

# Chapter 9

## Coping with Disasters: What Place Names Can Tell Us About Anthropocene and Climate Change



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**Abstract** This contribution is based on a series of questions and reflections, both of a theoretical and methodological nature, which have guided my post-doctoral research on Anthropocene, climate change and environmental disasters on the Italian Alps and which concern local linguistic, toponomastic and memory-related aspects of disasters and places.

Is there a ‘language of places’, a ‘local language’ that defines the specific context of environmental risk, catastrophe, hazards and disaster? Are there ‘local’ terms, inscribed in the territory, in the memory (and in local culture) to define those ‘disasters’ and catastrophes of which we have a specific local memory, linked to the places where they occurred? And again, do specific relations based on the ‘memory’ between places and disastrous events exist? Toponymy teaches us that.

The focus will be on the Mont Blanc area, a French-speaking land on the Western Alps characterized by a huge variety of extreme natural phenomena: avalanches, landslides and flooding, events that are becoming increasingly frequent due to the consequences of climate change (e.g. extremes, heatwaves) and which people will have to cope with. Some ancient place names in this region have maintained a significance related to local ‘natural risks’ as potential disasters or already happened disasters and catastrophes. The whole Alpine region is described, named and ‘recognized’ throughout a large variety of toponyms that communities have created on purpose to mark out places, to protect them, to exploit them but also to avoid them.

Although language and landscape are the sound and visual background around which the experience and perception of a place are articulated, place names constitute a class of words, or names, long neglected in the anthropological debate. From its beginnings, cultural and social anthropology has paid great attention to the study and comparison of terminologies and classes of names related to the kinship and classification of the natural and plant world while neglecting those related to place names, which have long remained the prerogative of ‘pure’ linguistic studies.

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The ‘words of others’, the ‘names of others’, question the anthropologist on the ‘sense of the places’ that they inhabit and by which they are at the same time inhabited. Names, wrote Carlo Levi, mean something: there is a magical power in them; a word is never a convention or a breath of wind, but a reality, a thing that acts. Anthropology can help us, also by questioning the ‘names of others’, to enhance local knowledge about climate and the environment and to propose novel solutions to the current challenges.

**Keywords** Sense of the places · Social vulnerability · Coping · Disasters · Anthropocene

## 9.1 *Nomina Sunt Consequentia Rerum: A Name, A Destiny*

The ancient Romans used the locution *nomen omen* to indicate how the destiny (originally of a person) was inscribed in the name, and so too the supreme poet Dante, in the *Vita Nuova*, reminds us, quoting Justinian,<sup>1</sup> how *nomina sunt consequentia rerum*, or how names are consequent to things. And this is true also, and above all, for a special class of words: place names.

Place names, or toponyms, are the result of a process of continuous exchanges and relations between the environment and those who have inhabited and lived in it. They tell of what has been, what still is, but also of what no longer is or no longer has been because the passage of time, environmental and climatic changes or cultural and social changes have erased its traces. Toponyms can also tell us something about the ‘destiny of places’ and their—and our—future. Place names carry with them memories, but they also bear witness to the oblivion and loss of meaning to which they are subject by their very nature as ‘products’ of human culture.

A place, through the name it has been given, is able to connect several perceptive, cognitive and linguistic dimensions within itself. The perception of a place, the ‘physicality of a landscape’, its linguistic expression and its ‘imaginary extensions’ should no longer be thought of a priori as independent albeit interacting factors (Tallè 2016), but as an experience, even an embedded one, of ‘being in’ a place, a multiple correspondence of meanings and senses, a reciprocal interaction between natural phenomena, environment, culture and language.

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<sup>1</sup>*con ciò sia cosa che li nomi seguitino le nominate cose, sì come è scritto: «Nomina sunt consequentia rerum», Vita Nuova XIII, 4.*

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The ‘words of others’, the ‘names of others’, question the anthropologist on the ‘sense of the places’ that they inhabit and by which they are at the same time inhabited. Quoting Carlo Levi, words mean something: there is a magical power in them; a word is never a convention or a breath of wind, but a reality, a thing that acts (Levi 1945).

