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Pierre de Potestad

Translator: Urmila Nair. urmila6531@gmail.com

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Tracks and Traces of Mont Blanc's Itineraries: an Approach Through Wayfaring

Pierre de Potestad

Translation : Urmila Nair. urmila6531@gmail.com

- 1 An entry into the high glacial mountains creates tracks, signs of the journey through this environment defined by its permanent snow cover and morphological dynamism (Lliboutry, 1965). A track is a series of imprints recognized as a guideline, that facilitates wayfaring along the snowy surface. Its interpretive nature, both in its creation and when followed, makes it a sign of wayfaring, understood as the adoption of an uncertain path and environment (Kirschner, 2017). Here, to “make tracks” is to relate a sensuous, personal study of the conditions of the terrain within the creation of ephemeral geographical information. Continually present in the discourse and represented since the first ascents, the track remains important in the contemporary context.
- 2 The semiotics of the track, a product of the attention paid to it (Eco, 1978), reveals a certain relationship with the environment within this sense of wayfaring. Leaving behind a track requires a transmission, a decryption based on a shared culture; the sign of the track has to be interpreted and narrated to be significant (Gagnol *et al.*, 2018).
- 3 Lines traced on maps represent itineraries, reproducing the tracks of passage as accounts of exploration, whether commemorative or propositional (Morcrette, 2016). The semiology of such traces reveals their correspondence with the conditions that shape wayfaring in the high mountains. Beyond fixing an itinerary on a map, the historical evolution of these cartographic traces, together with the surface of the maps, echoes transformations in the practice of such glacial passages. I will therefore consider tracks and traces as, respectively, signs within accounts of ascents, and narratives in graphical representation, with a view to discerning the tension that unites them.

- 4 This study proposes a historiography of the track, rooted in the evolution of representations of the trace, within the normal routes of Mont Blanc from the time it was first climbed. The study is based on drawings, engravings and maps where significant changes appear in the itinerary or its representation. The study also examines the occurrence of the track in narratives, and its current acceptance in the discourse of mountain professionals, including guides and caretakers of refuges, who were questioned during semi-structured interviews. The specificity of the high glacial mountain, its snow cover apart, is due to the slopes that block the horizon from view. A frequent recalibration of the projected pathway is therefore required, depending upon the steepness and lay of the land¹.
- 5 Within this approach towards a territory of emptiness (Corbin, 1988), we shall see, firstly, how tracks create an efficacious relationship during an ascent. Second, we shall consider how the traces of itineraries diffuse an exploratory and commemorative logic, throwing into relief the high mountains.
- 6 With the development of an expert knowledge of the environment of the high mountains, mountaineers claim emancipation from the vernacular knowledge of guides, and thereby lay claim to their own wayfaring practices. This is the focus of the third part of this essay, based on the accounts of mountaineers and on the maps produced from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, which manifest traces as proposals.
- 7 Contemporary relationships with the track are rendered complex by the multitude of practices and climbers. Finally, the examination of current representations of the itineraries of Mont Blanc affords a critical approach, within which the represented disappears from place to place, leaving in its stead the uncertainties of progression.

The first exploratory tracks: measuring oneself against the high glacial mountains

- 8 It was the sight of the eternal snows that attracted the first tourists to the Alpine valleys. From Geneva, this natural wonder motivated detours from the “Grand Tour” that was the first modern tourist circuit. The approach of the high mountains was a part of this will to “be in the world” (Falaix and Corneloup, 2017). Savants and explorers, these first tourists quantified the physical characteristics of the high mountains, thereby objectifying them (Debarbieux and Rudaz, 2010). Local people were taken on as guides and their traditional pastoral and hunting practices were employed within the touristic approach to the glaciers. Like Alpine animals, those exemplars of easy progress whose pathways they tracked, the hunters and rock collectors were perceived as beings apart, associated with the marginal spaces of the high mountains (Debarbieux, 1988). An exogenous territorializing rationality (Debarbieux, 2001) would be needed to justify the search for a passage through the glaciers to the summit of Mont Blanc. This materialized in the person of a 27-year-old savant from Geneva, H. B. de Saussure, who, in 1767, proposed a cash prize from the Academy of Geneva, which paved the way for such attempts.
- 9 Footsteps thus took over from the gaze towards the summit, the significant place of focus and of touristic subversion (MIT, 2002). During the ascent of glacial surfaces, the track took on meaning in travel accounts. A product of the passage of a moving body

