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**Rowing in
Venice today**
An ethnographic inquiry

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ROWING IN VENICE TODAY

An ethnographic inquiry

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Thesis for M.A. Environmental Humanities

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*Venezia non si vede, non si comprende, non si conquista
nello spazio breve di un giorno*

F. Braudel

Introduction

This research stems from a specific need, a personal and collective concern that emerged during my three years of living in Venice. Each day, I became acutely aware of the slow but undeniable disintegration of Venice's rich historical, cultural, urban, and social fabric. While not a total collapse, the gradual unraveling compelled me to gather the fragments and demonstrate that, even amid this decline, alternative and hopeful narratives about Venice's seemingly predetermined fate still arise.

At first, it was the human traffic and frequent congestion along the city's busiest paths that stirred within me a growing unease about Venice. Even more than its breathtaking artistic and architectural views, this overwhelming condition made me feel as if I were living in a dream, in a state of unreality. Could it truly be possible for an urban space to be entirely subjugated to uncontrollable waves of tourists? Much like many Venetians who had long since grown weary of this situation, I began to acknowledge the role of the *sconte*: the shortcuts, or better yet, detours, which, though they lengthen the journey, undoubtedly make it less exasperating. But the real turning point came a few months after my initial move to Venice. Holden, a dear friend and university companion, bought a traditional Venetian boat, which he kept in the Castello district—a quieter area less affected by the throngs of tourists and maritime traffic (Fig. 1). When I first gripped the oar and we began gliding through the tranquil waters of Castello's canals, it was love at first stroke. Not long after, I joined one of the many rowing groups in the historic city with the clear goal of making it regular practice, a habit and a reprieve from urban chaos. I would soon learn, often at the risk of falling into the water, that much like human congestion, the *moto ondosso* (wave motion) can be equally frustrating. Needless to say, the increasing turbulence of these waves is directly linked to the tourism industry's relentless growth.

There is no denying it: the city of Venice and its lagoon are in a state of critical vulnerability. We are confronted with problems that can no longer be ignored, as they pertain to the way we inhabit the world and whether that way is sustainable and in balance with the broader system of human and non-human life. In the Venetian context, the situation is quite evident: this form of humanity is out of balance. The lagoon is increasingly becoming a lifeless pool, and the city itself an empty shell, hollowed out of its inhabitants and transformed into a ready-made playground for thousands of daily visitors.

Yet, this is not the only image of Venice available to those who live within the lagoon's spaces. As with any city, the image we have of it is never singular but plural. It depends on the places we dwell, the people we meet, habits and personal inclinations, and, for Venice especially, the interplay of land and water. The image I have chosen to explore in this research mainly focuses on the second dimension: the city of water. More specifically, the research focus delves into the world of Venetian rowing and starts by examining one of the frequent claims that has remained unresolved since the second half of the twentieth century: "Venetian rowing is disappearing." I took it upon myself to gather and share evidence that the reality is not so clear-cut. This led me to analyze some other key aspects that stem from either negative or positive response to this statement. What has disappeared from the Venetian rowing tradition? What responses followed Venice's entry into the industrial and later post-modern world? How has Venetian rowing been redistributed within the social fabric? What functions does it serve today? These are some of the research questions that I will consider throughout the text.

The first chapter addresses the research topic primarily from an ecological perspective. In particular, I analyze the emergence of the socio-ecological relationship between humans operating within the lagoon environment and how they (humans and the environment) mutually influence each other. From this intra-action arose the practice of Venetian rowing, in both its technical and material aspects. Equally important is the constellation of local knowledge that makes up the universe of local environmental knowledge of the Venetian lagoon. A universe of knowledge, but also a universe of meaning, which for millennia has informed human actions in this hybrid space, shaped by both human activity and natural forces. Faced with the gradual disappearance of this world, I will address the theme of the crisis of presence, and why it is relevant to discuss it here in the Venetian context.

The second chapter discusses the cultural processes that have shaped and are shaping Venetian rowing into a cultural tool used differently today than in the past. Although some traps of the global consumerist machine may threaten the biocultural uniqueness of this practice, and indeed a universe of meaning for human action, adaptive responses have nevertheless emerged within cultural processes, which I distinguish between folkloric and folklorized. What are the consequences of each? What can be learned from comparing these two models and uses of Venetian rowing?

Finally, the third chapter reconnects the threads of ecology and culture in Venetian rowing to uncover some elements of significant anthropological value in contemporary Venice. This third and final chapter brings together the analyses proposed in the previous sections and adds to the potential that emerged and was recorded in the ethnographic field. As I will explain shortly, it is here that I allow the anthropological discipline to manifest in its contemporary essence, as a contingent,

pragmatic, and reflective life experiment. In light of this, I have given voice to initiatives and rowing societies, which have sparked important movements of collective social resistance based on education about living in the lagoon, an open negotiation of identity boundaries, and the free gift of life practices.

Theoretical premise

The anthropological approach that has inspired the conceiving and the realization of the present research aligns with a particular kind of anthropology, one that returns to asking simple yet essential questions about how we inhabit the world. “How should we live?” begins Ingold’s reflection on why anthropology matters (2018). I adapt this question to the Venetian context: how should we live in Venice?

The anthropology of Ingoldian inspiration, before questioning the profound meaning of living (“why do we live”), of being alive, of life itself, aims to address its concrete, real, and social dimension. Indeed, my anthropological approach seeks possible answers by immersing itself in the real world, and the human presence in the world indisputably starts from being present with and among others. In simple terms, Ingold explains that living is both a challenge and an opportunity woven into the everyday. And as we navigate life, we encounter the unpredictability of the combinations left to us by our predecessors. Hence, deciding how to live is always a shared endeavor, involving those who came before and those who walk alongside us. Human life is inherently social; it is “a never-ending and collective process of figuring out how to live. Every way of life, then, represents a communal experiment in living.” (p 2). This text aims to give voice and substance to the collective, social experiment unfolding in contemporary Venice. As I mentioned earlier, the research intention arose on a personal level, but especially from those who inhabit Venetian space daily. It is a question that has been historically and eternally present when dealing with a changing environment like the lagoon. Even more so today, as it is subject to processes that reveal both issues and opportunities related to human habitation.

It’s easy to label Venice as a decadent city, born out of impossibilities and thus destined for an alluring yet concrete decay. What’s harder, however, is tracing the global and local trends that affect Venice and other places worldwide. These trends threaten the well-being of life on our shared planet. And like many other places in the world, Venice faces significant ecological and social risks. It is a microcosm of the ruins generated by the relentless march of capitalism. This is why the anthropology I propose seeks to navigate through debris to discover paths suited to deal with the increasing precariousness of life. It doesn’t presume offering a single, straightforward solution to counter harmful trends. Instead, it adopts a humble stance toward spaces and people with whom life—and research—has been shared. Rejecting the imposition of prepackaged answers, the anthropologist opens themselves to being influenced, even transformed. For anthropologists what is important “[...] is rather to share in their presence, to learn from their experiments in living, and to bring this

experience to bear on our own imaginings of what human life could be like, its future conditions of possibility,” writes Ingold (p. 8). Anthropology thrives on this interplay of imagination and experience.

Studying a group of people by immersing oneself in their reality is not about extracting knowledge to apply elsewhere. Anthropology itself has taught the mistake of assuming that universal and objective truths can be generated to function in every context. Instead, the anthropology I am inspired by aspires to wisdom. Unlike the rigid processes of knowledge, wisdom doesn't aim to fix concepts but to unsettle them: not to instruct but to educate, in the literal sense of “drawing out.” Ingold asserts, anthropology's task is:

“To draw on what we learn from our education with other people to speculate on what the conditions and possibilities of life might be... Anthropology thrives on this freedom to speculate, to say what we think, without pretending that our words are distillations of the views of the people among whom we have studied” (p.112)

At its core, this research is about mutual education, a bilateral relationship that involves both the researcher and the people I have partially lived alongside. This relationship is not instrumental but participatory. And the anthropological principle of participant observation inherently demands another essential ingredient for meaningful research: time. It takes time to share in the lives of a place and its people. Without it, one cannot grasp the profound dimensions of how a human community inhabits its world. Since the processes anthropologists study are endless, so too is their work. My research, which took over two and a half years to materialize into this text, is no exception. I do not see this text as complete or final, nor could it ever be. As Ingold puts it, anthropology “is a discipline that works by entering into the life process and going along with it” (p. 120). Hopefully, life along the lines of Venetian life will continue to flow.

Once again, the centrality of participant observation in this research must be emphasized. This “participant observation is a way of studying *with* people. It is not about writing other lives, but about joining with them in the common task of finding ways to live [...] It is rather a commitment to *learning by doing*” (p. 14) Specifically, I will discuss my participation in rowing experiences and the essential aspects that emerged in conversations with my interlocutors and companions, alongside a theoretical framework that contextualizes and supports the dynamics observed in the Venetian lagoon. Among the research questions that guide this work, there are also personal ones, which can nevertheless lead to lessons that go beyond the individual. What have I learned from living in the city of Venice for three years? Why is it important to share these lessons? What meanings, what sense emerges from the microcosm of Venetian rowing? What freedom and what degree of creative imagination can I offer back to the text, but even more so to the social life of Venice?

The following pages are the result of a combination of events that represent the key aspects I intend to explore, along with theoretical digressions that provide a broader and deeper understanding of the anthropological findings. One possibility I kept in mind while shaping the research text lay in the dialectic between different anthropological nuances: anthropology of memory, of the past, anthropology of testimony, or anthropology of education, of potential, and for the future? Arguably, all these anthropologies compound for the text I am now returning. In any case, the main result of my ethnographic experience is one of deep engagement. As if the city, personified through its representatives, inhabitants, and guardians, intervened with the aim of capturing another person. To engulf it. To extend the tentacles of a fragility that calls for care, presence, and attention. Out of this emerges an engaged *anthropologist*, myself, who allows himself to be influenced in the composition of the following text.

For an ecological theory of rowing

“Back in the day, either you rowed, or you rowed.” Sometimes, nothing explains a situation better than a tautological either/or statement made by an eighty-two-year-old man born and raised in Venice. On September 28, 2024, during a group¹ excursion to the island of Torcello, I naively asked two veterans of the oar how common rowing was among the Venetian population. In my mind, I was referring to a narrow time span of two or three generations, those within their temporal understanding. It didn’t take long for our conversation to move back in time, much like our sandolo as we approached Torcello, the first historical settlement of Venetian civilization.

It only took us an hour to arrive, and besides the area that gravitates around the Tessera canal², the weather and the water were sunny, calm and enjoyable. During that time, we had the serenity and the opportunity to tell and to hear stories on past traditions and costumes concerning the Venetian world of rowing. Also, we spent great care in understanding which was the best configuration of our crew. Assiduous rowers like Gianni (also called “Gani”) and Sergio pay a lot of attention to the pace and the coordination that rowers seek when they go out together³. It goes without saying that a fine balance can be found after weeks of practice along with the same members. Therefore, despite some unbalances in the first section of the route—Nicola in spot number three was pushing too hard so that my counter-push even his thrust—we finally came to an agreeable rhythm towards the end of the path. A rhythmically coordinated crew cruising along the lagoon waters is quite a beautiful sight. It expresses a way of moving based on mutual support, listening and shared effort. With that pleasant and enjoyable gait, we entered a secondary canal that ran along Mazzorbo and that introduced us to the final part of the route right before Torcello (Fig. 2). The rising tide nudging from the Adriatic Sea towards the mainland was delicately accompanying our vessel. For me and Nicola it was the first time scouting the northern lagoon, which is ideal to grasp the motley surface of a lagoonscape. Sergio, inspired by the amenity of the surroundings, shared an aphorism by word of mouth: “Lì dove comincia la terra finisce il mare...e viceversa” (“Where the sea ends, there the land begins...and vice versa”).

¹ This group is the Gruppo remieristico 3 (Tre) Archi, which is the association I am a member of since 2023.

² The Tessera Canal connects the Marco Polo Airport to the city of Venice. It runs along a long stretch of the lagoon just north of the historic center, providing a clear and unobstructed path for water taxis to travel quickly. Sergio told me that once, while crossing the canal by rowboat, a taxi driver harshly shouted at him: “Have you ever seen a bicycle on the highway?!”

³ Positions and correspondent roles are counted from bow backwards, depending on the side of the oar. Gani, 78 years old, was the reliable stern rower (position 4, oar towards the right) we needed for our outing, and who is always highly recommended when wandering in the “open” lagoon. Sergio, 82 years old, rowing from position number 2 (oar towards the left) *da sentina*. Then Nicola, our engine in position number 3 (oar towards the right) as he really has an efficient technique; and finally me, dictating the tempo in position number 1, but alternating my role with N. so as to get some rest.

Truly poetical, as he expressed with just a few words, the essence of an aesthetic appreciation of the surrounding landscape (Fig. 3). At one point, one particular vessel captured their attention. It was a well-maintained *bucintoro*⁴ (see Fig 1). That unusual sight of traditional Venetian vessels brought their personal accounts of past memories in highlighting the decreased variety of existing vessels and the tasks they once served. Perhaps it was fatigue and the “beating sun” (Gianni), but it felt as though vivid images of the recent past were reflected on the water, then bouncing back into our eyes, offering me a sketch of an unwritten (hi)story, the one in the blank spaces between the lines of a book. These visions were interrupted by closing remark about the drastic reduction in the (bio)cultural and technological diversity of existing boats. Wooden skeletons of abandoned vessels lay fallen in desuetude and abandoned places of the lagoon⁵, a dry thud signaling their obsolescence in material culture. This sight marks a sharp transition from an industrious civilization, one constantly engaged with the oar, to a fast-paced, motorized world far removed from slowness.

Structural and global processes are among the main causes of these changes. In this regard, I had an interesting conversation with a colleague, Pietro, who is originally from Padua and has been a Venetian rowing teacher at Ca’ Foscari. Pietro discussed a process that began in the late 19th century when the socio-economic fabric of the Veneto region was still deeply interconnected with the dense network of rivers and canals essential for transport, work, and daily life. The watery dimension was central not only to the historical center of Venice but also to the local environmental knowledge (LEK) of rowing and navigation that extended across the entire lagoon population and well inland, where canals and rivers served as vital ecosystemic elements. In the early 20th century, however, regional administrations began to favor road and rail infrastructure (Turri 2000; Vallerani 2010). Historian F. Vallerani writes:

“Of course, today the situation may seem desperate in the midst of the tormented hydrography that furrows the concrete mush of the city spread from Turin to the Po Delta: these are the collateral effects due to the so-called economic ‘miracle’, whereby the definitive decline of inland navigation, suffocated by the faster and more ubiquitous road transport, was followed by the end of that age-old relationship with waterways, favored by the amphibious character of the Po Valley’. (2009, p. 4)

Massive flows of concrete swept through the region, choking canals and fundamentally altering society’s way of life. Cement, motorways, and railways offered greater speed and efficiency in transporting goods and people. In essence, globalization and motorization gradually imposed new

⁴ The Bucintoro is a traditional Venetian ceremonial boat, notably associated with the Venetian Republic. It was a richly decorated state barge used during important public ceremonies.

⁵ Massimo, a member of the 3 Archi association, tells me of a place in Lio Piccolo where a number of traditional Venetian boats are abandoned.

material and cultural models (Marinelli 2010), replacing LEK and techniques that had long co-evolved with the environment.

Currently, Venice and its entire lagoon environment face significant socio ecological challenges. On one hand, the lagoon is becoming less and less of a lagoon. Generally, in this typology of environments the land increasingly overtakes water in the later stages of its progression (Fletcher et al. 2005). Yet, the human communities inhabiting this environment over the past millennium have reversed its typical process by redirecting the major rivers flowing from the mountains and mainland (D'Alpaos 2009). These rivers originally carried the sediments that formed the lagoon's land surfaces. At the same time, the advent of motorized boats has significantly increased the impact of the so-called *moto ondosso* (wave motion). Stronger and more frequent waves now strike indiscriminately against all surfaces of the lagoon and the city, accelerating a process of erosion of the foundations (Scarpa et al. 2019). This, in turn, exacerbates the sinking of Venice and other areas of the lagoon. Last but not least, the accelerated pace of global warming and the resulting climate change have significantly increased sea levels, along with more frequent extreme weather events. These factors have led to a considerable rise in the number and intensity of high tides, further elevating water levels (Lionello et al. 2020).

