Shaul Bassi

“None of that shit matters to the Swedes”: Venice, Bangladesh, and the Postcolonial Anthropocene

Abstract: This chapter examines recent literary and visual texts that represent the Bangladeshi migrant community in Venice as a vantage point to observe the postcolonial condition in the context of the planetary environmental crisis. The texts analyze different forms, genres, and languages: Amitav Ghosh’s novel *Gun Island* (2019), Francesco Dalla Puppa, Francesco Matteuzzi, and Francesco Saresin’s graphic novel *La linea dell’orizzonte* (2021), and Emanuele Confortin’s documentary *Banglavenice* (2022) expose the Anthropocene unconscious of a city that has traditionally been used to represent romantic and escapist fantasies or apocalyptic scenarios. While popular culture still produces countless narratives and discourses that envision a timeless Venice or its mirror image as a moribund, drowning city, the texts under scrutiny show a more complex, living, cosmopolitan, and amphibian Venice where new and old communities interact and reinvent themselves in relation to a fragile ecosystem threatened by sea-level rise. Their stories, which also connect the city with global histories and geographies, show how the long-term effects of colonialism and of the Anthropocene are intertwined, narrate how migrants negotiate new lives and identities, and offer perspectives of postcolonial translators, artists, and intellectuals who connect us to multiple stories for our times of crisis.

Keywords: Anthropocene, postcolonial, environmental humanities, Venice, Migration, Bangladesh

> what euer hath the worlde brought forth more monstrously strange, then that so great & glorious a Citie should bee seated in the middle of the sea, especially to see suchpallaces, monasteries, temples, towers, turrets, & pinnacles reaching vp vnto the clouds, founded vpon Quagmires, and planted vppon such vnfirme moorish and spungie foundations. (Contarini 1969: A3r)

Prefacing *The Commonwealth and Gouernment of Venice* (1599), his translation of Gasparo Contarini’s *De magistratibus et republica* (1551), the English courtier Lewis Lewkenor marveled at the unique interaction of nature and culture, the tension between the human architectural and spiritual aspiration to the heavens and the earthbound pull of the land and the sea that defined this amphibian city. Lewkenor was contributing to the early modern myth promoted by the Republic

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of Venice to describe itself as the ideal polity, in an effort that, as Peter Platt has shown, was rhetorically characterized by the trope of paradox. Venice was divided between land and sea; it was a political paragon for Europe and yet open to trading with Africa and Asia; a Catholic state defiant of Roman hegemony; a republic led by a prince and sustained by a complex system of checks and balances. This "monstrously strange" city had the "ability to astonish, to puzzle, and to challenge cognitive categories" (Platt 2009: 59). In their introduction to the inaugural issue of the environmental humanities journal *Lagoonscapes*, Serenella Iovino and Stefano Beggiora have updated this early modern paradox to our own era:

> 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. (2021: 8)

In this chapter I would like to examine this "hybrid artificial organism" from a postcolonial perspective, which is almost invisible in the countless mainstream media representations of Venice but key to appreciate the cultural and symbolic function of the city as a guide to our global environmental crisis.

Venice appears intermittently in Gaia Vince's *Nomad Century. How Climate Migration Will Reshape Our World* (2022), an awe-inspiring portrait of a planet radically transformed by an environmental crisis predicted to displace at least 1.5 billion people over the next thirty years. The author mentions it as one of the cities that have invested substantially in protecting themselves from sea-level rise (43) through the submerged inflatable gates likely to be inadequate by 2050 (142). Her sobering conclusion is that Venice "soon . . . will be solely a museum. Other celebrated cities, or parts of them, will follow" (143). Passages like this in a book that has been described as "optimistic" (Ward 2022) are likely to increase the eco-anxiety of Venetian residents and admirers, but they also prompt the question: if in the worst case scenario there are only a few decades left, what should we do with them? The tourist industry has already offered an unequivocal answer: let's consume Venice as much and as quickly as possible. Before COVID 30 million visitor presences were registered every year, vis-à-vis a resident population that in 2022 declined to under 50.000, and the easing of the pandemic restrictions have made the average number of tourists skyrocket. These statistics are not uncomplicated, but they embody the paradox of overtourism: the same source of wealth that is making the city richer and richer is also crushing its social fabric and civic identity. The coexistence of a substantial ecological threat with a carefree tourist experience is well captured by popular culture, which, to use Marc Bould's cogent definition (2021), manifests Venice's Anthropocene unconscious.