(Gagnol *et al.*, 2018), the track is an ablation, as Deluc and Dentand realized in 1776 during the first ascent to the summit of the glacier of Mont Buet, the highest point of the Giffre massif: "Without our guide, we would never have reached the summit: we did not possess the right shoes for such an enterprise. But he [the guide], with shoes whose thick, hard soles were covered in nails, struck the snow strongly with the side of his shoe and went up at an angle. He thus made in the crust small indentations that supported him, and that we used to climb after him, supporting ourselves with our sticks." The immediate sharing of these footprints conferred upon them an exemplary though ephemeral practice, changing with the melting or accumulation of snow cover on the glacier's surface. The significance of the track thus had to be actualized anew during each passage, within an interpretive relationship with the terrain that calls to mind the practice of wayfaring (Kirschner, 2017). Adaptive behaviour in an uncertain context reflects the mobilization of a knowledge founded in the interaction with the variability of the terrain (Hutchins, 2018). Such behaviour refers us to the idea of the line as movement (Ingold, 2013), inseparable from the ontology of the geographic experience.

- 10 After twenty years of wandering its northern and western flanks, the path to Mont Blanc was found in August 1786. H. B. de Saussure was himself led there the following summer. In the first *récit de course* (account of a mountain stage) (Amy, 2008), Saussure embodied a double strangeness: that of the physical distance that separated the Genevan savant from the high mountains of Faucigny that he had crossed, but also that of the socio-cultural distance between his experience and that of the guides he had hired in order to find a route to the summit, who would precede him in order "to level the route". In "following the footsteps of those who preceded" him, he abolished the distance separating them and asserted his determining influence on the territoriality of the people of Chamonix (Debarbieux, 1988). Beaufoy, who followed six days later "in his tracks", repeated this novel practice. Paccard would say of him that, "he marched like a guide" (cited in Engel, 1939). There was a consubstantiality of the environment and the local people who had become guides, inventors of itineraries (de Bellefon, 2003) and, subsequently, of the guides and the clients, to the extent that the latter adopted the gestures of the former. From the shared track was constituted a culture anchored in the referential universe of the practice of mountaineering (Bourdeau, 2006).
- 11 In replacing a touristic logic of the destination with that of the path necessary to reach that destination (Berthelot *et al.*, 2008), wayfaring became a form of territorialization that gave its measure to the territory traversed, and thus incorporated the latter.

From track to trace, exemplary representations of the entry into the high mountains

- 12 The significance of the exploration linked with the opening of this route may be found in the sketch by Gersdorf during the first ascent by J. Balmat and M. G. Paccard on 8 August 1786. His written account, made for Saussure, was accompanied by his sketch of the tracks of the ascent, visible the next day through a telescope. The tracks are represented by a thicker line, difficult to distinguish from the glacial surfaces which are drawn with a rapid fluidity.

- 13 Another sketch was drawn by M.G. Paccard in 1823, some thirty-seven years after the ascent. Its contours seem to be based on Gersdorf's sketch, drawn as they both are from the same point of view, from Le Brévent, and with similar lines representing the tracks. However, the itinerary as a whole is represented in a far more subjective manner in Paccard's sketch, both in its guideline and in its bifurcations. Paccard claimed a "hodologic strategy" (Gagnol, 2013), from the Greek *hodos* meaning "path", to attain the summit across an unknown surface. In his annotations though, he spoke of the "traces of uncertainty" (Morcrette, 2016) specific to an exploratory route map. He was thus already considering several passages, one of which was, as we shall see below, led by the guides of Fellows in 1827 and the other in the descent by Hudson's party in 1855.