All these effects in combination place the lagoon and the city of Venice in serious jeopardy (CMCC et al. 2023). In addition, from an urban and social perspective, the city of Venice has been undergoing an apparently unstoppable process of depopulation for over half a century. It is argued that the main causes are processes of *touristification* and *re-functionalization* of urban spaces (Zanardi 2020). Here, however, I would like to begin by focusing on the partial loss of one aspect of local environmental knowledge. Specifically, I am referring to *voga alla veneta* and some of the nuances associated with it.

I'm having a coffee with Fabio in Campo Santa Margherita. He came from Treviso to meet me at the pub and have an informal discussion. Although he is originally from the Giudecca, he works in Treviso as an electronic engineer because the historic center of Venice does not provide for a wide diversity in the labor sector. Our conversation meanders through various topics related to life in the Venetian lagoon, such as regattas, public transport strikes, and the differences between motorboats and rowing boats. At one point, a particular remark completely captured my attention: *'ndar per*

laguna in barca o a remo no xe 'a stesa roba' (“traveling through the lagoon by motorboat or by oar is not the same thing”).

For Fabio, the fundamental difference lies in how rowing forces you to move slowly, to match the rhythm of nature. “What nature?” I replied. The lagoon’s, of course. He offered an analogy comparing a hypothetical city in the woods surrounded by trees and rivers to Venice, which rises out of the lagoon’s unique environment. This environment, however, has a much higher “entry point” in terms of livability. Lagoonscapes are constantly mutating; they set out a hybrid pattern of conditions to which human and non-human agents must adapt. “The lagoon’s constantly shifting nature demands silence, attentiveness, and proximity” (F.). It calls for a deeply attuned perception of environmental signals: “Humans need to slow down/go slowly, to walk, to look around—only then can they truly immerse themselves in things” (F.). And this is why he sees the use of rowing boats as a preferable way of moving and wandering in this environment. Nonetheless, the matter of habitability is more difficult because people here should (preferably) possess a boat and consequently the knowledge of how and where to use it.

To expand on this point, we can look at Gibson’s theory on the concept of *affordances* (1979). The author’s point of departure sees the earth’s ground as the main surface where agents find themselves to be and to dwell. It is interpreted as the interface between “a set of objective conditions that exist independently and in advance of the creatures that come to inhabit it, and to which they must perforce adapt” (Ingold 2011, p. 78). These objective conditions to which human and nonhuman animals must adapt are called affordances. They can be understood as inherent potentials of environmental objects. Properties of elements are there to be taken up. Following this logic, the discovery of meaning as well as the operational consequences that stem from it are enabled or restricted by these affordances of pre-existent objects. For instance, whereas “the ground surface is a substratum that *affords* support for a terrestrial biped or quadruped” making it “stand-on-able, [walk-on-able and run-over-able]” (2017, p. 38), the affordances of *lagoonscapes* are for their very essence hybrid. They are stand-on-able depending on cyclical tides (*velme*⁶) and flat terrestrial platforms (*barene*⁷), so that *access-ability* inevitably depends on *navig-ability* (“*Lì dove comincia la terra finisce il mare...e viceversa*”). Numerous small islands, shallow sandy bottoms intersected by natural channels, and submerged or semi-submerged areas, all of these elements contributed to the

⁶ These are shallow, marshy areas within the lagoon that are periodically submerged by the tides. The term “*velme*” is often used to describe mudflats or tidal flats, typically found in the shallower parts of the lagoon. These areas are crucial for the ecosystem as they provide feeding grounds for many species of birds and marine life

⁷ These are natural sandbanks or mudflats that emerge during low tide, often forming islands or low mounds. *Barene* are vital to the lagoon's ecosystem as they provide habitats for various bird species and act as barriers to coastal erosion. They play an essential role in the dynamic processes of the lagoon, helping to regulate the movement of water and sediment.

development by human communities of slender, lightweight, flat-keeled boats that can be carried and maneuvered in a standing position, thus making Venetian rowing suited to the lagoon environment.

In the social sciences debate, the root causes of many socio-ecological issues are often traced back to anthropocentric dualisms. Chief among these is the dichotomy between humans and nature, which has historically been used to justify the domination and exploitation of the natural world. Consequently, social behaviors and environmental policies frequently reveal an anthropocentric perspective, one that prioritizes human interests and cultural values while sidelining or neglecting the significance of natural systems and processes (Plumwood, 1993; Merchant, 1980).

One of the goals of this chapter is to issue this widely spread intellectual domain. The arguments of this section rest upon several foundational ideas. The first one is that water as an element—or more specifically, the engagement of people on and with water—encourages a shift in how we view spatial, cultural, and contextual frameworks. The amphibious, lagoon environment is ideally suited to such posture. This perspective aligns with what Krause called “hydro-perspectivism” (2019), which can be useful in challenging the *life-worlds* that have been taken for granted in our own political, economic, and intellectual settings (p. 93).

Secondly, part of the theoretical architecture is built upon the lifework of the anthropologist T. Ingold. As a matter of fact, his thought has long focused on the attempt to overcome the aforementioned dichotomies so as to propose an alternative understanding of the socio ecological relations between humans, more-than-humans and the environment.

Thirdly, I deem it essential to center the argument onto the *moving-body* that directly engages with the practice of rowing. In fact, despite the ubiquitous presence of body movement in human lived experience, as an intimate part of one’s being, one’s ability to exist in complex material worlds within realms of social action, it is argued that the social sciences have largely overlooked the study of movement of human actions and interactions in socio-environmental contexts. Once again, this neglect stems from deep-seated philosophical assumptions that result from objectivist divisions: separating mind from body, reason from imagination, cognition from emotion, and verbal from nonverbal expression (Barbour 2004; Farnell 1994; 1999; Johnson 1991). As a corollary, embodied practices, techniques, and ways of moving have generally been dismissed as legitimate forms of knowledge. However, these *techniques du corps*—the “ways in which, from society to society,

[people] know how to use their bodies” (Mauss 1935, 97)—are fundamental to shaping human subjectivity and the spaces of shared experience between individuals.

Ultimately, I argue that an embodied perspective on *voga alla veneta* is a valuable tool for fostering what Fabio has called an “anthropological catharsis.” Returning to our earlier conversation, F. observes that the threshold for accessing the lagoon has been lowered. This is due to both the numerous road connections to the mainland and the widespread adoption of motorized transportation. “Ndar per laguna” (*wandering* in the lagoon) has become less demanding, noisier, and faster. Consequently, what F. describes as “l’esponente, il rappresentante [la voga alla veneta] più diretto delle dinamiche che servono per abitare in laguna” (“the most direct expression of the dynamics essential to living in a lagoon”) has been fading.

On the one hand, Venice and its lagoon are traversed by substantial flows of temporary visitors who largely remain unaware of these dynamics. This is partly because they spend little time here, and partly because they rarely engage in practicing “the most direct expression” of lagoon life dynamics. On the other hand, long-coevolved attentiveness to the lagoon’s rhythms and transformations has become the domain of a few, primarily those who still engage in the activity of rowing and thereby help preserve the lagoon’s LEK.

It is important to clarify that not necessarily every rower possesses a comprehensive understanding of the Venetian lagoon’s complex and ever-changing environment. However, as F. suggested, rethinking *voga alla veneta* offers a pathway toward an “anthropological catharsis.” Venetian rowing, in this context, becomes a vital medium for immersing oneself in the socio ecological history of the lagoon. Through this practice, one can cultivate an ecological posture that reorients social and political relations, not only among humans but also between humans and the more-than-human world.

The first step of this section consists in revisiting the previous explanation on the correlation—based on the concept of affordances—between the lagoon and its inhabitants. In short, it is a reading that points at a configuration by which natural features inform the agents dwelling in it how to adapt to such environmental conditions. Thereafter, the production of artifacts by human and non-human actors is what we generally call by the name of culture. A corollary of this reasoning twofold.

Firstly, surfaces only set the stage for the presence of objects. They are deprived of any potential to life. The latter is carried on above them, rather than in and with them. In Ingold's view, however, this type of sociological and ecological theory is based on a partial gaze of analysis of the relationship between humans and the environment. Secondly, this type of reasonings becomes valid for people or organisms too, which are depicted as simple forms, often described as "blobs". These blobs have an interior and exterior and are separated by their surface. They may collide, come together, or even merge into larger blobs (Ingold 2011, p. 3-7). Most importantly, however, is that blobs cannot cling to each other—at least without losing their distinctiveness in the closeness of their union. In these terms, the main argument is that in a world of blobs, (social) life would be impossible. In fact, since there is no life that does not involve the interweaving and interpenetration of socio ecological connections, there could be no life of any kind in a world made up of blobs.

By contrast, Ingold argues that the concept of the line allows us to revitalize a socio ecological understanding of life. In the lives of lines, parts are not static components; they are dynamic movements. Lines do not set a division between an outside and inside; no boundaries differentiate separate domains. Instead, they open up paths of movement or growth (2017, p. 70-1). Each path reveals a relationship which is not between one thing and another, such as the organism "here" and the environment "there." Rather, it is a continuous trail along which life unfolds. This path does not begin in one place and end in another but weaves through or within. In essence, Ingold concludes that "[social] life lies not in the accretion of blobs but in the correspondence of lines" (2017, p. 11). In this view, people, organisms, agents in general, are not seen as contingent individuals, but as verbs that carry out actions and can merge in instantaneous moments of interpenetration. Of course, this also applies to the contention that sees the ground surface as a pre-existing foundation *upon* which everything else is built. Rather, we argue that the very ground is simultaneously cause and effect of the lines of the organisms that dwell *with* it. With this in mind, we can also issue the matter of the entry point of lagoonscapes, which for human beings depends on navig-ability. To presume that vessels' construction and its complementary technique of use, for instance, spontaneously derived from the reading of pre-existent natural objects is flawed. And the same goes, of course, with the thinking that humans, endowed with an innate predisposition to toolmaking, materialize inner pre-designed objects so as to find solutions to operational problems. Once again, the last two are approaches that interpret the possibility and the potentiality of (social) life in terms of separate entities, thus neglecting a vital moment of interpenetration. In response to both types of reasoning, Ingold proposes what he calls "the dwelling perspective". According to the author, it

"ascribes the generation of form to those very processes whose creativity is denied by that perspective which sees in every form the concrete realization of an intellectual solution to a design problem [...] What it means is that the

forms people build, whether in the imagination or on the ground, arise within the current of their involved activity, in the specific relational contexts of their practical engagement with their surroundings. Building, then, cannot be understood as a simple process of transcription, of a pre-existing design of the final product onto a raw material substrate. It is true that human beings [...] have the capacity to envision forms in advance of their implementation, but this envisioning is itself an activity carried on by real people in a real-world environment, rather than by a disembodied intellect moving in a subjective space in which are represented the problems it seeks to solve” (2000, p. 186).

This reasoning overlaps with another description that Ingold makes of two adherent concepts: landscape and taskscape. The former includes not only natural elements conceived as being out there—as we just saw in opposition to Gibson’s theory— but also the collapsed acts of human agency into objects and constructions. In Inglis’ words, a landscape is “the most solid appearance in which a history can declare itself” (1977, p. 489). That is to say that the landscape is a lived and living process; it makes and is made by all of the agentic forces dwelling in and with it. Clearly, the elements of the landscape remain accessible for observation even long after the movements that created them have come to an end. This conception of the landscape focuses on forms; however, these are not pre-designed for creatures that harness them to their own advantage. Instead, they emerge and are sustained through the dynamic unfolding of a relational field that spans the interface between organism and environment.

This generative process, rooted in mutual interaction and formation, can be understood as one of *embodiment* (Ingold 2000). And this goes both for the development of bodily forms, as well as the extra-bodily creations of (cultural) agents. This twofold pattern is described as “a movement of *incorporation* rather than inscription, not a transcribing of form onto material but a movement wherein forms themselves are generated” (2000, p. 193). Once again, this movement is reciprocal. On the one hand, agents absorb and morph in their bodily forms or material creations the life-processes they find themselves to be. At the same time, features of the environment shift and coalesce in correspondence to the activities of the agents that dwell *with-in* them. The whole of these activities is what Ingold calls “taskscape”, since tasks represent “any practical operation, carried out by a skilled agent in an environment, as part of his or her normal business of life” (2000, p. 195). Again, these two concepts must be understood as one ensemble: the landscape is the taskscape in its embodied form; “a pattern of activities ‘collapsed’ into an array of features” (p. 198).

The theory presented here might seem obvious to people who have lived, worked, and spent decades in the lagoon, especially during the period before widespread motorization. From the oral testimonies gathered for the research, as well as from the biographies of well-known figures in

Venetian history (Ciacci, 2001), it became clear that the interpretation of the lagoon landscape was a daily practice, intrinsically woven into the gesture of rowing “alla veneta”. With every stroke of the oar, and the relative slowness it requires, anyone navigating the waters experienced the environment with a level of attention and intimacy far greater than today’s engines allow. It was a physical closeness that highlighted and reflected constant changes in the environment, the natural and human-induced effects on the conditions in which people lived. In short, this was the LEK of the Venetian lagoon, which is now entering its final stages of disappearance. Nevertheless, for this section of the text, it remains important to emphasize that even today, through the practice of Venetian rowing, it is still possible to approach a physical and emotional understanding of the place one inhabits, even if only temporarily. In this second circumstance, we are brought to recalibrate the experience of acting and existing in a world through all our physical senses. In some respects, as I will elaborate later, the act of rowing itself can be understood as a political gesture. For now, however, I want stress the sense of intimacy fostered by physically engaging with the material co-evolution of the taskscape onto the landscape. This nurtures a respectful and attentive attitude toward the material history that has shaped and continues to shape this space of interconnection between humans and more-than-human entities.

Nicola always says: *Compraeve a barca* (“Buy a boat”). I will return to the importance of this expression in a moment. Nicola is the founder of Venice on Board (VOB), literally a rowing school that started about 10 years ago in the Cannaregio district (Fig. 4). He openly tells me the reasons why he started this project: he could not accept that a similar association, RowingInVenice, offered Venetian rowing lessons mainly to tourists. Today, VOB is a well-established reality, reaching and satisfying the ambitions of hundreds of people eager to learn this ancient practice.

Some key questions echo through this first section of the thesis. What is the need to learn Venetian rowing? What is the need to teach it? What does it express, considering it no longer serves essential functions like transport and labor? I believe that a valid answer can be drawn directly from that “*compraeve a barca.*” With this phrase, Nicola wants to emphasize the centrality, the necessity, and the importance of wandering around the city and the lagoon, experiencing the aquatic dimension: “only this way can you truly understand what it means to live in the lagoon” (N.). Even better, of course, if you do it by rowing, thus reactivating in daily life a traditional practice that for centuries has shaped the material and spiritual life of the lagoon’s inhabitants. With his words, I started to grasp what is considered the primary purpose of Venetian rowing today: educating oneself to live in the

lagoon. Rowing in a traditional boat creates a lasting sense of fascination and reconnection with the embodied, material intelligence of the rowing gesture on a typical boat.

At the very least, this is what stroke me during a lesson with Nicola. He believes that, after years of practice and experience on water, he has developed a precise and effective *theory* that works for every learner, even after just five hours of classes. He told me this a week before offering me a free lesson in the canals of Cannaregio. When the day of the lesson arrived, I found N. waiting for me on a gondola, which, I must admit, made me quite nervous. Up until that point, I had practiced on *sandoli* and *mascarete*, smaller and lighter boats. But steering an 11-meter gondola through narrow canals seemed beyond my capabilities. Yet, guided by N.'s mastery, I managed to maneuver the boat even in places where it seemed impossible. Minute by minute, by listening to and applying N.'s instructions, the *technical intelligence* of the gondola began to reveal itself and *ascend into my body*: I became one with the boat. As many of the instructors I have met have often told me, skill lies in *feeling* the boat, merging with it, and making it an *extension of one's own body*. According to Nicola, the instructors of rowing clubs often fail to convey the complexity of the technique. Since rowing is no longer a necessity but primarily a sport and hobby, these instructors tend to focus too much on the competitive aspect, neglecting crucial details that are essential for a full understanding of the numerous nuances. First, one must softly and slowly apprehend the basics of the technique. Thereafter, one can start pushing the boat faster. I find truth in N.'s words. I have had more than three instructors from rowing clubs, and all of them focused more on the effectiveness of the push rather than on technical and aesthetical intelligence. Probably, the only one who gave me this other perspective was indeed Gianni.