In the first few minutes of the movie *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (2019), the young superhero travels to Venice on a stereotype-ridden high school trip: the group drives into the city on a van (where cars are not permitted), goes to the non-existent Leonardo da Vinci museum (the artist has a tenuous connection to Venice but he is a conveniently recognizable global hallmark), and Peter Parker replaces the Spidey costume he left at home with a Carnival mask when action calls. No sooner is the company dreamily lost in their meanderings that Venice is attacked by the monstrous aqueous giant Water Elementals, which wreaks havoc on its streets and monuments. Not even the amazing Spider-Man is powerful enough to oppose the overwhelming dominance of the waters over the fragile city: it takes another villain, Mysterio, to avert the devastation. And yet, once the battle is won, the shock is quickly reabsorbed and the unfazed tourists are ready to resume their sightseeing and shopping. The reassuring Marvel script provides a perfect example of what the psychoanalyst Sally Weintrobe has called the disavowal of climate change (2021: 137), a form of denial that does not refute the truth of impending ecological catastrophe but distorts it through a number of repeated daily unconscious and conscious gestures: “Disavowal works by finding *any* way to minimize feeling disturbed by a disturbing reality” (138). Yes, the crisis is happening and rising waters are threatening Venice, but some technological fix will take care of that (Mysterio, the MOSE barriers); yes my own lifestyle of conspicuous consumption is bad for the planet but I am just a lone individual and my small carbon footprint should not deprive me of the pleasure of enjoying one of the most coveted destinations in the world.

Fortunately, Venice is also producing counternarratives that, far from disavowing the crisis through tranquilizing cultural tropes, explore its local implications from a global perspective, demonstrating how the city can be a “thinking machine” (Settis 2016) for other cities, an influential laboratory for the environmental crisis. Significantly, these texts hinge on the long tradition of Venetian cosmopolitanism, already described by Contarini/Lewkenor in the usual terms of paradox and amazement: “others exceedingly admired the wonderful concourse of strange and forraine people, yea of the farthest and remotest nations, as though the City of Venice onely were a common and generall market to the whole world” (Contarini 1969: IIIr; 1). Vince mentions Venice as a city “created by migration” and refugees (2022: 46) and Jesse van Amelsvoort (in this volume) points to the climate migrant as the key figure in what he appropriately calls the postcolonial Anthropocene. In concluding his essay he writes: “If the Anthropocene is a representational problem, which cannot be apprehended immediately and in its entirety, we are in dire need of mediators that translate the overwhelming threat of the climactic hyperobject into more readily graspable units [. . .] what is needed, are mechanisms of translation that make the environmental crisis

legible and affectively felt in individual lives" (van Amelsvoort: p. 83). Extending his proposal, I would like to argue that Venice can function as an anthropocene mediator a mediator by examining a number of literary and visual texts that deal with climate migrants and translation processes.

This notion of postcolonial Anthropocene connects two academic and cultural discourses that have had an uneasy relationship, as van Amelsvoort also reminds us. In his influential study *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), Rob Nixon identified "four main schisms" keeping postcolonialists and ecocritics mostly apart. Postcolonialists foregrounded hybridity and cross-culturation; displacement; the cosmopolitan and the transnational; criticized nationalism; excavating or reimagining the marginalized past: history from below and border histories, often along transnational axes of migrant memory. Ecocritics celebrated wilderness and preservation; the literature of place; were traditionally nested in "a national (and often nationalistic) American framework"; timeless transcendentalism and "solitary moments of communion with nature" that mythologized empty lands repressing the colonization and genocide of native people (Nixon 2011: 236). There are important qualifications to Nixon's overview. Many postcolonial scholars of settler colonies such as Canada and Australia had always taken environmental exploitation and colonial racism into consideration and many postcolonial authors had developed forms of ecopoetics not corresponding to the American paradigms of nature writing. However, even as the fundamental recent work by critics such as Elizabeth deLoughrey, Graham Huggan, Helen Tiffin has gone a long way to bridge the gaps and open new interconnections, the polarity still operates, especially in the larger public domain. The environmental humanities, a more capacious term that has subsumed ecocriticism, have already incorporated many postcolonial themes and concepts (DeLoughrey et al. 2015; Heise et al. 2017). In *The Great Derangement*, the most consequential contribution to this conversation, Amitav Ghosh calls attention to our city:

