

“Much More Than Ice Blocks”. Exploring the New Intimacy of Human-Glacier Relationships in the Swiss Alps

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Abstract

This chapter explores the concept of *Glacial Intimacy* to examine the evolving relationships between humans and glaciers in the Swiss Alps, particularly in the canton of Valais. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and using a multi-sensory methodology, the study reveals how glaciers are more than geophysical entities; they are dynamic actors in local cultural practices, memories, and activism. By focusing on both local residents and urban climate activists, the chapter uncovers a complex interplay between personal attachments to glaciers and broader global narratives of climate change. Understanding these human-glacier relationships also sheds light on how mountain villagers are adapting and transforming in response to environmental and social shifts. Through ceremonies, rituals, funerals and everyday interactions, glaciers are seen as more-than-human beings that shape and are shaped by human experiences. The concept of *Glacial Intimacy* highlights the interconnectedness of these icy landscapes with belonging, memory, and the Anthropocene, urging a reconsideration of how glaciers are engaged with in both local and global contexts.

Introduction

This chapter argues that Swiss glaciers are not just geophysical formations but active participants in shaping local identities, memories, and environmental concerns. Through the concept of *Glacial Intimacy*, this study explores how

physical and emotional human relationships with glaciers are intertwined with communal practices, local livelihoods, and global environmental activism, especially within the context of glaciers' increasing disappearance due to the Anthropocene. Understanding human relationships with glaciers offers valuable insights into the broader changes and adaptations occurring in mountain communities, both in Europe and worldwide.

Glaciers are often perceived through varying lenses – for instance, some see them as symbols of climate change, while others regard them as integral parts of their environment and community. This chapter delves into human-glacier relationships focusing particularly on the canton of Valais, in Switzerland, where local inhabitants and climate activists engage with the glaciers in contrasting and sometimes overlapping ways. Through ethnographic accounts and theoretical reflections, collected and collated over the last four years, I explore how these interactions are shifting, especially in the face of accelerating glacial retreat.

My interest in the topic was sparked on Sunday September the 6th, 2020, when several citizen and climate activist groups from across Switzerland gathered to pay tribute to the Trient Glacier. This event was significant on a personal level, resonating with my own long-standing relationship with the Trient Glacier, and my positionality as an anthropologist allowed me to critically observe the intersections of personal memory, activism, and community rituals. The commemorative ceremony was supported by the Swiss Climate Alliance (which brings together 150 associations from several sectors of society) and Christian aid organizations, and Swiss scientist Jacques Dubochet, winner of the 2017 Nobel Prize in Chemistry was present, among other speakers. Notably, a Catholic priest recited a prayer for the Earth, borrowed from Pope Francis. Seeing this blend of activists, scientists, and Christians profoundly resonated with me. Maybe it was because the Trient Glacier, which is near my home in Valais, has been part of my life since childhood. I remember wondering, with an almost protective attitude, who these people who came to pay tribute to the glacier from outside the canton were. Why was a catholic priest here? Have such glacier commemorations ever taken place in the past? Were the residents of Trient (the small village of 170 inhabitants at the foot of the glacier that bears its name) involved in this event? I later discovered that the organizations behind this commemoration were two aid foundations, one

Catholic and one Protestant, aiming to raise awareness about climate justice in the global South. This tribute to Trient glacier was the second in a series of four glacier ceremonies held in Switzerland between 2019 and 2023.

As I dived deeper into the motivations behind these gatherings, it became clear that urban climate activists¹, driven by broader concerns of environmental collapse, view glaciers differently than the local inhabitants who experience them as part of their daily lives. This distinction between local inhabitants and activists highlights the variety of meanings that glaciers hold, and illustrates a tension between personal, lived experiences and broader global narratives of environmental crisis. By contrasting both perspectives, this chapter reveals the complex and multi-layered ways in which glaciers are perceived and engaged with. Interviews with Trient community members tell of a deep attachment to the glaciers that transcends scientific or environmental concerns. For these residents, the glacier is not an abstraction but a tangible part of daily life – a source of water, a marker of seasonal change, and a key element of local lifeworlds. Glaciers are more than just ice; they shape the practices, memories, and sense of belonging of those who have lived alongside them for generations. Conversely, for urban activists, glaciers stand as powerful manifestations of what is at stake in the fight against climate change.

Combining the initial observation I made at the Trient gathering with other tributes, I aim to analyze how different perceptions of glaciers – whether as sacred, economic assets, or reminders of climate collapse – reflect a diversity of human-glacier relationships that transcend simple categorizations. These diverse perceptions, often highlighted in commemorative ceremonies, embody the intersection of activism, spirituality, and science. Thus, they illustrate the complexity of the climate crisis and its deeply personal, ethical, and existential impacts on societies worldwide. To capture these intricate dynamics, I introduce the concept of Glacial Intimacy, which encapsulates the complex, more-than-human relationships that individuals, ecosystems, and communities share with glaciers. This concept emphasizes how glaciers as more-than-human entities shape human experiences, identities, and practices, while simultaneously being influenced by human actions, emotions, and global forces such as climate change.

¹ The members of climate activist associations met during this research are all based in urban areas.