Gianni is one of the two or three instructors at the 3 Archi rowing club. An elderly man, always with a cigar in his mouth and dark sunglasses that hide his eyes, he is originally from Murano and considers himself a *true Venetian*. I'll elaborate more on this in the final chapter. For now, I share the lesson we had on July 30th. G. suggested heading out early in the morning, to avoid both the hottest hours of the day and the maritime traffic, which, with its wake, would interfere with our lesson. In the end, the issue didn't arise because that day, strong winds kept us from leaving the dockyard, which partially shields us from the waves and the currents amplified by the wind. According to both Gianni and Nino, the best time to learn is precisely in adverse conditions: if you can handle the boat against wind, currents, and waves, it will undoubtedly be easier to do so in calmer lagoon waters. We decided to stay in the dockyard and focus on mastering some fundamental maneuvers, such as mooring and turning the boat in either direction.

Gianni's approach to teaching and rowing is quite different from Nino's. Other members of the association told me that G. spends a great deal of time teaching techniques from land, without venturing onto the water. In contrast, N. considers it essential to immediately immerse oneself in real conditions to learn and apply the techniques of rowing. Given the premises, I was expecting a lesson heavily focused on technical aspects. Surprisingly instead, G. placed a strong emphasis on aesthetic appreciation. Unlike N., who favors a physical and energetic approach to handling the oar and boat, G. suggested holding the oar with just two fingers. This way, he explained, the body relaxes, physical tension dissipates, and the rowing stroke becomes more graceful: "Don't you feel better? It's also more beautiful and elegant, isn't it?" Rowing, he asserted, "is an art".

I have long been intrigued by the use of the expression "the art of rowing". It seemed to me that the same cultural processes that shifted the practice of rowing into the realm of tradition—then to become folklorized, as I will explain in the next chapter—are similarly at work in framing Venetian rowing as a form of art. It felt like a sort of melancholic and idealized appeal to a millennia-old practice now fading away. To gain a deeper understanding, I asked the people I encountered over the past few months for their opinions. Yet, a clear, definitive answer rarely emerged. It was as if there was an unspoken element, something that could not be articulated in words.

For now, I think we can leave the linguistic issue of whether rowing is an art or not unresolved. Probably it is, but perhaps what's even more interesting is that anyone has the opportunity to engage with it and *become an artist* simply by picking up an oar and being guided by a master. As for why one might do so, something is already beginning to take shape. It's about educating oneself through a traditional practice and knowledge that places the body and the environment in which it lives at the heart of the social, spiritual, and political issues of our contemporary lives.

This brief glimpse into the process of learning the Venetian rowing technique aims to bring the discourse of living in the lagoon not only to its aquatic dimension, but also to the matter of making experience on water through the body. Earlier, I attempted to illustrate the significance of reclaiming the aquatic dimension to develop a fully socio-ecological and historical perspective of this inhabited space. Now, my goal is to put forward a deeper understanding of the embodied experience in the Venetian lagoon, as it can provide an alternative view of making knowledge and being wise. As Johnson argues: "the continuity of our bodily interactions and knowing with our abstractive modes of thought is the key to a unified view of knowledge as a means of transforming our experience"

(1991, p. 6-7). On these grounds, I argue that an ecologically sound and embodied conception of knowledge can function as an active tool for transforming problematic situations in the Venetian lagoon. Eventually, for some people this form of knowledge is coming to an end, something to which I will return in a moment. Nonetheless, my thinking is that it can still help the inhabitants (lagoon inhabitants) to better understand themselves and their world so as to pursue mutual interests and ends.

As a starting point we can revisit the suggestions of phenomenology which argue that the notion of embodiment is the existential condition of being human (Merleau-Ponty 1962). It means existing in the world and inhabiting it through one's body, adapting to it over time. The concept of embodiment thus encompasses the ways in which humans experience their bodies with-in the world, and the world through their bodies. On the boat, while the attention tries to remain on the act of rowing, the touch of the water and the waves produced by other vessels reveals the unity and the interconnectedness of bodies that traverse the waters of the lagoon. Everything is in flux. "The spectacle of the world" is a play of interconnections, where the boundaries between objects blur into one another. Hence, perception and awareness transform our *com-prehension* of the phenomenal world.

It is through human perception that meaning emerges. With every new perception, we learn something: the world is always there, yet our perception shifts its meaning. In addition, Merleau-Ponty suggests that perceiving is not about referencing a collection of data but witnessing an immanent sense emerge (1964). Each present experience adds a new layer of meaning, one that will shape and inform future experiences. In other words:

"Our perception of the environment as a whole, in short, is forged not in the ascent from a myopic, local perspective to a panoptic, global one, but in the passage from place to place, and in histories of movement and changing horizons along the way" (Ingold 2000, p. 227).

In lagoon environments, people walk and row. Bodily materiality, along with thinking, is constantly interacting with the shifting materialities of land and water. Under this light, movement whether on land or on water is not simply a tool for acquiring knowledge, not just a way to travel between points to gather sensory data for mental processing. The walker-rower gains understanding through the very act of moving. For the same reasons outlined in the previous paragraph⁸, it can be argued that what is called the Venetian "civilization of water" (Crovato et al. 2004) emerged precisely from the physical crucible of embodied experience within the lagoon environment. Human communities of the Venetian lagoon are themselves an embodiment of the lagoon's body, shaping and being shaped by the landscape through an ongoing co-creative process between various

⁸ I am referring to the "dwelling perspective" by T. Ingold.

interpenetrating forces. In these environments, human beings have developed external objects so as to perform tasks beyond their innate physical limits. Anthropologist F. Remotti calls this extension of the body onto a technological object and their mutual engagement “embodied intelligence”. My previous depiction of rowing lessons showed how important this form of intelligence is for expert rowers. It is a constitutive part of the identity which structures and informs life in the Venetian context. The president of the Venetian Rowers Associations has defined rowing as “something that emerges and renews itself from a deep need for existence. To row in Venice is to reconnect with the essence of who we have been for generations.”⁹ What happens, then, when a fundamental element of one’s identity is threatened of disappearing?

Starting on this point, it is now fundamental to explore a practical understanding of the notion of presence. For de Martino, presence in the world fundamentally entails the ability to bring together, within the immediacy of consciousness, all the memories and experiences necessary to respond adequately to a given historical situation (1948, p. 116-7). This capacity stems from the body’s potential to embody reality, making it familiar and self-evident. It is through the minimal routines of daily life that a sense of belonging to the world is achieved. Conversely, the loss of this relationship, wherein reality is objectified and rendered meaningful, acts as a trigger for a crisis of presence. Therefore, although presence can be seen as the tension driving people to act, a capacity for transformation within the world and of the world, this capacity for action can falter during critical moments of existence. Such moments are often tied to crises or specific economic and social conditions.

In light of this reading, it is reasonable to claim that the Venetian community is heading toward—or perhaps has already arrived at—a crisis of presence. Indeed, some members of the 3A rowing club confide, with profound bitterness, that they no longer row or participate in social initiatives advocating for a re-centering of the lagoon’s space around the needs of community rowing. In essence, their crisis translates into inaction. They admit they have lost the will to fight because rowing is no longer a useful tool to respond to the prevailing of economic interests that prevent motorized boats from restrictions of any sort. The ever-increasing wave motion has profoundly transformed the conditions of the environment in which these people were used to operating. As a consequence, rowing has become much more difficult, thus alienating people from a whole world of long shared practices and that is now slowly disappearing.

⁹ See: <https://thewayofthemiles.blogspot.com/2019/08/voga-veneta-patrimonio-unesco.html>

This sentiment is echoed by Erica, the president of my association, who shared her shock at a significant event that occurred about twenty years ago. During a 3A meeting, the senior members of the group had prepared a video presentation about the association's history. The video collected the memories of all the members and concluded with a sunset over the lagoon, symbolizing the end of a story: the story of Venetian rowing. For these members, the end is here, it has come already. We are faced with a clear example of what De Martino has called "cultural apocalypse". The Italian anthropologist used this expression to describe moments when the symbolic frameworks and practices that sustain a group's collective identity and ability to act meaningfully in the world are threatened or collapse entirely (1977). And as these examples show, part of the Venetian community has accepted the final disintegration of its shared cultural world.

Yet, such crises reveal that the world is not pre-given but constructed; it is shaped by our capacity to inhabit and transform it, even as we are shaped and transformed in return. According to Erica, the image of the sunset reflects a partial and defeatist view of the social destiny of the lagoon communities. On the contrary, she thinks we should embrace the struggle of perpetuating Venetian rowing along with rowing associations "against all odds" (E.), as it educates people on the importance of maintaining the delicate balance between human activities and the lagoon's ecological systems.

This is where the active and constructive role of Venetian rowing still comes into play. It is one of the ways in which we are physically reminded that there is a world that we inhabit together. Thereafter, we communally evaluate our knowledge, our wisdom in the context of how well or how poorly we are functioning and flourishing within an ever-changing environment. Doing it in the company of others highlights that the tension toward operability in the world is an ongoing individual and collective effort. Ultimately, it may help to reimagine and revitalize the relationship between people, traditions, and the socio-ecological landscape at issue.

The theoretical background described thus far opens new avenues for interpreting the "material text" of the Venetian lagoon. I borrow this expression from S. Iovino (2012; 2019) because it effectively encapsulates the merging of dichotomies such as nature/culture, human/non-human, mind/body. Social life and biological life, mental and physical bits of knowledge proceed intertwined. The central argument is that both types of relationships rely on inter-penetration, exchange, and gifting, or, to borrow Ingold's phrase, they rely on *the life of lines*. I believe that in both contexts, thus in the whole socio ecological system at issue, this chain of interpenetration among diverse natural and cultural

agents has been disrupted. As a result, both ecological and social life find themselves at a critical juncture.

The contribution by material ecocriticism suggests that this never-ending *correspondence, inter-activity, and intra-activity* between the forces of nature and culture, physical elements and practices create texts composed of embodied stories. And just like a pen guides us in reading, interpreting, and correcting the lines of a written page, likewise Venetian rowing is a fundamental tool for grasping the socio ecological meaning of the Venetian material text. The point is that our engagements with these material texts are acts of interpretation. Yet, these interpretations do not exist solely in the abstract; they have concrete repercussions. They materialize in the crises affecting our ecosystems, landscapes, and communities. A drastic decline in the use and prevalence of rowing boats translates into the disappearance of a deeply rooted and historically co-evolved knowledge and way of life intimately tied to the lagoon environment.

In light of this, a renewed negotiation is needed to understand and determine the most appropriate ways to inhabit a complex and heterogeneous space like the Venetian lagoon. I will elaborate further on these points in the second and third chapters. For now, starting with Venetian rowing, my aim has been to lay the groundwork for an ecological theory of and for the lagoon world.

One clarification is necessary: this theory is not intended as a nostalgic call to exclusively reinhabit the Venetian space through rowing, although it sounds captivating. It would be naive to suggest that many activities essential for the proper functioning of human societies should disappear overnight. Given the pressing challenges facing the lagoon, it is clear that political action is required to mitigate human impact. Nonetheless, the aspects I have exposed and will address concern the opportunities that rowing offers in terms of active presence within the territory. In this first section, the analysis focused on the socio ecological foundations. Now, I will move on to the cultural dimension.



Fig 1: *Roberta*, Holden, myself and friends rowing in Sant'Elena.



Fig. 2: Sergio and "Gani". Entering in the canal of Mazzorbo. The Bucintoro in the background



Fig. 3: “Lì dove comincia la terra finisce il mare...e viceversa” – Sergio.



Fig. 4: Venice On Board head quarter in the sestiere of Cannaregio.

On rowing *alla veneta*: between tradition and *folklorization*

For the last year and a half, I have immersed myself in the various schools and experiences of Venetian rowing active in the historic city. I learned from conversations with interlocutors, acquaintances, and friends from diverse backgrounds that the *voga alla veneta* today branches out into an intricate delta of multiple activities, crafts, celebrations, and both institutional and non-institutional sporting events. These branches are all integral to the historical and social context of the lagoon.

The aim of this chapter is to sketch a framework that captures this multiplicity of spaces, actors, and cultural institutions, in order to reconstruct the relatively recent cultural transformations of Venetian rowing.

To start with the basics, in *Prontuario di voga alla veneta. A handbook of venetian rowing* (2024), we read from the very first pages that until not so long ago, the problem of teaching how to row in Venice was simply non-existent: “every father teaches his child - and in these waters, has done so for millennia” (p. 11). This assertion is followed by a comparison between the ratios of motorboats to rowing boats and their land-based counterparts, cars and bicycles. Basing on this analogy, the authors acknowledge that bicycles still have a *raison d'être*, meaning that they can still be used when car traffic is adverse, for instance. In contrast, rowing boats have practically lost their function as an alternative to motorboats as a means of transportation. In this regard, some interlocutors of my research confirmed that the *voga alla veneta* is a practice maintained by a few people as a hobby, while others emphasized its competitive, sporting nature. Others, like Fabio, professional rower, traditional fisherman, and one of the main advocates of the social movement *Poveglia Per Tutti*, likened rowing to the *Palio di Siena*: a unique local sport, without any identical counterparts, stemming from traditional practices that have evolved into sporting events. In any case, during ethnographic research no one failed to make this one observation: that rowing and the use of rowing boats no longer serve for work or subsistence purposes. An old popular saying, “*barca xe casa*” (the boat is home), signified that the boat was not merely a means of transport but an extension of one’s living space: “For the Veneto people, a practically amphibious people, the use of the boat and the oar are physiological, like breathing and eating” (Crovato et al. 2004, p. 13). Essentially, without a boat moored outside the home, it was challenging to carry out daily chores, to maintain contacts, and to pursue earnings essential for the maintenance of home and family. In other words, people used to row “to live, to hunt, to fish, to communicate, to defend themselves, to trade, to work” (p. 13). However, from the end of the 19th century onwards, the construction of the *Ponte della Libertà*, which

definitively connected the historic center to the mainland, followed by an accelerated motorization of boats and vessels in the second half of the 20th century, transformed Venice from an island into an extension of the mainland. The result was a gradual annihilation of its watery dimension, leading to a significant decline in the use of rowing boats. Ultimately, Venetian rowing has been relegated into small niches of “cultural survival”.

The concept of cultural survival suggests that culture, following A. Kroeber’s ideas, is also a historical inheritance (1917). It reflects the historical constitution of the human condition, shaped by both the external world accommodating generational changes and the internal world of values, norms, beliefs, practices, and customs that accompany these changes. The “superorganic” view of culture¹⁰, emphasizing its structural aspects, overlooks the constant dynamics of change it undergoes. Nonetheless, it is also true that the notion of inheritance implies that culture can never remain the same, as each generation inherits different material and immaterial outcomes from historical processes that continuously shape and reshape cultural systems. E. Sapir referred to this with the concept of cultural “genuineness” (1924), highlighting how culture, as a way of life and practice, is adaptable to the practical needs of each generation. Later I will expand on my meeting with Marzia from the Canottieri Giudecca association, who suggests there is a new ‘generational’ need stemming from Venetian rowing groups. It calls for mending the laddered social fabric of the city and restoring a sense of community.

Yet, one central aspect concerns the tendency by some international institutions to validate tools and practices that fix cultural expressions over time, encompassing both their material and immaterial aspects. This approach can lead to a rigid understanding of culture. It tends to immobilize cultural assets within a dimension of preservation and aesthetic or historiographic appreciation and consequently it may overlook its dynamic and evolving nature. By emphasizing the preservation of specific expressions, these institutions may inadvertently stifle creativity and innovation within cultural practices. For example, in the 1990s, UNESCO initiated a process of heritage recognition (*patrimonialization*) for Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). Prior to this, only material artifacts were eligible for entering into the special status that UNESCO confers to “cultural and natural heritage considered to be of outstanding value to humanity”¹¹.

