

# Introducing *Lagoonscapes*. *The Venice Journal* *of Environmental Humanities* Editorial

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The heat is on. On September 21, 2021, the CMCC Foundation (Euro-Mediterranean Center on Climate Change), has released an important report, *Analisi del Rischio. I cambiamenti climatici in sei città italiane* (Risk Analysis. Climate Change in Six Italian Cities). Providing “the first integrated analysis of climate risk in Italy”, the scientists working at the Center envision a very disquieting – and yet highly realistic – picture of the future for the most iconic Italian cities. Heatwaves will make life in Rome and Milan very hard, and Naples will be almost an appendix of Africa, in terms of temperatures and desertification. Bologna and Turin, situated in two of the most problematic sites of the peninsula in terms of pollution, will suffocate with smog and hot temperatures. The CMCC report follows another crucial document: the IPCC Working Group’s report, *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis*, approved on August 6 by 195 member governments of the IPCC. As strongly as ever, the report confirms that climate change is not a mere weather forecast for an undefined future: it is a reality, which is “already affecting every region on Earth”. And it is increasing, with scenarios that include heatwaves, longer warm seasons and shorter cold seasons (+ 1.5 °C) or, worst, heat ex-

tremes that will be hardly compatible with agriculture and health (+ 2 °C). No earthly system, whether bio-chemical, geological, or social will be immune from this: that is the Anthropocene. Meanwhile, the leaders of the world's most powerful countries (we are writing this editorial in the wake of the G20 Rome summit and at the eve of the COP26 UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow) are hesitating in finding a satisfying agreement that would put limits to fossil energy and inaugurate a real era of climate justice.

The humanities, all over the world, have long been responding to this vexing situation. One of the results is the rise of the Environmental Humanities. And it is highly symbolic that Venice is becoming the avant-garde for this cultural change. In fact, the role of the city in this conversation is unique. Situated in the upper Northeast corner of our warming peninsula, and for centuries at centre stage of the world's attention, Venice plays a key role in both the context of the environmental crisis and of the cultural responses to this crisis. In fact, this hybrid artificial organism of land and water is a planetary kaleidoscope for all the dynamics that characterise the Anthropocene. Venice is a city of global exchanges and a crossroads of civilisations; a city of merchants and capital, but also a city of art, of culture, of diverse political experiences. It emerges from a biotope - a lagoon - that has been transformed, making it a human-made environment that increasingly escapes human control. Above all, however, Venice is a delicate urban ecosystem affected by global warming, extractive tourism, a paradoxical petrochemical site via its alter-ego Porto Marghera. In other words, Venice is a city that is inscribed into a nature that it has altered and from which it totally depends. Because Venice is not simply a place: it is a complex reality shaped by the interdependence with its environment. To quote Salvatore Settis and Piero Bevilacqua, whose research has inspired our work for a long time, we might say that Venice is a "thinking machine" and a planetary metaphor. And it also is in a 'trans-local' conversation with places that, from the same situation of exposure and hybridity, are called to respond to the challenges of climate change in all its repercussions on the life of people and ecosystems, as well as on the imagination of our 'uncanny' times. A powerful example of this is Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*, a novel that was written in Venice and that, from Venice, talks about the Sundarbans in Bangladesh, biodiversity, migrating people, and new alien copresences.

The first Italian journal expressly dedicated to the Environmental Humanities, *Lagoonscapes*, is exactly animated by the 'local' awareness and the 'planetary' vision that underlie this discourse. Its title mirrors this spirit and the inescapable need to strengthen the junction between cultural perspectives and ecological complexity.