In the last 20 years, in contrast to the theoretical proposals of contemporary anthropology centred on flows, non-places (Augé 2009) and globalization, the debate has been enriched by an ethnography attentive to places and landscapes, and the symbolic and social relevance of place names in different cultural contexts has been realized. The anthropological approach can help us also by questioning the ‘names of others’, to enhance local knowledge about climate and the environment and to propose novel solutions to the current challenges. The ecological knowledge contained in place names, if brought to light, can alert us to critical events in specific places, can warn us of certain risks and can remind us that extreme events always have a return time that escapes human memory. As Van Aken argued, the intimate cultural relationship that defines our atmospheric involvement has also settled into the words. The words with which we denote the weather have always been models for defining the experience of our social time, and the language itself is profoundly ‘atmospheric’ (Van Aken 2020); in the same way, place names tell us something about climatic knowledge and record traces of events that have affected local communities over time (disasters).

In the Anthropocene,<sup>2</sup> a juncture of prevailing economic globalization and planetary ecological crisis, those landscapes, places and territories in which ethnographic practice has always taken place, have thus returned to the research agenda from a different perspective: no longer ‘natural frames’ of the ethnographic enterprise, but social and symbolic constructs that are protagonists of social life on a local scale. For all indigenous, aboriginal and First Nations peoples, names of places are essential communicative tools; for these communities the names given to features in

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<sup>2</sup>The first attempt to include the Anthropocene among the geological eras, as the last drift of the Quaternary period, was made by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000) who observed that since the industrial revolution, man has so profoundly transformed the Earth’s atmosphere by producing greenhouse gases and, in particular, CO<sub>2</sub>, that we must speak of a new era. This hypothesis, developed and formulated on the basis of a specific disciplinary reflection (atmospheric chemistry), was immediately placed in dialogue and dialectic with all the knowledge concerning humanity, involving history, as well as biology, economics and, of course, anthropology. The concept of the Anthropocene, while not finding a unanimous consensus among scholars and researchers dealing with environmental and ecological-political issues (Iovino 2020), has nevertheless initiated a dense debate on our ‘species impact’ on the planet and a series of interesting and promising critiques. These include Moore’s Capitalocene thesis, which argued that capitalism does not ‘have’ an ecological regime, but in fact ‘is’ an ecological regime, in the sense that capitalism is founded—also—on the subordination of nature in the broader sense, human and non-human, to the needs of wealth production and accumulation (Moore 2016).

the landscape help them to share traditional ecological knowledge (Berkes 1999) even in times of crisis.

To do ethnography on communities, 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 disasters and the ecological and environmental emergencies (Dall'Ò 2019).

In some regions of the world, as, for example, in the Andean regions of Bolivia (Boillat et al. 2013) or among Australia's Aboriginal peoples (Koch and Hercus 2009) or even among Kaluli people in Papua New Guinea (Feld 1996), 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 (Jones 2016; Inglis 1993). Knowledge and understanding of places and the events that occur there (e.g. floods, rockfalls, overflows, river floods) are not learnt by local communities as phenomena separate from culture, reserved for 'science', but as a common heritage. On the contrary of what happens in Western societies, where the environmental threat is no less serious, but where traditional ecological knowledge has been seen as a poor relation to modern scientific data, and place names have lost their original meaning (Jones 2016; Radding and Western 2010).

The environmental value inscribed in the ancient Alpine place names has been scarcely investigated, and its usefulness for the reconstruction of historical landscapes has not yet been exploited. Even less has their value for the present been recognized. Yet, by valuing the traditional ecological knowledge that place names contain, a dense body of ecological and climatic information that we have so far not exploited could become available to us again.