> Can anyone write about Venice any more without mentioning the *aqua alta*, when the waters of the lagoon swamp the city's streets and courtyards? Nor can they ignore the relationship that this has with the fact that one of the languages most frequently heard in Venice is Bengali: the men who run the quaint little vegetable stalls and bake the pizzas and even play the accordion are largely Bangladeshi, many of them displaced by the same phenomenon that now threatens their adopted city – sea-level rise. (2016: 13)

The persistence of dominant tropes of Venice (Tanner 1992; Doody 2006; Scappettone 2014) is actually such that *aqua alta* (see *Spider-Man*) can be still exorcized and the overwhelming majority of high-brow and low-brow representations remain blissfully indifferent to the Bangladeshi community, community. On the other hand, Ghosh himself and a few Italian authors have made important contri-

butions in the direction of the postcolonial Anthropocene. To contextualize their effort we can start from an unremarkable, liminal, intermedial site: a bus stop in a city famous for not having cars. Venice is in fact a municipality that extends to a vast mainland area where the majority of residents live, where over 3 million passengers per year come through the international airport, and where Marghera, an industrial complex that at some point was the largest in Europe, is located. As Iovino and Beggiora put it, this petrochemical site is a paradoxical "alter ego" of Venice (2021: 8), created a century ago to bring the city up to date with industrial modernity but also provoking ruinous excavations of the lagoon that have made subsidence a vicious ally of sea-level rise, and causing water and air pollution levels that have been toxic for the ecosystem and deadly for many workers, as a historic trial demonstrated. The bus stop, roughly halfway between Venice and the larger town of Mestre, corresponds to Fincantieri, the Marghera shipyard where gigantic cruise ships, the emblem of overtourism, are assembled. At the beginning and end of the working shifts, you can see the stop crowded with long lines of workers: most of them are from Bangladesh. Their community is at the center of Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* (2019), Francesco Dalla Puppa, Francesco Matteuzzi, and Francesco Saresin's graphic novel *La linea dell'orizzonte* ("Horizon Line" 2021) and Emanuele Confortin's documentary *Banglavenice* (2022).

Adding an innovative chapter to the long history of the Venetian literary myth (Bassi 2023), *Gun Island* (2019) is Ghosh's first answer to his own scathing examination of the novel's inadequacy to address the magnitude of the climate crisis. In his sympathetic critique of Ghosh, Mark Bould goes even further by calling *Gun Island* a fictional version of *The Great Derangement* (2021: 66). He persuasively defends the author from himself, not only suggesting how Ghosh had already addressed anthropogenic themes in most of his previous novels, but also showing how *Gun Island* successfully mobilizes a number of literary and cultural codes that function as "hybrid artificial organism" (to quote our definition of Venice) worthy of the tradition of Venetian paradox:

> Exploring the mundane novel's capacity to deal with improbable – which is not the opposite, but an inflection of the probable – [*Gun Island*] produces a census of the uncanny by repeatedly activating then rejecting other genre frameworks that might explain the odd, climate-related events it depicts. It invokes the kinds of rationales provided by sf, fantasy and horror, as well as by the Umberto Eco/Dan Brown/Indiana Jones school of mystically inflected globetrotting conspiracy thriller involving archaeology and exegesis, but refuses to collapse into any of these narrative forms. (Bould 2021: 66)

