

HUMAN-ICE RELATIONALITIES THROUGH THE LENSES OF ECOPOETRY

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ABSTRACT

The background for this paper is a science-humanities collaborative project (in its preliminary phases) exploring the bio-cultural significance of glaciers. From this standpoint, I ask: what might human-ice relationalities entail and look like? I suggest that one answer, among many possible, revolves around ecopoetry. My premise is that, contrary to the assumption of individual human authorship, an ecopoem is not single-handedly written by the poet, but is instead co-created: it is the outcome of a relationship, an entering into a dialogue through listening, observing, sensing, imagining, tending to, feeling with – and then translating the experience into words. The ecopoetic image or verse emerge in and from an interaction with the world which is affective and relational – a correspondence (Ingold, 2017). Acknowledging the more-than-human as co-creator in the ecopoetic act replaces the exceptionalism of human authorship with relationality and interdependence. Seen through these lenses, ecopoetry becomes a practice and a channel to explore ‘more-than-human’ relations and possibly gain glimpses into different forms of knowing. The intended contribution of this paper is to argue for ecopoetry as a form of multispecies interaction and a tool to transform our concept of ‘knowledge’ by affording, through the attentiveness, imagination and affective engagement engendered by the ecopoem, a heightened awareness of more-than-human forms of inhabitation of the planet.

Poetry calls us to stay awake, to find the words to describe how it feels, to sing to what hurts, to reach out, to attend more closely and with more care, to each other, and to our fellow species, to see all things as our kin Brigley and Evans (2021, p. 10).

RESEARCHING GLACIERS

The broader context for this paper is a collaborative research project investigating the scientific and cultural-affective significance of glaciers – and their demise. This interdisciplinary project endeavours to combine natural sciences, forensic archaeology, and environmental humanities approaches to explore the bio-cultural significance of glaciers (Gobbi & Gaudio, 2022).

Two-thirds of all irrigated agriculture in the world is likely to be affected in some way by receding glaciers (UNESCO 2025). This alarming data raises broader questions about the cascade effects of glaciers' disappearance for human and nonhuman life, and the planet's ecosystems. Currently there is a relatively poor understanding of these consequences. The project aims to engage with these issues, and more broadly, it aims to try and understand what exactly is lost when we loose a glacier (Varutti et al., 2025a, 2025b).

An environmental humanities scholar, I am specifically interested in the affective and cultural-symbolic dimensions of ice - its role in shaping identities, memories, a sense of place, and site-specific forms of knowledge. I am also drawn to explore how losing ice entails also an affective loss, and a loss of imagination, for the current and future generations. It is important to cast light on the existential costs of ice loss as they are mostly invisible, yet they should be taken into consideration by decision-makers and policy makers (Varutti, 2023a).

More humanities-informed research on glaciers is needed. This is also a timely endeavour, since the United Nations has declared 2025 the International Year of Glaciers' Preservation', and 2025-2034 has been earmarked as the 'Decade of Action for Cryospheric Sciences' (United Nations, 2025).

ICE HUMANITIES

Theoretically, my reflection connects with the field of ice humanities. This is an emerging interdisciplinary field investigating the relations human-ice, to explore, as Dodds & Sörlin (2022, p. 1) phrase it 'life on and with ice'. In this approach ice is seen as a 'social and material composite' that is in constant elemental transformation (ice is constantly shifting: melting, freezing, calving, cracking...) and in the process, it's affecting and transforming human and nonhuman entities (flora, fauna, geology, climate). At the same time as there is all this vibrancy, there's also another facet of studying ice. On a warming planet, studying ice means study something that is literally disappearing under our eyes. So the research is necessarily inflected by themes such as uncertainty, vulnerability, loss and grief.

Because I am interested in an affective perspective, I approach ice as lying at the core of a nexus of affective relations, which ice (in its presence or in its absence) contributes to sustain

and transform. It follows that my main proposition is the following: we do need to have some kind of relationship with ice, and some kind of response to its demise. We cannot continue to be indifferent (Varutti, 2025). The problem, as I see it, is that if we don't have a relationship with ice at all (and most of us don't, unless we live at high latitudes or high mountain areas) how can we create a relationship? How can we begin to be more aware – if not responsive, and caring?