Considering the study of toponymy in the Alps, and in the West in general, as a way to better understand the ecological wisdom of ancient mountain communities, would allow us to exploit it to implement the response to contemporary environmental challenges. Thus toponyms emerge to be like the most formalized and crystallized part of a "'local communicative competence', and native knowledge, which plays a strategic role in connecting, even historically, human interactions with the environment. 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'. In *The Savage Mind*, Lévi-Strauss noticed how proper names were a 'special class of words' possibly to become for the ethnographer an integral part for his research (Lévi-Strauss 1966). While the main focus of Lévi-Strauss' interest was on kinship and totemic classification—which led him to reflect on those proper names of persons that are composed of animal and plant names or that come from kinship/relationship terms—he had 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. Indeed, Lévi-Strauss pointed out that the difference within them was not only of a linguistic nature, but rather cultural, 'in the

way each culture shapes the real and through the variety of limits it [. . .] assigns to the work of classification'. In the same way, place names play a key role in the classification and meaning of the real and its relations to the environment. For Lévi-Strauss, the attribution of a name is the last act of a procedure of classification and signification carried out in a 'space', in a society of 'named places', which are real points of reference as between people within a group.

If place and person names seem to be the point of semantic intersection between zoological and botanical ethno-taxonomies, ethno-geographies and so on and cover some peculiar features, then place names related to environmental hazards and disasters can indeed be considered as part of a system (or an ecosystem), a paradigm, through which and within which to read the territory and the environment (Dall'Ò 2019). The understanding of a vocabulary, if 'shared' by its community, has many chances of survival, and, if we consider the 'natural' risks and dangers that characterize a specific territory, this relationship appears even more essential.

According to the cases and the languages we are dealing with, we can find less or more semantic transparency,<sup>3</sup> in the sense of a greater or lesser flow of meanings. If this transparency and intelligibility are lost for historical, political or other reasons, the consequences can sometimes be dramatic. Losing the ability to 'understand', to 'decipher' the meaning of a name, in this case a place name, entails risks; by losing the memory of places, one also loses the ability to remember and understand the natural phenomena that characterize these territories. Place names can provide clearly marked points of reference in space, hubs, passages or boundaries that limit areas of different characteristics. All these features produce a dense weave that brings together social relations, historical memory and territory. During the time I spent in the field conducting my research, I was able, on several occasions, to collect some particularly illuminating examples of the relationship between place names and disaster memory.

## 9.2 An Ethnographic Case: La Saxe

Climate change and its consequences for Alpine communities have become a reference model, on a local scale, for talking about long-term disasters. In particular, with the melting of glaciers and permafrost (the permanently frozen layer of soil that holds mountain slopes together) due to global warming, we are witnessing complex scenarios of change and loss: from the loss of biodiversity—flora and alpine fauna (Losapio et al. 2021)—to soil impoverishment, to extreme climate events, such as water bombs, droughts, landslides, floods, overflows, which become more frequent

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<sup>3</sup>The Italian 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 (Gnerre 2013).

year by year and which are progressively eroding the territory and generating far-reaching consequences on the communities that have to cope with them.

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 phenomena of erosion, flooding and avalanche. Names of places coined by speakers of old Franco-Provencal dialect, the language of the ancient inhabitants of the Valley of Aosta, which were planted on the landscape between ca. 550 and ca. 1100 A.D. survive albeit often in changed forms.

The case of the Mont de La Saxe landslide concerns the dangerous mass of landslides on the two slopes of the mountain of the same name and the containment works—the rampart, the bypass of the Dora torrent from Val Ferret and the rockfall tunnel—built to protect the hamlets on the two slopes of the mountain: Entrèves to the east, and La Palud to the west, both tourist resorts with a high level of tourist traffic, located close to the municipality of Courmayeur and the Mont Blanc massif.



The M. de La Saxe landslide (east)



The M. de la Saxe rockfall barriers (west)

As the ancient place names suggest, and as it still partly appears today, the area must have had an aspect characterized by the presence of watercourses and marshy areas: ‘Entrèves’ is a very common place name in the Valley of Aosta and specifically indicates a place at the confluence of two watercourses: from the Latin *Inter aquas*, between [the] waters, where *ève* in francoprovençal—the Valle d’Aosta local patois—means water. In this case, the ‘waters’ are those of the Dora of Val Vény and the Dora of Val Ferret. La Palud instead derives its name from the Latin *palus*, meaning marsh, and owes its origin to a marshy area, probably drained in past times and today completely built up.

