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Translating the "City of the Eye": Mapping Contemporary Venice between Travel Writing and Residents' Accounts

ABSTRACT

In this article I explore the "translational city" through the unique lens of contemporary Venice. The multiple cities that have been the subject of work on the "translational city" display different linguistic and cultural relations: from the dual city, through (post)colonial cities, to cosmopolitan cities. While Venice historically shares some of the characteristics of these models, its social, cultural, and linguistic make-up is exceptional in terms of both nature and scale. Progressive hyper-touristification in the last 30 years has led to a complete transformation of Venice as an urban space with the dramatic shrinking of the resident population and their ways of inhabiting the city and has made travel writing central to how its urban spaces are imagined and experienced. This shift calls for a reconsideration of the role of travel writing in shaping our perceptions and our experiences of the city. The article offers a comparative analysis of how the city is imagined, by placing Joseph Brodsky's influential English travel account, *Watermark*, in conversation with two collections of residents' narratives; it is also an attempt to map how travel writing, as a form of translation, mediates between the city's global perceptions and its local realities. The analysis uncovers an important disjuncture between how Venice is imagined by Brodsky as a global citizen and how it is remembered, memorialised, and constructed by Venetian residents as "denizens" seeking to reconstitute a local/minoritised language. The article explores Venice as a specific example of a translational city, while reflecting on a broader set of questions on the politics of language, travel, translation, and community

Keywords: translational city, contemporary Venice, over-tourism, travel writing, local identities, resident narratives.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a tendency in global representations of Venice to prioritise the voices of outsiders—primarily English-speaking travel writers—who observe and interpret the city from a distance. This perspective is clearly illustrated in a somewhat critical review of Joseph Brodsky's best-selling *Watermark: An Essay On Venice* by John Julius Norwich in the *Literary Review*, where he states:

> There are hundreds of ways of writing about Venice. One can be lyrical and high-flown like Ruskin; fastidious and dismissive like Gibbon; melancholy and nostalgic like Proust; ghoulish and disapproving like Dickens; sensitive and almost unbearably precise like Henry James. One can write histories or guidebooks, disquisitions on the painting or the architecture, poems, descriptive essays or novels. *Watermark*, however, is none of these things. (Norwich n.pag.)

Norwich's review serves as a microcosm of this Anglocentric predominance. In his attempt to highlight the uniqueness of Brodsky's perspective, Norwich lists a range of authors whose writings on Venice have shaped the city's literary representation. However, what is striking about his assessment is that the horizon within which these writings are considered remains almost exclusively confined to the English language, with surprising omissions from major works in world literature on Venice—such as Calvino's *Città invisibili* and Goethe's *Italienische Reise*—and only a brief mention of Proust. This approach subtly constructs a frame of reference that establishes a canon of world literature on Venice, one that is largely shaped by Anglophone writers. Such selective recognition reinforces a view that is filtered through the lens of a specific cultural and literary tradition, shaping how Venice is understood and represented on the global stage.

Within this primarily English-language canon, Brodsky's *Watermark* stands out for its distinctive focus on contemporary Venice as the "city of the eye"—a concept that has profoundly impacted how the city is imagined and experienced. Published only a few years after Brodsky was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature (1987), and drawing on his 17 years of annual visits to the city, *Watermark* (1992) elevates Venice to the status of a work of art, "the greatest masterpiece of our species" (116). For Brodsky, the picturesque nature of Venice's art and architecture guarantees a benign, enchanting, and uplifting public environment for visitors and citizens—an argument reinforced by the city's enduring attraction over the centuries. Notably, Brodsky suggests that Venice offers a unique way of engaging with time and space, encapsulated in the phrase "water equals time and

provides beauty with its double" (134). The lagoon's water, which not only surrounds but shapes life in the city, reflects the picturesque quality of the palazzi, offering Venice's unique beauty twice over.

