a huge amount of traffic. Among this changing we have to claim a progressive abandonment of pastoralism and cultivation in a large part of the territory.

By the 2nd half of the Nineteenth century it has been observed a propagation of the “new consumer culture”, eager and short-sighted, able to eat away in a few decades the fabric and the memory of previous civilization.

What avalanches, landslides, winters, floods, epidemics, wars, tyrants, and invaders, could not achieve in 10 thousand years, it's becoming possible, in the last minute of the alpine watch, due to

such a strong and persuasive model, able to erase prior history. In the valleys where the ski of mass and ski resorts were welcomed, the town ate up nearly all the rest.

This culture has changed the mountain by three words which did not exist in the alpine vocabulary: pace, motor-transport, cement. In other words, ski, cars and blocks of flats [33]. Even the architectures have been completely transformed into “city-models” by the spread of holidays homes, and by the acquisition of huge buildings areas and lands by large financial groups.

The research methods was based on field work, participant observations, and semi-structured interviews with key local stakeholders (hunters, ski guides, new inhabitants, managers, politicians, students aged 10–13), and a survey on the local Alpine archives.

## 6. Some examples of toponyms in the Mont Blanc area

Place names are labels, true, but as far as we have realized, they are the outcome of a process of constant exchanges and relations between the environment and who has inhabited and experienced it. They tell us about what has been, what remains, but even about what is no more, or has not been anymore because of the passage of time, and environmental and climatic or social and cultural changes, have deleted their prints.

Place-names carry with them memories, but they also testify forgetfulness and the loss of significance, for they are submitted to their nature of human culture “products”.

A place, through the name it has been given, is able to connect various perceptive, cognitive and linguistic dimensions in itself. The perception of a place, the physicality of a landscape, its linguistic expression, and its “imaginary extensions” ought not to be thought *a priori* as if they were four independent factors although interacting with each other [6], but to be the experience of embedding about to “stay in” a place; a multiple relation of meanings and senses, a reciprocal interaction among landscape, body, and the language where a body inhabits a place, and by it inhabited in turn.

The Valley of Aosta is characterized by a typical alpine landscape with arduous and steep mountainsides, and it is subject to several types of natural phenomenon of erosion, flooding and avalanche. Names of places coined by speakers of old Franco-Provencal dialect, the language of the ancient inhabitants of the Aosta Valley, which were planted on the landscape between (.... *ca.* 550 and *ca.* 1100 A.D.) survive albeit often in changed forms.

In the Mont Blanc area, where the detachment of avalanches and landslides is very common in the winter season, we record the presence of some evocative toponyms by such phenomenon, for example *Lavanche*, *Lavanchey*, *Lavancher*<sup>4</sup> [34]. In the regional *patois* (a French regional dialect) the word *lavèntse* means “the place where an avalanche slides”. The name *lavèntse*, avalanche, comes from Latin *labina*, landslide, landslip, from which the Italian term *slavina* derives.

In Haute Savoie (France) *lavencher*, *lavanchy*, *lavanche*, *lavancheret*, prevailing in mountain zones of Mont Blanc. First attestation reported about the use of toponyms *lavanca* (1200 *ca*) and *lavanche* (1572 *ca*) are spread in Swiss region [35]. In Franco-Provencal areas *Lavanchy* is also

<sup>4</sup> In Savoy and in the Mont Blanc area, the most employed toponyms in some avalanche zones are *Lavancher*, *Lavanchy*, *Lavanche(s)*, *Lavancheret*. See: Bessat H, Germi C (2001), *Atlas toponymique Savoie, Vallée d'Aoste, Dauphiné, Provence*, Grenoble: Ellug, 186–190.

unregistered as patronymic. A toponym is considered to be a linguistic construction, concerning the relation between the inhabited environment and the community that lives (or used to live) in it, which in this place it spends its own daily life.