Figure 1: Baron de Gersdorf, *Sketch of the track leading to the summit of Mont Blanc, August 9th 1786*

Baron de Gersdorf, sketch of the track leading to the summit of mont Blanc, August 9th 1786, from E.H. Stevens, 1929, *Paccard's lost narrative*, courtesy Jacques Perret

Figure 2: Michel Gabriel Paccard, *Sketch of the itinerary of Ascent of the Mont Blanc on the 8th of August 1786, 1823*

Michel Gabriel Paccard, sketch of the itinerary of ascent of the mont Blanc taken on the 8th of August 1786, joined to a letter to Johann Gottfried Ebel, 1823, courtesy Archives d'Etat du Canton de Zurich

a a traces in the snow observed with a telescope on the following day of my ascent of the mont Blanc in 1786

M crevasse more than a toise wide covered by a snow bridge which we would pierce with a stick

K dangerous crevasse at the foot of the Dôme

x x x the routes I had traced on this drawing before my first ascent, and upon which I decided on spot seeing the two yellow ones impassable, especially the one on the right which Balmat wished to follow

- 14 The first official representations of the “route to attain the summit of Mont Blanc” were commissioned by Saussure.
- 15 M. T. Bourrit made a painting of this route, which was engraved for the edition of Volume IV of Saussure’s *Voyages dans les Alpes* in 1796, in which his ascent is recounted. In a perspective view from the bottom of the valley of Chamonix, the glacial surface of Mont Blanc’s north face stands out amongst the elements of the landscape. The tracks left by Saussure and his seventeen guides are represented therein. The line is dotted. On it are marked the two points of bivouac of the climb, at the summit of the Montagne de la Côte and on the Grand Plateau, milestones of three days of wayfaring within a landscape that one embraces at a glance, like the protagonist in the foreground. The precisions regarding the circumstances of the ascent are to be found here in graphic form. The marked undulations of the itinerary reflect the sinuosity of the passage between the great crevasses of the Petit Plateau and the Grandes Montées. On the final slope below the summit, the crossings would have revealed the fatigue of the climbers, expressed in Saussure’s account, due to altitude and steepness.
- 16 The aim of this engraving is to authenticate the ascent in its spatial inscription, to offer a proof of it. The legend clearly indicates the itinerary in the past tense, by which “was reached the summit of Mont Blanc”. This representation in perspective may thus be viewed as a route map of the commemorative type (Morcrette, 2016), wherein the rhetoric of the image presupposes a vision of a space traversed and therefore mastered.

Figure 3: Marc Théodore Bourrit, *View of Mont Blanc and of the route by which one has reached the summit, 1796*

- 17 Saussure commissioned C. Exchaquet to make a relief map of the range, which inspired an engraving, made separately in 1790, the subtitle of which specifies: “we have indicated the route taken in the month of August 1787 by the Professor de Saussure, renowned physicist from Geneva, to reach the famous summit of Mont Blanc which had, until shortly before that, been considered inaccessible”. The aim was thus, first and foremost, to provide a support to the account of that historic ascent that changed the status of the high mountain. From an oblique aerial perspective, which further emphasizes the supremacy of Mont Blanc, the line of ascent appears almost vertical, marked by uniform undulations that reflect the detours that served to reduce the steepness of the slope by making a zigzag pathway. While the areas of seracs are distinguished from those of the plateaux on the glacial surfaces, no crossing of the line of ascent seems to indicate the presence of transverse crevasses. Whereas the glacial areas are scrupulously represented, their surface serves here as a basis for an itinerary, without any depiction of its morphology or of the constraints that it presents to wayfaring.
- 18 The engraving mentions equally the unsuccessful attempt via the Arête du Goûter planned by Saussure, the trace of which has been drawn to the point where the steepness and the wind got the better of the courage of the mountaineers charged with opening the climb, who had nothing but the limited support of their sticks and hobnailed shoes to help them along.

