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## **Living the End of Beauty** **Threatened Landscapes and the Politics of Aesthetic Emotions**

### Abstract

This article demonstrates how aesthetic emotions, such as wonder, awe, grief, and enchantment, transform into practical judgments that guide care and politics in threatened landscapes. Drawing on multi-year ethnographic research conducted at two sites that we place “in dialogue” rather than in strict comparison – the rapidly warming Alps (France, Italy, and Switzerland) and a conservation complex at Empire Ranch in Arizona – we demonstrate how invocations of beauty and ugliness render ecological change tangible and morally significant. In the Alps, mountaineers, guides, and glaciologists observe the “darkening” and retreat of ice, reworking their attachments as they learn to recognize – or reject – new forms of beauty. In Arizona, volunteers, scientists, and neighboring communities actively promote beauty through restoration practices, where scientific metrics and often unspoken aesthetics quietly co-produce decisions about species, histories, and futures. In both locations, aesthetic judgments are not epiphenomenal; they are situated social practices that authorize certain feelings, mute others, and establish particular orders of care. By foregrounding ordinary conversations about beauty, we contribute to anthropologies of the environment, affect, and aesthetics, showing how people experience ecological crises through sensory value, how loss is apprehended and negotiated through aesthetics judgement, and how these values become claims about what must endure.

### Keywords

aesthetics; environment; glaciers; affects; beauty; loss; conservation; Alps; Arizona

Résumé (French)

Cet article montre comment les émotions esthétiques — telles que l'émerveillement, l'admiration, le deuil ou l'enchantement — se transforment en jugements pratiques qui orientent les manières d'être et d'agir dans des espaces menacés. À partir de deux enquêtes ethnographiques mises en relation dialogique — conduites sur des glaciers alpins et sur un ranch en Arizona — nous montrons comment les références à la beauté et à la laideur donnent une épaisseur sensible et morale aux transformations écologiques. Dans les Alpes, alpinistes, guides et glaciologues font le deuil des glaciers, reconfigurant leurs attachements à mesure qu'ils apprennent à reconnaître — ou à rejeter — de nouvelles formes de beauté. En Arizona, des bénévoles, des scientifiques et des communautés locales s'emploient à restaurer des paysages dégradés, où indicateurs scientifiques et esthétiques tacites co-produisent des décisions concernant les futurs à promouvoir. Ces deux terrains soulignent l'importance des jugements esthétiques, compris comme des pratiques sociales qui autorisent certaines émotions, en inhibent d'autres et instituent des ordres spécifiques du *care*. En étudiant les évaluations ordinaires de la beauté, l'article montre ainsi la manière dont la crise écologique est vécue à travers des sensibilités situées, participant à déterminer ce qui doit être abandonné ou sauvé.

Mots clefs

esthétique ; environnement ; glaciers ; affects ; beauté ; perte ; conservation ; Alpes ; Arizona

## **Living the End of Beauty**

### **Threatened Landscapes and the Politics of Aesthetic Emotions**

July 2022. In the heat of a summer that would melt Alpine glaciers like never before, Laurent – responsible for maintaining access to the huts around the Mer de Glace [Sea of Ice], adding meters of ladders each year to compensate for glacial retreat – sat on the terrace of a café in Chamonix and described how he feels on viewing the Talèfre glacier, a tributary of the Mer de Glace. “Talèfre, I don’t look at it anymore. There’s nothing left to see. It’s a pile of rocks. The glacier is dead. It’s really gone. It upsets me, it pisses me off. Talèfre, it’s a disaster, it’s sad. The glacier has gone. We have a lake now. Have you seen the lake? It’s beautiful.” His desolation also recalled the glacier of the 1990s: “Damn, but Talèfre at the time had beautiful tables – large rocks perched on slender columns of ice. It was magnificent, splendid. It was a beautiful glacier; it was a super beautiful glacier. I’ve always been in love with this glacier. But it’s dead now, it’s nothing like it used to be. It’s not the glacier I knew. Talèfre, it’s legendary.” Ordering another round of beers, Laurent added that the welfare of Talèfre was also a family matter: his great-grandfather, a guide still famous in the valley, and later his grandfather, had looked after the Couvercle hut overlooking it. Indeed, Laurent had taken his own son to walk on the glacier before it vanished.

October 2023, Empire Ranch, in the borderlands of southern Arizona: Maribel Cruz welcomes a small group of visitors in the shade of the Zagan, beneath the beams where swallows have built their nests. Around us, the pale grasslands stretch to the horizon, interrupted only by scattered mesquite trees and the corrugated peaks of the Santa Rita mountains. The ranch house, half-restored, half-decayed, carries the smell of dust and mesquite bark. “Four years ago,” Maribel explains, “my husband and I were on a motorcycle trip to Sonoita [about 50 miles south of Tucson]. We saw a sign on the road, and I thought,

what about stopping there? From the first second, I fell in love with the place.” Today, leading visitors, she presents the ranch as “a true gem of our history.” Still emotional at the memory of her first encounter with the land, Maribel pauses. After a few seconds of silence, she adds, “You’ll see. This place is magical. It’s so beautiful here.” What began as a roadside stop has since turned into a commitment: despite a full-time job as a marketing manager in Tucson, she now volunteers each month to guide visitors through “our national heritage” and to support conservation initiatives. For Maribel, beauty does not simply enchant – it compels care.

As anthropologists, how do we account for such discourses and emotions regarding beauty? At first sight, Laurent and Maribel express sentiments that are anything but extraordinary: love for glaciers or ranchlands, wonder at landscapes, grief at their degradation, commitment to their care. Such words are not unusual; we heard them often in our fieldwork, offered almost casually, as if they required no explanation. It is precisely this banality that unsettled us. How could something so familiar, so taken for granted, escape ethnographic attention and yet weigh so heavily in people’s choices – whether to look away from a beloved place or to devote oneself to its preservation? Listening to these accounts, we came to realize that when people call a place beautiful, or grieve the loss of its beauty, they are doing more than reporting a feeling. They are passing judgment: saying what matters, what should endure, what calls for care. To name beauty, or to lament its fading, is also to position oneself in relation to a place – to signal attachment, obligation, and responsibility – in contexts where beauty can also circulate as an economic stake, enmeshed with tourism and heritage. In this sense, aesthetic emotions are not of lesser importance than political or moral concerns; they are social practices that orient action (Codjia, 2023), linking perceptions of beauty to moral stances and political commitments.