A Bricolage Methodology

The exploratory research presented in this chapter is based on a combination of ethnographic methods, including in-depth interviews, participant observation, and analysis of relevant documentation. This bricolage approach, which pieces together diverse forms of data, aims to capture the multi-layered and evolving relationships between humans and glaciers in the Valais region. Additionally, this research was informed by a multi-sensory methodology that allowed for a deeper understanding of how glaciers are experienced and perceived through the senses, emotions, and embodied practices. This approach draws on the work of scholars such as David Howes (1991), Paul Stoller (1997), and Sarah Pink (2015), who emphasize the importance of engaging in anthropological fieldwork with all sensory dimensions: sight, sound, touch, smell, and even taste. It also incorporates some insights from the work of Carey et al. (2016), who call for a framework in feminist glaciology that emphasizes the need for diverse and inclusive narratives, thereby integrating the emotional and cultural significance of glaciers for communities into our analysis, much like the experiences of Trient's inhabitants.

A series of formal ethnographic interviews² were conducted with a dozen local inhabitants of Trient village (the youngest was 20 and the eldest 73 at the time of the interviews), and with Gaëtan³, the person in charge of the Climate Justice project in one of the two foundations that organized the demonstrations at the foot of the glaciers in Switzerland. In addition, several informal conversations with other stakeholders involved with the glaciers took place during walks and travels. These interviews offered insights into the personal and emotional significance of glaciers for those living near them, while also clarified the motivations behind the activists' tributes to glaciers. The formal interviews were semi-structured, thereby enabling participants to share their experiences and perceptions in an open-ended manner. Moreover, a walking day and outdoor round table organized at the foot of the Trient Glacier in Sep-

2 I warmly thank Jean-Charles Fellay, from the Regional Centre for the Study of Alpine Populations (CREPA) in Valais, a keen expert of the region and its inhabitants, who conducted these interviews with me. The presence of two interlocutors not only diversified the perspectives but also encouraged deeper reflections from the participants, creating a more interactive and layered dialogue.

3 All the names of the interviewees have been changed.

tember 2024⁴ provided an opportunity for further reflection with various participants, including the Trient glacier mountain hut warden, a guide, students, and members of the public. This walking ethnography, inspired by Pink’s (2015) ideas around sensory ethnography, created a space to engage directly with the landscape through movement and sensory perception (Ingold, 2000), which allowed participants to connect with the glacier through sight, smell, and sound. Howes (1991) and Stoller (1997) argue that anthropology must go beyond intellectual observation to include the sensuous aspects of subject study. In this research, touching, hearing, smelling and visual experiences played a role in how locals and visitors perceived the glacier as an active participant in their lives.

Of the four glacier demonstrations held in Switzerland between 2019 and 2023⁵, I participated in the last one, at the foot of the Morteratsch Glacier in Les Grisons canton, in May 2023. This immersive experience, where participants engaged not only intellectually but sensorially and emotionally, was useful for capturing the embodied dimensions of human-glacier interactions. Echoing Ingold’s “dwelling perspective” (2000), which emphasizes that human experience and knowledge of the environment are shaped through active, sensory engagement with it, this concept can be extended to glaciers as part of a landscape that is not passively observed but actively lived with and experienced. At Morteratsch, for instance, a pastor from the Philippines spoke, linking climate change in his country to Switzerland and urging Swiss citizens to act. A glaciologist emphasized the urgency of the situation and the possibility of mitigating it through environmental behavior change. A representative of the Protestant churches in the Grisons addressed the crowd in Romansh (one of the four Swiss national languages), reinforcing the pastor’s and glaciologist’s messages while highlighting the importance of creation in Christian philosophy. The commemoration also featured traditional Swiss elements, such as the Alpine horn played by three performers (two females and one male) in folkloric costumes. The speakers stood on a large rock, which served as a platform for the official part of the ceremony. Although the glacier itself

4 In collaboration with the collective « Glaciers Ardents » and the CREPA (Regional Center for the Study of Alpine Populations) whom I warmly thank.

5 Activists distinguish between ‘funerals’ for glaciers that glaciologists no longer consider glaciers, and ‘commemorations’ for glaciers that, from a scientific standpoint, are not yet deemed gone.

could not be clearly seen, one could half make out its presence in the distance, blending into the grey sky. The rugged landscape and the somber atmosphere underscored the retreat of the Morteratsch Glacier, which was the focus of the gathering (see Figure 1). Approximately 200 people participated in the event, walking through the valley left by the retreating glacier.



Figure 1 – Tribute ceremony for the Morteratsch Glacier, held at its foot on May 20, 2023. Copyright by Viviane Cretton.

The Grisons ceremony, held at Morteratsch in the Romansh-speaking region, followed a model similar to those at Pizol in the German-speaking region, Trient in the French-speaking region, and Basodino in the Italian-speaking region – each representing one of Switzerland’s four linguistic regions. These events typically included a glaciologist to provide a scientific and embodied perspective, a representative from the Global South to highlight the far-reaching impacts of climate change, and a local religious figure to offer a spiritual dimension to the issues discussed. The four commemorative events consistently aligned with key political events in Switzerland, such as parliamentary

debates, elections, or referendums. For example, the Morteratsch ceremony was held just before a popular vote on June 18, 2023, regarding the Climate Act, a key measure aimed at achieving Switzerland’s climate neutrality by 2050. The march at the foot of the glacier became an opportunity for participants to express their support for the vote, many carrying flags in favor of the initiative (see Figure 2).



Figure 2 – On May 20, 2023, the Morteratsch ceremony took place just ahead of the June 18, 2023, popular vote on the Climate Act – a key measure aimed at achieving Switzerland’s climate neutrality by 2050. The event provided an opportunity for participants to emphasize the importance of this vote. Copyright by Viviane Cretton.