Gun Island traces the journeys of Dinesh (Deen) Datta, an Indian scholar and antique book dealer, who returns from New York to the Sundarbans in West Bengal, and then travels to Los Angeles and Venice to unravel the mystery and legend of a

seventeenth-century enigmatic character known as “The Gun Merchant”. The novel presents the contrast between a contemporary postcolonial and cosmopolitan middle-class individual, a well-to-do Indian intellectual with multiple passports who easily navigates and inhabits different continents, cultures, and languages, and the young Bangladeshi migrants who travel illegally and dangerously to make a better living in Europe. In his global wanderings, propelled by the quest for the mysterious merchant living in the age of Contarini and Lewkenor, Dinesh interacts with many characters who, in different positions and roles, are involved in the experience of global migration. The young Tipu, a young migrant that Dinesh meets first in India and then in Venice, talks to him about “connection men” or *dalals* in Bangla, the people who link the migrants through an intricate system of phone communication to facilitate their perilous transnational journeys. The phone is the indispensable instrument for the migrants to stay connected to their families, to pay for the various services on which the traveling depends, to map the available routes. Less predictably, Tipu explains, once the final destination is reached “it’s their phones that help them get their stories straight” (2019: 67). The puzzled Dinesh asks for a clarification, and Tipu’s answer illuminates a crucial tension between the postcolonial and the environmental. The stories in question are the fictive ones that the migrants need to provide to the European officers to be granted political asylum:

> It’s gotta be a story like they want to hear over there. Suppose the guy was starving because his land was flooded; or suppose his whole village was sick from the arsenic in their ground water; or suppose he was being beat up by his landlord because he couldn’t pay off his debts – none of that shit matters to the Swedes. Politics, religion and sex is what they’re looking for – you’ve gotta have a story of persecution if you want them to listen to you. (Ghosh 2019: 67)

The standard story demanded by the enlightened Scandinavian authorities is based on a human rights agenda echoing traditional postcolonial concerns – “politics, religion and sex,” issues of identity and persecution that paradoxically make the postcolonial refugee the model victim who can finally enjoy the freedom and relative privileges of the metropolitan West. This script is appropriated and rewritten by the most unlikely postcolonial author, the “connection man” who knows that displacement by environmental disaster still does not merit recognition and hospitality, putting pressure on the postcolonial parameters with which we traditionally look at borders, boundaries and the crisis of Europe. In *The Great Derangement* Amitav Ghosh offers a definition of epic resonance about his migrant family: “My ancestors were ecological refugees long before the term was invented” (2016: 3). However, as also noted by van Amelsvoort in this volume, “ecological refugee” is a not a category officially recognized by the 1951 Refugee Convention, which offers protection to those fleeing war and persecution along grounds of race, religion, nationality, social

group or political opinion. As the group *Climate Refugees* clarifies, significantly using an example from our country of interest, "This could leave the Bangladeshi family displaced across borders by a disaster, the subsistence farmer in Chad with no option but to leave his country because he lacks water for farming, or a mother forced to flee her country because of a climate change-induced resource war, outside the legal framework for protection" ("Climate Refugees" 2022). More recent legal instruments are trying to extend such protection: the Global Compact on Refugees, affirmed by the UN General Assembly in 2018, recognizing that "climate, environmental degradation and disasters increasingly interact with the drivers of refugee movements" (UNCHR 2022), and the UN Human Right Committee ruling in 2020 that climate refugees should not be subject to repatriation (Vince 2022: 69).

> Like if they're from Bangladesh, I tell them to say they're Hindus or Buddhists and are being oppressed by Muslims. And if they're from India I tell them to go at it the other way around – that works pretty good too. And then there's sexual orientation of course, and gender identity – they love those kinds of stories over there. But that's where the art comes into it, Pops – you've got to judge who can carry off what. You gotta know your clients and what kind of story fits each of them. So you could say that what I'm providing is a point-to-point service. (Ghosh 2019: 67–68)

Tipu is a "connection man" with very pragmatic goal-oriented stories, that are called, with appropriate irony, "art." Their instrumentality and efficacy cast an ironical light on the supposed disinterestedness of Dinesh/Ghosh's literary narratives, and perhaps as a caustic comment on certain market-oriented forms of postcolonial writing. But Dinesh Datta, who in the course of the novel gets chased, bitten, drenched, stalked, evacuated, and who is a far more passive individual than most of the other characters in the novel (especially the women – scientists, activists, scholars), is ultimately also a connection man, a collector, interpreter, decipherer, translator of disparate languages and stories. In a world that expects the mass migration of unprecedented numbers of people, the function of cultural and linguistic mediation will be more and more crucial.