For Venice, the city and its lagoon have been listed as World Heritage sites, obtaining international recognition and protection for their unique environmental vulnerabilities. The Veneto

¹⁰ The idea of the superorganic suggests that culture exists as a level of organization that transcends the individual and the biological. It is not reducible to the behaviors or actions of individuals but instead represents a collective, social dimension of human life that operates independently of any single person’s actions.

¹¹ See: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/about/>

region, on the other hand, first in 1963 and then in 1996, has institutionally safeguarded what is “[...] the original denomination of typical and traditional wooden vessels of the Venetian lagoon, as prescribed by art. 1 law 366/63 March 5th, given its heritage of the secular history and culture of Venice.”¹² In the absence of an international status applicable to the material artifacts of the Veneto population, the regional level has intervened with specific legislation aimed at ensuring the seal of authenticity to the production of traditional Venetian vessels. By contrast, however, there is still no official sign of institutional preservation of its immaterial substratum: the technique and knowledge associated with rowing Venetian boats. This distinction is both subtle and important, as the underlying logic fails to recognize that the protection of the “original denomination” of vessels does not automatically ensure the preservation of the rowing culture. In fact, the Venetian people I have encountered during the past months expressed deep concern and sorrow over the disappearance of an entire community that no longer than 40 years ago filled the city canals with their traditional family boats. This is not to suggest that the immaterial dimension of rowing should fall under the domain and competence of national and supra-national bureaucracy so as to be preserved and revitalized. Indeed, even in the absence of institutional support, the cultural “genuineness” of Venetian rowing is reflected in forms of community involvement and urban initiatives put forward by those who have chosen to stay and to inhabit the lagoon area. Rather, I argue that the intangible component of Venetian rowing, its “affirmative dimension” (Marcuse 1969), has entered a process of ‘folklorization’, which lends it to different kinds of uses.

To expand on this point, I build the analysis upon two theoretical contributions. The first one is drawn from the Italian anthropological branch of post-demology which has highlighted some effects related to the patrimonialization of folklore (Dei 2018, p. 145). Post-demology revisits A. M. Cirese’s attempt to systematize and normalize the anthropological branch of demology as a scientific, empirical, and deductive discipline (1973). Dei argues that:

“The problem with demology was that it remained firmly anchored to a definition of the specific object (understood not in terms of changing socio-historical processes but as a repertoire of cultural traits); it privileged one aspect of Gramscian reflections on folklore, which presents it as oppositional or alternative to the dominant culture. This has prevented it from turning its attention to the *cultural market* and *mass-media* dynamics” (2015, p. 388-389).

In other terms, the advent of mass culture has entirely surpassed “a dichotomous social model, in which high and low culture coexist in parallel isolation, albeit with occasional transfers from one to the other” (p. 388). Following this reflection, some fundamental questions posed by the

¹² “[...] la denominazione d'origine delle imbarcazioni in legno tipiche e tradizionali della laguna di Venezia, come definita dall'art. 1 della legge 5 marzo 1963, n.366, in quanto patrimonio della storia e della cultura secolare di Venezia”. See: <https://www.regione.veneto.it/web/attivita-produttive/barca-tipica-della-laguna-di-venezia>

anthropologist can be reframed in the context of Venetian rowing: What is the status of the *tradition* of Venetian rowing today? What are the consequences of its integration into the realm of mass culture and the cultural market? “Does it disappear, erased by media homogenization? Can it be studied as a phenomenon of the past, or in its revived forms?” (p. 388).

The second analytical component is an examination of the evolution and use of material/immaterial cultural objects through the theoretical tools of the American sociologist Ogburn (1922). According to the author, a distinctive feature of material culture is its continuous and cumulative pattern of change over time, meaning that each stage or formation of this type of culture constitutes an overcoming of the previous ones. This implies that earlier stages or formations can be considered obsolete regarding their instrumental contributions (p. 77-78). It is also crucial to recognize that earlier stages retain significance and merit appreciation “by virtue of a symbolic significance different from that of their origins; so that, at the very least, such stages may survive, but only as mere historical relics, as testimonies of memory” (Bonolis 2013, p. 12). To put it in other terms, “there is also a dimension of objects that opposes their historical form and proposes itself to a different judgment of the user” (p. 13). Marcuse referred to this dimension as the “affirmative” character of material culture, describing it as the realm in which objects are valued beyond their instrumental eligibility, based on criteria independent of their mere functional nature (1969). Therefore, the relationship between users and cultural objects is significantly influenced by their potential for aesthetic experiences and the symbolism that such experiences can acquire within specific social dynamics.

This concept is perfectly illustrated by an exchange I had with Fabio when I asked him if he still engaged in traditional *moeche* fishing using a rowing boat [stage 0 of the material cultural object]. Surprised by the question, he looked at me and coldly replied, “Are you crazy? Of course, we go out in the motorboat [stage 1 of the material cultural object].” Yet, Fabio himself told me about an “anthropological catharsis” triggered by a renewed relationship with rowing in the lagoon [affirmative dimension of stage 0] and the activities that promote its dissemination [dynamics of social interaction]. Nevertheless, the symbolism of the “affirmative” trait of culture can also lend itself to uses that turn the ‘art of rowing’ into an empty imitation of itself, thereby inhibiting some other functions that I will disclose throughout the text.

The third time I ever rowed on a traditional Venetian boat was during the opening parade of the 2024 Carnival. Prior to that, I had rowed on a boat owned by my friend Holden in November 2023, and the only “actual” lesson from an expert came the day before the Carnival with Nino, the informal instructor of group 3 Archi. Here, I wish to focus on the meaning of the *corteo d’acqua*¹³ in a festival that has been revitalized only in recent years and has rapidly become a powerful tool for promoting tourism in the city of Venice.

Carnival is one of those “four or five occasions” that Ciccio,¹⁴ a founding member of our rowing association, defines as “instrumental for municipal administrations to show the thousands of tourists that a folkloric Venetian community still exists.” The water parade was established in recent years as an additional marketing move for the broader festival, which spans two weeks and includes various events. It is easy to find testimony from many locals about the frustration and annoyance caused by the overcrowding during the Carnival period (Harris 2001; Zanardi 2020). As a consequence, many residents tend to “escape” from the city during the time of Carnival festivities.¹⁵

During the first edition of Carnival since I moved to Venice (2022), I’ve also avoided participating in the events taking place throughout the urban space because of the spread overcrowding. However, my curiosity and approach were quite different when I discovered that, as a member of a rowing club, it was possible to join the opening water parade. It was as though the navigable waterways allowed me, if only temporarily, to escape the human congestion that clogs the *city of stone* during the Carnival period. This felt even truer when I learned that, during such occasions, maritime traffic in the city is suspended for the duration of the event. Thus, when my friend suggested we join the water celebrations, I didn’t hesitate for a moment. In the following days, the blisters on my hands and the soreness in my arms would have plenty to say about such impetuosity. Yet, after receiving our instructor’s blessing the day before, we made our way on the morning of January 28th to set out with the *sandolo*¹⁶. At the dock, we had our first encounters with numerous groups of friends dressed in the most varied and extravagant costumes. Holden and I, unprepared as two out-of-town students participating to the event for the first time, we were equipped with a simple paper mask that covered half our faces and which we soon discarded because it obstructed our vision while rowing. As if this weren’t enough, already ridiculous in our almost-costumes, we were the slowest among the boats which were already significantly late heading toward the meeting point at Punta della Salute. It was precisely our delay and slowness that filled the experience on the water

¹³ A ceremony, a parade held on water surfaces (the Grand Canal).

¹⁴ He was presented to me as Ciccio, although it is not his real name, which still remains obscure to me to this day.

¹⁵ Nino: “When possible, either I don’t go out in the streets or I leave for the weekend. Also, I have stopped participating in the water parade, it is no fun anymore.”

¹⁶ Traditional Venetian boat.

with a tragic sense of spectacle. Holden and I, slow and uncoordinated on our sandolo, we were alone on the Grand Canal, surrounded by thousands of curious eyes. If we had escaped human congestion, it came rushing back to us through the fixed, crushing gazes of the crowds perched on the Rialto Bridge, along all the vaporetto docks, and from any other vantage point overlooking the Grand Canal. Upon reaching Canal's large S-curve, we encountered the procession coming in the opposite direction. We maneuvered to turn the boat around and join the conspicuous fleet slowly making its way toward the Rialto Market area (Fig 5). Since 2018, it has been a *caorlina*¹⁷ disguised as a "pantegana" (a type of rat) that leads the water procession. It is worth looking at the artistic director's comment on the 2023 edition:

"A wonderful parade of typical Venetian boats with over 100 boats and more than 800 rowers in costume. *Traditions* and colors blended together to create a wonderful event. [...] Typical Venetian songs accompanied the slow progress of the procession, organized in collaboration with the Venetian Rowing Associations' Coordination, led by the *Pantegana*, a 7-meter-long boat that symbolizes the *popular Venetian Carnival*."¹⁸

However, the pantegana was created with a different purpose than celebrating the Carnival tradition, thus opening a dual reflection.

In this circumstance, the use of the term tradition can be framed through the lens of historian Hobsbawm, who refers to "invented traditions" as those "appear[ing] to us, or purport[ing] to be, ancient [but often] have a fairly recent origin, and are sometimes invented out of whole cloth" (1983, p. 3). As I mentioned earlier, the Venetian Carnival lost its appeal for almost two centuries after the fall of Serenissima in 1797. Only from the 1980s did the festival begin to be revitalized, and eventually "firmly re-established itself as an essential feature of Venice's cultural life" (O'Rourke 2015, p. 2). Besides, the water parade, which officially starts the festivities of the Carnival, was institutionalized by the municipality only a few years ago. Being a relatively recent addition to the festivities and presided over by the Venice municipality, I argue that the *corteo d'acqua* belongs to the conceptual category of "invented traditions". However, if one of these purposes is to strengthen group cohesion, then the water parade—as a metonym for the entire Carnival—has (partially) failed.

When I raised the issue of Carnival with my interlocutors, I found that many had already stopped participating in the event. Ciccio tells me that in the early 1980s, Carnival still offered socializing opportunities for the (Venetian) community: communal dinners and family gatherings, which have decreased due to aging and depopulation. Within just a few years, the festival was entirely

¹⁷ Traditional Venetian boat. Bigger and larger than a sandolo, its function was mainly that of transportation of various stuff.

¹⁸ See: https://www.ansa.it/canale_viaggi/regione/veneto/2023/02/05/carnevale-venezia-gia-in-festala-pantegana-a-ponte-rialto_6c0e73ae-fc7b-4fc4-823f-b51d19fd1a64.html

absorbed into and subsumed by the tourist economy, leading many people to distance themselves from the urban and social space during that period.

Secondly, building on Dei's reflections on the distribution of folkloric tradition in contemporary society (2015), we must return to the original meaning of the pantegana, as conceived by the popular organizing committees: to parody the opening of Carnival in Piazza San Marco, which stages the fall of an angel from the sky. A local councilor explained that the pantegana "is the symbol of the Venetians, indicating that even when all the Venetians are gone because they can no longer survive in a city so expensive and touristy, the rats [pantegane] will remain, as they are tough to kill."

Of all the experiences I had in the historic city concerning the interplay between rowing, tradition, and folklore, the Carnival one is emblematic of the cultural processes concerning transformation in the fruition of Venetian rowing.

Friday, June 28, 2024. It was a hot summer day, and as I had promised a friend from Rome who was visiting me, we headed to the Sant'Alvise remiera¹⁹ to take a sandolo ride. By that time, I had hardly practiced going out as a *poppiere*²⁰ by myself, and it was also the very first time I would personally carry someone with me on a boat. To honor my guest, I decided to embrace some Venetian clichés by wearing gondola-shaped gold earrings resembling a *fero de prora*²¹. When we arrived at the pier, Peppe the crane operator, looked at me and smiled at my earring: "Are you themed dressed? I don't know how happy the others would be." At first, I didn't understand. Then he explained that many Venetians do not regard the figure of the gondolier favorably, viewing it as representative of a wealthy profiteer within a closed circle of workers dedicated to the tourist market.

Interesting monographs have been written on gondolas and gondoliers, respectively by G. Penzo (1999) and R. Vianello (2011). Here, I want to focus on the figure of the gondolier because it exemplifies a process that L. Satriani described prophetically 40 years ago: the interplay between folklore and profit (Satriani 1973).

¹⁹ A term that has various meanings. One is simply that of "Boathouse". By extension, it can also refer to the rowing association one is a member of.

²⁰ Stern rower.

²¹ Dialectal expression that refers to the iron plate situated in front of traditional gondolas. It resembles the shape of a rudder interspersed with six lines. Those six lines evoke the six "*sestieri*" (neighborhoods) of Venice.

As analyzed by M. D'Eramo (2021), the mechanisms of the tourism-symbolic machine operate through markers that highlight certain aspects of a culture or even an entire cultural sphere. The tourist attraction is socially constructed by the arrows (markers) that society points towards it as something to be visited (p. 49). Through this semiological operation, there is an inter-play between signifier and signified: "Once marked, a sight becomes an attraction and in turn the attraction itself becomes a marker. Thus, for an American or an Asian traveling in Europe" (p. 50), Venice becomes the marker of Italy, and the gondola becomes the marker of Venice. Moreover, the marker is what gives the tourist attraction the seal of authenticity (p. 53). However, this soon takes the form of a false promise, a pursuit of the unattainable:

"The paradox, the dilemma of authenticity is that to be experienced as authentic it must be marked as authentic, but when it is marked as authentic it is mediated, it is a marker of itself and thus lacks the authenticity of what is truly inviolate, uncontaminated by mediating cultural codes" (Culler 1981, p. 4).

In this sense, it is fair to say that thousands of tourists taking a ride on Venetian gondolas contribute to altering the contours of this cultural expression. By over-consuming and projecting their experiences onto the media landscape of social networks, tourists continuously place markers on Venetian gondolas and gondoliers, distancing it as much as possible from its supposed authenticity.

Nonetheless, one could also argue that it is not only tourists who are involved in this aestheticization process. The cultural institution claiming (supposed) authenticity makes itself instrumental for primarily economic purposes. This is what Helga Sanità brilliantly argued in a conference that reinterprets Satriani's work and the studies of demology in light of contemporary issues (2019). Satriani's initial reading viewed folklore as a culture *escaping from itself* (1973). In the Venetian context, the modernization process can be said to have severed the Venetians' connection with rowing, viewing it as an inefficiency of the past, a model to be surpassed in favor of motorized convenience²². H. Sanità's insight emphasizes that "communities bearing cultural differences, those with specific folkloric testimonies, have become, in most cases, much more aware of their own position and are often active protagonists in the commodification of their own identities and traditions" (2019, p. 338). Hence, the category of gondoliers, which for centuries formed the foundation of the Venetian social fabric, first experienced a drastic decline in actual numbers due to the motorization of boats. Subsequently, their quintessential practice has been definitively relegated to the realm of tradition and folklore. Ultimately, as previously discussed, the few remaining gondoliers participate in the final phase of extreme aestheticization of their folkloric traits: striped shirts, straw hats, and occasionally folk songs sung for tourists, forming a stylized package. In the

²² Here, too, my exchange with Fabio on the use of oars and rowing for work practices comes to mind ("Are you crazy? Of course, we go out with the motorboat").

words of H. Sanità, these active protagonist communities “have acquired self-confidence and manage the processes of commoditization in a position that is no longer one of subalternity” (p. 338).

Focusing on this last point, R. Vianello has conducted an extensive ethnographic study that demonstrates that even in the past, when the work of a gondolier was much more demanding than merely transporting pre-formed groups of tourists, it was the “particular condition of freedom that bound them to their job. This social status allowed gondoliers to establish their own internal rules and hierarchies within their professional organization” (2018, p. 31). Today’s depiction of the gondolier as a self-made entrepreneur can be seen as one facet of the culmination of neoliberal rationality. This narrative logic promotes the creation of isolated individuals and self-entrepreneurs (Dardot et al. 2021) in a labor landscape that is increasingly precarious, characterized by extreme flexibility (Sennet 1999) or stiff rigidity, both of which are seen in the tourist monoculture. R. Vianello asserts that “since each gondolier is a sole proprietor, despite the pronounced corporatism that distinguishes them, the category often finds itself internally fragmented. This fragmentation weakens them when unity of purpose is required and diminishes their influence within the community” (2018, p. 32). And brings people like Peppe and others to discredit them by ignoring a longstanding unique working condition in Venetian society, having long served in a prevalent occupation and as a vital institution for key cultural events (such as regattas). Today it has become a semi-closed category of workers, tradespeople, and custodians of technical art, often stylized into folkloristic figures for the tourist market. It is not my intention to reduce this historic and noble profession to a mere symbol within the tourist circuit; it was Giorgio who enlightened me and opened my eyes to other possibilities.