Although I did not attend the earlier ceremonies, I reconstructed the funeral for the Pizol Glacier in 2019 (see Ats, 2019; Bilodeau; Jaquet & AFP, 2019; La rédaction de TF1Info, 2019; Vincent & AFP, 2019); RTS Play (2019) and the commemorative tributes for the Basodino (see Maillard Ardeni, 2021) and Trient Glaciers (see Ats, 2020; Dorsaz, 2020; Felley, 2020; Zbinden, 2020) through media coverage, telephone interviews with organizers, and participant testimonies. I supplemented this material with a targeted press review, paying

special attention to the language and images used in reports on glacier funerals (Maillé, 2021; Ouest France, 2019). Finally, my personal memories of the glacier from childhood played an important role in shaping my understanding of these events and the broader human-glacier relationship.

Touching the Glacier

I remember touching the Trient Glacier during Sunday walks with my father and brother as a child in the 1970s – an experience that has since become impossible due to the glacier’s retreat. This memory of touching the glacier – feeling the cold, textured ice, observing how it shifted between smooth and rough surfaces, and playing with melting droplets – was a common experience for my generation.

This practice of physically engaging with the glacier resonates with Classen’s (2012) exploration of how the sense of touch shapes human relationships with the natural world. Touching the glacier was not just a literal act. To go and touch the glacier was a way of expressing our closeness to it, both physically (it was easily accessible on foot, and we could touch it) and sensorially (its cold, hard texture was special, and some of us relished the sensation of touching it). This sensory interaction allowed people to experience the glacier in a deeply embodied way, connecting them to the landscape both physically and emotionally. This echoes Gagné’s work (2024) when she describes glaciers as “vital bodies”, emphasizing how human encounters with ice are sensory, emotional, and deeply relational; in alignment with the multi-sensory approach used in this study.

In 2025, the glacier’s significant retreat – over 1,000 meters in the last 30 years – has made this experience impossible, transforming it into a distant memory for those who grew up with it (Figure 3). The loss of this physical connection highlights not only the glacier’s disappearance but also the disconnection some of us now feel, both from the landscape and from a part of our past. This echoes the themes of nostalgia and loss described in Stoller’s (1997) work on sensuous scholarship, which reminds us of how climate change alters not just landscapes, but the ways in which we relate to and experience the natural world.



Figure 3 – The Trient Glacier in August 2024. Copyright by Viviane Cretton.

The analysis I propose in this chapter also draws on existing documentation, including historical records, scientific reports, and cultural texts. These sources provide a broader context for understanding how human-glacier relationships have evolved over time and how they are framed within both local and global discourses. My thinking has solidified through an iterative process of engaging with empirical data, texts, and their meanings. Like the bricolage methodology discussed earlier, this approach required time, patience, and attention, along with a constant effort to balance personal experience with broader analytical perspectives – a process of both centring and decentring. When personal experiences resonate with urgent global issues, it can be uncomfortable to confront one’s lived realities within the framework of anthropological discourse.

With these methodological foundations in place, we can now turn to the literature on how glaciers are perceived and engaged with, starting with their role as sites of mourning and loss.

Glaciers as Sites of Mourning and Loss

Mourning for glaciers has recently become a mediated practice in several parts of the world, including Switzerland. In September 2019, the Pizol glacier in the Swiss canton of Saint-Gall was the subject of a funeral-style ceremony to mark its death, as it had melted to the point where it no longer qualified as a glacier from a scientific perspective. Hundreds of people, many dressed in mourning attire, gathered to bid farewell to what was once a majestic natural entity. A wreath of flowers was laid, but unlike in Iceland, where a commemorative plaque was installed for the Okjökull glacier in August 2019 (L'avenir, 2019; Bayce, 2019), no permanent memorial was left at Pizol.

These public ceremonies are designed to raise awareness about climate change. Media reports frequently cover glacier funerals, reflecting a deep sense of loss and highlighting the irreversible trajectory we are on (see LCI, 2019; Bilodeau, 2019; Vincent & AFP, 2019; Ats, 2019; Jaquet & AFP, 2019; AFP, 2019). The discourse mourns not only glaciers but also the ecosystems and communities that depend on them. Combining scientific data, public mourning, and calls for policy change, glaciers are presented not just as environmental phenomena but as a powerful embodiment of the Anthropocene.

These farewell ceremonies, usually reserved for humans, reveal that glaciers hold a deep spiritual and cultural significance for many communities worldwide. In the Peruvian Andes, the Himalayas, and parts of China, glaciers are revered as sacred spaces and are often seen as the places where deities dwell (Allison, 2015). The Tlingit and Tagish peoples in the circumpolar north, for example, regard glaciers as sentient beings that require ritualistic respect (Cruikshank, 2005, 2012; Hayman et al., 2021). Similarly, in the Himalayas, glaciers are viewed as cultural landmarks and sacred entities, with their disappearance carrying significant emotional weight for local communities (Gagné, 2018). The retreat of glaciers thus represents, not only environmental loss, but also cultural and spiritual erosion, affecting both human communities and the animals that rely on these ecosystems. Gagné's work also highlights the economic implications of glacier retreat, showing how it impacts water resources, agriculture, and herding practices that depend on meltwater.