Figure 4: Karl Ludwig Zehender, *Perspective view on the valley of Chamouni, the Mont Blanc and the adjacent mountains in the Haut Faucigny, 1790 (detail)*

Karl Ludwig Zehender, *Perspective view on the valley of Chamouni, the mont Blanc and the adjacent mountains in the Haut Faucigny, 1790 (detail)*
courtesy Collection Musée Alpin, Chamouni-Mont-Blanc

Key: to Bernoud van Borchum in L'explication des remois de l'éclatante l'année qui représente la vallée de Chamouni, le Mont-Blanc, et les montagnes adjacentes, enrouler d'après le récit de M. Juchepet Bâle, 1791

(the altitudes are those measured by H. R. de Saussure)

11 Pierre ronde, hut of M. de Saussure and route he took in 1786

18 Aiguille du Goutte. One can see the steep ridges which M. de Saussure scaled with much effort in 1785 up to the height of 1535 toises

19 Summit of that Aiguille and route by which one attempted, without success, to reach the top of mont Blanc

23 Montagne de la Côte

24 Summit of that mountain where M. de Saussure spent the first night while ascending the mont Blanc in 1787 (1310 toises)

25 Passage of the Glacier on the way to mont Blanc

26 Dôme of Aiguille (du Goutte) (2120 toises)

27 Snow-plain where M. de Saussure spent the second night (1995 toises)

28 Summit of Mont Blanc (2460 toises)

- 19 These first representations fixed the track as an itinerary and sketched the account of a wayfaring capable of establishing a precedent in the history of the high mountains in general, and of Mont Blanc in particular. These engravings support the exemplary nature of this itinerary, “proposed in order to be followed” (Morcrette, 2016). Nevertheless, they do not foresee the ever-changing conditions of the ascent, only the possibility of which is proven by its representation. These engravings represent a call for a physical commitment by tourists and savants, led by the newly minted guides who alone were deemed capable of reproducing that guideline on the glacial terrain.

The track as a sign of potential wayfaring, founded in an intimate relationship with the environment

- 20 Sharing a track reduces the uncertainty associated with an entry into an environment charged with strangeness. In the *Narrative of an Excursion to the Summit of Mont Blanc*, in 1825, Sherwill indicates that he could “distinctly see the track we had left in many places over the snow; and though nine persons had traversed the dreary plain, the mark of our footsteps appeared as if some one solitary traveller had been wandering “in endless mazes lost,” so zigzag was the direction.” It is, nevertheless, a carefully elaborated track that is observed, defined by the interpretation of the terrain and the will to go forward in the safest and most efficient manner, assuming a “space in a situation of mobility and a body embarked upon narrative” (Gagnol *et al.*, 2018).
- 21 The track gives here an image of a series of footprints, facilitating progress by compacting the snow. In expressing his visual and kinesthetic pleasure, Sherwill describes a form of recreational wayfaring that is specific to mountaineering,

consisting in the search for a passage through a dynamic environment, based on a sensitive knowledge of the environment in which a “corporal ecology” plays out (Andrieu and Sirost, 2014).