## **The Environmental Humanities and Venice: A Symbolic Laboratory**

The Environmental Humanities are an increasingly consolidating discourse within the horizon of the ‘New Humanities’. The scholarly community as well as the general public have become more and more familiar with their trans-disciplinary approach, which programmatically debunks the divide between the ‘two cultures’ and often bridges scholarly research and activism. In this first issue, Serenella Iovino’s article will address the role and contribution of the Environmental Humanities in relation to the “Anthropocene body politic”. Still, we believe that a few words of introduction will help our new readers to better orient themselves in this landscape. (In addition to this swift overview, a list of recommended readings is also available at the end of this editorial.) Emerged as a unitary field in the last fifteen years, the Environmental Humanities are based on the encounter between the humanities, the social and the natural sciences. Literature, philosophy, history, art, anthropology, geography, sociology, and political science enter a conversation with ecology, biology, climatology, and geology with the aim of providing a critical and cultural dimension to the environmental crisis, and to our relationship with the other natures. The Environmental Humanities have a strong political and ethical dimension, especially in that they advocate for forms of justice for marginalised social groups as well as nonhuman beings, from animals to ecosystems and endangered landscapes. By definition, but also without any ideology of proselytism, they bring in themselves a strong social commitment, promoting a culture of inclusiveness, democracy, and sustainability. The Environmental Humanities help us understand that the environment - with its issues of climate and energy, justice and pollution, landscapes and places, humans and animals, global networks and local needs - is always already a cultural territory, often shaped by the priorities and values of society. Being aware of the environmental dynamics in their historical, philosophical, and anthropological dimension is important to understand them in their entirety. Together, these disciplines have the power to shape our moral imagination, our historical understanding, our way to critically relate to other natures, including other human natures, and sharpen our sensibility.

The midwifing role of environmental philosophy, history, and literary criticism for the birth of this discourse has been often highlighted. Despite its influence, however, anthropology, which is one of the foundational cores of this journal, is still a rather unexplored field, one that deserves here a closer look. In fact, Environmental Humanities, anthropology of the crisis, and the new frontier of the study of human-environment relationships were born together and are closely related. Investigating the relationships between human

beings and the environment, trying to interpret the dynamics supporting this relationship, and to compare the different adaptive techniques of the members of a given society to the environment has now become more a necessity than a trend. In addition to this, a redefinition of the category of 'nature', and of what is commonly understood as 'natural' has triggered the more recent 'ontological turn'. Scholars such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Bruno Latour, and Philippe Descola have shifted the scientific debate towards the recognition of the importance and permanence of local indigenous ontologies and the breaking of the recent and narrowly localised demarcation in the West between nature and culture. This also explains the importance of an ethnographic investigation in rural and indigenous contexts. Within the Environmental Humanities, ethnography reinforces the effort to understand, for example, issues related to justice and the accessibility of various communities to natural resources and the management of common goods, also in relation to the dynamics of capitalism. More recently, the emergence of multispecies ethnography, with its emphasis on co-evolutionary dynamics and social models, has consolidated this shift to a 'more-than-human' anthropology. In this context, while theorists such as Tim Ingold, Pauleen Bennet, and Roberto Marchesini have contributed to the development of 'anthrozoology' (human-nonhuman-animal studies) and interspecies relations, Eduardo Kohn, Michael Marder, and other scholars have proposed different perspectives in which anthropology and biosemiotics are coupled to shape on what has been defined the "vegetable turn". *Lagoonscapes* will thoroughly explore these conversations, starting with the next two monographic issues, which are expressly dedicated to the proceedings of the international conference *Humanities, Ecocriticism, and Multispecies Relations* held at Ca' Foscari University of Venice in September 2020.

These considerations make even clearer the philosophy underlying our journal. *Lagoonscapes* is a sort of prism through which multiple perspectives converge, turning the Venetian lagoon into a symbolic laboratory, an observatory, a forge of ideas about the global panorama of the Environmental Humanities. This journal too, in other words, aims to be a "thinking machine".