Connecting the twenty-first century ecological migrant to the sixteenth-century merchant and Jewish refugees in the Ghetto, *Gun Island* also challenges the stereotype of Venice as a recent city of migration, nurtured by the most reactionary political and cultural forces of a city cultivating a xenophobic and antihistorical notion of autochthonous Venetianness but unwittingly supported in progressive contexts such as the exhibition *Migropolis* (Scheppe 2010). Mounted in St. Mark's square, the heart of Venice's tourist experience, this show meritoriously showcased the lives of recent migrant communities and their invisible contribution to the local economy, but was completely silent on the century-old tradition of Venice as a migrant city and employed a visual and verbal language too sophisticated for the overwhelming

majority of visitors. Making *Gun Island* his most readable and informative novel so far, Ghosh also makes the case for accessible stories.

Two recent Italian texts also focus on the Bangladeshi community, harboring the promise that a new generation of Bangla-Venetian residents may tell their own stories themselves before too long. Both Dalla Puppa, Matteuzzi and Saresin's *La linea dell'orizzonte* (2021) and Confortin's *Banglavenice* (2022) are programmatically ethnographic narratives that try not to treat the community as a traditional object seen through the gaze of the Western observer. Dalla Puppa, Matteuzzi and Saresin make that explicit by problematizing the figure of the ethnographer himself in their graphic novel, which opens with a lone jogger running in the beautiful landscapes of Italy pondering on his existential dilemmas. This romantic overture seems to evoke the tradition of the adventurous, individualistic male hero of many Italian comic books, quickly subverted by the sudden, anticlimactic appearance of the urban landscape of the small provincial town of Alte Ceccato. This turns out to be less the story of Stefano than his sociological exploration of the trajectories of the Bangladeshi families involved in complex migration routes connecting their homeland to Italy and the United Kingdom. If the latter is the desired final destination of their 'onward migration' and Italy is considered an intermediate stage, Stefano discovers that these double migrants try to reconstruct in London part of their acquired Italianness. The story unfolds in typical ethnographic fashion through the interviews of Stefano with several (male) members of the community. Like Gosh's Dinesh, Stefano is also a tormented, accident-prone man, who cannot guarantee his girlfriend the kind of stable relationship taken for granted in the traditional Bangladeshi society that he interacts with, and who gets in turn robbed at knife-point, drenched, snubbed, let down during his research missions.

The standard migrant course he investigates is retraced by Apon, who Stefano meets in London. In 1994 the young man arrived in Rome, was hypnotized by its beauty but could not find a good job and moved north. In their first dialog, we learn that Apon belongs to a middle class that in Bangladesh "could only fall and never rise" and Europe was the destination that promised upward social mobility. In two consecutive close-up shots of Stefano and Apon suggesting an equal and intimate relationship, the latter explains: "We were Italians, but always seen as foreigners, I was always a Bangla factory worker, and my son the son of a Bangla factory worker . . . in theory we had everything, but . . . skin colour . . . ." (Della Puppa et al. 2021: 27). The next page is a spread showing a full-scale aerial view of the promised land of London, the multicultural metropolis that Italy's province cannot (yet) offer. Veneto, the region where Venice is the main city, is one of the regions that have integrated economically and socially the highest number of migrants while also producing the most reactionary political aggrega-

tions. In his accompanying essay, Della Puppa describes the paradoxical situation of the town council meeting where the same politicians who had erected several bureaucratic hurdles to avoid the stabilization of Bangladeshi residents, were now concerned that this community was leaving en masse, depopulating the schools and the shops. And yet, with all this structural and cultural racism, explicit or implicit, Italy had created an emotional space that led the community to build ‘a little Italy in London’ and constitute there the *IBWAUK*, the *Italian Bangladeshi Welfare Association UK*.