- 22 During C. Fellows' ascent in 1827, the danger of an avalanche and the fear of an accident, such as had befallen the caravan of Dr Hamel in 1820 in the section of the Rochers Rouges, made the guides decide to pass below, via the Corridor that led to the Brenva Pass. From then on, that would be the main route followed by caravans of the *Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix* (the Chamonix Guides' Company), founded in 1821, after the accident that claimed the lives of four guides in the old passage.
- 23 This itinerary is reproduced on an image of a view of Mont Blanc taken from Le Brévent with a camera obscura, which offers a proportionate view of the mountain. The trace now begins on the right bank of the Bossons glacier, via the Pas de l'Échelle. It traverses the Plan Glacier in the direction of La Jonction, in an area where the shading reflects the irregularity of the terrain. The line of ascent goes around a large transverse crevasse to return towards the rock of Grands Mulets which serves as a night halt. There onwards, progress is defined by sections of long crossings between crevasses and brief projections between the plateaux. After the Corridor, the final line is straight above the Rochers Rouges.
- 24 The simplicity of this line reflects a better match between the practice and its representation. This ascent took a new passage and thus signified, once more, the interpretive and detailed nature of this journeying towards Mont Blanc. The old passage is, nevertheless, indicated on the side of the Col du Goûter, whereas it ought to have figured above the Rochers Rouges from the Grand Plateau. The graphic narrative of this new itinerary, drawn in propositional form, marginalizes the old passage to the point of dislocating it.

Figure 5: Charles Fellows, *Mont Blanc from the Breven*, 1827

- 25 The search for itineraries continued, with the emancipation of mountaineers from guides, in the second half of the nineteenth century (Debarbieux, 2001). Foreign climbers, experienced in the glacial environment, asserted the objectification of the skills needed to enter into the high mountains. The transition from the vernacular knowledge of guides to expert knowledge resulting from an intimate practice of the glacial environment, thus nurtured exploratory ambitions with regard to other routes. The line of ascent of Mont Blanc was, however, imposed by the *Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix*.
- 26 In this consideration of the itinerary lies the paradoxical difference between, on the one hand, the local people, to whom skills were attributed and who were content to guide climbers via routine, established pathways, and, on the other, the foreign mountaineers, who were bored of pathways marked by habit and who wished to explore more completely the possibilities of the high mountain routes. "It seems strange that so many years should have passed away without more vigorous exertions having been made to scale this lofty dome from many other points; for surely it is much more interesting to explore and find out some new route, than to follow for ever in the same well-known track. This may, perhaps, be accounted for, by supposing on the one hand that the peasants do not feel sufficient interest in these matters, to induce them to sacrifice some of the finest days in the year; and, on the other hand, that our own enterprising countrymen, and able mountaineers from other countries, make too limited a sojourn in this land of mountains, to enable them to gain that experience of glaciers which is essential before any attempt be made at discovering unknown paths", wrote Hudson and Kennedy in their *Where there's a Will there's a Way*, published in 1856.
- 27 British mountaineers incorporated well the knowledge of the specific environment of the high glacial mountain, planning the pathway to be followed and applying a

hodologic strategy in their progression, as Hudson states here : “It seemed advisable that my observations as to the route should be complete, and quite independent of any one else. [...] Having carefully treasured Mollard’s observations respecting the route usually followed by those who had ascended this mountain, and having attentively considered the various obstacles likely to be encountered, I marked out with the eyes that line of march which on the whole seemed most favourable”.

- 28 At first, Hudson’s party started on the southern slope of the massif, imitating the attempt by Courmayeur’s guides on 31 July 1855. However, they were forced to retreat in the face of bad weather on Mont Blanc du Tacul. Finally, a passage was found from Saint Gervais. A hut was built on the Aiguille du Goûter. However, the passage rejoined the Grand Plateau and the itinerary of the Corridor from the Col du Dôme as the party was unable to cross the ridge on account of the wind.
- 29 The map attached to this account isolates the Bossons glacial basin. For the first time, the map indicates three itineraries taken, including the descent via the Grands Mulets towards the valley of Chamonix. The itinerary that climbs beyond the Tacul is represented in dashed lines. This itinerary signals the possibility of a line. The traverses towards Mont Blanc from the Col du Midi and the Col du Dôme would not be climbed until 1863 and 1861.