RELATING TO ICE THROUGH ECOPOETRY

I suggest one of the many possible ways to establish a relationship with ice is through eco-poetry. Eco-poetry is poetry that has environmental messaging (see Walton, 2018). It aims to engender ecological awareness in readers, and it does so by evoking affective engagement (Varutti, 2026; 2023b). As a language, we know that poetry is evocative and lyrical, and also very, very precise, condensed, distilled to the essence. In addition, poetry is also intimate, it often bypasses cognition and rationality, to speak directly to our emotional self and to our imagination. In the realm of environmental communication, poetry's ability to reach the emotional self is extremely valuable.

Emotional messaging is indeed powerful. Studies in ecopsychology show that emotions empower ecological messaging. For instance, emotions make the effects of environmental messaging last longer (Goldberg 2023). If we extend these findings to eco-poetry, where we see eco-poetry as a particular kind of environmental communication, we see that the more the eco-poem engenders emotional responses, the higher its ability to communicate the environmental urgency. And indeed, I suggest to *think of eco-poetry, as a kind of affective training: we can learn to emote through eco-poetry, through the repeated acts of reading and writing it*. Learning to connect emotionally with the more-than-human world is a skill: studies in the field of affective ecology (Barbiero 2021) indicate that we can learn to connect with Nature, building on our innate Biophilia.

These insights cast a new light on eco-poetry. Eco-poetry is not just a literary genre, but it can be a powerful pedagogical instrument that helps us *cultivate* an affective relationship with the world. Elsewhere (Varutti 2026) I have drawn on the work of UK poet laureate Simon Armitage to illustrate these propositions. In 2023, Armitage published the pamphlet *Cryosphere* which gathers a set of poems written in occasion of Armitage's visit to Ny-Ålesund, in the Svalbard archipelago. Examining the poems in the *Cryosphere* collection led to the identification of a series of linguistic strategies and tools that eco-poetry deploys in order to engender an emotional response in the reader and create a connection with the 'more-than-human' world of the Arctic. They include, among others, individuation, bearing witness, and invoking vulnerability (see Varutti 2026). These insights cast a new light on eco-poetry. Eco-poetry is not just a literary genre, but it can be a powerful pedagogical instrument that helps us *cultivate*

an affective relationship with the world. Importantly, some of these linguistic tools can be applied beyond poetry, to wider contexts of environmental communication, where the aim is to elicit an emotional response.

ECOPOETRY, THE 'MORE-THAN-HUMAN', AND UNSELFING

I have argued for ecopoetry as a tool to create and uphold a relationship with the more-than-human world, and notably with ice. Engaging with ecopoetry in this way, can have a series of implications. Firstly, it may change the way we think about poetry, as we come to see that ecopoetry is much more than just a literary genre, it can be a tool for ecological pedagogy and ethical transformation. Secondly, it may change human relations to the more-than-human through affective engagement and unselfing. Ecopoetry brings us into a different position in relation to the 'more-than-human'; we are no longer external observers, but through the ecopoem we learn to be affected, and therefore we become participants. This is also an ethical stance; we are no longer self-centered, but we begin the work of 'unselfing'. I borrow this concept from philosopher Iris Murdoch (1970: 369), who defined unselfing as "to give attention to nature in order to clear our minds of selfish care." I see unselfing as a step towards learning to relate differently.

Thirdly, engaging with ecopoetry can also change our idea of 'knowledge' at large. From this position of unselfing, we begin to enter into a conversation with the 'more-than-human', a conversation that acknowledges our mutual interdependence and inevitable constant collaboration. This can have much broader implications in terms of reframing the very idea of knowledge: because from here, from this position of unselfing and awareness of interdependence, we can begin to ask new questions about knowledge and ice. Such as: what does ice 'know'? How might this 'knowledge' be accessed? (How) might the unique features of ecopoetry (its multisensory, embodied, imaginative and affective registers) open pathways towards different ways of knowing and different forms of knowledge? How might this affect (challenge, enrich, transform) other forms of knowledge, such as scientific knowledge – calling perhaps into question the very concept of knowledge itself? And what does it take, ethically, to recognize a different form of knowledge as knowledge? In other words, what does it take to rethink our human-centered idea of what knowledge is, and who and what it is for?

The Anthropocene calls us all, but especially us in academia, to try and experiment with these kinds of ontological shifts and imaginative exercises which may help us reframe the very notion of knowledge, and the hierarchies we attach to different forms of knowledge. And by doing so, we can begin to revise the ethical values that underlie those conceptualizations and hierarchies – which I believe is one of the core challenges of our times.

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