## Our First Issue

In its inaugural issue, the journal includes scholarly articles and some gifts from prominent guests. We open with the salutation of the UNESCO penned from its Secretary-General for Italy, Enrico Vercelli. Far from offering a merely 'official' contribution, though, Vercelli insightfully addresses the role of the humanities in the Anthropocene, also providing a historical account of the relationship between

UNESCO and Venice, and discussing the many challenges – at once ecological, cultural, and social – that our city must stand vis-à-vis the climate crisis. Shaul Bassi’s “The Environmental Humanities at Ca’ Foscari: Old and New”, gives us a first-hand report on the birth of the Environmental Humanities in Venice and how this discourse has been integrated into the institutional fabric of Ca’ Foscari with the launching of the first Italian MA’s Programme (*corso di laurea magistrale*), to which this journal owes its originating impulse. It is also worth mentioning that the former Center for the Humanities and Social Change, whose generous support was key to starting this enterprise with Bassi as its immediately past director, is now officially The New Institute Center for Environmental Humanities. After Bassi’s foundational narrative, we delve into the specific features of the humanities and their role for a culture of sustainability. Serenella Iovino’s article, “A Constitution for the Anthropocene Body Politic: Environment, Culture, and the Humanities in the Twenty-First Century”, is a revised version of her Keynote Address at the 2021 UNESCO European Conference for the Humanities. By acknowledging the official approval of the BRIDGES Project on education for sustainability as a partner of the UNESCO Management of Social Transformation Programme, Iovino evaluates the role of the Environmental Humanities in the agenda of the so-called “New Humanities”, paying a special attention to their relevance during the COVID-19 pandemic and to Venice, here taken both as a symbol and as a very concrete object of care. The lecture ends with the invitation to turn the current crisis into a constitutive moment for the “Anthropocene body politic”, namely, the earthly collective of agents and of processes, both human and nonhuman, natural and technological.

After this introductory section, our readers will find the real core of the issue, which is comprised of six articles, authored by an ensemble of experienced scholars and emerging researchers. These latter have all been post-doctoral fellows in Environmental Humanities at the Center for Humanities and Social Change in 2020-21.

The conversation opens with Ifor Duncan’s “The Meteorological Occult: Submergences in the Venetian Fog”. Taking a night walk in a typically misty Venice, Duncan describes fog as a “political materiality”, which acts as an unexpected lens onto slow forms of pollution. By delving into the sensorial intensity of what he calls the “occult meteorology” of fog, Duncan explores the forms of imperceptible pollution that affect modern environments in their predicaments of infrastructural systems, from commercial flight to petrochemical logistics. Daniel Finch-Race’s “Imagining Venetian Hydro-Peripatetics with Ciardi, Favretto, Lansyer, and Pasini” proposes a sensory approach to physical and representational environments from a pedestrian perspective. With a view to bringing arts-based considerations to bear on UN Sustainable Development Goal 6.6, concerned with the

protection and restoration of water-related ecosystems, the analysis primarily revolves around Italian and French depictions of Venice in the 1880s-90s that encompass stimuli for smell, sound, taste, and touch as much as sight. And also addressing a sensorial and very material experience of Venice is the essay written by Sasha Gora, "On Ice: Life and Lunch at Mercato di Rialto", in which the author scrutinises the multispecies and synesthetic dimension of the world's most artistic fish market. Based on personal observation and theoretical reflections, in this ethnographic contribution Gora considers "the entanglement between seafood and people, ice and freshness, and life and lunch", as she effectively put it. The fourth essay of our selection, Emiliano Guaraldo's article, "Resisting the Tourist Gaze: Art Activism Against Cruise Ship Extractivism in the Venice Lagoon", takes us to the centre of a long-standing that has opposed residents, environmental movements, local institutions, cruise companies, and port workers. The impact on the delicate balance of the Venetian lagoon of the so-called *grandi navi* (big cruise ships) seems to be here only the tip of the iceberg of the socio-ecological problems caused by a phenomenon that Guaraldo calls "extractive tourism". The grim image of the Titanic, as a fitting metaphor for consumerism in the Anthropocene, seems to have been momentarily defeated by a socio-environmental activism that drew precious energies from the works of the visual artists who inspired the paradigm of an international alternative thinking.