Figure 6: Charles Hudson, E. S. Kennedy, *Map showing three routes to the summit of Mont Blanc, as taken by a small party of Englishmen in the summer of 1855, 1856*

Charles Hudson, E.S. Kennedy, *Map showing three routes to the summit of Mont Blanc, as taken by a small party of Englishmen in the Summer of 1855, 1856*. In *Where there's a will, there's a way : an ascent of Mont Blanc by a new route and without guides*, London, 1856.

- 30 Advances in topographic survey techniques permitted the creation of new maps that replaced the artistic representations of the practice of high mountain climbing.
- 31 With the incorporation of Savoy to France in 1860, the location of the massif on the frontier justified its rigorous cartographic study. Captain Mieulet was thus dispatched in 1863 and his observations also served the Englishman Adams-Reilly, who drew up a

map on behalf of the Alpine Club. Published in the same year, in 1865, these two maps represented for the first time the itineraries of ascent of Mont Blanc via the Bossons glacial basin as well as via the ridges. The contour lines represented on the glacial surfaces of Mieulet's map helps one perceive the alternation of ledges and slopes, to which the line of ascent corresponds with its straight and zigzagging lines. This map reflects most precisely the possibility of passages of "pathways of Mont Blanc" on the French side, which was the only side being climbed at the time.

Figure 7: Ministry of War, *Massif du Mont Blanc*, Topographic study by M. Mieulet Capitaine d'État Major, 1865 (detail)

- 32 From then on, the itineraries began to approach the "total historical fact" of the mountaineering route (Vallot, 1999), associating the personalities of authors, the identity of the place and the techniques employed. New routes via the ridges became possible with the use of the first crampons, invented by the British. By multiplying the possibilities of tracing lines of progress on the mountain, technical developments nurtured the transformation of the relationship with wayfaring.
- 33 Photography sheds a different light on the track, reproducing it in snapshots taken in the high mountains. Thus, A. R. Bisson documented the ascent of Mont Blanc in 1862 and offered a view of the angular climb of the sole track of ascent trodden by the multiple tracks of the descent. E. Whymper, in 1895, shows its scale in relation to the enormity of the Bossons glacier at La Jonction.

Figure 8: Auguste-Rosalie Bisson, *View taken while ascending Mont Blanc*, 1862

Auguste-Rosalie BISSON, view taken while ascending mont Blanc, 1862
in Jacques Perret, Michel Jullien, *Mont-Blanc : premières ascensions, 1770-1904*, Editions du Mont-Blanc, 2019

Figure 9: Edward Whymper, *View of Glacier des Bossons*, 1895

Edward Whymper, view of Glacier des Bossons, 1895
in Peter Berg, *Whymper photographie : conférence à la lanterne magique*, Editions du Mont-Blanc, 2012

- 34 In this new approach to the dimensions of the mountain (Amy, 2008), an irreversible form of engagement of the capacities of mountaineers comes into play as they strive to

measure up to the mountain (Ghersen, 2016). It was an assumed wayfaring, as A. Mummery expressed it in 1895: the mountaineer's "delight and pleasure in the sport are chiefly derived from the very uncertainty and difficulties which it is the main function of such a guide to eliminate. [...] The true mountaineer is a wanderer, and by a wanderer I do not mean a man who expends his whole time in travelling to and from in the mountains on the exact tracks of his predecessors [...]". Unlike the guides who had made mountaineering a seasonal vocation, Mummery related his practice to sports, thereby invoking the idea of rules transposable to different places by mountaineers who, in that "golden age", would multiply, if not exhaust, the possibilities of new pathways.