Figure 1: *La linea dell’orizzonte*: the *IBWAUK.* Courtesy of © BeccoGiallo.

London was multiethnic, but remained the old colonial power that had preached British superiority and underdeveloped Bangladesh; Italy, whose colonial past the Bangladeshi had not suffered, had become a place of nostalgia.

We understand why from a second interviewee, the Uber driver Kazi who moonlights as a cameraman, documenting Bangladeshi festivals, an unpaid occupation that allows him to make his community visible and to prepare for his work in the UK. He hosts Stefano in their tv studio, temporarily switching the roles of interviewer and interviewee. Kazi compares the frantic pace of the En-

glish capital with the more relaxed atmosphere of the Italian small town, where work in the tanning factory was very hard but life was quiet and regular, quiet, and weekends were available for the family and the community in the Italian squares conducive to easy socialization. The neoliberal Uber-type economical model grants greater independence but demands a difficult organization and impacts personal relationships. As Kazi reminisces about Italy, in the last table of page 115 he explains: "I used to live in Venice. It is the most beautiful city in the world . . . " Next, the reader finds a spread that, echoing the glorious apparition of London, offers an emblematically split space: the upper part reproduces the classic tourist view of Venice's Grand Canal, while the lower part shows the 'alter ego' Marghera, with its ethylene arc and an oil tanker ironically mimicking the Rialto Bridge and the gondola depicted above. Kazi's experience there is summarized in a single page (Figure 2), where the first spell as a dishwasher in restaurants (and we see once again the architecture of Venice, not the kitchens) is followed by employment in the shipyard, where he is subcontracted by the big company. "In Italy I was only a foreign factory worker, here I have made my dream come true, even if it's a small TV, but I can work and the channel is broadcast worldwide" (Della Puppa et al. 2021: 119). Now Kazi is a cameraman: like Deenesh, Tipu, and Stefano, he is a connection man, a collector of stories.

In *La linea dell'orizzonte* the historic Venice remains a temporary professional stage and a distant horizon for the migrants; for Stefano, who contemplates the fish-shaped city from his plane, is his landing spot as he finally starts a more stable and mature relationship with his girlfriend. In Confortin's *Banglavenice* Venice itself is a protagonist and is seen mainly from the water. This observational documentary that explores and questions coexistence with water in Venice is a poetic, slow-paced narrative inspired by Ghosh's work. It poetically weaves together the voices of Bangladeshi migrants with that of older Venetian residents who experience the metamorphosis of the city. Unlike the graphic novel, where the narrator is part of the story, Confortin never appears or makes his voice heard on or off camera, trying to give the viewer the impression that you (like him) are an invisible witness to his Venetian vignettes. He started from a poetic intuition that Bangladeshi may be attracted to Venice of all places because of the similarity of waterscapes, but he quickly acknowledged that other, more pragmatic reasons (explained in *La linea dell'orizzonte*) had connected these territories. Moving beyond this tantalizing analogy, he then pursues the uncanny changes experienced by Bangladeshi families that have relocated to both sides of the Venice lagoon. Compared to the lives narrated in the graphic novel, this is the next generation, the one that has chosen Italy to stay. "In all restaurants you find one or two Bangladeshi people we work hard" tells proudly to the camera in his basic Italian a man taking a break from his painting job in one of the most important boatyards (Figure 3).

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Figure 2: *La linea dell’orizzonte*: Venice and Marghera. Courtesy of © BeccoGiallo.