We argue that following such feelings – especially those tied to emotions of loss and care – offers a productive way to understand how people perceive and respond to environments they value and experience as threatened. While aesthetic categories could be thought to risk trivializing or overshadowing political and moral concerns, what emerges from our interlocutors in the Alps and Arizona is the opposite: aesthetic emotions and evaluations are woven into ordinary practices of attachment and care. To feel and to say that a place is beautiful, or that its beauty is vanishing, is also to express that it matters, that its value deserves recognition and care, and that the feelings it elicits are bound up with how people inhabit their worlds.

Anthropology has long engaged with questions of aesthetics, not only in art worlds and cultural production (Maquet 1979; Flores 1985) but also in the texture of ordinary life. Early debates asked whether beauty could be understood as a universal category (Coote 1992; Sharman 1997), while more recent work has emphasized its variability across cultural contexts (van Damme 1996, Popenoe 2012). Scholars have shown that aesthetic experience is not an abstract domain but a relational process, lived through the senses in encounters between people and things, actions and environments (Bunn 2018). As Küchler (2002) and Severi (2023) argue, form organizes memory and persuasion, giving images and objects material force in social life. From this perspective, aesthetics is never peripheral but constitutive of social worlds. And because beauty is always entangled with value, morals and politics are never far: as Austin-Broos (1990) and Ahmed (2004) insist, aesthetic and political life cannot be disentangled; emotions, including aesthetic ones, are always implicated in moralities.

This entanglement becomes especially visible when environments are perceived as threatened. Our concern is with the ordinary judgments of beauty and ugliness voiced in such encounters. To linger on beauty is not trivial, but rather part of what Tsing et al. (2017) call

“arts of living,” forms of attention that bind people to places and orient moral and political commitments. In the Alps, this intertwining of aesthetics and morality emerges in the idiom of purity: glaciers and high valleys are imagined as clean, radiant, and intact, while melting ice is experienced as a sort of stain or defilement. In Arizona, fascination with the beauty of grasslands is likewise moralized, though in a different register: it often invokes the figure of the pioneer, celebrating the authenticity and moral strength of those who endured and cultivated such environments. Coote (1992, 266) observes “what is morally good is expected to display valued aesthetic qualities, and what displays valued aesthetic qualities is expected to be morally good.” In both of our field sites, aesthetic judgments were also moral and political ones, grounding collective claims about what should be lamented, restored, or valued.

This dynamic resonates with a long genealogy of scholarship on environmental aesthetics and conservation. William Cronon’s (1996) major critique of “wilderness” shows how aesthetic sensibilities toward “nature” have historically shifted – from fear and hostility to sublimation, and eventually to a more domesticated sublime – while remaining deeply connected to projects of national identity, privilege, and erasure. Roderick Nash’s work on wilderness and conservation similarly demonstrates how aesthetic and emotional attachments to landscapes were shaped through literary and artistic traditions associated with elite settler imaginaries, traditions that informed the creation of U.S. conservation institutions such as the National Park Service (Nash, 1967).

More recent scholarship has extended these insights by showing how efforts to “bring nature back” are inseparable from aesthetic expectations about what landscapes should look like, and from the social and political projects those expectations sustain. Scholars have documented how rewilding can reproduce nostalgic fantasies of pristine nature that erase human histories and labor (Jørgensen 2015), generate ambivalent or even unsettling aesthetic

experiences (Prior and Brady 2017), and unevenly distribute benefits and burdens along lines of class, race, and access (Kanoi 2024). Political ecologists have likewise emphasized how aesthetic judgments contribute to broader regimes of valuation and exclusion, notably through the “othering” of invasive species and the normalization of particular ways of seeing and ordering landscapes (Neumann 1995; Lidström et al. 2016; Andreucci and Zografos 2022).

Placed in this light, our material contributes to a growing anthropological concern with the emotional life of environmental changes. Norgaard (2006, 2011), for instance, demonstrates how anxiety and guilt underpin climate-change denial, while Choy (2011) shows how fear and unease can shape ecological perception and orient environmental politics. Such work has placed emotions at the very center of ecological crisis. These are often described as “negative affects”: unpleasant feelings arising from the existential disturbance provoked by environmental degradation: fear (Weston 2017), “inquiétude” (Roux and Lévêque 2024), sadness (Elliott 2018), grief (Chamel 2021), or newly coined categories seeking to capture the affective singularity of the present. Over twenty years have now passed since Glenn Albrecht (2005) coined the notion of “solastalgia” to describe the distress of environmental loss experienced at home. Yet, as research on the emotionality of ecological catastrophe has expanded, scholars have also documented a broader range of affects, including positive ones: joy and hope among pro-climate activists (Wettergren 2025), which fuel what Arne Harms (2023) calls “regenerative cultures” (2023), or the sense of consolation that emerges from participating in the protection of endangered species and environments (Dow 2016). If the ecological crisis compels us to “stay with the trouble” (Haraway 2016), that trouble is also a disturbance of feelings – an affective turbulence where new assemblages emerge, sometimes counterintuitive, yet always grounded in the positions and experiences of those who feel them.

Yet, while studies of the affective regime of ecological upheaval have multiplied, far less attention has been paid to the aesthetic emotions elicited by ecological destruction. By aesthetic emotions we mean affective responses – such as awe, wonder, or dismay – shaped through encounters with beauty and ugliness. Our approach foregrounds this register, showing how, whether in the Alps or in Arizona, invocations of beauty were not incidental remarks but ways of expressing what mattered, how loss was felt, and why care was required. Far from abstract appreciations, these invocations were affective investments that made ecological risk tangible. In both settings, beauty condensed moral, political, and emotional claims, providing not only sensorial grounds for valuation but also an idiom through which futures could be envisioned and contested.