Contemporary tracks and traces, an affirmation of the gap between practice and representation

- 35 With the surveying of numerous itineraries, increasingly difficult both technically and physically – the Guide Vallot of 1951 mentions 64 itineraries for Mont Blanc – the attractiveness of normal routes was reconsidered. Yet, it was always the track that directed the course along the glacial terrain, and its forms had multiplied with the diversification of mountaineering practice and the development of the use of skis and ice axes.
- 36 This historical itinerary leading to Mont Blanc is today frequented mainly by ski touring. The normal route of ascent has been shifted to the Arête du Goûter from Saint Gervais, which the Bossons route joins at the Col du Dôme. The maps of the *Institut national de l'information géographique et forestière* (IGN, the National Institute of Geographic and Forest Information) have eliminated the traces of mountaineering; the traces on Mont Blanc on the *Top 25* maps are only marked as "ski routes" that include "tricky passages". On these maps, the only route indicated to the summit is thus, once again, that of the Grands Mulets. This route is represented by long dashes, indicating rather loosely the progression within the glacial context. The latter is rendered via shading, representations of the accidents of the glacial terrain (such as crevasses, areas of seracs), and contour lines at a spacing of 10 metres. In the nineteenth century, the trace reflected relief features via its undulations. Here, by contrast, it invokes the experience of the terrain. In the "tricky passages", the representation is dotted, giving it greater continuity while inviting caution. A variation of the route is thus indicated along the North Ridge of the Dôme du Goûter. The representation stops abruptly, however, at the level of the "Vallot Hut" where skier-mountaineers set aside their skis to complete the ascent on foot. The Arête des Bosses is thus left to the discretion of climbers over a vertical drop of 500 metres to the summit.

Figure 10: IGN, Carte TOP 25 3630 OT, *Chamonix-Mont-Blanc*, 2017 (detail)

- 37 It is indeed the interpretive nature of the practice that comes to the fore in this choice of representation of itineraries. Following the guideline leading to Mont Blanc is left to the discretion of climbers. This attempt at fostering responsibility in the engagement with the high glacial mountains depends on the thickness of the line that directs the course there (Berthelot, 2011). This thickness is founded in the cultural and historical values of mountaineering which, as we have seen, have been marked by the bifurcations of the track as a function of degrees of danger and technical skill required. In summer, thousands of mountaineers use the traverses via the ridges while only a few dozen climb up to Mont Blanc via the Bossons glacier. L. Moucheront estimates that the uncertain nature of this itinerary shapes the search of those who pass via the Grands Mulets refuge, of which he is caretaker. He says that there is a “filter” involved in the process of climbing Mont Blanc, which is “welcome” given the context of popularization of this ascent via the normal route (personal communication, February 2020). When L. Moucheront signals the passage of a stone marten to his refuge, he writes on his blog that its tracks give a “good idea of wayfaring”, recalling their inductive and animal nature. Many practitioners now produce GPS traces relative to their actual route, which can yield precise and current ideas about wayfaring. Once shared, these traces would, nevertheless, manifest a lag with respect to the ever-evolving glacial terrain. For K. Bodin, high mountain guide, one places oneself on “rails” in following such digital traces, which can harm the contextual relationship, whether instinctive or expert, with the environment (personal communication, January 2020). The GPS traces visible on ski-mountaineering forums make it possible to report on a practice in accordance with the conditions encountered, ephemeral and circumstantial as these are. When downloading a trace, the VisuGPX website, for example, warns that the trace is “provided without any warranty” and advises that one “may not have to follow it blindly”.

Figure 11: GPS tracks of the itinerary of Mont Blanc throw the Grands Mulets, consulted on March 2nd 2020

- 38 The map has become an object of circumspection even as its precision reflects the objectification of a faithful representation of the terrain. It is because the uncertainties associated with the vagaries of high mountain wayfaring lead its guideline to “disappear into trackless space” or to drift (Cosgrove, 1999). On the maps published for hikers by the Tourism Office of Chamonix (*Office du Tourisme de Chamonix*), there is a disjunction at the entrance into the glacial environment, which is considered a “high mountain space” although the tongue of the Mer de Glace is situated below the equilibrium line of the glacier, where ablation wins over the accumulation of snow. The semiology of traces reflects a relationship with the high mountain environment that is strongly marked by the effects of climate change on the practice of mountaineering, as shown by the variations in access to the Mer de Glace as well as to the trail that overhangs it (Mourey, 2019). The lines are partially erased on the glacial surfaces so as to invoke the need for a detailed interpretation of the terrain and to discourage hikers who are less certain of their “sense of itinerary” (Trommsdorf, 2011). One also finds this tendency in the *Top 25* map of the IGN at the level of the Mer de Glace, with the dotted representation of the “tricky passage” which is loosely separated in places.