This emphasis on the visual aspects of Venice as physical objects to behold—its art, architecture, geography, and unique landscapes—has significantly influenced how the city has been appropriated and reimagined by visitors and artists, shaping both its perception and representation in profound ways. This portrayal as a backdrop for introspection and a mirror for global concerns raises important ethical questions about whose voices are heard and whose stories are told. What are the broader implications of these multiple reimaginings? How does the enduring metaphor of the "city of the eye" shape not only the way Venice is envisioned today, but also how it is lived and experienced? And where does this leave the Venetian community of residents when it comes to their right to narrate and imagine their own city?

Travel writing is central to the re-imagining of Venice on a global stage, but it is also fundamental in shaping how tourists and visitors engage with the city's physical spaces and inhabitants. Like all forms of travel writing, Brodsky's book also represents an ongoing process of cultural and linguistic translation that defines Venice today. Positioned as authorities on foreign destinations, travel writers translate the images, thoughts, values, and experiences of others into the language of their readers. As Michael Cronin reminds us, there is an important ethical dimension to travel writing that is doubly bound with the practice of "translating others" (Cronin, "Knowing" 334). As representations of the lives and environments of other cultures and languages, travel narratives assume access to knowledge that must account for the necessity of translation and the ethical implications of representing and "speaking for" others (334). In this context, it is crucial to understand how the global story of contemporary Venice and its inhabitants has been largely written *about*, not written *by* Venetians and, as a consequence, the resident population, their stories, memories, experiences, and their right to reimagine their city have been marginalised and silenced. Venice's duality as both a tourist destination and a living (if increasingly threatened) city highlights its uniqueness and complexity as a translational city, shaped not only by how it is imagined, but also by how it is inhabited and experienced.

As part of this exploration, I offer a comparative analysis of how Venice is represented in Joseph Brodsky's *Watermark* and in a selection of resident narratives. Chosen not only for its significance as a literary guide to contemporary Venice, but also for the distinct cosmopolitan Anglophone perspectives which it represents, Brodsky's travel account exemplifies the view of the global citizen who navigates Venice with

the authority of a privileged, erudite observer. His perspective, marked by a knowledgeable yet detached lens, offers a view that, while differing in some respects from John Urry's concept of the "tourist gaze" (176), remains troublingly appropriative.

As a counterpoint to Brodsky's narrative, I also examine how Venetian residents themselves remember, imagine, and recount their city, offering an original and marginalised perspective often overlooked in global discussions about Venice. The analysis focuses on narratives that have emerged over the past 15 years as part of various social movements advocating for residents' rights. It includes two independently and locally published collections of resident accounts, chosen because they cover different phases in the community's journey of self-awareness around the threat to their survival: the initial phase, with a memorialisation of a thriving and now forgotten past (*Quando c'erano i Veneziani*, 2010) and a more urgent and political call to listen to residents' voices about their life in the city today (*Ascolta Venezia*, 2021).

What makes this comparative analysis particularly enriching is that travel accounts and resident stories are rarely read side by side. By bringing them into conversation, I trace how they collectively shape the city's identity, precisely because they speak to different readers and offer divergent views. I argue that these narratives should be understood as integral pieces of the story of contemporary Venice as a translational city, as they not only map different ways of inhabiting it in various languages, but they also illuminate alternative sensory landscapes that are often overlooked. Together, they constitute one of those areas of language traffic, or "translation zones," that characterise the translational city, "where language relations are regulated by the opposing forces of coercion and resistance, of wilful indifference and engaged interconnection" (Cronin and Simon 120).

The asymmetry between these texts also extends to questions of readership. Written in English, *Watermark* is widely circulated, frequently reprinted, and now canonical in travel literature, shaping global imaginaries of Venice. By contrast, the resident narratives, written in Italian and Venetian, are published by local independent presses and are aimed at a regional audience. This linguistic orientation reflects different modes of address: where Brodsky speaks to a broad global Anglophone readership, the resident narratives are grounded in communal knowledge and do not seek translation for an external gaze. Their limited accessibility to outsiders is not incidental, but reflects a choice to prioritise local memory and continuity over global legibility.

By examining how these global and local narratives intersect and diverge in contemporary Venice, the aim is to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics that influence not only this particular city, but also

other cities experiencing similar tensions between global commodification and the preservation of local communities. Through this exploration, the article also reflects broader questions concerning the politics of language, travel, and community.