These perspectives offer alternative ontologies that challenge the Western scientific approach, but Western ontologies themselves are being reshaped by the

vanishing of glaciers. In Austria, for instance, Nöbauer (2022) discusses profound changes in the ways glaciers are perceived as they retreat. Historically viewed as awe-inspiring and dangerous, glaciers in Alpine regions were once seen as more-than-human entities with their own agency. As they melt away, this interdependent relationship is now giving way to a sense of irreversible loss. Nöbauer (2022) also explores the dependence of Austrian ski resorts on glaciers, illustrating how human activities are deeply entangled with glacial environments and how this relationship is being reevaluated in the face of climate change. Similarly, Chamel (2023a) investigates emerging “animistic” relationships with glaciers in the French Alps, where both locals and scientists are developing new modes of engagement, treating glaciers as living entities that require care. As O’Reilly (2016) highlights, sensory engagement with glaciers is not exclusive to local communities. It also extends to glaciologists, whose intimate scientific work bridges empirical knowledge and personal, sensory experience. Drawing on Philippe Descola’s notion of relational ontology (2005), which challenges the traditional Western divide between nature and culture, Chamel (2023a) suggests that even within a Western, naturalistic context, glaciers are increasingly seen as possessing agency and relationality. As we see, the disappearance of glaciers extends far beyond environmental degradation, encompassing cultural, spiritual, economic, and geopolitical dimensions. The retreat of glaciers is not merely an ecological issue but one that deeply affects the underlying social and cultural fabric of the communities connected to these landscapes.

Reversing the Ritual

These communal shifts are evident not only in recent glacier funerals but also in rituals that evolved in response to glacial retreat in the past. Processions and prayers to glaciers are nothing new in Valais, and in Switzerland more broadly. According to local annals, in the 18th century, villagers near the Trient Glacier organized processions to the Orny oratory (Orny is a glacier next to the Trient Glacier) to petition the Lord for good weather during harvest season. Special processions were also held during times of drought to ask for rain (Melly, 1937). In the German-speaking part of Valais, since 1678, the Aletsch Glacier has been feared and prayed about by the people of the valley during

religious processions, to ensure that its advance and the devastating floods it caused each year would be contained. The Catholics of Fiesch, a village near the Aletsch Glacier, even took an oath to end this scourge, with the support of Pope Innocent XI. Since the 1980s, however, the glacier has been retreating, and now people appeal to God to help combat global warming and the subsequent melting of the glacier. The villagers made a special request to Pope Benedict XVI to reverse their prayer. In 2010, he granted permission to amend the "oath of disasters," allowing their prayers to address the issues of global warming, climate change, and glacier melt (see Apic, 2010;; Keystone-Ats, 2012; Blanchoud, 2010). These reversed prayers are well known to glaciologists, who often remark that in the past, people prayed for glaciers to stop advancing, whereas today, they pray for them to stop melting.

This type of glacier ritual reversal is also found in the Peruvian Andes (see Allison, 2015). The Quechua people who live near the declining glacier of Mount Ausangate traditionally cut large blocks of ice from the glacier and brought them down the mountain to share with family, friends, and livestock as part of the pilgrimage. The glacier ice is said to have magical healing properties, ensuring fertility on family farms, restoring health, and strengthening babies. In recent years, concerns over the glacier's retreat have led to changes in local custom: the ice is not to be removed, and guards are stationed at the glacier's edge to prevent anyone from taking pieces away. In 2003, strict regulations were put in place to enforce this.

Glaciers thus occupy a complex place in the human imagination. These examples show that glacial retreat is not simply a material process but has important implications for how local people understand themselves and make sense of their environment (Allison, 2015, p. 494). Indeed, major landscape changes affect the internal processes that shape human subjectivity and meaning-making (Allison, 2015, p. 501).

Glaciers as Instruments of Activism

Glaciers hold profound personal and spiritual significance for those who live near them but for many urban activists and organizations, who may not share such a close physical proximity, they also serve as powerful tools for political and environmental action. In recent years, glacier commemorations in Swit-

zerland have increasingly become sites of activism, with political agendas and environmental campaigns woven into the ceremonies. What distinguishes these recent glacier commemorations from past spiritual or religious rituals is the explicit focus on climate justice and political action. In Switzerland, the collaboration between Christian aid associations working on climate justice for countries in the Global South and various organizations addressing climate issues within Switzerland has added a new dimension to these events. For instance, about the commemoration at the Morteratsch Glacier in May 2023, as the event was closely tied to the popular vote on the Climate Act, one of the organizers, Gaëtan, candidly acknowledged the political undertone of the event, saying: “We’re a bit like urban activists invading a mountain region. In a way, we’re instrumentalizing glaciers, which haven’t asked us for anything, for political purposes” (interview, 28 April, 2023). This reveals a significant shift in how glaciers are framed in these events: no longer just as sacred or natural entities, but as entities leveraged to raise awareness about the pressing climate crisis. While these ceremonies may resonate with activists and environmental groups, the way glaciers are mobilized for political purposes diverges sharply with the deeper, more personal attachments that local residents have to these icy landscapes. For urban activists, glaciers serve primarily as powerful revelations of environmental degradation and climate collapse. The political nature of these events often distances them from the lived realities of local communities, who see glaciers as more than just indicators of a broader global crisis. For many local communities, glacier loss is deeply personal – embedded in memories, histories, and livelihoods. This divide between local and activist perspectives illustrates the complexity of human-glacier relationships, where glaciers embody different meanings depending on proximity and experience. This difference between local inhabitants and activist perspectives leads us to a broader reflection on glaciers as markers of the Anthropocene: glaciers, as emblems of climate change, are at the heart of contested narratives in this epoch.