We met in Strada Nova at the end of July, at the Osteria Do Colonne, around 9 a.m. I had just woken up, while he had been working since 6:30 a.m. and had already changed into his clothes for his second job of the day: apprentice shipwright. His first job? “Fiosso”²³ and apprentice gondolier. He is a sunny, vibrant, and enthusiastic individual, deeply in love with the gondola—perhaps more than anyone else in the world. From his stories, it became clear to me that the bond he had with his jobs, his craft, and his social circle transcended mere reflections on contemporary cultural processes. Yet, some aspects of our conversation illuminated dynamics that are equally significant for understanding rowing, folklore, and tradition.

Like in the past, most participants in Venice’s famous municipal regattas are gondoliers. G., an aspiring gondolier himself, won the historical gondola regatta in the “young category” at just 20 years

²³ Dialectal expression that signifies the relationship resembling traits of familiar bonds between an apprentice and his master gondolier.

old. He expressed regret for having sidelined his training with his rowing partner due to their busy work schedule: him as a double apprentice and his friend as a taxi driver. Over the last two or three decades, however, Venetian regattas have lost much of their symbolic and unifying power. G. pointed out that nowadays, the Venice City Council no longer awards cash prizes to the winners; in contrast, in the past, winning a flag meant living “like a king” for a year, free from charges at local bars and restaurants. Thus, regattas reflect fundamental cultural processes surrounding rowing and Venice (Fig. 6).

The Crovato brothers’ historical research suggests that regattas as competitions emerged in the early stages of lagoon civilization (Crovato et al. 2004). They began as spontaneous challenges among peers to demonstrate who could navigate boats better and faster. By the 13th and 14th centuries, the purpose of regattas began to evolve: “the playful aspect was integrated into military organization, drill, and troop training” (p. 22). In the 15th century, with the expansion of the Venetian Republic, regattas became choreographed displays of achieved splendor (p. 22). During this period, the so-called *barcaroli*²⁴ and gondoliers serving the Venetian aristocracy began training for regattas, turning these events into significant social occasions that showcased the political ambitions of noble families. In this context, “the figure of the *regatante*²⁵ was subordinate to that of the servant [...] cared for like a thoroughbred horse in races” (p. 24). It wasn’t until the 19th century that the *regatante* began to be liberated “from the role of *servidor da barca*²⁶: no longer a *barcarolo* but included in the category of gondoliers” (p. 30). However, following French and Austrian dominations, changes in administration, and the decline of the Venetian aristocracy—accelerated by the rise of industrial society—these factors weakened the diverse meanings associated with the regatta as a festivity, celebration, and race. For some time, gondoliers continued to perform in regattas and ensured the conservation of the standing technique of rowing that otherwise would have declined. Nonetheless, starting in the mid-19th century, the touristification of the event had already begun. This led to positive effects in terms of economic impact, but on the other hand, it also had negative consequences, which are emblematic of some degenerations that continue to this day.

Against this background, it is once again valuable to reference Hobsbawm’s account on invented traditions. The Venetian regattas were first labeled as “historical” only from the third edition of the International Art Exhibition (known as the Biennale) in 1899. According to Hobsbawm, “All invented traditions resort to history as a legitimation of action and cement of group cohesion” (p. 15). In this research, we examine “a group, a society, the Venetian one, which has been the protagonist of

²⁴ Dialectal expression which refers to low-class people whose job was uniquely based on the use of boats.

²⁵ A person who participates in Venetian regattas.

²⁶ The servant of the boat.

its own existence for over ten centuries, now in decay” (Crovato et al. 2004, p. 62). However, the brief overview in this section illustrates that regattas have always existed, even in varying social contexts and historical phases, sustained by ancient customs and associations. Thus, while they cannot be classified as entirely fabricated events with no real ties to the past, it is possible to view their “re-functionalization as a result of evolving customs, time, and sporting practices” (p. 63).

As noted earlier, motorization transformed traditional customs, leading regattas, rowing, and gondolas to become “practices and objects available for symbolic or ritual use, increasingly detached from everyday practical applications” (p. 63). These dynamics have been interpreted and leveraged by both past and present administrations to generate economic benefits, exemplified by the institutionalization of the parade that has accompanied the historical regatta in early September almost uninterrupted since 1899. This was a deliberate invention aimed at benefiting tourism, transforming spectators into participants²⁷. The success of the *corteo* has further influenced the organizing committees of these parades

“in the recovery of folklore [...] and the presentation of historical facts that would consolidate [...] the myth of the Serenissima by keeping alive a legend that, if we want to put it in less romantic and more marketing terms, is useful in promoting tourism.” (p. 66).

The 3 Archi boathouse is the area I often show friends to give them a glimpse of the experience I’ve been immersed in for several months. On Sunday 19th of May, I took a colleague and university friend to see the *remiera* and, eventually, to take a trip together. However, the 48th edition of the Vogalonga was taking place that day. I still regret not having the courage to attempt the 33 km typical route, partly due to the absence of my companion and rowing mentor Holden.

As we emerged from the pier overlooking the northern lagoon, an endless procession of people appeared before us, covering the final stretch of the established route, passing through the Canal of Cannaregio and then heading towards San Marco. Almost immediately, I noticed a discordant element in the scene: a fleet of canoes and kayaks, but no traditional Venetian boats; not a single person rowing Venetian-style, standing with the characteristic slow and graceful movement.

After this brief but significant encounter with the event, I decided to bring it up in conversations with my research interlocutors. On July 26th, while out on the water for a stern rowing lesson, I

²⁷ On the threshold between spectators and participants in the Venetian Carnival see: O’Rourke, P. J. 2015.

discussed it with Nino, who told me that rowing associations were born “thanks to the Vogalonga. Rowing was really disappearing. Then it [the Vogalonga] became a business model. That’s how things do here in Venice: they change, they transform.” His succinct response conveyed an oxymoronic blend of resignation and serene acceptance, which I also found in my conversation with Giorgio: “Hardly any of my peers go out in a rowing boat. I participated in the Vogalonga once and then gave up. There were masses of people, a mess; it’s no fun that way—it loses its meaning.”

Up to that point, I was convinced that the Vogalonga was created to revitalize “the Venetian community’s awareness of its intrinsic links with water” (Munerotto 2014, p. 117). The author states that “transcending the dimension of mere sport or folkloristic event, it has transformed into a symbol of resistance against the dominance of motors and an appeal for the conservation of the Lagoon, evolving into a manifesto of environmental sensitivity” (p.117-8). In fact, the original intentions of the promoters included changing the route each year, motivated by a clear goal: “to highlight the environmental degradation of the lagoon and rediscover, with the tranquility that only rowing can offer, the different areas of the lagoon” (Crovato et al. 2004, p. 71). Three years later, the Crovato brothers published significant photographic evidence about the conditions of the lagoon outside the city center, showcasing the appalling state of numerous islands located beyond Venice (Crovato et al. 1978). In the following years, various groups of friends organized themselves to establish new rowing associations, ensuring that the heartbeat of lagoon society—rowing—could continue to thrive.

The initiative generated an ecological and social awakening on real issues affecting the lagoon ecosystem. Nevertheless, within a few years, the Vogalonga found itself “swallowed up and stiffened by the well-known mechanism of tourism, emptied of its functions of collective exploration of lagoon balances and imbalances.” (2004, p. 73). Suffice it to think that on the day of the first edition, 8th of May 1975, there were 545 Venetian rowing boats for a total of 2000 rowers (Testa 2002, p.67). Years of great success and participation followed; records were broken every year, “it was the era of the Venetians’ enthusiasm, of the birth of many rowing clubs, of the revival of traditional shipyards, of the flourishing of the art of rowing.” (p.70). However, upon examining the detailed statistics of recent years, a significant disparity emerges. Of the approximately seven thousand annual participants²⁸, the ratio of Venetians/Italians to foreigners is 1 to 8. Venetian-style rowers? 10% of the total. An image fully echoed in the words of a city councilor regarding the last edition:

“Più rematori (seduti) che vogatori (in piedi, alla veneta). Più tedeschi che veneziani (nell'edizione 2024) e più moto ondoso di quando venne creata come forma di protesta contro il moto ondoso. Chiamiamola *Remalonga* e

²⁸ This is the average number of participants to editions of the last decade. See: https://vogalonga.com/it/storia?_gl=1*t8ip50*_up*MQ..*_ga*MTY3OTA4Mzc2MC4xNzI5Njk1Mjky*_ga_F31B3F2PGC*MTcyOTY5NTI5Mi4xLjAuMTcyOTY5NTI5Mi4wLjAuMA..

che continui pure negli anni a venire, ma con un nome che rifletta la realtà attuale anziché evocare ciò che non è più.”²⁹

Already in 2002, local journalists were lamenting and deconstructing the true image of the event. In some periodicals we read about the disproportion between outsiders and Venetians:

“The fact in itself would not be so shocking if it were not for the fact that in this way the original ecological significance of the event, which from being a cry of alarm for a lagoon abandoned to increasingly wild motor traffic is becoming a sort of international festival of rowing, and Venetian rowing is increasingly fading.” (Testa 2002, p.70).

If we look back at Giorgio’s and Nino’s comments, they have both acknowledged the *meaning* of the event, which has mainly been important for its ecological and social implications. We are confronted with local initiatives aimed at bringing the urban community closer to vital issues for the inhabited space. This is even more poignant considering that such an *act of culture* was born on water to address water. It aimed at preserving and revitalizing the amphibious nature of Venice, by re-contextualizing how people inhabit and relate to the lagoon space. In other terms, the initiative provided a learning opportunity, setting the stage for understanding the interplay between macro and micro scales as part of the transformations influencing the way of inhabiting the world. However, similarly to the re-institutionalization and re-valorization of the Venetian Carnival, once it entered the aesthetic dimension of the tourist machine, it lost the essence of its genesis and soon people like Giorgio and Nino would stop taking part in this communal experience. Although I will explore this topic more extensively in the third chapter, we are witnessing a process of re-functionalization of the urban space in Venice, particularly affecting the collective rituals discussed so far. “It is indeed very difficult for locals to create and maintain their own spaces without being quickly displaced” (Zanardi 2020, p. 160). It is as if

“anything Venetians start will soon attract the attention of visitors, who will come to enjoy whatever new entertainment this unique city has to offer. And as always, these visitors, purely by virtue of their numbers, will soon alter the entire experience.” (Davis et al. 2004, p. 125)

Another immediate concern is that, in an attempt to raise human awareness toward a more ecological and respectful mindset, the cultural initiative may have inadvertently contributed to fostering a touristic model characterized by a huge human footprint (D’Eramo 2021). This creates a “double bind” between an activity with ecological intentions and behaviors that are deeply anti-

²⁹ I have deliberately left the original comment because it better renders the distinctions that the speaker wants to underscore. We could translate it as: “More rowers than Venetian-type rowers. More Germans than Venetians, and more waves when it was created as a form of protest against wave motion. Let us call it *Remalonga* and let it continue in the years to come, but with a name that reflects the current reality rather than evoking what it no longer is.” See: <https://www.veneziatoday.it/cronaca/vogalonga-i-vogatori-sono-10-percento.html>

ecological (Eriksen 2016). In these terms, it can be useful to consider the thought experiment conducted by G. M. Salerno in *Venice and the Anthropocene* (2022). The author stages a visualization exercise on the potential scale of human impact in the city of Venice. If we relate and calculate the carbon footprint of thousands of people coming to Venice for an ecological activity, the image becomes quite jarring. Also, the absolute aestheticization of an experience like the Vogalonga drains its numerous meanings by making it a one-off experience, and it masks the social and community efforts and cultural expressions that reflect a much more complex relationship with the world of rowing. More on this in chapter three.

In conclusion, I trace the emergence of the aforementioned double bind to precisely those processes of aestheticization and subsequent *folklorisation* (or vice versa) that make use of cultural practices with primarily economic purposes, and which cast the complexity and the value of their meanings aside. By revisiting Ogburn's theoretical model, we find what he refers to as a "cultural lag" (1957): an asynchronous dance step, where the cumulative and progressive stages of material culture do not correspond to predictable changes in the experience of its immaterial counterpart [the *voga alla veneta*]. This gap has left the affirmative characteristics of Venetian rowing vulnerable and susceptible to aestheticizing and *folklorising* tendencies, which have then set the stage for issues that I have described in this first section. Despite everything, there is still an aspect of contemporary Venice that, for now, resists the processes described so far.

Whilst in the middle of the lagoon, Nino said to me: "It's all thanks to the Vogalonga. *Voga alla veneta* was really disappearing. Then it [the Vogalonga] became a business model. That's how things change here in Venice; they transform." I replied: "But I don't think that applies to rowing associations. Quite the opposite." Just before reaching *Rio della Guerra*, a key junction linking the *Tessera* canal to the Grand Canal—where the constant flow of taxis ferrying tourists from the airport to the historic center makes conversation nearly impossible—N. acknowledged that, indeed, rowing associations have managed to sustain themselves, even in the face of public administration's attempts to confine them to a "rowing reserve, as if we were Indians" (N.)

I looked back at this conversation with Nino from July 26, as it encapsulates not just lessons in stern rowing but also reflections on recent history. I believe this exchange—question, response, and further clarification—represents a critical crossroads between my earlier observations and what will unfold in the subsequent narrative of rowing. Thus far, I have briefly navigated the theme of rowing

tradition through a social-historical lens, starting with lagoon inhabitants' ancient connections to their environment, tracing its decline in the modern era due to motorization, and noting its re-valorization with socio-ecological purposes, which were quickly subsumed in the economic circuit. Through cross-generational testimonies and vivid imagery of this pivotal transitional phase, I have introduced an anthropological perspective to explore folkloric, or better yet, *folklorized* practices that illuminate a contemporary aspect of Venetian rowing. This juncture is significant because the Vogalonga serves as a paradigmatic example of how I intend to analyze the distribution and actualization of traditional practices within the social fabric (Dei 2015). Amid the tide of mass tourism, some rowing societies have emerged. It is my intention to conclude the first chapter by focusing on these rowing clubs.

As I walked towards the headquarters of the Canottieri Giudecca rowing club (Fig. 7), Marzia, a charismatic reference point for the whole group, immediately replies to my research questions with simple words:

“In the past, everyone knew how to row; there was always a family member who would teach or pass on, a father, a grandfather. Now, it hasn't been like that for some years. And it is a knowledge, a technique that is being lost. We could say that *in part* the remiera have taken that function so as to fulfill that role of transmission.”

I remained intrigued by that “in part”, and I realized later in the conversation that M. was referring to the fact that rowing no longer fulfills those basic, vital social and economic functions it once did. At the beginning of the conversation, she made a point of emphasizing two current functions: sport and hobby. At the conclusion of our meeting, we agreed on a third possibility. But for now, I would like to highlight that her “in part” did not refer to those who are actually covering that role of transmission: most of it is left to rowing associations that engage locally in daily teaching activities. In fact, M. and her husband tell me with great joy that in the last 10 years the Canottieri Giudecca has set up several courses and lessons for children, collaborations with middle and high schools, as well as initiatives that are able to intercept young adults in their twenties – the latter being an age-group often absent in rowing clubs.

In this respect, every remiera has its internal functioning and mission. Although they were all born as groups of friends, now they have included different activities for people who want to learn the Venetian rowing technique. For instance, the Canottieri Cannaregio offers lessons with specialized instructors for those looking to row hard and seriously. Despite some good recommendations, personally I decided not to enroll in the Cannaregio association, because it approaches rowing with a level of seriousness that I found excessive for my pursuits—I was looking

for something more recreational. It was then that, following the suggestion of my 70-year-old neighbor, I discovered 3 Archi.