The place name ‘Saxe’ is also interesting and revealing. It derives from the Latin *saxum*, stone, plural *saxa*, and gave its name to this small hamlet. The mountain of La Saxe has the appearance of a large, round, stony, barren boulder and is characterized by the phenomena of the crumbling of the slopes and the detachment of rock that had probably already taken place in Roman times. An ancient place name (Saxe), therefore, which in addition to describing its morphological—and perhaps phenomenal—characteristics, reveals its clear Roman origins. The area has been known since ancient times for the availability of precious metals and minerals, and in Roman times the presence of mines was a widespread feature. Today, one street, the ‘rue Trou des Romains’ (Street [of the] Hole of the Romans), is named after the characteristic appearance of the entrance to the ancient mines.

It was along this street that, in 1927, during construction work, a Roman incineration tomb was discovered, which, thanks to the objects found inside, can be dated between the end of the first century BC and the middle of the following century. In fact, the tomb had yielded various ceramic materials, including an oil lamp and a precious and significant armilla (i.e. a bracelet) made of soapstone, a typical jewel of the Gallic Alpine parures. On the basis of the clearly Latin origin of the name of the village and on the basis of the chronicles by the historian Strabo on the fantastic gold mines coveted by the Romans—the well-known ‘*aurifodinae*’,



silver-lead mines probably already known and exploited by the Salassi natives before Rome and hypothesized to be in the area of Mont de La Saxe—it is very likely that a small settlement arose here as a result of the coexistence of Romans (mostly military) and the local population.

The Mont de La Saxe area is currently in the news because of a major landslide phenomenon, which affects both<sup>4</sup> the eastern and western sides of the mountain of the same name and has caused a series of difficult to manage and sometimes dramatic consequences in recent decades.

The landslide on the western side is sadly known for a serious accident that cost the life of a French motorist in 2011, who was run over and killed by the detachment of a boulder that fell to the valley on the state road that connects the town of Courmayeur to the Mont Blanc tunnel. The road, Valle d'Aosta's Statale 26, is the only alternative to the motorway to reach the tunnel and is, as we can imagine, a fundamental passage for the international movement of people, vehicles and goods from one country to another.

The first rockfall officially dates back to the fatal accident on 2 January 2011, but unofficial information suggests that similar incidents, without consequences, have been occurring since the late 1990s, when a number of boulders broke loose from the eastern face of the mountain and rolled down into the valley, crossing the main road and ending up in the gardens and private plots of land of some houses located immediately below the road. In an interview,<sup>5</sup> a local administrator recounted how, 'inexplicably', the locals had never alerted the authorities to these 'dangerous finds': 'in La Saxe we had to intervene in two different cases, it was an impressive job, humanly very heavy for me. . . We had to clean up the slope along the main road, we had planned it, with the thawing and everything else, and we had to evacuate the inhabitants of the houses below, that was also planned. . . meetings, explanations, with people telling you that they have lived here for years and nothing has ever happened, and then you find out that boulders had already been found on all sides and that nobody had said anything'.

In spite of the evident 'risk' and in spite of an increase in the number of detachment episodes in recent years due to an ever-increasing climatic instability involving the whole area subject to the landslide and accentuating the phenomenon, the population concerned had never felt the need to 'alert' the competent bodies in order to 'protect themselves' or their houses. One resident of the area 'at risk' said in an interview that 'nothing has ever happened where I live, the rocks never reached the houses, they stopped much earlier or crumbled. They made a mess to evacuate everyone, but there was no need to do so'.

Although the preparatory phase had been carefully planned, with planned evacuations and the creation of a replacement road system for the inhabitants of the

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<sup>4</sup>The landslide on both sides of the La Saxe mountain threatens the hamlets of Entrèves and La Palud, as well as the main road linking the village with the Mont Blanc tunnel and the village centre a little further down the valley.

<sup>5</sup>Field interview with a local administrator P. D.



isolated villages, the greatest difficulties, says the mayor, came from the community of residents: ‘It was all very complicated to manage, and you go a bit by nose, because nobody tells you what to do. You plan everything [...] You get the impression that people don’t want to be rescued, they take a step backwards [...] if a catastrophic event happens, people welcome you with open arms, because they are in a state of need, but if you prevent it, you create annoyance, people see it as an intrusion’.