## **Sites in coincidence**

Between 2020 and 2025, Jean Chamel conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the Alps to document the changes taking place in the high alpine mountains, and to understand how they affect the people who have developed a strong attachment to these “eternal snows,” such as glaciologists, mountaineers, guides, and crystal hunters. About 50 semi-structured interviews were carried out, with subjects recruited through snowball sampling in two key locations: the Mont-Blanc massif (mostly around the Chamonix valley, but also on its Swiss and Italian sides) and the francophone Valais Alps. Interviews were supplemented with the participant observation of the same people in action in the high mountains, using fieldwork notes, photos, videos, and in situ go-along interviews (Kusenbach 2003). Around fifteen sessions were carried out, ranging in duration from a few hours to several days, and involving mountain climbing, photo and video shooting, trekking, and skiing.

As for Sébastien Roux, he investigated a conservation initiative in the Arizona borderlands over several years, at first in an informal way and eventually in a more systematized manner. With the help of a geographer, he visited Empire Ranch more than thirty times between 2020 and 2023. These visits encompassed biannual restitution events and colloquia, guided tours of the site, and a three-day local festival organized in 2023. Alongside ethnographic observations and documents collected in situ, a photographic database of some 1000 images was assembled. Sébastien Roux also consulted a collection of archives concerning Empire Ranch, collected and organized by the Special Collections unit of the University of Arizona Library. Finally, in addition to dozens of exchanges on and about Empire Ranch conducted over the years, he also conducted eight formal interviews with volunteers and officials involved at various levels in the conservation of the site.

When we began these investigations, our projects were entirely separate, each following its own questions and trajectory. As our conversations unfolded, however, a common concern gradually took shape: how to account ethnographically for the ways people sense and endure the aesthetic degradation of what they value, and how they grapple with the ambiguous feelings it provokes. We had not intended to foreground aesthetic emotions, nor to frame our work comparatively. Yet through continued dialogue we realized that our materials resonated, offering complementary perspectives that could enrich one another. We therefore placed our fieldwork in dialogue (Crowley-Matoka and Hamdy 2016; Roux and Macalli 2004). This is not a comparison in the strict sense, but an effort to attend to similar anxieties (Stoler 2010) encountered almost coincidentally (Boellstorff 2007) in two distinct ethnographic settings. In different contexts, yet at nearly the same historical moment, we worked alongside people who described their worlds – and the landscapes they cared for – as degrading. Taken together, these resonances highlight that aesthetic judgments and emotions

are not peripheral embellishments but central to how ecological transformations are apprehended and endured.

## **Mourning the Melting of Beauty**

In the Alps, global warming is occurring at twice the rate of speed in comparison to that of the plains. What's more, the transformation of the mountain cryosphere is accelerating, leading to an increased loss of glacial mass, the retreat of glacier tongues, the melting of permafrost, and a rise in the number of rockfalls. The emotion most frequently mentioned by Jean's interlocutors when speaking about these changes is sadness, [or *tristesse* in French]. "Sadness" and "What a sadness" are the words most often written in comments on photos of rapidly retreating glaciers posted in Facebook groups of Chamonix valley inhabitants. They refer to the loss of glaciers' beauty as "heartbreak." This loss is experienced all the more intensely because the adjectives most commonly used to describe these threatened peaks convey a sense of unlimited "wonder" and "enchantment." Mountains are often described as "magical," "fairy-tale-like," "extraordinary," "unbelievable," "unreal," "sublime," and "grandiose." They are considered "marvels" of "unheard-of beauty" and conducive to "moments of grace."

For years, Mathieu has managed a refreshment stand that allows visitors to contemplate the void left by the retreat of the Bossons Glacier in Chamonix. He describes the contrast of the glacier's whiteness amidst the larches and its former "spectacular forms" as producing a "pure aesthetic feeling." He says, "You cannot help but find it beautiful." For him, "this aesthetic quality also makes it emotionally compelling. It is because there is something aesthetically pleasing about their forms and colors." Yet, after returning from a

recent hike with Jean Chamel on the glacier's terminal tongue, he explained: "What I feel, and I think you feel it too, is this fracture, this trench splitting the glacier in two. It is really sad." He also found it "a bit distressing" that the ice was darkening and added that:

"From below, I have less desire to go there. It's less attractive. There was a time when, with those flames and pyramids, I really felt drawn in. Aesthetics play an important role. Now, it is no longer the same. I go because I know it is good for me. I know that up there, I will be happy."

According to Mathieu, this attachment born of beauty seems to echo in the empathy expressed by most of the people Jean met who spoke directly of a mountain range in duress and gave testimony to the empathetic feelings that this situation evoked in them. "The mountain is less beautiful, and to see it falling, and the glaciers melting and disappearing, it makes me sad, it really does," confessed Patrick, a mountain guide instructor, on the terrace of his chalet overlooking the Aiguilles de Chamonix range. "Seeing the mountain as it was last summer almost made me cry. You get the impression that the mountain is weeping too," he said, explaining that from his house he could directly see and hear parts of the mountain collapsing. He compares the present to the years before 2010, when "the mountain was much more radiant, much more beautiful," but also to the moment of the interview, in autumn: he points to a ridge of snow and ice that in summer "was gray, gray-black. And that... that really doesn't make you want to go. But now, to see that immaculate white again is truly a pleasure."

Enzo, a guide from Valle d'Aosta, was similarly despondent: "I suffer with the mountain to see it like this," he explained, over an espresso in a hut within the Italian sector of the Mont Blanc massif. Enzo prefers to avoid such exposure, and therefore avoided "going up there" during the last, scorching summers, when the pristine snow turned to grayish ice at

times “polluted” with sand brought by strong winds from as far as the Saharan desert – echoing the blackening evoked by Mathieu; when the ridges known for their mixed snow-and-rock climbing paths became an unstable mass of sand and shifting boulders; and when the cliff faces, destabilized by melting permafrost, were the scene of incessant landslides and collapses. Avoiding the sight of beauty fading, in order to avoid suffering, is thus one possible response. For him, as for Patrick and Mathieu, the emotion was not only one of ecological concern but of aesthetic loss: the mountain was “less beautiful,” “darkened,” “no longer attractive.” It was through such judgments of beauty that loss became palpable, giving moral weight to their sadness.