VENICE AS A UNIQUE TRANSLATIONAL CITY: FORCED TRANSLATION AND THE "TOURIST GAZE"

One of the key advantages of looking at contemporary cities as translational spaces is that it foregrounds the role played by languages and their interaction in imagining, creating, and contesting the make-up of the spaces that we inhabit as citizens. Unlike the multilingual city, which is often perceived as an urban space where different languages coexist independently, the notion of the translational city emphasises "the connection between languages, the conversations that are enabled or impeded . . . but also the tensions and rivalries among them" (Simon, *Cities* 21). In doing so, it highlights how languages are not merely present, but are in constant negotiation, shaping the city's identity, history, and social fabric.

Such negotiations manifest differently across various urban contexts, with cities exhibiting a variety of linguistic and cultural dynamics (King Lee 3). These range from dual cities, where two dominant languages compete for institutional and political supremacy (Simon, *Translating Montreal*; Pizzi), to colonial and post-colonial cities, which bear the enduring marks of colonial power structures on language and culture (Simon, *Cities*; Suchet and Mekdjian), and cosmopolitan cities, where multiple languages and cultures coexist, weaving a complex tapestry of interactions (Cronin, "Digital"; Koskinen).

Venice's position as a translational city is deeply rooted in its long history as a principal crossroads between Europe and Asia. Over centuries, it has embodied multiple urban models, functioning as a colonising empire during the "Serenissima" Republic (1100–1715), as a colonial city under Habsburg rule (1798–1866), and as a principally dual city after Italy's unification, where standard Italian and Venetian existed in a diglossic balance as the vehicular (official) and the vernacular language, respectively (1866–1980s). Today, like many other tourist destinations, Venice is a cosmopolitan tourist hub where a multitude of languages and cultures interact on a daily basis. Yet what truly defines its contemporary social, cultural, and linguistic landscape is the exceptional scale of its touristification. Over the past 30 years, hyper-touristification has led to a mass exodus of residents (Zanardi 1) and an overwhelming increase in tourist accommodations, transforming Venice into an urban space shaped

primarily for international consumption (Bertocchi and Visentin 2). This forced exodus of the resident community has also led to a forced translation of multiple aspects of the city's life and an increasing transformation of the language used to explain and navigate the city, which has gone from Venetian and Italian to English (Tufi 82–88).

John Urry's concept of the "tourist gaze" offers a useful lens for understanding how global tourism interacts with and reshapes a city's identity. He defines the tourist gaze as a socially organised and systematised way of seeing, constructed through travel narratives and tourist experiences (172). This gaze is not a passive observation, but an active, constructed view that shapes and fulfils tourists' expectations. Drawing on Foucault's notion of the "gaze" as a mechanism of surveillance and control (217), Urry argues that the tourist gaze is enmeshed in the power dynamics that structure the relationship between the observer and the observed. In tourist sites, of which contemporary Venice is an unfortunate archetype, visual consumption thus becomes a means of appropriating the physical environment of the city, transforming it into a space designed not for production, labour, or everyday life, but for spectacle and aesthetic consumption (Urry 178).

While Urry's tourist gaze captures the ways in which global tourism transforms cities into spectacles for consumption, Michael Cronin's distinction between "citizens" and "denizens" deepens this analysis by revealing how language and rootedness shape the lived experiences of those who inhabit these urban spaces, highlighting the ethical dimension of encounters between visitors and locals in tourist sites ("Knowing" 335). Global citizens, according to Cronin, often engage with the world from a detached, dominant perspective, navigating different cultures and languages as global actors with the privilege of mobility (338). Reflecting on the relationship between language and place, Cronin reminds us that travel is not just a spatial activity, but also a linguistic one. In travel narratives, language allows meanings to circulate beyond the direct experience of the traveller to other speakers of that language, who at other times and in other places can read about those experiences and navigate those foreign spaces (336). However, both language difference and the very act of partaking in the logic of contemporary cosmopolitan mobility brings a degree of distance and detachment between travellers as global citizens and the places which they visit. This dual distancing—spatial and linguistic—further reinforces the traveller's position as an outsider, shaping their experience of foreign spaces.