In March 1999 an enormous snow mass, the avalanche of Lavancher, detached in the Valdigne, the westernmost area of the Valley of Aosta, all along the crest joining Tête Liconi and Tête Drumiana (two peaks whose height is above 2.500 meters) causing a victim, and several injured, 40 acres of wood have been destroyed together with most of the more recent buildings in the *villette* of Dailley. This phenomenon in itself is not unusual: almost every year a snow slide pours down the valley along a canyon. What happened in 1999, instead, due to a climate anomaly (an earlier daily snow melting followed by a refreezing of water at night), is that a very fast channel of slide, similar to a bob rink, was shaped. The avalanche, passing through it, accelerated reaching the frightening speed of 200 hundred km/h. It was not the snow but the powerful blow to slope down the village of Dailley, cutting down two houses while some other twenty buildings were damaged. The ancient trees fell down creating on the mountain a sort of giant fan, a large semicircular track very similar to that provoked by an explosion<sup>5</sup> [36]. Experts from the regional administration ascertained that the surface damaged by the effects of the aerosol was 3 times more extended than that one covered by the rubles of the avalanche. The aerosol damaged and destroyed the most recent houses; which had been built during the economic boom period and located outside the perimeter of the ancient historical village. The old centre of this village, whose houses had been built during the middle Age, suffered no damage in spite of the unusual strength of the aerosol.

Glaciologists consider this fact as proving that the old dwellers of this area drew on the information of such prodigious data bank of people's experience. A knowledge perpetuated and improved from generation to generation that helped them to choose for their village a safer site that in no way could have been struck either by the huge snow fall, or by its devastating blow. For ages these people had coexisted without problems about the same avalanche running down each year<sup>6</sup>.

Given the climate unpredictability that characterizes the Mont Blanc area, and that makes uncertain—to name but a few—the forecast about snow, temperature variations and permafrost melting—this area is much more exposed to the risks of events like the avalanche of 1999 and to the consequences for the inhabitants and to their infrastructures.

Lavancher is a typical case where a toponym records memory of a rather usual event by fixing itself in the historical memory of the land.

For ages inhabitants of this area had seen the falling down of avalanches, and they had built and planned their community's life, pastures, farming activities, relying on the specificity of the morphology of those places. The avalanche of Lavancher is to be considered as a cyclical event and part of a local history, embedded in the same relation between humans and mountains. Dailley's inhabitants in late seventeenth century erected the local chapel dedicated to Saint Anne, in order to call for protection for avalanches.

<sup>5</sup> See the report in Cerutti AV (2001) *Meteorologic situation, elevation of the iso-therm 0 °C and the avalanches in the Western Alps during February*, in “Geografia Fisica e Dinamica Quaternaria”, Volume V.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem.

A little further to the North, the Val Farret, a steep valley at the feet of Mont Blanc whose extension stretches for 20 km, remains closed in winter because of the fall of avalanches. For long periods no means of transport or people are allowed to transit. In this area some small villages cover the evocative name “Lavachey”, (from the Latin *labina*).

Many dialect words from this region are also employed to indicate landslides or floods: Gai, Cail, Caili, Caille, have already become proper place-names. CAIL comes, as the related French “Caillou”, that means “stone”, from Celtic CALJO, rock, pebble, from the radical Pre-Indo-European \*CAL, stone. Some of these names are preceded by words identifying other elements, is the case of “Pra dou gai” meaning the grass of landslide [37].

Stony grounds are the result of the flaking and ruins of a mountain slope, giving origin to toponyms Clapèi, Cllapèi, Quiapèi. Similarly names like “Iér”, “Guier”, “Ller” refer to gravelly soils, lands as an effect of an overflowing, or flooding of a river. The words Rovéna, Rovine, Ruines, Rovinal, come from Latin RUINA (“overthrow, ruin”), indicating a caving ground in presence of water, and are common toponyms in the Aosta Valley.

Not by chance if nearby Lavancher, in a zone of ancient debris and floods, there is a municipality named *Ruine*. Inhabitants have no memory of natural accidents in this area, and so they do not consider the link with the original meaning of its name.

As the ancient maps and charts from the local archives record, some toponyms in this area rely on religious signs and symbols connected to the land by stone cuts, or to the use of apotropaic symbols, used for home protection. These symbols that have marked, as a constellation, the territory, are witness and memory of the historical interaction between “the sacred” and the need to face vulnerability and risks. Rocks, slabs, aedicules, crosses, that have especially been used in the past as alert and peril land markers, now are becoming more and more obscure (opaque), and only in few cases survive maintaining a sense of “sacred places”. It seems interesting to note that some ancient charts mark the use of the toponym “*Bois banal*”, banned wood, (from Old French *banir* “to summon, banish”) referring to a forest in which was forbidden to access, nor to pasture, neither to fetch wood. The role of these forests seemed protecting the villages below from avalanches risk.

Water also occupies a key-role in the Valley of Aosta glossary of toponyms, because of its vital and salutary function on one hand, or death like, and the threat on the other one, being the origin of floods, landslides which are responsible for the change of landscape aspects, besides affecting and distressing the life of local communities.