Melting Glaciers, Emblematic Embodiment of the Anthropocene

Orlove et al. (2019) present the Anthropocene as a period in which glaciers are seen as icons of climate change, revealing their vulnerability to human-induced environmental shifts, particularly global warming. However, this concept of the Anthropocene is increasingly contested by social scientists. Drew and Denzin Gergan (2024), for example, explore divergent perspectives on the future of Himalayan glaciers. They argue that the Anthropocene should not be seen solely as a geological concept but as a politically charged reality that encompasses multiple scales of interaction, emotion, and power. Their critique calls for a decolonization of the Anthropocene, emphasizing the recognition of more-than-human agencies and the importance of emotional responses to environmental crises. Similarly, Gagné and Drew (2024) critique the Anthropocene's human-centric narrative, which centers human impact on the planet. They question whether this framework adequately accounts for the agencies of non-human actors, such as glaciers, animals, and ecosystems, in shaping Earth's systems. The retreat of glaciers, for example, is not only a consequence of human-induced climate change but also part of a complex web of relationships involving animals, plants, and local ecosystems. This reimagining of the Anthropocene suggests that addressing environmental challenges requires not only confronting human actions but also acknowledging the intricate interdependencies between humans, non-human species, and geophysical entities like glaciers.

Literature and empirical narratives highlight that glaciers are not merely seen as blocks of ice: they act as embodiments of both collective memory and climate change for many communities around the world. This perspective underscores the deep interconnectedness between humans and their environment, where glaciers' retreat forces livelihoods and ways of life to evolve. Indeed, glacier funerals reveal more-than-human connections, showing that glaciers are part of a broader web of interactions between human and non-human actors. They influence ecosystems and human lives by shaping weather patterns, water supplies, agriculture, and local economies. Simultaneously, they serve as a form of public engagement, drawing attention to climate change through ceremonial actions that mobilize communities. These entanglements suggest

that glaciers are not passive entities but active participants in the climate drama, both influenced by and influencing human actions.

Building on this foundation, I now turn to a closer analysis of how the concept of Glacial Intimacy unfolds in the everyday lives of local inhabitants and activists alike. Through ethnographic accounts, I will explore how personal, communal, and political engagements with glaciers reveal complex, intimate relationships – starting with local narratives and the personification of glaciers.

Glacial Intimacy: The Mood of the Glacier and Local Narratives

The Trient Glacier, like glaciers in the Himalayas, Canada, and the Andes, is more than a physical entity – it is seen as a living being that reflects emotions and moods. Charlotte, a 20-year-old high-school girl and Trient resident, describes how locals refer to the glacier as “sad” due to its rapid melting and retreat (interview, 10 May, 2023). What once was at a 15-minute walk distance from the hut café is now over than 2 hours’ hike away, and the glacier itself is largely inaccessible due to safety concerns. This shift represents not just a physical loss, but an emotional one, especially for older residents who remember when the glacier was a part of daily life. That is unfortunately not the case for Charlotte who is too young (“I never had the chance to go on the glacier or touch it”), unlike her father, 51 years old : “When he was a child, it took him five minutes on foot [from the refreshment stand] to go and touch the glacier” (interview, 10 May, 2023).

In Gagné’s (2018) ethnography from Ladakh, glaciers are similarly viewed as emotional beings, with clear skies signalling happiness and cloudy skies indicating anger. In Trient, the glacier’s changing color, from white to brown-grey, reflects its deterioration. Philippe, a teacher and member of the Trient municipal council notes the emotional impact of these changes: “It’s a joy to see these white glaciers full of snow. But to see it diminish, of course, gives you the blues” (interview, 17 June, 2023). Even bad weather, which would typically be unwelcome, is now celebrated by locals if it benefits the glacier. He explains: “We’re happy if it’s bad weather for a month because it’s good for the glacier” (interview, 17 June, 2023).

Local Narratives and Glacial Personification

In Trient, the glacier is personified and described as a “neighbor” who has witnessed generations of families grow. This anthropomorphism reflects a deeper emotional intimacy with the glacier, as local stories emphasize its presence as more than just ice. Jacques, head of operations at the hydroelectric plant in the neighboring commune, was introduced to me by several residents as the local historian of Trient. He explains that the Glacier, in a way, played a significant role in saving the valley, first through ice harvesting⁶ and later through water capture by the national railway company⁷. He also describes how the glacier’s seasonal melt influenced agricultural practices and community life. For the residents, the glacier’s rhythms dictated the timing of crops and provided a protective water source during dry periods (interview, 9 May, 2023). Similarly, in Canada, elderly native women describe glaciers as sentient beings that react to human activity (Cruikshank, 2012). In Trient, stories of the glacier advancing and retreating over centuries are part of local history. Odette, aged 75, wonders if the glacier might one day advance again, just as elders in the past had observed (interview, 9 May, 2023).

The Glacier as More Than Ice

For the people of Trient, the glacier is more than a physical entity – it is a living presence intertwined with existence, cultural heritage, and environmental change. Luc, 70 years old, local councillor and beehive owner, recalls how easily the glacier could be reached during his childhood, and he remembers its distinctive shape, the *patte d’ours* (bear’s paw), which fascinated him as a child: “I can still see the bear paw and the water flowing out from under this kind of blue cavern, it was magical, I would say – the black glacier and the blue underneath – we didn’t understand why the ice was blue...” (interview,

6 The Trient Glacier was industrially exploited beginning in 1865. By the late 1880s, 10 to 15 large carts would depart daily from the Col de la Forclaz during the summer, transporting between 20 to 30 tons of ice blocks by road to Martigny. From there, one train per week would deliver the ice to major French cities such as Paris, Lyon, and Marseille. However, the invention of machines for artificial ice production caused the collapse of this glacier-based industry in 1893.