In contrast to this privileged and detached perspective, Cronin introduces the view of the "denizen," a term advanced by the organisation Common Ground to refer to individuals embedded in their local environments, equipped with an intimate and adaptable knowledge

of their surroundings (337). The word originates from the Latin *de intus* (from within), emphasising a deep-rooted, internal connection to place. A denizen's relationship with place is inherently tied to the local language and culture, allowing them to navigate the complexities of their environment with an understanding that is often inaccessible to outsiders (338). Importantly, the notion of the denizen also avoids the pitfalls linked to ideas of "authenticity" and "nativism" (Anderson 22), focusing instead on the lived, active engagement with place rather than a static or exclusive claim to identity. This distinction between global citizens and local denizens echoes Urry's critique of the tourist gaze as appropriative; however, the critique is extended to emphasise the role of language and local knowledge in resisting the homogenising forces of globalisation.

In contemporary Venice, the tension between global citizens and local denizens becomes especially pronounced. While travellers experience Venice through the lens of the tourist gaze, appropriating its spaces for their own consumption, local residents navigate a city that is increasingly hostile to their daily lives. The residents' connection to their environment, expressed through their linguistic practices and intimate knowledge of the city, offers a counterpoint to the flattening effect of the tourist gaze. However, it is crucial to recognise that contrasting the mobility of global English with the rootedness of Venetian may mistakenly imply that the local operates beyond the realm of translation. Yet, as Cronin reminds us, the polysemy of the term "denizen" itself reflects a translation act—a trace of contact with other languages and cultures ("Knowing" 338). Even languages that are minoritised or rooted in specific places, such as Venetian, cannot escape the condition of translation. As we shall see in the analysis that follows, this complicates the distinction between global citizens and local denizens, revealing that both global and local perspectives on the city are shaped through acts of translation.

OBSERVING VS. DWELLING: CITIZENS, DENIZENS, AND COMPETING VIEWS OF THE CITY

Although Brodsky visited Venice multiple times over 17 years—a duration suggesting more than just a fleeting, tourist-like engagement—his perspective remains that of an erudite global citizen. His admission that his Italian "wildly oscillat[es] around its firm zero" (61), his complete lack of acknowledgement of Venetian as one of the languages of the city, and the fact that his social interactions were limited to "English-speaking natives and expatriate Americans" (62) indicates a linguistic detachment from the everyday life of the city. This linguistic choice reflects an orientation toward

Venice as a place of intellectual and aesthetic contemplation rather than as a complex, multilingual community. What is striking, however, is that this downplaying of language sits uneasily alongside Brodsky's own work as a self-translator and the profound attention to the importance of linguistic form he demonstrates in his reflections on self-translation (Ishov 14). Paradoxically, as we will see in this section, Brodsky's portrayal of Venice reveals instead a highly visual, appropriative gaze, where the city is not a living, functional space, but one transformed into an object of aesthetic consumption, seen exclusively through a detached and external lens.

Familiarity combined with linguistic detachment places Brodsky within a spectrum of belonging to Venice, neither a mere tourist nor a fully integrated denizen, but a visitor enamoured with the city, yet removed from the rhythms and languages that define it as a lived experience. His account centres on the experience of Venice's unique beauty as a broader reflection on the human condition (Brodsky 85), while rendering Venetians invisible—mere fixtures in the city's landscape, essential only for facilitating the visitor's exploration (16). This universalising, romantic view encourages tourists to take possession of Venice with their eyes, providing the stimulus to visit the city and have the perceived spectacle confirmed for themselves. As Urry notes, "it is the distinctiveness of the visual that gives all sorts of activities a special or unique character" (172), and, in Brodsky's portrayal, it is this visual distinctiveness that drives tourists to claim Venice as a spectacle while disregarding all other aspects of the city's life:

> The eye in this city acquires an autonomy similar to that of a tear. The only difference is that it doesn't sever itself from the body but subordinates it totally. After a while—on the third or fourth day here—the body starts to regard itself as merely the eye's carrier, as a kind of submarine to its now dilating, now squinting periscope. (Brodsky 44–45)