Erica, the 3A's current president, confirms to me that by now the club has fully taken on an educational function. By education she refers both to the learning of the rowing technique, as well as to those aspects of ecological sensitivity—as I have described in the first chapter. To do so in a hybrid and international context like the city of Venice, it has made itself open, available and active in the student and youth context. In some ways, Nino himself was the protagonist and the initiator of this process. Sitting in the group's quaint headquarters (Fig. 8), he tells me how it all started. It was 2005 when a young student decided to learn how to row Venetian-style and, following that hazy trail of hearsay and personal stories, he managed to turn to the 3 Archi. Sergio, a former member, coldly replied to turn to the (Canottieri) Cannaregio, which made Nino annoyed by the matter. He realized that the club would not last long if it continued to reject young people. For too long it remained closed as a group of friends, since it was originally founded by and named after a group of friends. It was time for someone to take on the *response-ability* of teaching and passing on Venetian rowing, so that both techniques and associations would survive. The approach at 3 Archi is much more informal, as two or three men in their seventies take on the role of sharing their knowledge of rowing while also learning how to teach it themselves. To participate, all that is required is an economic fee paid every six months, with no additional costs. This is thanks to people like Nino, Gianni and Vittorio who have fully embraced the mission of transmitting this peculiar knowledge and technique as a form of gift-sharing.

Rowing associations differ not only in the number of boats, members and activities in the lagoon area, but also in the historical context of their birth. What is certain is that the boats all originate from the ancient Venetian lagoon maritime tradition: *gondole*, *gondolini*, *sandoli*, *mascarete*, *topi* and *sanpiero*, all the way to the large representative boats (Crovato et al., 1980). Recently, these traditional boats have been joined by English rowing boats, canoes and kayaks, thus opening their availability to sporting activities that find their ideal habitat in the lagoon. In fact, on the subject of rowing clubs it would be more correct to recognize that

“The first manifestations of sports associationism in the lagoon date back to the end of the 19th century with the birth of the Reale Società Canottieri Bucintoro (1882) and to the beginning of the 20th century with the Società di Sport Nautici e Rari Nantes Francesco Querini [...] organizations that at the time exclusively practiced rowing with English rowing” (De Cecco 2002, p.55).

Surprisingly, Venetian rowing did not yet appear among the activities of the first generation of sports associations, but still naturally extended throughout the entire civic body.

The second generation of rowing clubs dates to the Second World War and is marked by the presence of Venetian rowing activities as it started to decline with the first advent of motorization. Finally, “The third generation was born at the end of the 1970s with the occupation of the spaces of the former slaughterhouse at Punta San Giobbe” (p. 56). Following the social and ecological awakening initiated by the Vogalonga, in 1977 “the Settemari association and the Gruppo Remiero Tre Archi took symbolic and public possession of the central slaughter rooms. A few years later, the entire area was occupied until it housed 12 rowing clubs”. (p. 56). Of these twelve, nine remain active today, no longer operating in the disused structures of the former slaughterhouse. In fact, as early as 1991 “the municipal administration of the time finalized the concession of the entire complex to the University of Venice, forcing the representatives of the oar clubs into a nerve-wracking negotiation to ensure their associations’ mere survival” (Caniato 1997, p. 96). Fortunately, the Committee of Punta San Giobbe and the associations that were part of it settled in another structure overlooking the northern lagoon and of a size suitable to house a fleet of boats and members that had reached significant numbers³⁰. It is worth spending a few more words on this transition of the groups from Punta San Giobbe to the Sant’Alvise boatyard because it helps introducing a dichotomy I will return to later in the text; a sort of structural and structuring dialectic between two opposing elements: water and land.

In *Venezia città industriale, gli insediamenti produttivi del 19° secolo* (1980) we find two interesting aspects regarding the drawings and works dealing with the slaughterhouse in question. The conceptual thread that binds all the works and designs on an architectural level conveys the longing to be rooted to the land. It is a way of reading the Venetian history through a conception of the “earth understood as a primary and ancestral instrument of struggle against or in favor of water, in order to transform it into a regulated component of the inhabited area” (Bellavitis 1997, p. 11). Previously, the area of the former slaughterhouse, after falling into years of disuse and degradation, has been the center of disputes over who should obtain a concession and make use of it. Starting from 1991, this concession benefitted the economic campus of Ca’ Foscari University. Before this assignment, everything pointed towards the allocation of the unused space for the project of the San Giobbe Hospital, sketched out by the renowned architect Le Corbusier. The first sketches he provided in September 1964 already configured the image of a hospital complex elevated above the water by

³⁰ Counting, albeit approximately, the number of enrolled members to the Venice rowing clubs is a very difficult task, and one that actually can never be concluded. These are, in fact, rather informal associations, with rules of engagement and membership duration varying from group to group. For example, over a six-month period an association may have 200 members, while in the following six months this number may even double (think of the transition from winter to summer). In any case, after contacting some of the presidents of the various clubs in the historical city, the average number of registrations can be between 1,500 and 2,000. The counting of the boats that make up the fleets of each *remiera* is easier since it can be found on their websites.

stilts. By doing so, there is an emptiness that comes to be realized between the inhabited area and the land, a “hyperbolic and uprooted conception of the land-water relationship that Venice has always had to fight to coexist and survive in its marvelous but treacherous territory.” (p. 11). However, with the fading of the hospital project following the death (by drowning) of the architect, the occupation in 1976 by the rowing societies made “the profound and dramatic difference between *inhabiting* and *navigating* evident, upon which the constructive traditions of a city, born and grown in the impossible, are founded.” (p. 11). This was an intuition that came from below, an *act of culture* promoted by a few groups of friends, who managed to revitalize the intimate amphibious nature of the city, the lagoon, and the inhabited space.

In summary, these rowing clubs settled in dilapidated structures, without funds from public administrations, and restored and transformed them into spaces for the preservation of traditional boats. They carried out efforts to preserve a unique collective heritage, which is complemented by an important daily presence rooted in the territory, gathering people of all ages around initiatives for ecological awareness, education, and the revitalization of the practice of Venetian rowing. Ultimately, this was a meeting of people, places, and traditions that still today has much to teach those living in unique urban spaces like the Venetian lagoon. For instance, Sergio told me during our outing in Torcello that it was a mistake by the academic institution to settle in Punta San Giobbe not to recognize and to enhance the potential connection between the rowing communities and the new study center frequented by young students. If the rowing workshops next to the university structures had remained active, S. believes that the roots laid by the founding members of the societies would have fostered a flourishing of vital generational exchange within a new, hybrid Venetian social fabric.

Building again on Satriani’s ideas, we can conclude that the *folkloric* practice of Venetian rowing served an “adaptive purpose” (1973), in contrast to the *folklorized* practices promoted by the touristic logic. Differently from the latter, rowing clubs have managed to resist those cultural processes of folkloric aestheticization. This was made possible both by the relatively recent birth of the associations, which has not yet allowed them to enter the processes of historicization and consumption of the tradition, and also by the local presence and daily commitment that the practice of rowing in the lagoon requires. Some other conversations with presidents and members of the various rowing clubs suggest to me that today the problems for rowing associations are of a different kind. Clearly, there is also interesting potential to be discussed. I will return to this in the third and final chapter.



Fig. 5: Carnival 2024, corteo d'acqua.

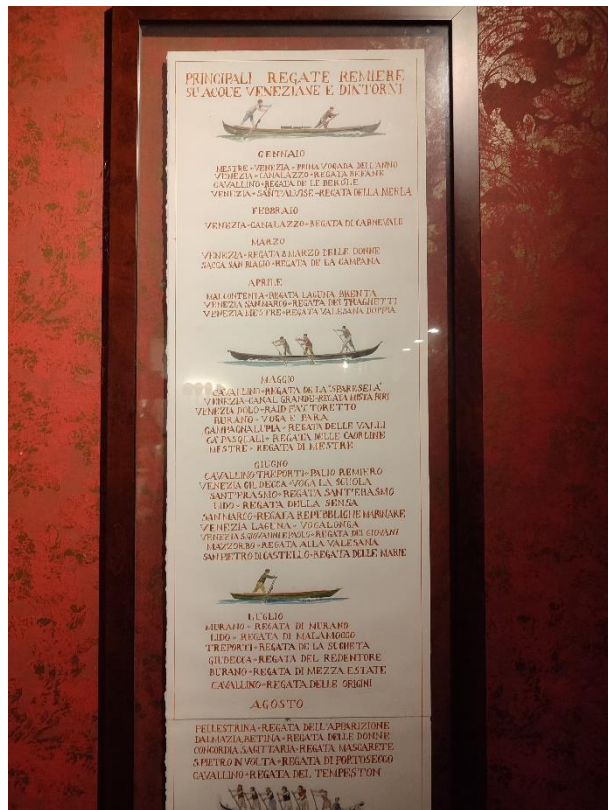


Fig. 6: A list of some of the regatta events held in the Venetian lagoon.



Fig. 7: The headquarters of Canottieri Giudecca.



Fig. 8: A detail of the 3 Archi headquarters.

Venezia non si comprende davvero ritagliando dal suo contesto i brani di prevalente valenza formale, e fermandosi a contemplarli...occorre farne esperienza dal punto di vista giusto, e con un tempo di percezione giusto.

S. Bettini

City of stone, city of water

The waves crash indiscriminately against bodies and foundations. We cling tightly to the oars and rowlocks, brace our feet, and lower our center of gravity to avoid falling. We hold onto one another, rowing with care and persistence to avoid capsizing and being swept away by the relentless, intensifying current. This current, both ominous and powerful, mirrors a form of accelerated humanity, consuming Venetian spaces with ecologically decontextualized purposes. Closing my thesis, I ask: what does it mean to inhabit the ecology of the lagoon in today's world?

The first two chapters suggest that the aquatic nature of the lagoon is fundamental and inseparable from life in this environment, both ecologically and socially. The main argument here is that denying the aquatic space—or at least repurposing it—is at the root of the challenges facing lagoon life. For this reason, adopting a radically ecological human stance, one that restores the vital role of water in the lagoon's spatial and cultural fabric, is more necessary than ever. The first chapter provided a foundational understanding of the historical co-evolution between humans and the environment, emphasizing the importance of daily *negotiation* to shape a way of life attuned to the lagoon's dynamics, as seen through the embodied act of rowing. The second chapter analyzed the cultural practices of Venetian rowing, concluding with the adaptive effects of folkloric local traditions as opposed to *folklorized* ones.

Now, this third and final chapter seeks to synthesize all these elements. I will explore the challenges, capacities, and initiatives of inhabitation that stem from Venetian rowing. In short, I ask whether “Venice's life coincides with the life of the lagoon and the structural presence of water, or whether Venice can only survive by negating the lagoon and its waters” (Vittadini 2012, p. 6).

To begin, I propose a structuralist distinction inspired by the anthropological classic of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966). He viewed myth as a bridge connecting nature and culture, as a structure that illuminates human thought and action. For Lévi-Strauss, the binary opposition of raw and cooked, for instance, served as a symbolic framework revealing the meaning attributed to reality. Applying this

reasoning to the lagoon's context, the fundamental and irrefutable symbolic dichotomy is that of land and water: surfaces and containers of life-worlds that unveil affordances and shape human habitation in interconnected yet distinct ways. For a long time, there was no division between these realms. This interconnection is also reflected in the historical political-administrative structures of Venice. Since every lagoon faces the inevitability of silting up or becoming part of the sea, Venice's wise early administrators ensured the coexistence of land and water to sustain lagoon civilization.

“The identification of the lagoon with the city's very life—not just for defense but for trade, production, fishing, and health—was central to shaping the institutions, rules, and governance of the Serenissima. [...] The city's survival depended on continuous interventions to prevent the lagoon from silting up and becoming marshland” (Vittadini 2012, p. 8).

In short, administrative actions had to consider both land and water, always with the goal of preserving the lagoon's unique morphology and its society. Yet, the loss of insularity, coupled with the lack of gradual and cautious interventions, parallels the decline of Venice's historical governance. After the fall of the Serenissima, Venice ceased to be an independent state, and the city's relationship with lagoon preservation began to deteriorate.

In this regard, M. R. Vittadini states that “The radical transformations marking Venice's structure from the mid-19th century onward [...] share a common thread: *the denial of water*” (2012, p. 11). This denial manifests physically, economically, and culturally. The city's insularity diminished under Austrian rule after the construction of the trans-lagoon railway bridge, connecting Venice to the mainland—a foundational instrument of economic integration within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This bridge was later mirrored by the road bridge inaugurated in 1933 under Mussolini, ending at Piazzale Roma, where automobiles finally entered the lagoon. This marked “an astonishing reversal of the city's structure” (p. 13). A city founded and built on water, from which it historically drew both protection and resources, is now definitively (though not entirely) opening up to the world of wheeled machines. From water to concrete, for now only as a means of connection between the mainland and the city island.³¹ Similar interventions—burying canals, building bridges between parishes, and restructuring pedestrian and maritime routes—reconfigured community dynamics. Cement pathways and bridges exponentially facilitated entry into Venice. In the short term, this meant millions of tourists could easily access the historic center via land. In the long term, it severed the connection between living and working spaces, leading to economic and residential shifts (Fig. 9).

³¹ In the last decade some ambitious projects for underground metro systems beneath the lagoon have also been proposed, all aimed at facilitating access to Venice's entire historic center.

The result has been depopulation, driven by real estate reorganization and the gradual loss of essential services that define a functionally inhabited city (Zanardi 2020).

In essence, these structural transformations epitomize the “denial of the aquatic space”: living in the lagoon while ignoring the watery dimension. Arguably, denial also means repurposing water bodies. Over the past century, as these structural changes unfolded, the city’s *temporary* population soared. Hotels proliferated, second homes multiplied, and tourism-based monoculture took hold. Consequently, the city’s infrastructure and services, such as the transportation of goods and people, have been reshaped to meet new demands: addressing an ever-growing and increasingly pressing set of needs (Fig. 10).

This historical dialogue between pre- and post-denial of water connects to the introductory theme: waves motion. Writer G. Mencini synthesizes:

“Until the mid-19th century, mobility of people and goods was guaranteed by oars. The steam engine first, and later the marine motor, revolutionized centuries-old practices. Marine motors stir water in ways Venice was unprepared for, especially given the tens of thousands of boats navigating the city and lagoon daily. The problem is clear: traffic, speed, and maneuvering keep the water in constant agitation” (2011, p. 5).

The incessant wave action erodes shores and building foundations, creates sinkholes, and destroys centuries-old lagoon morphology, including its marshlands. It also poses hazards for those people rowing, constantly at risk of capsizing. Referring back to the second chapter, I argue that this wave agitation is both a reflection and a driving force behind the cultural apocalypse of Venetian rowing. Can modernity and motorized transport be stopped? Here, the structuralist reference to dichotomous elements sheds light on how the lagoon’s spatial logic is experienced: “Have you ever seen a bike on a highway?”—once shouted a taxi driver to some rowers on the Tessera Canal (see note 1). Water, once fluid and open, is reduced to a cemented line, a fixed and immovable transit point.

This duality between “the city of stone” and “the city of water” discloses two intertwined dimensions through which Venice can be respectively traversed or inhabited. Conceptually and co-evolutionarily, those two dimensions do not exclude one another. However, today it is possible to navigate and experience the urban lagoon environment without engaging with its aquatic essence, which would have been unthinkable in the not-too-distant past. The structural transformations previously discussed have enabled the reduction of the Venetian lagoon to the city of Venice only.

