

## Preface

Francesca Tarocco

Director of THE NEW INSTITUTE Centre for Environmental Humanities (NICHE)

Pietro Daniel Omodeo

Director of the UNESCO Chair Water Heritage and Sustainable Development

Venice is our method.

We mean this in the quasi-literal sense of ‘method’ in its Greek composite, *metá* plus *hodós*, that is, the ‘path beyond’, a ‘way through’ – in our case, a wayfinding examination of the water lands of Venice. We hint, as well, at Venice’s capacity to exist beyond Venice. Its natural-cultural ecosystem opens up to broader geographies of a network of water cities – Bangkok, Tenochtitlán, Shanghai – its tidal rhythms to planetary interconnectedness. The flow of life, the lives and many niches that contain them, harbour the possibility of distant travel. There is also the specific nature of Venetian waterscapes and mentalities. Inner and outer, inflowing and outflowing. There is a dual movement of self-reflection: islands unto themselves, and an environment connected to the Alps, to Mediterranean shores, and to the Oceans.

Venice is also method in the genuine epistemological sense. Our exploration aims to deepen and expand our knowledge of the Anthropocene, a predicament in which humans and technologies act as geological forces of world transformation. This awareness calls for a novel alliance between disciplines. We hope to connect knowledge of nature to cultural studies and to the arts, contributing to the emergent field of environmental humanities. We also hope to foster an approach that is both subjective and reliable, and that is open to the acquisition of new knowledge. In this way we wish to achieve a ‘stronger objectivity’ – as feminist standpoint theory and historical materialism have taught us. The emergent field of environmental humanities benefits from critical thinking, which we cultivate as a precious asset of cultural studies. We do not consider critique to be a destructive practice for its own sake but rather a preliminary step for the construction of bottom-up knowledge and practices. A democratic attitude should foster a reconfiguration of natural-cultural paradigms, with a goal of non-technocentric responses to the planetary polycrisis – environmental, climatic, political. The stake of the current environmental turn in the humanities (and the corresponding humanities turn in the natural sciences) is to forge novel outlooks grounded in the aesthetic, ethical, and political experience of the places we inhabit. Going beyond bookish literacy, we embrace a close reading of landscape inscriptions. Hence, the environmental humanities finds application in a sense very different from top-down schemes. The environmental humanities should be rooted rather than implanted, a form of knowledge in action; a method, indeed.

Venice is a place of resilience. The Venice Lagoon was formed roughly 6,000 years ago during the Flandrian transgression, when the rising Adriatic Sea flooded the easternmost part of the Po River paleoplain. The lagoon environment has always been characterized by a pronounced and fast morphodynamics, inducing important morphological changes even over the relatively short time span of a few centuries. Today, Venice faces the risk of submersion as a consequence of climate change and other threats stemming from misconceived environmental pathdependencies. Its future depends on decisions too complex and too-deeply imbricated with ideals and imaginaries to be delegated to technical solutionists, not unlike other water cities in the world. The many voices of this volume share a prism of viewpoints on the lasting interaction between historical actors, species, and the elements of Venice. May this volume – the fruit of years of intense engagement with our aquatic territory, lasting conversations, transdisciplinary scholarship and friendship – contribute to finding a ‘passage beyond’, one that leaves no one behind.