Throughout the book, Brodsky emphasises Venice's visual appeal, comparing the city to "painting" (21), a "myth," and a "treasure chest" (12). His descriptions reveal the dominance of the eye in experiencing the city's spaces, which are transformed into objects to be beheld "rather than inhabited or lived in" (Urry 179). In the extract above, this is taken to its extreme as the body itself becomes secondary to the eye's function, reduced to a mere vessel that "subordinates it totally." Brodsky's imagery of the body as a "submarine" for the eye's "now dilating, now squinting periscope" foregrounds Venice's ability to captivate the viewer, silencing the other senses and turning the act of seeing into the central mode of engagement.

This reduction of Venice to a visual spectacle continues in Brodsky's depiction of the city's labyrinthine streets. He notes that the "long, coiling lanes and passageways" (45) tempt the visitor to get lost in them, as though the act of seeing these streets were an end in itself. The city then becomes an intricate maze, designed to be visually consumed rather than navigated with purpose. Brodsky's metaphorical language reinforces this focus on the visual, attributing to the city "a porcelain aspect" (12), and comparing the palazzi facing the Grand Canal to "carved chests with unfathomable treasures" (29). Through these comparisons Venice is rendered a place of myth and fantasy through a lens that strips it of its present-day reality, turning it into an object that serves the viewer's imaginative and aesthetic needs. What Brodsky terms the "cyclopic" feeling that Venice gives travellers (12) further suggests that the city is seen through a single, dominating perspective where "one's eye precedes one's pen" (21), demonstrating the primacy of visual experience in his engagement with Venice. His resolve to let the "pen" follow the eye further emphasises the role of the travel writer as observer who shapes their account of the city on the grounds of their own visual journey, rather than allowing the city to reveal itself organically through engagement with its history, culture, or inhabitants.

While Brodsky's portrayal reduces Venice to a spectacle for visual consumption, dominated by the "tourist gaze," Venetian resident narratives reveal a different way of writing the city—one rooted not just in sight, but in a multisensory engagement with its environment and its languages. Much like architectural features, the sounds of a city play a crucial role in shaping its identity and historical narratives. While events, buildings, artifacts, and historical figures are often memorialised, the sounds of a city are inherently ephemeral, leaving few visible traces in the urban landscape. Yet, this impermanence does not diminish their importance (Cronin and Simon 120). Just as tracing the architectural development of a city helps us understand its history, its organisation into neighbourhoods and its social relations, listening to the sounds of the city (which of course includes the languages spoken) introduces the observer to layers of social, economic, and cultural complexity.

The collection *Quando c'erano i Veneziani*, edited by Caterina Falomo, vividly captures residents' personal memories of Venice in the 1950s and 60s, a time when the city's residents dominated the urban landscape, shaping its rhythms, sounds, spaces, and everyday life. These accounts provide an intimate view of how Venetians inhabited their city, mapping out a topography intertwined with the local culture, community life, and the Venetian dialect. Unlike the travel narratives that depict Venice as a spectacle for the eye, these resident narratives foreground the practical, lived experience of navigating and interacting with the spaces of the city. This immersive, multisensory

perspective is vividly captured in Luigi Albertotanza's account in the same collection, where the city's canals are described not as picturesque features, but as essential arteries of daily life and labour:

> It must be said that the canal, with its *fondamenta*, *Nani-priuli* and *Sangiofoletti*, the church square, the *squero*, etc., had all the characteristics of a small village. The canal, in particular, was in its own way a genuine little harbour, animated by various types of boats, almost exclusively workboats. It was crossed by large cargo transport boats, almost always manoeuvred by two men, each pressing a long and heavy oar against the bottom of the canal on one side, and against their shoulder (vaguely protected by folded rags) on the other side, applying the push by walking heavily along the sides of the boat, which allowed for a slow progression.[1] (16)