In the studies of historical linguistics [38] the archaic term *draco* (dragon) largely occurs in the Western alpine regions, especially in the Franco-Provencal ones, in reference to water elements like “stream”, or “spring”, but also in relation to some catastrophic events linked on river flooding, and extreme rainfalls, avalanches, rockfalls. In this region exist some legends telling about dragons and their destructive powers linked on water and glacier [39].

Principally classic hydronames are not only given to rivers, streams, torrents and lakes, but also to other place names indirectly related to water. It is rather interesting the case of the name of the river Dora: in the local dialect *Djouiye* means not only the biggest river of the region, but also refers to some tributary streams as well, or in general to every flow of water. Etymologically this word derives from Latin DURIA, which goes back to a pre-Latin radical *dor* whose meaning is “current

water". In the Val Ferret and in the Val Vény, two important valleys in the Mont Blanc area, the two local streams bring the name Doire.

## 7. Conclusions

To get worried, a person needs to know that he/she lives in a risky area. Even if a person knows of living in a hazardous area, may not feel worried for many different reasons linked to personality traits, cultural, social or economic factors [40]. A consistent number of researches underlines the relevance of optimistic or "normalisation" biases, or "fatalistic".

Fatalists, who seem to represent the major part of the population exposed to risks in the Mont Blanc area, as Douglas states, they don't deny the urgency of the problem but feel that we are totally impotent; we might just as well ignore the warnings, for there is nothing that we can do or ever could have done [41].

Fatalists do not "bet on the future", they stay distant, their behavior is difficult to understand and the anthropologist underlines: «I am always intrigued to know how they manage to remain so detached». Besides Douglas observed about her friends and scholar partners a tendency to be fatalists about environmental questions, and to believe in main resources of the nature. «I find that many of my friends mistrust these tales of doom; there have been too many in the past; nature has proved herself to be too robust for them to believe in the advent of a global disaster».

The paradox is to be aware of a risk, but not to perceive it: to see it and at a time not to see it. To see but not to foresee [42]. This is an attitude very close to the fatalism that Douglas investigated; a complex process which is carried out in a local context, through historical situated relations, and positions which are sometimes in neat conflict with technical assessments.

This might be the case of scotomization: a particular process of blocking unwanted perceptions. This process describes a mechanism by which the event of disaster is not denied, but the chance that such event might occur is underestimate [43,44]. Inhabitants of Lavanchey municipality agree that "nature cannot be monitored", nor predicted, and the fact to be mountaineers provides them more advantages than real risks. To some extent the idea largely shared is that it's worth despite everything.

Another modality of scotomization can also emerge on relation to the different experiences of perceiving time: Augé has spoken of oblivion in terms of suspension, a forgetfulness which requires the oblivion both of past and future; a time acknowledged designed to identify the present by unhooking it cutting it provisionally from the past and the future [45].

In the Mont Blanc area inhabitants had sometimes to evacuate their homes for weeks and months, and many of those families had no home to return to. Judging from their reactions, people appeared to be completely unprepared, like such events had never arrived before. But this is far from being the case: flooding, avalanches, landslides have in fact been part of the local history for a long time. Most of the past disasters seemed to have left little episodic trace among the local people "memoriescape". The term "memoriescape" was coined by Nuttall [46] to refer to the fusion of time and space in the grounded memories of place where contemporary, historical or mythical events that take place at certain points in the local landscape, becoming an integral part of understanding and knowing those places. Historical records include accounts of previous floods and avalanches, but

these events were not singled out as community disasters in the local memoryscape. Not all disasters are equally remembered in a community. It is well known that catastrophes are as much “social processes” as critical events, and these processes make the sharing of memories at different scales possible despite the fact that people may not have personal experience with what is being remembered. The theoretical concept of memoryscape [47] encompasses both the historical and “presentist” processes of remembering, and conveys how memory is also a spatial matter. A memoryscape can thus be defined as the timespace that shapes and is shaped by different practices of making meaning of the past. What is socially remembered, where, when and by who remembers, it becomes crucial questions in the memoryscape.

Memoryscapes are heterogeneous and shaped by social relations through different memory practices. Some memories become more dominant than others. Such unequal remembering seems to add conditions of social vulnerability more than enhancing resilience. People are re-building and re-inhabiting the same “risk places”, building their futures forgetting their past. Historicizing vulnerability means renegotiating the collective memory and the socio-spatial identities, and allows to connect past and future in a dialogical perspective.

## Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest associated with this research.

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