Before taking Jean to climb in one of his “secret” spots, Philippe, a guide from Chamonix, explained to him that he had “thought of leaving the valley so as not to witness the death of [his] beloved mountains.” He said this destruction “touches [him] very much. You feel their suffering [... and he] didn’t want to witness this spectacle anymore.” Yet, Philippe considered himself to be “lucky to have known a time when there were still glaciers,” when the mountain “still looked like something,” and when “it was still beautiful.” Philippe wrote a text, where he explains:

“In fact, what is left is extraordinary. And it’s a wonderful opportunity to still be able to enjoy these glaciers, these slabs of granite that still hold together. . . . I ended up completely reversing my view on the matter. How lucky I was and still am (compared to the young guides of today and tomorrow) to have known mountains that stand upright, that don't shed their skin every year, losing a flake now and then...”

Philippe now prefers to climb the Aiguilles Rouges – a massif of less fractured gneiss, not as sensitive to the thawing of permafrost – which he believes “will remain the massif that we

will continue to climb,” opposite the “tragic spectacle” of the crumbling peaks of the Mont Blanc massif on the other side of the Chamonix valley.

These examples reveal how deeply such emotions are felt. They arise from decades of intimate, personal engagement with socio-natural landscapes (Lounela et al. 2019) and convey not only the troubled, sorrowful reactions to the disappearance of a familiar territory (Bender 2001; Cretton 2025), but also the grief over the vanishing of a magnificent world – long perceived as unalterable and enduring – that had offered enjoyment and pleasure, often described as “unreal,” “magical,” or “unbelievable.” Paying attention to these emotions, and especially to their aesthetic register, brings into view aspects of environmental experience that existing studies of glacial retreat have overlooked (Brugger et al. 2013) or only lightly touched upon (Salim et al. 2021; Chamel 2023). In doing so, we see how environmental change reshapes attachments and relationships, and, ultimately, the politics they not only nourish but also set into motion.

## **Wonder At Work**

Centering the aesthetic question – paying attention to how subjects judge and value the beauty or ugliness of objects, landscapes, or situations – also invites us to consider not only the variability of these judgments, but also their ongoing reconfiguration. It is not simply a matter of recording what individuals find beautiful or ugly, nor of tracing the genealogy of such judgments. Anthropologists must also attend to how these assessments are revised, negotiated, and sometimes resisted over time, and to the meanings such transformations acquire. In other words, aesthetic judgments – like all forms of judgment – are neither fixed nor spontaneous; their evolution points to new ways of making sense of the world as it

changes. For example, the mountain climbers who were interviewed by Jean did not simply opine that glaciers were either beautiful or ugly. Some described them as less beautiful than before, while others insisted that geological changes and new mineral formations revealed fresh sources of beauty – sensibilities that were not simply discovered, but actively sought, cultivated, and at times sustained only with some struggle (Engelke 2007).

Jean Chamel grew up at the foot of Mont Blanc, spending much of his youth skiing and mountaineering at high altitudes. On the Mer de Glace – a glacier now rapidly retreating and leaving behind unstable moraines – he once delighted in the soft patter of falling stones, like raindrops, as the spring snow melted on a warm afternoon. In recent years, however, this delicate sound has given way to a constant din. During a visit to a site where the glacier had disappeared only a few years earlier, he was overcome with melancholy as he listened to loud, irregular rockfalls echoing like the sounds of a battlefield. The gray February sky, the absence of snow, and the solitude clashed with memories of a place once filled with skiers glowing after a day in the high mountains. At other times, however, he felt comfort in the autumn colors of vegetation gradually colonizing the empty glacier bed, or in rediscovering the possibility of crossing from one side of the valley to the other – something that was possible on ice until the 1960s.

Such moments show how mountaineers try to compensate for a primarily visual loss through other senses, discovering new sources of enchantment — or at least solace — while wandering in an environment they know and cherish. Jean himself struggled to disentangle grief, resignation, mourning, and adaptation in both his own experience and in the words of those he interviewed. The feelings generated by the perception of change were complex, variable, and often contradictory. Some interviewees for instance, expressed horror at the slow collapse of a mountain face, while also acknowledging their fascination with the process, and the beauty they occasionally found in it.

This difficulty in feeling was also a difficulty in naming. Mathieu admitted that he sometimes struggles to describe the sensations provoked by the world around him: “It’s true that we haven’t developed much vocabulary for that. We have many more words to describe what falls apart or what is bleak than what is beautiful. We just end up saying that it’s beautiful.” Such limits of language could intensify a feeling of sensory confusion, especially as judgments and evaluations are reconfigured. Some interviewees confessed that they now found beauty in what they had once considered ugly. New aesthetic perceptions were emerging, reframing environments and landscapes in transformation. Rémi, a young guide from the canton of Vaud and a student in geomorphology, explained that he no longer saw sediment-covered glaciers as mere “piles of pebbles” replacing “picture-postcard” scenery. Instead, he valued the protective layer of debris for shielding the ice beneath from the sun’s rays and granting the glacier a reprieve. Knowing that “[his] little glacier” still survived under its rocky shell offered him a modest sense “of compensation.” He added that he could feel just as moved, and perceive just as much beauty, in a forest taking root on a newly exposed glacier foreland – an illustration of how he adapts his aesthetic appreciation to landscapes in the making.

Similarly, *Éric*, a 60-year-old guide in Chamonix, voiced a kind of pragmatic – even if somewhat resigned – optimism. He still delights in bringing his clients to the top of Mont Blanc via the classic North Face route, which crosses the magnificent but rapidly shrinking Bossons Glacier. Yet he has accepted its likely disappearance and already imagines how the future “dry” route will look, speculating that it too “will be beautiful.”

Thus, although these individuals perceive change as deterioration and sometimes as irrevocable loss, they do not simply see beauty as a quality that is vanishing. Their sense of wonder is reconfigured, as aesthetic judgments and perceptions evolve alongside shifting landscapes. As Sara Ahmed (2010) has shown, such feelings are never just spontaneous

responses to external change but are shaped by political processes that render them legitimate and socially expected, and can therefore be consciously cultivated. This is precisely what Rémi and Éric's accounts reveal: individuals who work upon themselves to preserve emotions they consider essential, even fundamental to their humanity. Put differently, while the upheavals of the world strike at their sensitivities and foster a sense of loss – and, for some, a sense of responsibility for the deterioration of both the world and their world – these individuals also adjust their subjectivity to protect fragile sensations. Aesthetic pleasure, often imagined as natural or unbidden, may thus arise from a deliberate discipline of the self: an effort to align one's perception of the world with the emotions one wishes to sustain.