Figure 12: Tourism office, Valley of Chamonix-Mont-Blanc, *Pathways of Mont Blanc*, 2015 and 2018 (details)

Figure 13: IGN, Carte TOP 25 3630 OT, *Chamonix-Mont-Blanc*, 2017 (detail)

- 39 The possibility of making tracks or of correcting these is an essential act in bringing one's identity into play in high mountain wayfaring. This possibility is expressed

largely in the search for performance in the opening of routes, for mixed itineraries or those realized under specific conditions such as winter itineraries, or in the practice of off-piste ski routes. These are so many searches for an individualization of the relationship with a space accessible by means of gravity, in a “gesticulation [...] that constructs an analogic wayfaring in action” (Corneloup, 2008).

- 40 A rehabilitation of the body occurs in this relationship with impermanence, with the undefined and uncertain trace. The ethic of “Leave no trace / Sans trace²” participates in the valorization of the absence of marks produced by human passage. The ephemeral dimension and the autonomy necessary to adapt to conditions of the terrain work together to give back to the track its labile nature and to refuse the marking by means of a line on the ground and on maps. The necessarily fluid trace of the actual making of a track, together with the morphological dynamism of the outlet glacier, invoke the creativity involved in the conduct of wayfaring (Kirschner, 2017).

Conclusion

- 41 Aid to wayfaring, sign of vernacular, then expert knowledge of progression, measure of a hodologic strategy, the trace is versatile even as it engages in an itinerant relationship with the high glacial mountains. Its ephemeral dimension preserves its interpretive and circumstantial significance. The tension that is involved in the representation of traces in itineraries well reflects the transformation in the conditions of engagement with the normal route to Mont Blanc. In the exploratory, commemorative and propositional dimensions of traces, belies a gap with the sense of wayfaring that is at work in the practice, and that is shared in a track. The recent selective erasure of the representation of traces on maps invokes the individual significance of engagement with a track and the choices involved therein. The creativity of this improvisation, in interaction with the environment, corresponds to the existential significance of the line, whether track or trace. The track doubles as a dematerialized form in the use of GPS tracks, which represent so many individual memories, detached from their basis by technological mediation, and yet revelatory of the inscription of the body in the space of the high glacial mountains. Via the gap with its trace on a map, the elaboration of the track becomes finally a matter of a re-enchantment of the approach to the high mountains, in a creative, sensitive and intimate relationship with the environment.

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NOTES

1. The sense of wayfaring on snowy terrain is also encountered in the Arctic regions where it has been associated with a vernacular knowledge of progression (Collignon, 2000).
2. This is an ethical and environmental movement that began in North America. It advocates the minimization of tracks of human passage in natural spaces, so as to avoid perturbing ecosystems and to safeguard the expectations of outdoor recreationists.

ABSTRACTS

Since the opening of the high glacial mountain to tourism, entry into this environment has been mediated by the tracks left on the snowy mantle. These tracks form a guideline that reflect the practice of wayfaring, understood as the entry into an uncertain pathway, which requires adaptation to conditions encountered and experienced. This research seeks an understanding of the pathfinding at play in recreational wayfaring in the high mountains - through the occurrence of tracks in accounts of ascents, through their figurative reproduction as traces in engravings and maps from different periods, and through reference to them in the discourse of

mountain professionals. This “sense of wayfaring” articulates the evolution of itineraries and the conditions of access to the summit of Mont Blanc.

INDEX

Keywords: track, wayfaring, trace, itinerary, Mont Blanc

AUTHORS

PIERRE DE POTESTAD

Teacher
ppotestad@gmail.com