Now, it is precisely the city and the experience of it that I wish to discuss, particularly through the lens of T. Ingold’s reflections on different ways of traversing urban space. Ingold draws a distinction between a maze and a labyrinth (2021). A maze consists of streets bordered by barriers that obstruct one’s view beyond the immediate surroundings. In contrast, a labyrinth allows for the

possibility of getting lost, of wandering aimlessly without a predetermined destination. The distinction is profound:

“For most of us going about our business in the city, the streets are not a labyrinth. We walk them not for what they reveal along the way but because they afford transit from one point of call to another. We may still get lost in them, but that loss is experienced not as a discovery on the way to nowhere but as a setback in the achievement of a predetermined goal. We mean to get from here to there and are frustrated by wrong turns and culs-de-sac. For the urban shopper or commuter, then, the streets are not so much a labyrinth as a maze. [...] The maze, then, does not open up to the world, as the labyrinth does. On the contrary, it encloses, trapping its inmates within the false antinomy of freedom and necessity. Whether over- or underground, whether navigating the streets or the metro, urban pedestrians have to negotiate a maze of passages flanked by walls or high buildings. Once set on a particular thoroughfare, the city-walker has no alternative but to continue along it, since it is walled in on either side.” (p. 131)

The same holds true for temporary visitors or tourists who, arriving from the airport or mainland via bridges or water taxis, aim primarily to immerse themselves in the city of stone. In either case, the surrounding spatial and ecological context remains largely unexperienced. The main goal is to reach the historic center of Venice, which, through this lens, is encountered solely in its petrified urban form. The priority then is to visit its cornerstone attractions and museums, often at the expense of acknowledging the richness and fragility of the lagoon that supports and surrounds it. Conversely, the act of rowing inevitably carries us out on the city of water, framed as a labyrinth rather than a maze. I argue that this shift invites us to adopt a human stance that embraces the value of *attentionality*:

“In the labyrinth [...] The path-follower has no objective save to carry on, to keep on going. But to do so, his action must be closely and continually coupled with his perception. Lest he loses the way, he should be ever vigilant to the path as it unfolds before him. He has to watch his step, and to listen and feel as well. He must, in a word, pay attention to things, and adjust his gait accordingly. Path-following is thus not so much intentional as *attentional*. It thrusts the follower into the presence of the real” (2021, p. 132-3).

In the case of Venetian rowing, while one may set a goal before venturing onto the water, the act itself keeps the door open to constant change. The path is determined collectively and can be adjusted on the fly: one can pause to breathe, restart, or even change direction based on the contingent inspiration. Rowing entails directly engaging with the aquatic element, confronting it through the body. It fosters a slow, wandering, attentive way of seeing and appreciating the experience of living in the lagoon.

Starting with this distinction between making experience of the Venetian lagoon either by walking in the city of stone or by wayfaring in the city of water, we can address a second fundamental argument of the present chapter, that is, “the heart of the meaning and purpose of what we call

education” (p. 134). I want to argue that these two alternatives, city of stone and city of water, may correspond to two quite different senses of being contextually educated. The reason I bring up this other conversation bridges the first two chapters so as to address the matter on the fruition of Venice. The latter being microcosm of the issues concerning what is the best way to inhabit our world. By engaging in the Venetian context simply by walking on its streets and visiting attractions and museums, people may attune to kinds of understanding and fruition of the Venetian space that are fixed and homologous to the all plethora of visitors-consumers. In the second chapter I have shown that even the practice of Venetian rowing has been subsumed in the economic circuit of consumption over *com-prehension*. In this way,

“[...] a world that can be known only in its representations, in a plethora of images, slips from us in the very move by which we try to hold it in our sights. Our grasp of things is one that always leaves us empty-handed, clutching at reflections. We can no longer open to the world, nor it to us” (2021 p. 135).

Opening to the world means nurturing a human posture that is more attentive, wise, and careful towards the space people visit or inhabit. On these grounds we can posit some crucial questions for the arguments that will follow:

“Does knowledge actually lead to wisdom? Might we see more, experience more, and understand more, by knowing less? And might it be because we know too much that we seem so incapable of attending to what is going on around us and of responding with care, judgement and sensitivity?” (2021, p. 134).

In other words, how can we escape the Venice-maze? My answer is through direct engagement and exposure. And that, of course, is facilitated by the act of traversing the city of water by rowing. Education is a matter of leading people out into the world rather than favoring consumption and preformed/performed conceptions of local knowledge. This is something people rowing may have understood. Indeed, some of the most significant social initiatives aimed at increasing consciousness on ecological and urban issues on the lagoon have emerged from rowing associations.

It’s a humid Venetian Sunday. The sky is covered by an opaque white sheet, the typical blanket of humidity rising from the lagoon waters warmed by the late summer sun. It’s both cold and hot. Adding to the ambiguity of this atmospheric state is the anxiety getting out to experience something new. I set out early in the morning to attend the Poveglia x Tutti (PxT) social event held on the eponymous

island³². To reach the place by using public transportation, I had to get to Lido first. Still, there is no direct vaporetto line connecting the historic center or Lido itself to this place. Therefore, getting to the island requires someone to offer their boats to shuttle people back and forth. I find myself on a boat with strangers, yet quite immediately you can grasp a sense of sociability uniting all of us. Anyone heading to Poveglia is aware of the significance of their gesture. Whether directly or not, we absorb the spirit of a community that actively comes together to create shared spaces for the collective. That day, two main activities were planned: clearing invasive weeds and a theatrical performance by the *Bronxe Coverte* collective (Fig. 11). After taking part in both, I didn't expect a third, splendid opportunity to materialize. As I got to know soon after the outing, the rowing club Canottieri Giudecca is often involved in social events taking place in Poveglia or elsewhere. For such occasions, some of the members take the fleet so that they can arrange free teaching lessons of Venetian rowing. Ours as well was an impromptu boat outing casually organized by my friend Yvonne, a colleague, friend and member of Canottieri Giudecca. She convinced "il Puffo" to take us out on a *caorlina* of the Canottieri's fleet. He is a former gondolier, whose nickname derives from his affiliation with the Venetian gondoliers' circuit, a short, burly man of few words. He approached the dock where we were waiting, steering the *caorlina* with one hand, without even locking the oar into the *forcola*. We boarded and set off, tracing the calm waters of the southern lagoon. We circumnavigated the island of Poveglia, six of us, friends and new acquaintances alike. We teased each other but also taught one another how to row, improving our techniques based on personal experiences and shared tips. When we finished our brief aquatic excursion, I had the chance to exchange some words with Nino, the president of the association. He tells me that in the last years the rowing club has diversified the number of activities on rowing: "It is important to meet the needs of different age groups so as to be attractive and get more members". In their experience, one thing is clear: people that start rowing create a bond with the lagoon space. Young students especially find the motivation to stay, captured by the beauty of the city.

At this point, new fields of discussion emerge within the scope of this research. Earlier, I mentioned a *crisis of presence*, which for some members of the social fabric manifests as absence and inaction. This stems from the awareness that a world of collective practices is fading before their

³² PxT is a citizens' association founded in 2015 following the auctioning of the island of Poveglia. Faced with the risk that yet another island in the Venetian lagoon might be purchased and used for private interests, thousands of Venetians and non-locals alike gathered to decide how to stop the sale of this public space. To this day, the legal claims filed remain mired in administrative and bureaucratic conflict, the outcome of which will determine the island's fate: whether it will fall into the hands of private investors or remain a public asset—open, accessible, and eventually managed by citizens.

eyes, and that rowing, in this case, no longer appears to be a valid operational tool for resolving this crisis. A segment of the Venetian community now seems unable to project itself into the future, profoundly uncertain about the very possibility of its own perpetuation.

Conversely, the experience of PxT fits within a broader spectrum of collective resistance, demonstrating that Venice still retains a *self-regenerative potential*. Fabio was the one who first described this essential characteristic of the city and its citizens. According to him, said potential strongly depends on the issue of housing. He proposed a small numerical experiment: What would happen to the social fabric if just 0.003% of the 30 million tourists and visitors passing through the city decided to stay and live here? That would mean at least 30,000 new residents in the urban space, which would spontaneously trigger both quantitative and qualitative revitalization of essential civic practices, including rowing.

Hence, I purposely shift the focus towards the strengths deriving from rowing and engaging with lagoon's waterscapes, in light of considerations made by people like Fabio, Nino, Marzia, Vittorio and many others who consider it a foundational tool for revitalizing the Venetian culture, ecological consciousness and the social fabric.

Expanding on this point, water itself today represents one of the last bastions of resistance and a vessel for the reclamation of the urban social space. It is as if we are witnessing a phase that follows the denial of water, a phase that I conversely refer to as the *reclamation of water*. A particularly emblematic example is the long-standing protests against the passage of large cruise ships through the Giudecca Canal. In this case, the competition for urban space has unfolded precisely over these bodies of water, underscoring their fundamental importance to the city's inhabitants:

“On the water, activists turned boats into tools of protest by blocking the passage of ships. By using their row boats to block the movement of big ships, many participants turned their vehicles into effective counter-symbols. Their goal was to disturb the flow of traffic, to delay the arrival of cruise ships by several hours, and thereby to interrupt the system in the same way that it interrupts the paces of the city's inhabitants. Turning the water into a protest space, activists also drew attention to the fact that waterways are more than just transport routes. They are the streets of the residents and form an important part of the urban space in which people work, spend leisure time, and gather for important events” (Schimmer 2022, p. 395).

The second strength of rowing is how it enhances an *ethical sense of beauty*. Urban anthropologist C. Zanardi argues that here “beauty constitutes a fundamental civic value, becoming one of the principal bonds between the city and its citizens: an element that consolidates their reciprocal connection” (2020, p. 227). In Venice, experiencing beauty is an everyday occurrence: the city and its lagoon

stimulate senses and emotions, brightens journeys and movements, and generates vital feelings of fulfillment.

As I have highlighted in the first chapter, experiencing beauty in the Venetian context strongly depends on how one engages with its aquatic dimension. Water, an essential, dynamic, and experiential element, may offer people a strong sense of biophilia. To be more precise, we could say that lagoon biophilia is a pronounced expression of *hydrophilia*. Geographers C. Favaro and F. Vallerani argue that the added value of hydrophilia

“Is expressed not only in the preference for natural settings that include a water component but also in urban scenarios intertwined with aquatic morphologies. This dynamic fosters the revitalization of various types of waterfronts—be they cities by the sea, lakes, rivers, canals, or even those featuring fountains and ponds in public gardens. This specific preference for urban waterfronts, which we might define as 'urban hydrophilia,' is such a widely shared perceptual tendency that it has sparked *regeneration processes* in urban frameworks [...]” (p. 64).

During my research encounters, most individuals coming from cemented urban contexts or areas with few livable bodies of water are struck, even overwhelmed, by the opportunity to make experience of waterscapes. Angela, for instance, originally from Padua, whom I met in front of the VOB school, told me candidly that rowing had revealed to her a “powerful bond with the water.” Giovanni, from Basilicata, recounted how arriving in Venice and starting to row with the Canottieri Giudecca made him realize how indispensable this practice is to his life. Then there’s Erica, president of the 3 Archi, who moved to Venice 30 years ago to live here. Actively involved with the remiera from a young age, she speaks of understanding the value of an urban communal space enriched by the everyday aesthetic experience of beauty. Finally, Fabio offers the most explicit statement of all: “*I stay in this city because I want to row.*”

Under this light, Venice and its aquatic dimension characterize what F. Desideri has called *the aesthetic genesis of subjectivity* (2011). The aesthetic power of a place reveals itself through a harmony between corporeality and the objective aspects of the world, interwoven with emotional experiences. This is where and how the value of Venetian beauty comes alive, activated through the kinesthetic experience of water—when “the gaze, the vision that welcomes existence,” encounters “soul, atmosphere, nature, and the spirit of the place” (Hillman 2004, p. 32).

Against this background, one central aspect is that of reclaiming subjectivity in the processes through which individuals develop a sense of rootedness in their lived space. The representation of the landscape shifts from being

“An expression of absolute knowledge of the territory to the result of a relative vision that derives its meaning from the individual and their uniqueness. Its interpretation requires a metaphorical reading capable of capturing the ambiguities and trajectories of the processes it describes” (De Fanis 2001, p. 33).

Belonging to a place becomes not only a requisite for indigenous people, but for anyone engaged and thus captured by positive effects of hydrophilia.

The combination of these factors also produces ties of *topophilia*, that is, the emotional connection binding individuals to their urban living space. Stemming from it is what Vito Teti called the phenomenon of *restanza* (2021). *Restanza* is the physical objection to processes of depopulation. It is a value-driven choice that lies behind the decision to remain in a country, a city, the homeland. Whether for locals who remain or for newcomers who choose to settle, what guides this decision is a sort of moral obligation, a determination not to let the place they love die. For Fabio, loving [Venice] means “*abandoning oneself completely to the other—to be possessed, not to possess*”. Genuine, pure love leads to sacrifice, to unconditional attention and care for *the other*, even if this other is a whole lagoon city. The anthropological posture of those who engage in such an intimate, yet challenging relationship is one of love that is not unconditional but contingent upon precise terms, namely, service and active daily commitment. *Restanza* People become guardians of what remains, aware that the whole city is necessarily destined to evolve over time as it is subjected to new social and cultural pressures and tensions. Cultural, social, and urban guardians are those who take on the responsibility of protecting and nurturing the living fabric of the city. And thus, they exponentially increase what Fabio called the self-regenerative potential of the Venetian community. They contribute to setting up projects embodying the beauty and the values of a place—projects that become both stone, wind, and water, scattering seeds of regeneration.

Curiously, in the Venetian context, this regenerative potential emerges precisely from the paradox of a city which is losing its citizens. For those who leave,

“The departure is never clean, decisive, or free of friction. Abandonment is an explosion, a slow detonation that fragments, fractures, disintegrates, and incinerates. It calls into question the structure of the world left behind; it strains relationships, alters the density of places, and changes the morphology of the habitat and its spaces, their formal appearance, and their uses. Above all, someone stays” (Teti 2017, p. 135).

Conversely, those who remain intertwine with the changing dynamics of residential and territorial density. They find themselves in a position prone to constant renegotiation on how to rebuild the inhabited place.

Yet, indigenous remnants are not alone in this attempt. Venetian social density is nowadays dependent on the growing student population. The academic institutions present in the area facilitate what can be considered a *momentum* of repopulation. Yet, this is not merely a fleeting phase, or a brief period limited to the years of study. Often, many students come to understand the city of Venice as a place to stay (The Passenger, 2024) drawn in by its urban dynamics. Architect S. Pascolo summarizes said dynamics under the expressions of “laws of slowness” and “laws of beauty” (2012).

Those two are expressed by the possibility of having simple walks, random meetings with acquaintances and friends, moments of pause and appreciation of the surroundings. A city that, while requiring study or work to be inhabited, also offers the alternative of a restorative ephemerality, a respite from the frantic pace of modern times and the excesses of overtourism.

Venice is a place of beauty, community, and fragility, qualities that may inspire a sense of service rooted in the love for a city to which we attach deep emotional connections. Most do recognize that living in a space differs from merely traversing it or passing through it. To inhabit a place

“Involves a particular relationship with both time and space. Inhabiting incorporates long timeframes—the seasons, the years, and the succession of generations. It entails the creation of unique relationships with space itself and with others. It presupposes bonds of proximity, often tied to affective connections: living is not squatting. It means occupying, appropriating, settling, embedding oneself, and investing in a place in a lasting way” (Gravari-Barbas 2005, p. 5).

For those merely passing through, the Venetian space does not present itself as a place rich in meaning or social interaction. The time spent is too brief for any lasting subjective connection with the context. Conversely, the encounter between those who remain and those who choose to settle bursts forth in a profusion of humanity. Therefore, the experiences I have recounted regarding the world of Venetian rowing demonstrate that the city of Venice can also be lived as a

“Place of resistance to the large-scale processes of urbanization, standardization, and mercantile unification. This compels us to completely reinterpret past imagery and see repopulation as a long and complex strategy driven by new actors, often seeking new roots. These actors frequently bring with them significant cultural capital, activating new processes and inventing traditions and cultural forms that can counteract depopulation (Clemente 2016).

The lagoon space is complex and multifaceted, hybrid, fluid, and unpredictable, and so are the social dynamics that unfold in this place: “The interactions that animate it are mostly unplanned, serendipitous—an element of fundamental importance for maintaining communal bonds.” (Zanardi 2020, p. 207) This statement is evident in instances like our spontaneous boat outing in Poveglia or the conviviality experienced during remiera gatherings.

It was during one of these rowing club gatherings that, somewhat provocatively, I raised a sensitive issue for some native Venetians. Weeks earlier, while chatting with Efen, a dear friend from the Venetian mainland, he argued that a true Venetian is someone who knows how to handle a boat, or more narrowly, someone who knows how to row. I brought up this statement during a 3 Archi

group lunch (Fig. 12) to explore the concept of Venetian identity and why understanding its practical and social implications is important.