7 Since 1928, the Swiss Federal Railways (SBB/CFE) have been utilizing the water from Trient (via the Vernayaz hydroelectric plants) to provide hydroelectric power for French-speaking Switzerland and the canton of Valais.

15 May, 2023). Each inhabitant of Trient interviewed mentioned the Tine, a pocket of water that forms on the glacier during summer. It is said to burst with a tremendous detonation between July 15 and August 15. The water then disappears beneath the glacier, swelling the Trient torrent for 2 to 3 days. These floods can be significant, and in 1960, they were devastating, destroying several bridges and roads. Luc remembers:

And there was this smell, that’s what I remember, this smell of earth – it was cold, the water was freezing, and it felt like it came from the bowels of the earth. But you don’t get that smell during floods like that. It was dark brown, the water was turbulent, and it was carrying rocks (interview, 15 May, 2023)

Nowadays, the Tine has become a rare occurrence. But as in Luc’s deeply rooted memories, it left a strong impression on the eldest who experienced it as children. These memories now contrast with the barren rocks left behind by the retreating glacier.

The glacier’s retreat has also had practical consequences. Patrick, a glassblower and one of the 4 people in charge of the Trient bisse, explains how changes in glacial meltwater have disrupted local water management, while the increased frequency of rockfalls and avalanches has created new dangers (interview, 10 May, 2023). Alicia, a farmer and Trient local councillor, describes how shrinking water supplies have affected agriculture and animal husbandry in the region (interview, 15 May, 2023). For residents like Elise – who ran the glacier refreshment stand for 40 years – the glacier is closely tied to family traditions and community events, and its loss represents the fading of both personal and collective memories (interview, 22 June, 2023).

The glacier’s role in tourism has also shifted. Odette – who ran the village bistro in Trient from 1970 to 2013⁸ – recounts how the glacier once drew visitors who could easily engage with it, but now, according to her, as the glacier recedes, the village’s relationship to it has changed (interview, 9 May, 2023). In her words, what was once a key part of the village’s identity has become increasingly distant, both physically and emotionally. This shift reflects the broader societal impacts of glacial retreat explored in research by Orlove et al. (2019) and Clivaz and Savioz (2020), which highlight the economic and cultur-

8 The village bistro no longer exists today.

al challenges faced by Alpine communities that rely on glaciers for both tourism and water resources. These studies introduce the concept of “cognitive dissonance” into this context, describing the tension between acknowledging the effects of climate change and the economic dependence on glacial landscapes. In Trient, this dissonance is evident as the community must reconcile the glacier’s visible retreat with its historical role as a vital component of both local life and tourism income.

For some, the glacier incarnates more than memories or practical resources – it holds a sacred place in the community. Alicia, 52 years old, describes it as “God, just after God,” and her son has even had the glacier tattooed on his arm, reflecting its lasting importance to their family (interview, 15 May, 2023). As Alicia touchingly shared during a walking day round table in Trient in September 2024: “Every resident of Trient has a little piece of the glacier in their heart.” This sentiment captures the deep emotional bond that the people of Trient have with the glacier, holding its enduring presence not only in the physical landscape but also in the hearts and memories of its inhabitants. As Gillespie (2017) explains in her work on human-animal relationships, empathy and intimacy often extend beyond the human world – an idea mirrored in how Trient locals engage emotionally with their glacier. For Alicia, this connection runs even deeper; her son has the glacier quite literally in his blood, with its image tattooed on his skin, permanently engraved as a marker of deep-rooted ties and heritage (see Figure 4). This tattoo, a powerful symbol of his attachment, reflects the unique way in which the glacier becomes a part of local belonging, transcending mere physical presence to shape both personal and communal connections to the place. For the people of Trient, the glacier is not just something they see or interact with; it is something they feel – emotionally and even spiritually. It is a part of their past, present, and future, woven into the fabric of their everyday lives, as Alicia’s words so eloquently convey.

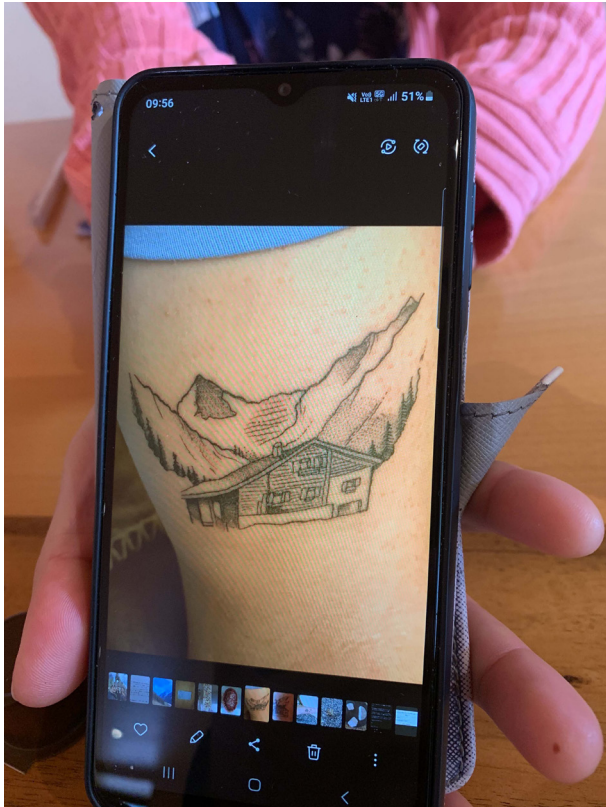


Figure 4 – After the interview, Alicia showed us the tattoo her son envisioned and got on his arm: it depicts the Trient Glacier in the background behind their house. Copyright 2023 by Viviane Cretton.