As regards the eastern side, according to a study by IRPI,<sup>6</sup> the Italian Research Institute for Hydrogeological Protection, this landslide is currently one of the most critical active landslide phenomena in the Italian Alps. Since 2009, the rock face has been constantly monitored by a network of four separate and independent systems that transmit data on the movement of the landslide in real time to the technicians of the regional government in Aosta, the main town, and is under observation by engineers and geologists from every corner of the world.

When, in April 2014, the La Saxe landslide, which had already been in action for about 15 years, was suddenly and abruptly reactivated, causing thousands of cubic meters of rocks and earth to plunge down into the valley, the ‘great emergency’ was triggered: the fear of a sudden and very large collapse was so real that about one hundred people were evacuated from the two hamlets, who had to abandon their homes for a month and stay in a structure made available by the Courmayeur municipality.

The La Saxe scenario more than 7 years after the crisis scenario, from a geological and physical point of view, appears unchanged. The detachments have come to a standstill, almost stopping completely during the construction of the rampart. The much-anticipated disaster did not occur. And this supported the current opinion that the work was an ‘exaggerated’, useless or harmful measure. The feared collapse did not occur, so there was no reason to intervene so heavily. That’s right, there was no collapse. At least not yet. According to studies conducted by the research team<sup>7</sup> of the University of Milan-Bicocca (Crosta et al. 2011), led by Professor Crosta, it is not possible to predict what will happen in the short term. The landslide could ‘remain asleep’ (like a volcano) for decades, or it could awaken and run downstream in a few weeks, or worse, suddenly.

What is certain is that climatic instability, climate change, makes collapse scenarios even more unpredictable. For example, it is now more difficult to calculate the amount and distribution of rainfall in the area, a phenomenon to which the landslide—which is periodically drained—is very sensitive. The landslide is a ‘vital element’ and reacts as such. ‘Water is essential: snow has a certain function... as does ice, or the intensity of rain. We can’t yet calculate the impact of a prolonged drought like this summer, or of a water bomb on Mont de La Saxe. With climate

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<sup>6</sup><http://www.irpi.cnr.it/project/la-saxe/>

<sup>7</sup>The team is part of the Department of Environmental and Land Sciences and Earth Sciences of the University of Milan-Bicocca.

change taking place, everything becomes less predictable, and yes, the risks of landslides are certainly increasing too'.<sup>8</sup>

### 9.3 Recurring Events

Remaining in the Mont Blanc area, where avalanches and landslides are very common, especially in winter, we can observe the presence of some other toponyms which we could define as 'predictive' of the phenomena which designate them, such as *Lavanche*, *Lavanchey* and *Lavancher*. In the patois, the French dialect of Valle d'Aosta, the word *Lavèntsé* means 'the place where an avalanche slides'. The name *lavèntse*, avalanche, comes from Latin *labina*, landslide, landslip, from which the Italian term *slavina* derives.



Lavancher Hamlet in Morgex

<sup>8</sup>Interview with Professor G. Crosta on 12 July 2017



Lavanche Hamlet in Val Ferret

On the French side of Mont Blanc, in the Haute Savoie, the toponyms *lavancher*, *lavanchy*, *lavanche* and *lavancheret* are very common, and also the patronymic *Lavanchy* is widespread.

In January 2021, following a thermal anomaly (sudden rise in temperature), an avalanche broke loose and fell on the village of Lavacher, whose name, as we can guess, records the occurrence of avalanche events, causing significant damage to the most recently built dwellings and sparing older ones. This phenomenon in itself is not unusual: almost every year a snow slide pours down the valley along a canyon; what appears abnormal is the period in which it happened (in January temperatures are normally well below zero) and the intensity of the phenomenon. As early as 1999, an enormous snow mass fell in the same area causing a victim and several injured. 40 acres of wood have been destroyed together with most of the more recent buildings. 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, cutting down two houses

while some other 20 buildings were damaged. Experts from the regional administration ascertained that the surface damaged by the effects of the aerosol was three times more extended than that one covered by the avalanche trail. 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 oldest core of this village, the centre, whose houses had been built during the Middle Ages, 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 (Cerutti 2001). An atmospheric and climatic knowledge inscribed in names, in place names, 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 stroked either by the huge snow fall or by its devastating blow.