## **Natural Beauties**

If Jean's interlocutors in the Alps revealed how beauty is grieved when geological time rapidly insinuates into human time, what struck some of them was not only the spectacle of change but also their own share of responsibility for it. To hear rocks falling, to watch glaciers retreat within the span of a single life, was to realize that what had seemed an immutable order of nature could in fact collapse. Mountains once imagined as eternal were now experienced as fragile, on the edge of collapse rather than in the midst of permanence. The loss was lived as incommensurable: something unfolding far beyond human control, yet at the same time inseparably tied to human action.

In Arizona, by contrast, those engaged in conservation projects imagine themselves not as witnesses but as stewards, actively responsible for preserving beauty against decay and disappearance. Aesthetic concerns are tied to intervention and repair: grasslands restored, rivers revived, species reintroduced. To "secure" beauty here is also to fight against erasure –

though in doing so, it inevitably produces its own forms of erasure, by privileging some landscapes, species, and histories over others. We approach the Alps and the desert grasslands in echo, attentive to the distinct histories and sensibilities that shape each. Considered together, they reveal how feelings of beauty and loss are themselves situated and contingent. In the Alps, people describe being overwhelmed by sadness, grief, or nostalgia in the face of a disappearing world they cannot prevent from collapsing. In Arizona, people express pride, joy, and sometimes relief in taking action to preserve the land, even as this work simultaneously reshapes the frame of memory and possibility, foregrounding some paths while obscuring others. In both situations, the aesthetic emotions and evaluations – whether tied to the mourning of what is vanishing or to the motivation of restoration – point to an experience inseparable from the political and cultural conditions in which it is embedded.

Empire Ranch lies in Arizona's Cienega Creek Valley, framed by the Whetstone Mountains to the east, the Santa Ritas to the west, and the Rincons to the north. Founded in 1876 by Walter Vail and his partner Herbert Hislop, it quickly grew into one of the largest ranching empires of the Southwest: within a decade, its herd swelled from a few hundred cattle to more than 5,000, supplemented by sheep grazing and silver mining. Vail rose to prominence as a wealthy "cattle baron" (Miller 2020), and under the Boice family in the twentieth century the ranch continued to embody the prosperity and myth of the American West. By the century's end, however, this once-celebrated domain had been reduced to a scattering of weathered buildings, vestiges of a world that seemed to be vanishing. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) purchased the property in 1988, and in 2000 Congress incorporated it into the Las Cienegas National Conservation Area.

Today, visitors who take the road to the ranch discover a preserved landscape of sacaton hills and salt grass, punctuated by barrel cactus and mesquite, and traversed by herds

of pronghorn antelope and Black Baldy cattle. Empire is not only a historical ranch turned conservation area; it also functions as a kind of living laboratory. Sébastien Roux, working as an anthropologist and co-director in an interdisciplinary center at the University of Arizona, became involved in supporting restoration projects – less as a direct research agenda than as part of the financial and scientific scaffolding that sustains them. That involvement provided an entry into a space where science, politics, and affect were constantly entangled.

The first time Sébastien visited the area was during the annual Cienega meeting in November 2021. About twenty participants – most of them biologists – spent the day walking the site, each responsible for one indicator of ecological health: frogs, mesquites, bird populations, water quality. Nothing was formally measured that day; the point was not revelation but ritual. The meeting worked as a collective performance of stewardship: the enactment, together, of care for the land under the banners of objectivity and reason. During the lunch break, as we sat in the shade of mesquites near a restored watering hole, Sébastien was approached by a small group of scientists curious about his foreignness. Their questions quickly turned to affect. Did the place inspire awe? They seemed confident in the answer they would receive, as if the vastness of the grasslands, the “untouched” mountains, and the stillness of the valley could only elicit wonder – especially from a European presumed unaccustomed to such expanses. The question was less a matter of curiosity than an invitation to confirm what they themselves already felt – a gentle prompt to align one’s response with a shared norm of wonder (Hochschild 1983). Sébastien answered without hesitation, for he too was moved, genuinely sharing in the pleasure of the scene. Only in retrospect did it become clear how this moment marked a subtle shift: the language of science and measurement gave way to another register, where the river was called “beautiful,” the air “crisp,” the grasslands “magnificent.” These words, absent from formal protocols, nonetheless circulated with pride

and conviction, quietly anchoring the collective sense that their labor of restoration was at once rational and beautiful.

For those engaged in the restoration of the Cienega, to let nature find its own “balance” or “harmony” would be, in their view, to abandon it once more to predatory interests: the overgrazing that caused intense degradation in the early twentieth century; the urban developers who, in the 1960s, dreamed of seizing the site; or the mining corporations now probing the surrounding hills for mineral wealth. Against such threats, restoration is framed as a proactive duty to sustain what they call “environmental harmony.” Mostly, their language is scientific – speaking of ecological balance. Rarely, if ever, is beauty named as a motivator; rarely is affect invoked as an argument. Yet beauty is everywhere, quietly fueling commitments, shaping attachments, and giving meaning to the work. Concretely, this labor of restoration has meant reviving conditions taken to signal a “healthy environment,” even when doing so requires heavy intervention – making them at once natural and re-created. It has involved curbing the spread of so-called invasive species (such as a mesquite imported from Texas), constructing artificial watering holes as refuges for biodiversity, and reintroducing animals with the support of wildlife protection authorities.