A Political Perspective: Urban Climate Activists and Glacier Commemorations

Interviews with the organizers of glacier commemorations and urban climate activists introduce an alternative perspective on glaciers, one that highlights the difference with the more personal, locally-focused views of Trient’s residents. For the organizers, the ceremonies are not simply about mourning the loss of natural landmarks; they are strategically tied to political actions, such as climate protection laws in Switzerland. As Gaëtan, the activist in charge

of climate justice for a Christian aid organisation, explains, “these commemorations are not just rituals of grief; they are designed to put pressure on decision-makers, to remind them that the time for action is now” (interview, 28 April, 2023). The glacier becomes a powerful emblem of climate justice, used to mobilize support for legislative change and raise public awareness.

Roots in Urban Activism and Local Concerns

The organizers also acknowledge the predominantly urban nature of the four Glaciers demonstrations in Switzerland, including the one in Trient. As one of them notes: “Many of the attendees are not from Trient or the surrounding areas. They are urban activists who come because they understand the larger implications of glacier loss – both for Switzerland and the world” (interview, 28 April, 2023). This stands in contrast to the views of the Trient locals, who have a long-standing, practical relationship with the glacier.

While Trient’s inhabitants tend to focus on the local importance of the glacier – its impact on water supply, tourism, and its communal and personal significance – the activists bring a global justice dimension into the conversation. They emphasize the disproportionate impact of climate change on the Global South, using the visual and tangible retreat of Swiss glaciers to draw attention to global inequalities. Gaëtan highlights this distinction: “What we see here in Switzerland is alarming, but it’s nothing compared to the devastation being felt in the Global South. Our glaciers are disappearing, but entire ecosystems and communities in other parts of the world are collapsing” (interview, 28 April, 2023). This global framing juxtaposes with the more locally grounded narratives of the Trient residents, who focus on the glacier’s immediate impact on their (small) community and landscape.

Despite these contrasting positions, no overt tensions or conflicts have emerged between the inhabitants of Trient and the activist groups, particularly those aligned with climate-conscious Christian movements. Although their paths occasionally intersect during symbolic, media-oriented public events, their agendas largely evolve in parallel. The activists’ presence in Trient was brief and aimed at raising public and political awareness on a global scale, while the villagers’ relationship to the glacier is rooted in lived experience, seasonal rhythms, and everyday concerns. Outside these encounters, the lim-

ited interaction between the two groups reflects not hostility, but rather the distinct temporalities, priorities, and registers through which each engages with environmental change.

This divergence becomes particularly visible in the commemorations organized by the activists, which express the spiritual and moral frameworks underpinning their engagement. These events, often marked by public performances and religious symbolism, contrast with the more pragmatic, grounded relationship Trient residents maintain with the glacier in their daily lives. Where the activists frame the glacier as an emblem of planetary crisis and loss, demanding immediate attention, the villagers relate to it through long-term patterns of coexistence, memory, and adaptation. Rather than a simple divergence of opinion or strategy, these differing engagements point to distinct environmental imaginaries – one oriented toward global ethical responsibility and mediated action, the other grounded in a slower, place-based ecology of care.

Ceremonial Mourning and Ongoing Local Adaption

Building on the symbolic and moral dimensions of their engagement, the organizers of the Glacier tributes incorporate a spiritual element into the commemorations, inviting priests and pastors to speak about the Christian responsibility to protect nature. These ceremonies reflect a belief in environmental stewardship, resonating with Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si*, which calls for an “ecological conversion” and emphasizes humanity’s duty to care for the Earth as a shared home (Francis, 2015). As Gaëtan puts it, “Protecting the glaciers is not just an environmental obligation; it’s a moral duty, a part of our responsibility as caretakers of creation” (interview, 28 April, 2023). This blends spiritual significance with a message of climate action, mirroring Pope Francis’ call for a renewed sense of stewardship. The *Prayer for the Earth* in *Laudato Si* invites believers to reflect on the harm inflicted on the planet and seek forgiveness, a sentiment also found in the ceremonial mourning for glaciers, which draws attention to broader environmental degradation (Francis, 2019). This echoes Chamel’s (2023b) exploration of eco-spirituality, which emphasizes the reconnection with Earth and other-than-human beings through rituals, aligning with a deeper ecological awareness. Whatever the case, al-

though some Trient locals, like Alicia, express a spiritual connection to the glacier – she describes it as “God, just after God” – this spiritual framing is not as central in their day-to-day relationship with it. For most residents, the glacier is seen more pragmatically, as a crucial element of their environment rather than primarily through a spiritual or symbolic lens.

The funeral-like ceremonies organized by the activists serve as a public awareness tool, distinguishing between full funerals (such as for the Pizol Glacier, which has completely disappeared) and commemorations (for glaciers like Trient, which are still retreating but have not yet vanished). As the organizer Gaëtan explains: “These ceremonies are meant to be symbolic, to wake people up, to show them that we’re not just losing ice – we’re losing our future” (interview, 28 April, 2023). However, this concept of glacial funerals is largely absent from the daily experiences of Trient locals, who do not organize such events themselves. For them, the glacier’s retreat is part of an ongoing, evolving relationship with their landscape. Their focus remains on the practical impacts of the glacier’s retreat, such as changes in water management, agriculture and tourism, rather than its emblematic or ceremonial significance.

