

Cristina Baldacci, Shaul Bassi, Lucio De Capitani
and Pietro Daniel Omodeo, editors

Venice and the Anthropocene. An Ecocritical Guide

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Irina Neacșu

PhD candidate, UNArte - National University of Arts, Bucharest, Romania | Fulbright scholar, Yale University, USA
irina@irinaneacsu.com

Among books that change one's relationship with a particular place, I could easily call out this one, published in 2022 and currently available in the bookshops of major Venetian cultural venues under the broader spectrum of tourism, cultural guides, city monographies. This collection of short essays is structured to emphasize the diverse but strongly interconnected aspects of Venice's cultural identity, such as waterscapes, architecture, foodways, eco-liberation, migrations, immersion, and air escapes. This brief list itself calls for awareness of how the Anthropocene operates, addressing both historical blueprints of the place and contemporary movements able to alter and even change the relevance and/or shape of those blueprints. We are currently knowledgeable of how human-made movements impacted the course of cultural migration throughout history, especially related to the colonial eras. If we address the strong bond of art and science in the 19th century amid expeditions of both humanists and scientists, we may notice a partial repetition of history. Furthermore, another question occurs: how do we deal with the (by now strongly protected) Cultural Landscapes? Do we aim to keep the horizon intact in terms of geological degradation, new dwelling developments, or vegetation control? Or do we instead aim to accept the historical change and therefore call out the ability to properly direct this ship rather than keep it still at all costs? In her foreword (second cover) of the book, Serenella Iovino, distinguished professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, sums up the red thread of this essay collection as follows:

"This guide, composed of several voices, forms a new, illuminating and disturbing mosaic of Venice and its Lagoon. What does the Venetian School of Painting tell us about our relationship with the environment and animals? What do peripheral places in the Lagoon like Porto Marghera and Pallestrina reveal about the advent and impact of modernity? What stories of extinction lie behind local delicacies like *baccalà mantecato*? What does the centuries-old relationship of Venetians with water tell us about other cities threatened by an increasingly hostile climate? The guidebook, accompanied by a map, is intended as a tool for learning about the city in a new way. Venice emerges here as a unique ecosystem at risk, but also as a key to understanding our increasingly vulnerable world."

Indeed, several voices show the Venetian reality unknown to most tourists. The neutrality of these voices comes out not as resignation but as active acceptance. In many other cases, the literature — essays and short prose — built up around the identity of a place falls under remorse, nostalgia, and a strong critique of the impact of modernity in terms of aesthetics and function. Instead, these voices link Venetian history to a broader, more robust, and universal process of decolonization. While decolonization becomes necessary in the contemporary rewriting and understanding of historical truth, art history and cultural studies welcome these new research additions and broaden up with, indeed, as Serenella Iovino mentioned, "disturbing" facets.

I place myself among the Venetian biennial tourists, traveling to the Lagoon for the Art Biennale and enjoying newly discovered ways to avoid crowds successfully. With every new visit, I feel increasingly familiar with the place and need to understand its less and less popular parts. There is a

sense of complicity with the place when one discovers its more intimate secrets. And I believe this is my own timing for appreciating this book in particular. It made me remember times when the Venetian horizon was utterly disturbed by the large cruise ships once allowed to approach Canal Grande, or, instead, reflect on the epistemology of (urban) dis-connection reflected in the *calli* of Venice. It is a book that brings together memories of a place in a different time and memories of different experienced ways of seeing that place. It also teaches about urban changes that occur when they seem unimportant and are left in the history of the place almost as mythological milestones. Such examples are Titian's Garden in Fondamente Nove, the monastery of the Cappuccine di Castello nuns and the Seminario Ducale demolished to make room for the Napoleonic gardens now known as the Giardini, or the last vegetable gardens in the island of Pallesina. It raises questions on the less pleasant realities of massive deforestation in the Dolomites to produce the underwater Venetian Woods, the enormous structure of pillars supporting the city, the health issues and the working-class environmentalism in Porto Marghera and the state of constant alert in the *aqua alta* season. I believe history should not un-see all these matters and should accept the strong interconnection between separate disciplines, such as architecture and art (practice and history wise), environmental studies, anthropology, and health care. The neutral character of the voices that I mentioned before as striking in such a diverse approach to the subject is indeed the voice of acknowledgment, care, and commitment. Ecocritical studies might become a must in the theory of architecture, and art might become necessary for environmental studies so that the result of the research can show that a comprehensive approach is up to date with the debate scene of the Anthropocene. Placing together mouth-watering food stories of the *fritto misto* and the *baccalà* and life-threatening stories of microbes and plagues calls out history's richness and multilayered aspects. Talking about both *terra ferma* and *aqua alta*, both land and sea, as both good and bad for both life and death, is a contradiction that raises questions placed in the right, middle, neutral spot of culture-nature intersection. With a return to the 19th century approach of culture-nature intersection, at that time with less concern for the environment and less commitment to acceptance and tolerance, the critiques of contemporary such intersections, based again on migration and change, call out for a complete reposition in research, with a broadening of own horizon in specific fields of work. *Venice and the Anthropocene* is edited by specialists in environmental humanities, colonial and postcolonial literature, ecocriticism, arts engagement, and historical epistemology. These voices, enhanced by those of the selected essayists, created one of the richest, most emotional, and most realistic at the same time, guide in the format of an easy-to-carry book aimed to deliver a new understanding of Venice. Lastly, this book is an acknowledgment that what is most striking in Anthropocene is that places with entirely different histories now share the same present. This acknowledgment produces familiarity and empathy and can potentially lead to an entirely new set of (re)actions to the idea of places as spaces to be, not only to traverse.