Of all the responses, only Gianni, my rowing instructor, expressed a possessive and exclusive view of the indigeneity of island natives. “No one can be Venetian unless they were born on the islands,” he declared. His stance reflected a defensive mindset typical of a civilization perceived as endangered, adopting measures to preserve itself in a last attempt to defend a supposed but unattainable cultural purity (Amselle 2004). In essence, Gianni articulated a vision of cultural belonging based on language and ethnicity, dismissing—at least in words—the inclusion of outsiders in local cultural practices like boating and Venetian rowing³³. Gianni’s perspective envisions the Venetian group as internally homogeneous while emphasizing its distinctiveness from others. To support his contention, he highlighted certain immutable characteristics: the geography of the city (“Anyone arriving from Piazzale Roma is not a Venetian”) and the Venetian language (which he insisted was not merely a dialect). For Gianni, ethnicity functions as a strategic tool for advocating greater protection of Venetian culture and the city against large-scale processes of contamination and commodification.

Nevertheless, Gianni was the only one at the table holding this view. His long-time friends teased him, pointing out his inability to acknowledge the inevitable present and future of the Venetian community. The opposing view, held by most of the group, supports expanding the boundaries of Venetian identity to include those who actively engage with its distinctive cultural traits, such as boats and Venetian rowing.

In this context, the conceptual tool of the “ethnic frontier,” developed by Barth (1969a) and revisited by anthropologist U. Fabietti, proves insightful. Fabietti asserts that “the frontier indicates the point of encounter, the contact between two societies, two forms of cultural life” (Fabietti, p. 104). It is, therefore, “something that, while separating, also unites [...] a zone where processes of cultural interaction occur” (p. 106).

Within this shared space of cohabitation, a broader and more widely accepted notion of Venetian identity comes out. This identity is neither “an ethnic matrix nor a claim to autochthony, but rather a way of being and a particular approach to locality: an active category requiring constant reapplication” (Zanardi 2020, p. 220). Anthropologically speaking, we observe in the dynamics of subjectivity and inclusivity within social groups a relationality between the parties involved. This conception of the self and the collective “neither includes nor excludes but spreads. It is a search for

³³ Ironically, his actions contradict his words, as he voluntarily teaches these practices to non-Venetians people.

common ground [...] a community of relations bound, but not bounded, by difference” (Ingold 2018, p. 50).

From this emerges the attempt to make the “we” and the notion of being Venetian a necessity of shared belonging, alliance, and negotiation over the appropriate way to inhabit Venice. A Venetian citizen, then, is someone who stays, but also someone who chooses to live here. A Venetian is someone who loves and respects territory, practices its customs, and shares its rhythms and rituals. In essence, someone who actively participates in the city’s life and dynamics.

The formation of this new, hybrid, and layered identity is of fundamental importance, as it reflects the need of people living in Venice to “find a position within an ongoing discourse [...] inserting themselves into a dynamic process.” (Barberi 2010, p. 9). Venetian identity is dynamic, not a survival of the past or an ethnicized construct, but rather a new product, a project (Hountondji 1994). This project revolves around inhabiting, valuing, and preserving Venice, and it is perhaps even more strongly embraced by newly acquired Venetians since these individuals adhere to

“Venetian identity and its rhetoric in an even more integral way than the natives themselves, deeply internalizing its traits and practices, and often positioning themselves at the forefront of its defense. It seems likely that people invest themselves more intensely in protecting what they have chosen, ensuring that the reasons for their decision to live in a place continue to endure” (Zanardi, p. 222).

At this point, let us return to the distinction between the city of stone and the city of water. I have emphasized the past and present centrality of the aquatic dimension in Venice’s urban space. Its importance lies not only in the ecological function intrinsic to the lagoon but also in its social and cultural significance, being a structural and structuring component essential to the mental and physical well-being of the city’s residents and inhabitants.

Considering the issues extensively discussed throughout the three chapters of this thesis, it is clear that there are no easy solutions to the socio-ecological challenges of life in the lagoon. To reinhabit Venice means rebuilding communities, creating the essential conditions for those who wish to remain and those who have chosen to lay roots in the city. This happens—and will continue to happen—through a series of daily gestures and actions aimed at countering the deterioration of economic and environmental conditions and resisting a world increasingly indifferent, mired in commodification and overtourism. It is a daily, proactive commitment aimed at building minimalist utopias (Zoja 2013): small but transformative efforts capable of changing the world or, at the very least, the places we inhabit and to which we must continuously ascribe new meaning.

“This is a hope for today: to continue to do the right thing for the planet, but also to continue to try to save what we love in particular—a community, an institution, a wild place, a struggling species—and to find joy in small successes” (Franzen 2020).

And for those fortunate enough to enjoy privilege, failing to notice what is happening is inexcusable (Teti 2017).

The central thesis of this section is to show that within the world of Venetian rowing there is the potential for fascinating dynamics of habitation and ecology. It is a traditional practice reinterpreted through the lens of contemporary needs in a city constantly in flux, subject to diverging yet creative tensions. Venice is a meeting point of past, present, and future: a laboratory of initiatives seeking an effective balance between traditional practices and new emotional bonds. Hence, one lesson we draw from this anthropological reading is that

“The past can and must be redeemed as a submerged world of alternative, unrealized possibilities, susceptible to future realizations. This redemption, restitution, or reparation becomes a moral exercise, enabling us to think of the present not as what is, but as what could be” (Teti 2017, p. 83).

“Real-life human beings [...] inhabit a fluid reality in which nothing is ever the same from one moment to the next and in which nothing ever repeats. In this oceanic world, every being has to find a place for itself by sending out tendrils which can bind it to others. Thus hanging on to one another, beings strive to resist the current that would otherwise sweep them asunder. Observe octopuses and anemones in the sea. They do not aggregate, and they do not fuse. They do, however, inter penetrate. Their many tendrils and tentacles interweave to form a boundless and ever-extending meshwork” (Ingold 2016, p. 11).

So is the condition of the *real inhabitants* of Venice and its lagoon. The metaphor of underwater life fits seamlessly within the context of the Venetian lagoon. The city of water is the stage where part of the socioecological destiny of the lagoon is put at stake.

The current that sweeps people away from the urban context is (strengthened by) shortsighted political decisions and relentless processes of touristification. A city without citizens ceases to be a city; it becomes a playground for visitors. It would seem, then, that the homogenization of Venice to the dictates and needs of globalized tourism represents a repetition of the same, something in which everything endlessly replicates itself. Yet, as I have attempted to explain through my ethnographic and lived experiences, this is not the only possible outcome. Life, with its seeds of hope and potential, is interstitial, arising both from the interpenetration of active agents exchanging lines of action and from the empty spaces it tends to occupy. A political issue is met with a filling by citizen action. A

housing void sees the emergence of community initiatives reclaiming public spaces. An ecological rupture prompts education about the structure and meaning of the lagoon's ecosystem.

Regarding the interpenetration of subjects, I have highlighted anthropologist T. Ingold's appreciation of one of the key concepts in Marcel Mauss's text on the gift. Rather than focusing on canonical interpretations of Mauss's work regarding universal and generalized tendencies of societies founded on either gift or market principles, the anthropological interpretation I propose centers on the continuation of life in the Venetian lagoon. My experience over the past two years has suggested that, if the social and civic flesh of the city remains alive, it is because of the gift and the exchange among those who have passed through, are passing through, and may remain in Venice. In sharing my encounters with (Venetian) people who share and teach traditional practices adapted to contemporary needs, I have sought to demonstrate that alongside the market-driven city there exists an alternative urban framework. This alternative is detached from economic interest and is sustained by the dynamics of giving. For instance, Erica told me about the values on which many rowing clubs in the city were/are founded. Despite the costs of maintaining boats and materials, these clubs have never based their goals and expenditure on charging high membership fees. On the contrary, as I mentioned in the second chapter, the real motivations behind the choices of these associations lie in offering affordable rates to facilitate membership and allow anyone who wishes to practice rowing. Currently, however, the primary risk for many rowing clubs is the potential for skyrocketing costs associated with renting common spaces, namely boathouses. If this were to happen, it would become impossible to continue charging the minimal and symbolic membership fees that currently make participation accessible, even for occasional rowers. Therefore, should these costs increase, it would likely lead to a drastic reduction in membership, a decline in dues, and eventually the expulsion of these clubs from the spaces necessary for their activities and the social gatherings of citizens. I presented this example because it illustrates what I mean by either continuation or severance of socio-ecological connections/lines. The issue is not solely economic or administrative. If rowing clubs were forced out of the spaces that sustain them, the result would be the gradual disappearance of rowers from the lagoon. Conversely, I am seeking to demonstrate the potential of the *gift*—the act of sharing knowledge and actively participating in community-building occasions—that many strive to embody and sustain through their involvement.

The gift reveals its potential through both the giving and receiving parties. The whole becomes greater than the mere sum of its parts, forming what Godbout calls the "value of connection" (1998), where *tendrils and tentacles interweave to form a boundless and ever-extending meshwork*. According to the anthropologist, "the gift always contains an element of the beyond, a surplus, something extra" (p. 219). I believe that this "something extra" is precisely the continuation of social

life, and therefore also the ecological life, of the Venetian lagoon. By sharing their knowledge, passing down a millennia-old practice such as Venetian rowing, those who participate in this exchange are interweaving themselves into temporal threads of far greater duration. It is the reactivation of old bonds between people and their environment in Venice's present. To put it another way: "The essence of the living is memory: the physical preservation of the past in the present." (Margulis et al. 1989, p. 64). This is why I see the teaching and learning of voga alla veneta within social circuits as one of the most precious gifts for countering the physical, cultural, and ecological draining of the Venetian lagoon.



Fig. 9: Risk of extinction for Venetians.

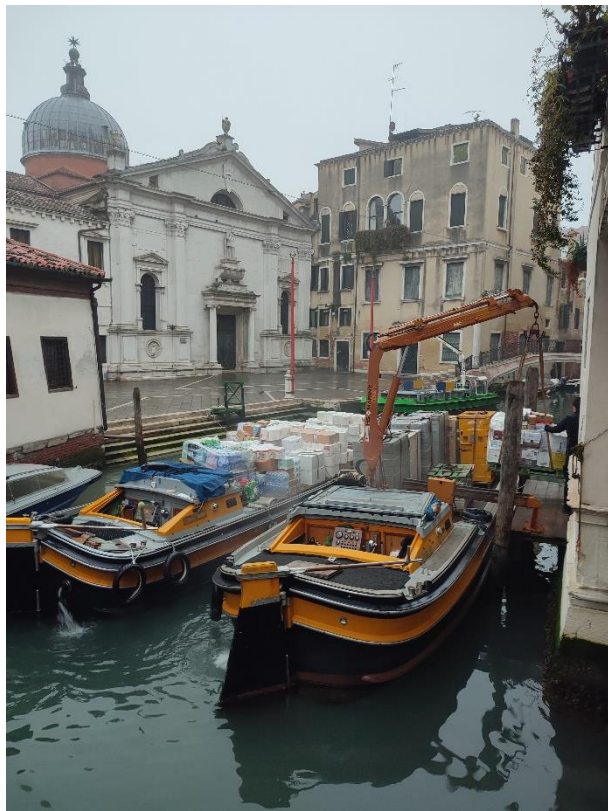


Fig. 10: Re-functionalization of aquatic spaces.



Fig. 11: *Bronxe Coverte* spectacle during PxT event.



Fig. 12: Tre Archi group lunch.

Conclusions

“In my opinion, we don’t communicate the practice of Venetian rowing well enough. More should and could be done. We need more minds at work; we need the efforts of artists, masters, and institutions. Something new is needed.” These are the words of Vittorio, another member of the 3A rowing club and a passionate rower. Recently he studied and obtained certification to be recognized as a Venetian rowing instructor. For him, rowing is almost an existential mission. He used to row as a child, learning “*a la valesana*” as a self-taught beginner. He shares stories of how calm and enjoyable the Venetian waters were just fifty years ago. And even though today rowing in turbulent waters is far more frustrating, he hasn’t lost any of his love for this practice. In fact, *despite*, or perhaps *because of* his sixties, he comments on the current situation with such clarity. *More should and could be done. We need more minds at work.* But how? And why?

As we reach the final pages of this text, I believe we can begin to sketch an answer to these last two questions. As to why we should “communicate the practice of Venetian rowing well [...]” the answer can be found by retracing the steps of this research.

In the first chapter, I reconstructed the ecological and appropriate reasons that fit into the lagoon context and that stem directly from Venetian rowing as an everyday practice, a way of moving, means of transportation, local environmental knowledge, and material cultural production. That such a fragile and ever-changing environment is severely affected by the massive and sudden replacement of oars with engines is quite evident, both for rowers and for those who approach ecological issues from a scientific perspective. The idea that we could or should return overnight to the old way of inhabiting the lagoon is equally naive. This doesn’t mean that the ecological fate of the Venetian lagoon should be left to the mercy of the erratic waves. Still, the current situation strongly calls for the implementation of concrete administrative measures. Just to make an example, one of the most favored measures by citizens is the installation of so-called AIS (Automatic Identification Systems) on water taxis, which are often guilty for creating strong waves due to the increasing demand for fast tourist transport. Clearly, faced with significant sanctions, there could be hope for an overall deceleration of the engines that tear through the lagoon waters. Then, a question arises naturally: if the wave motion decreased to a substantial, tangible level, would something change for those who row less because of the *moto ondoso*? And if many people took up the oars again, what would happen?

In the second chapter, I began analyzing the experience of Venetian rowing from two divergent perspectives. First, I detected its commercialization and spectacularization. Both processes *folklorize* the practice, making it easily marketable and appealing to the tourist sector, which peaks during

events like the Vogalonga and Carnival. Thereafter, I questioned whether this is the utmost respectful and educational experience for those engaging in the lagoon and its way of life. To avoid unhelpful radical stances, I answer by focusing on the second part of the second chapter and how it connects to the third and final one. In fact, beyond narrowing the analysis to a few folklorized events, I have also presented the image of another face of Venice: the one that continues to row out of passion and necessity. By briefly retracing the recent rise of rowing clubs, I have shown the emotional and existential bonds between the lagoon's people and local ecologies.

No longer do we row to make a living (to work), this is clear. But why then, do we row? And why can and should we continue to do so? The activities of the rowing clubs provide concrete answers to these questions. We row to educate ourselves. Certainly, rowing is a sport, which some approach with competitiveness. But rowing is also open to those who are willing to challenge themselves to learn a new practice, without the competitive or agonistic expectation. The rowing clubs, in virtue of their historic mission, represent the last stronghold in preserving this form of knowledge, this universe of meaning.

What are we educated to through rowing? As I mentioned in the third chapter, by rowing, we expose ourselves to the world, we do regain slowness, and we become more aware of how we inhabit this fragile planet. Above all, we weave ourselves into the fabric of the city's social life, which is somewhat resisting to a current that tries to wash it away. We need to inhabit places, and we need to know how to do so. I believe that rowing in Venice today does exactly this. And by revisiting Vittorio's words, how do we do it? By helping each other, by participating in activities related to rowing such as the PxT gatherings, protests against the wave motion, and spontaneous group outings that encapsulate the profound sense of being rooted in the place where we live. More minds are needed, and novelty is necessary. Erica had already told me about how the Querini rowing club added non-traditional boats to their fleet, made not of wood but of sheet metal, which seem to attract many young people because of their greater dynamism and simplicity, making them suitable for novice rowers.

One of many possible solutions, experiments. I'll propose a new one here. While I was rowing with Holden on a random Sunday in 2024, I speculated on the possibility that schools, high schools, and universities could encourage the participation of young students (and others) in integrated Venetian rowing workshops. By "integrated workshops," I mean sessions, eventually spread out over several days, aimed at educating and teaching this traditional practice and system of knowledge. Meetings that would cover the historical, contextual, and ecological aspects, alternated with actual rowing outings with groups of people, friends, colleagues. It's just an idea, but why not speculate?

If such a project could be realized, then yes, we would need more minds at work, those of artists, masters, and institutions. And who knows, perhaps someone like me, captivated by the magnetic pull of the oar, could decide to continue rowing, to stay, and to carry on the lines of life here in Venice.



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Gratitude