“We are never afraid . . . hot . . . cold . . . . We work hard, we don’t steal . . . . When the work is finished, a quick shower, and we go to bed . . . family and work, that’s it” – a reassuring narrative tailored for the implied Italian interlocutor who, oblivious of our country’s past of mass migration, has frequently bought into the toxic

Figure 3: *Banglavenice*: the boatyard. Courtesy of © Emanuele Confortin.

propaganda of the migrants as parasitic intruders. The man's father used to milk a cow and grow vegetables in Bangladesh; now he is proud of having bought a small apartment in Mestre: "Now I'm a Venetian," he laughs. No laughter, conversely, when he explains that he sent an email to the police immigration office to apply for the reunification with his wife and two small children, but no answer has arrived after five months. Like in the graphic novel, once you have gained access to the country, bureaucracy is the main barrier, but in this case the arrival to Italy was not the easy part. A newspaper seller, filmed both at work at his news stand in historic Venice and at home in the mainland, retraces his harsh migration journey. This included back-and-forth forays into Iran and Turkey, travelling on horseback or in the belly of a fuel truck, being locked in a bathroom, stuck in a room or even a cell with eight fellow migrants – "to come here I have been in prison seven times", he laughs, as he enjoys the simple comforts of food and a roof in Marghera. With one exception, all the characters of *Banglavenice*, whether Italian or Bangladeshi, remain nameless until the final credits, indicating Confortin's authorial decision to emphasise everyday life in Venice and typical professional roles, showing the incredibly normal and incredibly unique routine of workers from different generations. He tiptoes into widely different environments, as far apart as possible from the stereotypical glossy romantic images of the city, often travelling in early morning darkness or during fog-enveloped winter days – a far cry from the luminous glory of Venetian painting and postcards.

Long spells of silence accompany the frequent boat trips that alternate with interviews carried out in houses and working places. The Bangladeshi may be the newcomers, but they are portrayed as part of the larger effort of the citizens, seen in their menial daily lives in the early hours on non-poetic motorized barges, negotiating their existence with water and their economic challenges. We meet the

young man who lost his job during the pandemic and sleeps in a sailboat; the old restaurateur witnessing the high water invading his home and alternating a very colorful and scurrilous Venetian dialect to curse the lethal excavations of the lagoon with highly sophisticated explanations in Italian on the dynamics of hydrogeology; we see the famous boat builder who explains the difference between a gondola built fifty years ago, when it also used to transport heavy tourist luggage and navigated longer lagoon routes, and a modern-day gondola, only plying the Venice inner canals for the tourists but braving the furious ‘moto ondoso,’ the wave motion provoked by the heavy motor traffic. We see a boat full of newly manufactured coffins wrapped in plastic traveling on water towards a storage place near the hospital, where most funeral services operate. The casual conversation and jokes cracked by the deliverers create a funny counterpoint to the illustrious cultural trope of death in Venice. Throughout *Banglavenice* we frequently see Marghera, Venice’s ‘alter ego,’ appearing as a backdrop on the edge of the lagoon, as the urban setting where the migrants gather to learn Italian at the *Venice Bangla School* (see Figure 4) or to pray in their makeshift mosque, or as the politicized space where young activists sprayed the English-language slogan ‘TIDE IS RISING, SO ARE WE.’

Figure 4: *Banglavenice*: Venice Bangla School. Courtesy of © Emanuele Confortin.

Confortin seamlessly merges two different genres, the journey of the Asian migrant to Europe and the description of Venetian daily life. They coincide in the character who is the symbolic protagonist of the story, the 15-year-old Raosun Shamimul. In a documentary made mainly of self-contained portraits of people, the only discernible plot is that of Raosun studying the cello with his Italian teacher and seeking admission to the Venice conservatoire.

Figure 5: *Banglavenice*: the Cello lesson. Courtesy of © Emanuele Confortin.

The mid shot where he is standing with his instrument on his back in front of the majestic Baroque palace that houses the prestigious institution, one hour into the 90-minute long documentary, (re)connects the industrial Marghera of Bangladeshi migrants with historic monumental Venice.