These initiatives are marked by conflict and by competing interpretations of what should count as “natural” beauty, as well as by divergent views on how human action participates in reconstructing such an ideal. One of the most telling examples is the effort to “bring back” a colony of beavers, absent from this part of Arizona for nearly a century. Experts argued that the rodents could accelerate the restoration of degraded riparian zones, reducing erosion and fostering diverse habitats. In the mid-1990s, sixteen beavers were released into a nearby stretch of the San Pedro River, but the experiment quickly faltered: the animals struggled to adapt to the arid landscape, and some even attempted to escape into the desert. During a site visit in 2023, Sébastien joined a group of conservationists and a

neighboring ranch owner, who observed that the new colony was once again in decline. This time, the problem was predation: mountain lions, once startled by the beavers' return, had since adapted and begun preying on them. Despite these setbacks, a local association continues to raise close to \$100,000 annually to sustain the project. When asked why, experts justified the effort in ecological terms, calling beavers “obvious indicators of a healthy environment,” a formulation that leaves aside questions commonly associated with such reintroductions, particularly around care, predation, and the risks of ecological and social disturbances (Ogden 2018). Yet once conversations grew less formal, another rationale surfaced again. Beavers were described as “cute,” and “adorable,” qualities that made their return as emotionally compelling as it was ecologically desirable. Their presence would make Empire itself “more charming,” as one of the biologists stated, “enchanting” (Pettier 2019) the site itself and reinforcing pride in its restoration. In official discourse, professionals prefer the language of ecological “health,” aligned with professional objectivity. But in practice, the work of restoration is also carried by these unspoken affective registers, in which beauty – never admitted as evidence – quietly guides actions and sustain commitments.

In the end, what emerges at Empire is not simply a narrative of ecological repair. It is the ongoing work of shaping a landscape into something felt to be both resilient and beautiful – a labor where scientific and affective registers constantly overlap. Beauty is never acknowledged as evidence, yet it underpins the choices that determine which species, practices, and histories are sustained and which are left aside. Conservation here is a politics of beauty: a mode of ordering that produces sites of attachment and nurtures commitment.

## **Beautification and Its Silences**

The ranch has been the object of an intense labor of beautification, carried out not only through ecological restoration but also through the built environment and the narratives that sustain it. When the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) inherited the property, its agents – more accustomed to overseeing land than restoring historic buildings – admitted that they did not know how to handle the crumbling structures. In 1997, local citizens, some linked to the ranching families who had once owned Empire, created the Empire Ranch Foundation (ERF), a nonprofit dedicated to “protecting, restoring, and maintaining the historic buildings and landscape of Empire Ranch as an exceptional heritage of the American West and an educational center.” Since then, the ERF has completed more than eighty restoration projects: window replacements, roof repairs, corral renovations. It also took charge of interpretation, with volunteer historians eager to celebrate the culture of the American West. Tours of the ranch now lead visitors through barns and rooms furnished with cast-iron stoves, waffle irons, saddles, and bits – objects donated later rather than inherited from the site itself, but arranged to convey a coherent sense of authenticity. However eclectic their provenance, these objects succeed in producing an affective response. Visitors Sébastien accompanied often reacted with emotion, recognizing them as symbols of a rugged and beautiful past.

That past, however, is carefully selective. Visitors learn nothing of the wealth and privilege of the ranch’s owners, of the swimming pools and private airstrips that marked their affluence, or of the corporate empire the Vails and Boices built across the Southwest. Nor are they told of the ecological crises linked to overgrazing, of rivers diverted or drained, or of the long-standing conflicts with extractive industries over water and minerals. Instead, rust, dust, and old jugs are mobilized to sustain another ideal: an America of stoic, self-made men close

to the land, cowboys who shunned comfort even when wealthy, visionaries devoted to family and cattle. Volunteers occasionally admitted that they had tried to broaden this story – a few photographs of women, some bilingual captions in Spanish – but these gestures were minimal, framed as concessions. “That’s not really what visitors come to see,” one curator acknowledged. What prevailed was not complication but an aestheticized myth, a past polished into beauty precisely through its silences.

This selective beautification of history also shaped the governance of land. The search for restoring the land to how it “should be” translated divergent opinions and interests into the idiom of consensus, as if everyone were working toward a single harmonious balance. Yet at Empire, users were separated by markedly different priorities. Ranchers, for whom the grasslands were first and foremost pastures. Hikers and campers, who treated the same spaces as recreational landscapes. Scientists, who worried about ecological degradation and produced metrics to demonstrate it. These divergences surfaced in the meetings that punctuated the management of the site. Agricultural producers and environmentalists often confronted one another directly. Ranchers insisted on their legitimacy to use the land, their legal rights to grazing, and the authority of long experience. Scientists countered with ecological surveys and “objective” indicators, exasperated by what they read as local obstinacy. Conflict was omnipresent – in exchanges, reports, and gestures. But it was rarely acknowledged as such. Instead, it was managed, softened, and translated into the language of technical disagreement, giving governance the appearance of consensus and rational balance.

Sébastien was especially sensitive to these tensions because he straddled them himself. Part of his childhood unfolded among modest cattle farmers. He knew their bluntness in speech, their ambivalent relationship to animals, the patriarchal roughness of their worlds, their fierce attachment to property and land, their conservative values, and the disdain they often expressed toward city dwellers. But he also became an anthropologist,

trained in elite French institutions, acculturated – if never fully – to Parisian intellectual milieus, left-leaning, urban, and bourgeois. Socially, he was much closer to the scientists and educated volunteers who invested themselves in Empire as a laboratory of ecological conservation. This double positioning was more than biographical background. It sharpened his ability to perceive the different ways aesthetic emotions were expressed and recognized across social worlds.

Among cattle farmers, appreciation of land often appeared in gestures, routines, and tacit satisfactions rather than in explicit references to beauty. In conservationist and scientific circles, by contrast, landscapes were readily qualified as beautiful or degraded, pure or spoiled. Such words carried weight in public meetings. Having lived both registers, Sébastien could recognize that the competition at Empire was not about whether emotions existed, but about which forms of expression – spoken or enacted – could define what counted as order and what could be made beautiful. This asymmetry was particularly visible in meetings. The vocabulary of beauty – “ugly,” “beautiful,” “pristine,” “degraded” – was more readily mobilized by scientists and urban volunteers than by ranchers or others who worked the land. Ranchers seldom described the grasslands as ‘beautiful’ in meetings or in exchanges witnessed by Sébastien; their evaluations more often took the form of practical idioms – concerning water, forage, fences, and herd health. Yet this silence did not signal indifference. The pleasure of walking one’s land, the satisfaction of a herd running smoothly, the irritation at a broken fence or a field gone dry – these, too, can be understood as aesthetic emotions, even if they were not verbalized as such. In this sense, ranchers’ ideas of what Empire should be, and the actions they took to shape it, were also informed by their sense of harmony. The visions groups defended, and the forms of beautification they pursued – understood here as the care invested in aligning Empire with the ideal they imagined for it, in short, making it “more beautiful” – were all saturated with aesthetic considerations.