Lavancher Avalanche (2021)

Lavancher is a typical case in which a toponym records the geo-climatic memory of a rather habitual event by becoming fixed in the historical memory of the area. For hundreds of years, the inhabitants of this area had witnessed avalanches and had built and planned the life of their community, pastures and agricultural activities on the basis of the specific morphology of these places also based on meteorological and climatological observation. Although the Lavancher avalanche is a recurring event, to which the Alpine peoples even gave a place name in the past, and although this phenomenon still occurs with some regularity and causes damage, it seems to have left little trace in recent generations.

Given the climatic unpredictability of the present time which characterizes the Mont Blanc area and which makes forecasts of snowfall, temperature variations and permafrost thawing uncertain, to name but a few, this area is nowadays much more exposed to the risks of events such as the avalanches of 2021 and 1999 and the consequences for inhabitants and their infrastructures.

It is no coincidence that near Lavancher, in an area of ancient debris and flooding, there is a municipality called Ruine. The words *Rovéna*, *Rovine*, *Ruines* and *Rovinal* come from Latin *ruina* ('overthrow, ruin'), indicating a caving ground in presence of water, and are common toponyms in the Aosta Valley. The inhabitants have lost the memory of natural accidents in this area—due to the long return times of extreme weather events and to the linguistic opacity of older toponyms—and therefore do not consider the link with the original meaning of its name.

## 9.4 Saints and Holy Places

As the ancient maps and charts in the local archives record, some of the toponyms in this area are based on religious signs and symbols linked to the land by stone cuts or the use of apotropaic symbols, used to protect the house from disasters. These symbols, which have marked the area like a constellation, are evidence and memory of the historical interaction between 'the sacred' and the need to deal with vulnerabilities and risks. Rocks, slabs, wayside shrines and crosses, which especially in the past were used as markers of alertness and danger in the territory, are now becoming increasingly obscure (opaque) and only in a few cases survive while maintaining a sense of 'sacred places'. It seems interesting to note that some ancient maps mark the use of the toponym 'Bois banal', banished forest (from Old French *banir* 'to summon, to banish'), referring to a forest where access, grazing and wood gathering were forbidden. The role of these forests seemed to protect the villages below from the risk of avalanches and at the same time prevent excessive land consumption. Similar to what we know happened in Oceania, where some forests were declared 'tapu', sacred, taboo.

Popular cults, pilgrimages and sacred spaces often reveal mechanisms through which communities protect and sacralize places and space. As Fabietti revealed, a ritual is always and in any case a way of relating to objects, spaces, places, materials: all things that make religious experience extremely concrete. These things, artefacts, even brute matter such as the earth of rocks, are what sometimes 'precipitates' the sense of religious practice, where the rite (gesture, prayer and vocation, handling elements of various kinds) makes religion, that is, makes it 'concrete', comprehensible and communicable to the very eyes of those who identify with it (Fabietti 2014).

In this context, the approximately eight hundred chapels in the Valle d'Aosta built in the villages constitute a particularly significant heritage. After the Council of Trent, in relation to the Catholic Church's need to affirm, in contrast to the Reformed Church, the legitimacy of the cult of the Virgin Mary and the saints but also in relation to the changed social and demographic conditions, there was a real proliferation of foundations, constructions and dedications of small sacred buildings, chapels, oratories and shrines dedicated to the Virgin Mary and the saints. Through these intercessors, communities invoked divine protection against disastrous events such as floods, avalanches and landslides. The local religious architectural heritage is

very rich, with numerous votive buildings, often located on the edge of inhabited centres, or near streams, avalanche gullies, or along landslide paths, or at the foot of glaciers.

Very common, and very old, in particularly inaccessible places and along the steepest slopes of the Valdigne, in the Mont Blanc area, is the dedication of sanctuaries and chapels to Saint Defendente, a martyr saint of the Theban Legion, venerated throughout Italy as a protector against wolves and fires and in the Alpine valleys above all as a protector against avalanches, landslides and floods.