The problem of over-tourism, along with the 'Disneyfication' of the city that is plaguing Venice, is further analysed and developed in the article "The Role of Performance in Environmental Humanities: The case of Joan Jonas's *Moving Off the Land II*" by Gabriella Giannachi, Director of the Centre for Intermedia and Creative Technologies at the University of Exeter. The overcoming of the consumerist and capitalist logic is concretised here through a possible reinvention of Venice as an international environmental laboratory, where new cultural, socio-political, and economic practices can be envisioned and planned. The paradigm of this project is structured through the amazing installation made of mirrors, videos, drawings, and performances enacted by the New York artist Joan Jonas, which Giannachi invites us to discover. Jonas's installation was exhibited in Venice at the Ocean Space: a collaborative platform located in the former Church of San Lorenzo, which has been transformed into a place for discussion and interdisciplinary research on the future of our watery planet.

With the last scholarly contribution, we must go back to where it all began, namely, literature. The essay comes indeed from a protagonist of the ecocritical debate, the American Germanist Heather Sullivan. In her "Bodily Transformations: Goethe and Mann in Venice", Sullivan turns to two classical authors, whose work has contribut-

ed to shaping the modern imagination about Venice. Using material ecocriticism, Sullivan considers how Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* and Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Italian Journey* portray the experience of Venice's watery boundaries as transformative both one's sense of the body as well as the body itself. Whereas Mann obsessively presents bodies in *Death in Venice* including the impact of cholera on the body of his protagonists and of the city, Goethe's bodily focus remains more abstract, scientific, and comprehensible only later in his natural writings, where the full bodily dimension of the animate world partially deflects his discussion away from more uncomfortable aspects of human embodiment.

Ideally responding to both Thomas Mann and the challenges and impulses provided by UNESCO, the closing piece is an interview with art historian and public intellectual Salvatore Settis, who is Chairman of the Louvre Museum's Scientific Council and perhaps the major exponent of the struggle for the commons and one of the most vocal advocates for saving Venice. In an insightful and dense conversation with environmental historian Roberta Biasillo mostly based on his book *If Venice Dies (Se Venezia muore, 2014)*, Settis addresses the very concept that has inspired us in this editorial piece: thinking (with) Venice. After discussing the many faces of Venice's agony as well as its resilient power, he reminds us that Venice's complexity is the figure of the entangled dynamics of natural crises and social issues, lifestyles and clichés, and lyrically concludes: "'thinking' is throwing a stone into the quagmire. Or in the Lagoon".

Art, meteorology, climatic imagination, bodily immersions in the ecology of places, food, eco-ethnography, multimedia performance, extractive tourism, debunked clichés, and quagmires: this first issue is a sample of what we envision to be our mission, namely, to create bridges of elements, voices, and visions, facilitating encounters of theories and individual matters, and stimulating 'trans-local' negotiations along with planetary awareness.

We would like to close this first editorial with a programmatic statement on the 'philosophy' of our Journal and the way we - editors and collaborators - conceive of our work. The Environmental Humanities for us are a dialogue: a dialogue between science and humanities, between scholars of different backgrounds and countries, and most of all a dialogue between the liveliest energies of the academic world and civil society. There is no research that is not, in principle, Environmental Humanities research. To see the world in a grain of sand, you need the sand, the eye, and the capacity to imagine all the connections - evolutionary, biological, narrative, emotional, ecological - among all these elements. If, as anthropologist Eduardo Kohn maintains, forests can 'think', then also lagoons can. Our "thinking machine", in other word is alive. It is a living organism in which natures, cultures, presences, stories, and temporal di-

mensions coevolve and coemerge. Trying to voice this effervescent natural-cultural complexity from Venice, the community around *Lagoonscapes* is delivering a message: it is necessary to think with realities like Venice to see the world.

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