At Empire, then, conservation – understood as the social production of an aestheticized natural order – rested on intertwined operations: the curatorial staging of a mythic past, through restorations and interpretive choices that determined what could be shown and what remained silent; the procedural containment of disagreement, dissolving conflicts over what the place should be into the language of consensus; and the unequal competition to enact harmony, as different groups advanced, in words and in practice, their own visions of how the land ought to look and be cared for. Together, these operations did not resolve conflict but reorganized it, yielding the appearance of balance by privileging some pasts, voices, and feelings over others. Beauty here was not neutral but a political effect – generated as much through silences and exclusions as through visible acts – in the effort to render the land “as beautiful as it should be,” to borrow the words of Louis, a herpetologist involved in restoring the creek. To attend to aesthetic emotions, then, is to recognize not only what is voiced and enacted in the name of harmony, but also the struggles and inequalities that such harmony conceals.

## **Privileged Affectivities**

Narratives of environmental change travel unevenly: their social and political effects vary across contexts. As Julie Cruikshank (2005) shows in her work on glaciers in the Mount Saint Elias region, stories about environmental change can function not only as expressions of loss or attachment, but also as social tools through which economic relations, moral claims, and historical tensions are articulated. Seen in this light, the material examined here shows how aesthetic emotions were shaped by unequal positions, privileges, and capacities to translate such narratives of environmental change into political critique or collective claims.

Indeed, the aesthetic emotions we encountered were never free-floating, nor reducible to matters of personal taste. They were marked by forms of privilege – class, race, gender, generation – that shaped who could experience beauty, how it could be narrated, and which attachments were sustained over time. Privilege was not a backdrop, but a condition that set the terms for how loss and care were felt, named, and transmitted.

Many of the people Jean Chamel met in the Alps had long experience of mountaineering and a lay familiarity with glaciology. They knew that glaciers had once been larger, carving valleys and carrying boulders for miles, and that in other eras they had retreated, leaving tree stumps frozen in the ice. Such knowledge, however, often encouraged older interlocutors to downplay or put into perspective what they now observed. Even as the transformations unfolded at an unprecedented pace, they framed them as part of a cycle, one more turn in a long geological rhythm. Carlos, a mountain guide and crystal hunter in Chamonix, gave this perspective a sharper edge. He had grown up in northern Spain amid what he called “eroded Alps,” broad cirques carved by glaciers long since vanished. Against that background, the changes in Chamonix did not strike him as catastrophic. “That would be cynical,” he argued. “Who are we to judge nature? Nature is decaying, that’s the way it works.” What others described as tragedy, he reframed as transformation. The retreat of the glaciers even opened new opportunities: cracks in the granite where crystals could be found, including the most prized variety, pink fluorite. “If it happens in Chamonix, it will be beautiful,” he concluded. For him, the challenge was not to resist change but to adapt to it – and to find beauty in what emerged.

Like Carlos, most of Jean’s interlocutors were white, educated men in midlife or older. Their attachment to independence and self-reliance echoed the values of their alpine professions, while their political engagement remained minimal. In contrast to recent calls to attribute responsibility for glacier “killings” and to demand justice (Provant and Carey 2022),

few raised questions about the systemic causes of the crisis, and none mentioned participating in climate marches or local mobilizations. For these mostly male interlocutors, the geological timescale they knew conceptually was colliding with the human one they experienced in their daily lives (Clark 2011). When anger or despair surfaced, it was quickly absorbed into a vague sense of powerlessness. Indignation was expressed as sadness; revolt, as resignation.

In conversation, they often returned to earlier generations – fathers, grandfathers, great-grandfathers – who had known glaciers “in their true beauty,” or who had lived through the “golden age” of mountaineering. These genealogies were overwhelmingly masculine: lineage was traced through male figures, while women were absent from the stories. Children were sometimes mentioned, usually sons, taken to see “our” glacier before it disappeared. But references to forefathers outweighed projections toward descendants. Beauty itself was narrated as a masculine inheritance, a terrain where male memory and lineage defined what counted as worth remembering. What was mourned was not only the fading of the mountains but also the loss of privileges once naturalized as a masculine birthright, as well as the endangerment of a local way of life by gentrification and intensified tourism – a genealogical framing of loss that displaced political critique into the register of personal memory and inheritance.

If in the Alps privilege made it possible to treat loss as part of a natural cycle, in Arizona it sustained other narratives – festive, pedagogical, patriotic – through which beauty was secured. In November 2023, Sébastien Roux attended the annual Cowboy Festival, the main fundraising event organized by the Empire Ranch Foundation. The festival was meant to generate the income needed for restoration projects, and board members repeatedly explained that “people need to have fun” and that such events make the site “known and appreciated.” Yet not everyone was comfortable. Some volunteers worried aloud that the festival promoted a caricatured vision of the West, at odds with the site’s educational

mission. As Sébastien walked through the grounds, the contradictions were hard to miss: vendors selling cowboy hats and MAGA caps; rodeo-style demonstrations cheered on by families; a reenactment of the Anza expedition performed almost entirely by white volunteers. The event drew hundreds of visitors, but beneath the festive atmosphere was revealed a tension few cared to name. To sustain restoration, the foundation relied on symbols of a mythologized West – symbols that attracted audiences and funding, but that celebrated certain pasts while pushing other histories, and other bodies, to the margins.

This aesthetic re-enactment of a Western past cannot be understood solely as a local attachment to history or landscape. It resonates with broader contemporary political imaginaries structured around restoration, return, and inheritance. While our interlocutors rarely invoked partisan identities explicitly, their emphasis on bringing the land “back” to a recognizable and celebrated past situates the ranch within present-day “great again” narratives, in which nature is imagined as needing to recover an earlier state. In this configuration, landscapes become sites of moral and political differentiation. Claims over restoration also function as claims over legitimate heritage and rightful succession, implicitly delineating who belongs and who does not (Berliner 2018).