In sum, the urban climate activists and organizers of glacier commemorations bring a strategic and activist lens, using the glacier as an icon of global climate justice and political mobilization. This differs from the more personal, intimate connections expressed by Trient’s inhabitants, who view the glacier as part of their daily lives, heritage, and belonging. Nevertheless, these two perspectives offer valuable insights into how glaciers are perceived but also highlight the different scales at which these relationships – local and global – are experienced and understood. The juxtaposition of local perspectives with activist frameworks allowed for a nuanced understanding of how glaciers shape human morality and global environmental concerns.

Conclusion: Local Intimacies, Global Connections

Throughout this chapter, I have explored some of the multifaceted relationships between humans and glaciers, from personal connections rooted in local communities, such as those in Trient, to the broader political and activist frameworks presented by urban climate organizers. These perspectives

– whether emotional, practical, or political – are united by a recognition that glaciers are not merely passive, natural features. Instead, they are dynamic participants in a more-than-human world, where humans and non-humans are intertwined in a shared existence.

The concept of Glacial Intimacy arises from this deep engagement, encapsulating the intricate, evolving relationships between humans and glaciers, while drawing on emotional, spiritual, and ethical dimensions. This idea is not just a theoretical outcome but also a reflection of the bricolage and multi-sensory methodology that guided this research. These approaches enabled the investigation of human-glacier relationships from several angles – merging interviews, personal experiences, emotional responses, and sensory engagements with the environment. By weaving together different types of knowledge, this methodology highlights the rich, layered complexity of human-glacier interactions.

Through touching, smelling, and feeling the glacier, the research captured how glaciers evoke profound feelings of nostalgia, reverence, and grief, but also resilience. These emotions were palpable in the interviews with locals, who spoke about the loss they felt as the glacier retreated, while coping with this changing reality in their daily lives. The methodology allowed the research to move beyond abstract descriptions and engage with the sensory and emotional realities of these relationships. The spiritual dimension of Glacial Intimacy was also revealed through the embodied experiences of glacier funerals and other rituals. The inclusion of spiritual leaders in these ceremonies, as observed in the urban activist commemorations, highlighted the sacred significance that glaciers hold for many. The multi-sensory aspect of these rituals – blending sight, sound, and touch – reflects a life-like understanding of glaciers as more-than-human beings, alive and requiring respect and care. This connection between glaciers and spirituality, as expressed by figures like Alicia, illustrates how glaciers are seen as active, revered participants in human life. This view connects to Shapero’s (2017) explanation of glacier oracles in Peru, where glaciers are similarly personified and integrated into local spiritual and practical worlds.

In a time when glaciers are rapidly retreating, Glacial Intimacy challenges us to rethink the ways in which we engage with these entities. It invites us to recognize glaciers as intimate partners – shaping and being shaped not only by

human actions, emotions, and practices, but also by non-humans beings and forces. This intimacy, revealed through multi-sensory engagements and the layering of diverse knowledges, evolves as glaciers melt, landscapes change, and new generations form their own engagements with these more-than-human others. Notably, both urban activists and local inhabitants contribute to these evolving relationships, albeit in different ways. While urban climate activists approach glaciers through commemorations and rituals to raise awareness of broader global issues, local inhabitants engage with the glacier as part of their daily lives and cultural heritage. These parallel forms of engagement illustrate how Glacial Intimacy can bridge both activist movements and local practices, demonstrating that intimate connections with glaciers are formed not only through proximity but also through political and emotional acts of care.

The concept of Glacial Intimacy not only captures the sensitive and embodied significance of glaciers for local communities but also challenges dominant narratives of environmental crisis by emphasizing human-environment entanglements. This framework offers a new lens for understanding how landscapes under threat compel both personal adaptation and collective action, making glaciers central to discussions of climate change, human existence, and activism in the Anthropocene. Even as the glacier retreats and physically distances itself from the community, its presence in the hearts of the residents persists. This enduring connection reflects how the Trient Glacier, like many glaciers worldwide, is a visible embodiment of change – expressing not just the environmental shifts but also the collective and emotional reconfigurations that accompany such transformations. Its retreat compels the community to reflect on their role within a broader ecological and communal system, even as the glacier continues to serve as a reminder of the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world.

This research exploration modestly contributes to bridging the human-glacier connections found in the Western world with other ontologies that recognize the deep entanglement between humans and more-than-human entities. In Western contexts, where nature is often seen as an external force to be managed or observed, this study reveals how even within this ontology, intimate connections with more-than-human entities like glaciers are not only possible but thriving. These relationships, while perhaps less collective

and more individual than those found in Indigenous cosmologies, nonetheless challenge the dominant narrative of disconnection that characterizes the Western view of nature. By focusing on the sensory, emotional, and cultural dimensions of human-glacier engagements, this emerging study opens new avenues for thinking about how landscapes, even in Western societies, are woven into the construction of human subjectivity, memory, and belonging. It also suggests that the ontological divide between the West and other societies may not be as absolute as often presumed – for even in contexts where glaciers are seen primarily as natural phenomena, they are deeply embedded in the social and emotional fabric of human life.

Ultimately, *Glacial Intimacy* calls for a deeper, more reciprocal engagement with the more-than-human world. The experience of Trient, though deeply local, reveals broader global connections. The community’s interdependency with its glacier illustrates how local impacts of climate change are part of an interconnected system. By documenting that intimate ties with more-than-human entities exist within the Western naturalistic framework, this research reveals how glaciers are not only witnesses of climate change but intimate partners in a shared planetary existence. By understanding this intimacy, we as humans gain insight into the global connections that bind more-than-human communities across the world.

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