On 2 January, the liturgical feast day of Saint Defendente, an evocative rite still takes place in Elevaz, above the municipality of Pré Saint Didier, in the Mont Blanc area, to invoke divine protection against avalanches. The saint of the Theban Legion was also venerated at Entrèves and also at the foot of Mont Blanc; at the base of the Brenva glacier in Val Vény stands the sanctuary of Notre-Dame de la Guérison, dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

The first signs of worship date back to the sixteenth century, when a cross was placed on the spot where the sanctuary now stands, in a place called Berrier, a place name that in patois means rock, stone. Mountain dwellers used to stop there to pray and to invoke protection from avalanches, and the place became known as La Croix du Berrier. Interesting evidence of this interweaving of the sacred, death, devotion and protection from natural hazards are certainly the ex-votos: figurative chronicles, sometimes surprisingly detailed and circumstantial, which allow us to reconstruct the dynamics of certain events and disastrous phenomena that occurred over time. Paintings, canvases and objects depicting scenes of saints and Marian apparitions in the act of diverting watercourses and melting avalanches to protect villages and travellers are common. The Virgin's thaumaturgical fame has made this sanctuary a very popular place of worship and the destination of hundreds of special ex-votos that completely cover its interior walls. Most of these were donated by mountaineers who, thanks to the intercession of the Madonna, managed to escape 'certain death'. It is interesting to note that the Italian word *superstite*, which comes from the Latin *superstes*, refers to the one who survived, but also to the witness, in this case the witness of divine mercy. In the shrine there is, among other things, a silver model of the sledge of the first Italian expedition to the North Pole, led by Luigi Amedeo di Savoia, which reached the highest Arctic latitude of 86° 33' 49" on 25 April 1900. The veterans brought it as a gift on their return from the extreme parallel to Notre-Dame de la Guérison, invoked as a protector during the dangerous expedition. The sacred place, here, this 'frontier' between the glacier (a dangerous, uncertain, threatening place) and society (the place of the living, of activities, of culture) connects and reconnects the local meanings—historical and anthropological—of religious experience with the practices through which religion is 'made'.

## 9.5 Conclusions

A central theme for anthropology dealing with disasters is that of invisibility, invisibility that does not only refer to the inability to ‘see with one’s eyes’ a threat but concerns the impossibility of having a cognitive perception of it, similar to what we have seen happen with ancient place names, which while recording the memory of an event are no longer useful for communities involved.

Also the scientific and media narratives on the effects of climate change are dealing with invisibility: the ‘great derangement’ or ‘blindness’ that Amitav Ghosh (2017) warns us about is echoed by the intrinsic invisibility of the very object of our research which, perhaps precisely because it is ‘global’, seems not only to escape an overall view but also to evade any attempt to grasp it. Climate change is not a one-off event; it does not manifest itself as an upheaval of the present, but is rooted in deep time (McPhee 1981). Although climate change generates evident impacts and consequences, its characteristic of being an event of long duration, i.e. articulated on time scales that go beyond the limits of our existence, eludes immediate perception: the melting of Arctic glaciers, the extinction of exotic species, changes in the composition of the atmosphere, the flow of sea currents, the disappearance of coral reefs—these are phenomena that are beyond our perceptive reach, and however much we are told and described about them, we do not have the capacity to imagine them, to make them real. The Anthropocene, Haraway notes, is real, as are its implications, including the current ‘immense, irreversible destruction’ that is taking place not only for the eleven billion people who will inhabit our planet by the end of the twenty-first century but also for a whole host of other creatures (Haraway 2015). On a local scale, in mountain contexts, where the history of climate and place is rooted in the memory of the lived territory—even in that of place names—we have the opportunity to give voice to traditional knowledge, knowledge which can also tell us something about the climate of the past, about vulnerability and about how the inhabitants coped with it. Not only that, but we have the opportunity to question these place names, to make them less opaque and to use them to learn how to read and to understand the territory and the challenges of the present.

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