In what is arguably the most moving scene of the documentary, we see Rauson and his older brother sitting with their widowed mother in their simple kitchen in Marghera. Here the environmental kinship between the two distant and yet interconnected waterscapes of Bangladesh and Venice, so different and yet both susceptible to ecological catastrophe, suddenly erupts in the narration: "Tell me about the monsoon in your village." Rauson was born in Italy, is a native speaker of Italian, and visited Bangladesh when he was very young; the older Zamir was born and studied in Bangladesh, is basically bilingual and acts as the linguistic and cultural mediator between the mother who survived a lethal flood in the village and the little brother who has only vague memories of their ancestral homeland and a more precarious grasp of Bangla. The two brothers use Ital-

ian with one another while switching to Bangla as they address their mother, who occasionally drops some Italian or English words to help Rauson. “The people would die in their sleep, falling into water.” The tragedy of the inundation occasionally gives way to the comedy of the quotidian, as in her anecdote of a cat snatching the chicken that an uncle had amorously cooked for the family visiting from Italy. The rural landscape of Bangladesh gradually materializes in the Marghera kitchen through the stories, the internet images, the sketches of the house drawn by Zamir for Rauson, who tries hard to recognize a place he visited only as a small child. “How could cats move around in the flood?”, he asks, striving to make this (un)familiar place his own.

In a later scene, we see Rauson and Zamir on a typical Venetian boat learning rowing skills and lore from a local expert. It is an emblematic, almost stylized version of a process that has characterized the history of Venice for centuries, the assimilation and integration of the “wonderful concourse of strange and forraine people” to renew the city, especially in times of crisis. The documentary ends with the intertitle “Raosun Shamimul Islam is the first student of Bangladeshi background to have been admitted to the Venice Conservatoire,” nodding to the classic redemptive narrative of the migrant outsider that makes it to the shrine of Western culture. But in our age of eco-anxiety, where we read in well-informed books like Gaia Vince’s that Venice may not be around for much longer, a different symbolic ending is the remark by the grey-bearded restaurateur, himself a migrant from another part of Italy, who praises the Venetian “incredible tendency to *sdrammatizzare.*” This untranslatable verb is the opposite of dramatize, namely to play down the drama of life: “you create a city on water: this is a way to *s*dramatize.”

If popular discourse, from Spider-Man to media reports, insists exclusively on the destructive force of waters, *Banglavenice* is both a praise of the connective role of water and of the ability of humans to forge new multiethnic, collaborative communities capable of staying with the trouble of the Anthropocene (Haraway 2016).

The works examined in this chapter represent an alternative Venice. In a city vulnerable to ecological disaster and often represented as a passive, fragile victim in need of aid and assistance, numerous organizations and individuals are engaging with the environmental crisis as agents of change and models for other coastal cities. As shown by Felicity Fenner (2022) and van Amelsvoort (2023), the international art scene, with the Biennale as its gravity center, has made Venice a hotspot of ecologically oriented art. The TBA21 foundation has created Ocean Space, a museum and collaborative platform devoted to marine art and research. The major public institutions have joined forces to proclaim Venice World Capital of Sustainability, through the creation of a foundation by the same name. Ca’ Foscari Univer-

sity of Venice has launched a research center in the environmental humanities, the first international master's degree in the field in Italy, and an international journal. In many of these places – museums, restaurants, hotels, factories – Bangladeshi migrants provide essential services through their barely visible labor.

Interrogating the Renaissance myth with which we opened, Elisabeth Crouzet-Pavan claims that in these widely circulated stories "Natural calamities were surmounted; oppositions and conflicts were erased. Always miraculously overcome, they hardly ruffled the surface of Venetian life. . . . the city could never know decrepitude or senescence. It had excluded itself from time and becoming" (2002: 190). It also excluded itself from the unsettling and seemingly contradictory elements of which it was constituted. The final paradox is that Venice is at once the place where the most pressing global issues (neoliberal capitalism, migration, climate change, overtourism) are all present and simultaneously dissimulated behind a veneer of beauty, still charming us with escapist fantasies or their mirror-image of apocalyptic catastrophes. It still remains easier to imagine eternal Venice or moribund Venice rather than a living, amphibian Venice that has century-old lessons for the present and the future. The authors examined here have reinscribed Venice in time and becoming, narrating stories where the long-term effects of colonialism and of the Anthropocene are intertwined, where migrants negotiate new lives and identities, and where postcolonial translators, artists, and intellectuals connect us to stories for our times of crisis.

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