On the second morning of the festival, the Audubon Society led a birding walk at the southwestern edge of the ranch. A dozen participants – mostly elderly, all white, dressed in wide-brimmed hats and carrying binoculars – moved slowly through mesquite thickets along one of North America’s great migratory flyways. Sébastien, camping on site with a colleague, joined them. Among the group was Betty, a retiree from Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, who now winters in Arizona: “Too much snow,” she laughed, “I only want to see it in pictures.” She had become passionate about birds and the desert: “It’s so beautiful here, so calm. The light is clear, the air is crisp. Nature is still wild, like it used to be in Michigan.” Just as she praised the calm, a U.S. Border Patrol helicopter thundered overhead. The group fell silent,

then lifted binoculars again as if nothing had happened. The intrusion was quietly erased so that wonder could continue. The privilege of aesthetic absorption included the privilege of not having to notice.

That morning underscored a disquieting contrast. Bird migration was celebrated as resilience: despite climate change, drought, and urban expansion, birds still crossed continents, returning each year along routes tracked by scientists and birders. Human migration, by contrast, was impeded, criminalized, and often met with violence. The Cienega is promoted as a “national treasure,” yet thousands of migrants have perished at its gates, disappearing a “land of open graves” (De León and Wells 2015; Reineke 2016). On site, however, nothing acknowledged this catastrophe. Official signs mentioned migration only to urge visitors to report “suspicious activity.” A few miles south, the border wall cut across the desert, scorching the grasslands and scarring the horizon. Small openings were engineered to let animals through – deer, jaguars, birds – while migrants were stopped, detained, or made to disappear (Sundberg 2011). What appeared as paradox was in fact order: a landscape designed to preserve an image of authentic wilderness for some, while consigning others to tragic fates.

What was striking, then, was not only the contrast between what was celebrated and what was erased, but also the ease with which visitors could move on – back to binoculars, birds, and the language of resilience. The privilege of wonder was not just about the present moment of looking; it also extended into the future, shaping how beauty was imagined across time. This became especially clear in conversations with conservationists. When Sébastien asked them – volunteers, professionals, or agency staff – for whom restoration was being undertaken, the question often produced a moment of hesitation, before eliciting passionate replies. A few, especially among those speaking in an official capacity, mentioned abstract entities such as the state or the nation. Most, however, spoke quickly and personally: it was

for “my children.” Not children in the sense of future generations, but their own sons and daughters. “I want my children to know what life was like before.” “When I see such beauty, I want to pass it on.” “I want my children to be able to see these landscapes and animals.” Pride came not only from the ecological benefits of restoration, but from the promise that their children would inherit its pleasures. Beauty was not simply experienced in the moment; it was claimed as inheritance, a privilege to be secured and passed on.

The aesthetic pleasures our interlocutors described were never confined to the moment. They were woven into longer temporalities through which people situated themselves. In the Alps, this often meant a sense of dispossession – envy toward fathers and grandfathers who had known the mountains in their “true” beauty. In Arizona, it meant pride in restoring landscapes so that one’s own children could inherit them. Although these attachments followed distinct patterns – one grounded in generational continuity amidst public landscapes, the other anchored in a “love at first sight” settler narrative tied to private property, each involving specific forms of erasure – in both cases beauty was framed within narratives of loss and transmission that stretched across generations.

In both settings, these narratives were sustained by privilege. White, educated, and generally well-off, our interlocutors had the resources and security to turn encounters with landscapes into aesthetic experiences, and to imagine those experiences as rightfully theirs to keep and to pass on. Beauty was felt as natural and spontaneous, yet claimed as a right – something to be enjoyed in the present and guaranteed for one’s heirs.

## **Living with Change**

If beauty appeared in our fieldwork, it was never incidental or decorative. The words of our interlocutors – whether grieving a glacier’s retreat or celebrating the restoration of an iconic ranch – were saturated with aesthetic judgments that carried weight in their lives. To call a place beautiful, or to lament its fading, was to name what mattered, to mark what called for care. What gradually became clear through our encounters was that aesthetic emotions – wonder, grief, enchantment, awe, sorrow – were not marginal. They shaped attachments, guided practices, and oriented how people lived with change.

Paying attention to these feelings also clarifies how ecological crisis is lived. The sadness provoked by a collapsing glacier, or the pride of restoring a grassland, is not only a private sentiment. Such feelings are part of the affective life of environmental change, through which loss is perceived and obligations of care are formed. In our material, such judgments carried political potential, but in different ways. In the Alps, they often involved working on oneself – learning to mourn a landscape and to recalibrate one’s sensibilities in the face of irreversible loss. In Arizona, they more often took the form of acting directly on the materiality of the environment, reshaping landscapes so as to secure and transmit what was considered beautiful. These modes of engagement were not equivalent: they carried distinct political implications and were sustained by unequal positions, resources, and privileges.

As anthropologists, we are charged with making sense of a world in which environmental crises turn lives upside-down, and where the people we work with may lament a world that has been damaged or lost while also trying “to feel at home” (Vine 2018) in the troubled places they inhabit. In this context, attending more carefully to aesthetic feelings is a way of making sense of lived experiences approached ethnographically, attentive to how

expressions of beauty, when situated in practice, also reveal political and moral stakes. To call a glacier sublime or to praise a grassland as beautiful is not only to describe a perception but to articulate a relationship to the world: a way of being, acting, and thinking that signals attachment and obligation.

These impressions also reflect on anthropology itself. If our interlocutors constantly invoked beauty, what does it mean for us, as anthropologists, to listen? We too were moved by these landscapes, which compelled new questions once we took these feelings seriously. In the Alps, standing on the moraine of a vanished glacier, Jean Chamel felt the same melancholy voiced by his companions – the sense that a once sublime scene had lost its radiance. In Arizona, Sébastien Roux shared in the delight of a restored grassland, until reminders of the militarized border tore through the frame of wonder. Such moments reminded us that fieldwork is not conducted from a distance: we were drawn into the very aesthetic affects – melancholy, wonder, dissonance – that we set out to study. Reflexivity here means acknowledging how these responses shaped our attention, how they filtered what we described, and how they oriented what we came to treat as significant. To study beauty, then, is to trace how attachments are formed and contested, how worlds are cherished and grieved, and also how futures are envisioned and feared. It is to recognize that in worlds threatened by collapse, the experience of beauty is always an impetus to say what matters to whom – and what futures remain imaginable.

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