In this extract, the canal becomes a well-defined space with clear functions and a sense of community, a place where the complexity of the urban environment is not bewildering, but rather integral to the rhythm of everyday life. The description of how cargo boats were manoeuvred by two men highlights this intimate, active physical engagement with the landscape. The slow, laborious process of moving these boats, driving long oars that scraped the canal bottom while pressing into the men's shoulders with each stroke, reveals a tactile relationship with the environment. Albertotanza recalls how the canal water was used for practical tasks such as washing dishes and cooking polenta (16), illustrating the residents' symbiotic relationship with the lagoon. For the residents, the lagoon and canals were an integral part of daily life, sustaining their everyday routines and practical needs, in stark contrast to Brodsky's symbolic portrayal of the city waterways as a mirror reflecting the city's aesthetic grandeur, timeless and almost otherworldly. The imagery here presents a fundamentally different approach from the more detached gaze of the global citizen, focusing instead on the embodied knowledge required to navigate Venice's unique geography as denizens.

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[1] All translations in this article are my own. While translating I felt it was important to leave the Venetian terms in the original and italics to showcase the diglossia inherent in the resident's voices. Here is the original Italian version: "Va detto che il canale con le sue *fondamenta*, Nani-priuli e Sangiofoletti, il campo della chiesa, lo squero, ecc, presentavano tutte le caratteristiche di un 'paese.' Il canale, in particolare, era nel suo piccolo, un autentico porticciolo, animato da vari tipi di imbarcazioni, quasi esclusivamente da lavoro. Era attraversato da grosse imbarcazioni da trasporto merci quasi sempre movimentate da due uomini che puntando, ciascuno, un lungo e pesante remo sul fondo del canale, da una parte, e alla spalla (vagamente protetta da stracci ripiegati) dall'altra imprimevano la spinta, ottenuta spostandosi camminando pesantemente lungo i fianchi della barca che permettava un lento incedere" (Albertotanza 16).

The residents' accounts further emphasise how their relationship with the landscapes of the city is characterised by a sensory, embodied connection to the environment which foregrounds the city's aural landscape, recounting the daily rhythms of sounds that echoed through the city at dawn: "Every day, the same pattern of sounds filled the air at the break of dawn. The clatter of milk cans being unloaded in front of the dairies from *batele* or large *sandoli*. . . And the roar of the first diesel engines starting up on the *burci* boats was especially loud" (16).[2] These sounds, repeated day after day, were central to the Venetians' experience of this small corner of the city. This focus on the auditory dimension contrasts with the visual emphasis found in travel writing, offering a more immersive portrayal of life in the city. The sounds of work and commerce, such as the watermelon seller's distinctive Venetian cries—"*al tajo, al sajo . . . tute rosse*" (17)—root the city in the linguistic reality of daily life, distinct from the picturesque and mythical Venice perceived by travellers. As Cronin and Simon note, drawing on Alain Corbin's work on the sensory overlays of cities (120), the cries of peddlers and vendors had a signifying function for the auditory landscape of cities because they conveyed information not only about the wares being sold, but also about the geographical origins of the sellers themselves. These cries, embedded in the social fabric of the city, serve as markers of local identity and commerce, creating an aural landscape where the city speaks to them in their own language.

Throughout *Quando c'erano i Veneziani*, the inhabitants' connection to place is expressed not only through descriptions of daily life, but also through the use of the Venetian dialect, which further connects the narrators to their environment. While most of the narratives are written in standard Italian, they are also peppered with Venetian words and expressions, emphasising the deep-rooted relationship between the residents' spoken language and the city's landscapes. Tim Ingold's concept of "dwelling" emphasises that local knowledge arises from a deep, embodied connection to one's environment, cultivated through continuous engagement with the surrounding landscape and its material realities (5). In *Quando c'erano i Veneziani*, this form of dwelling is reflected in the Venetians' use of dialect to describe their world. The Venetian dialect acts here as more than a means of communication; it is a form of rootedness that expresses an intimate knowledge of the city's spaces, practices, and rhythms of life. Inhabiting the city through the Venetian dialect produces knowledge of

[2] "Si ripetevano ogni giorno tutta una serie di rumori che si diffondevano alle prime luci dell'alba. Il rumore dei bidoni del latte, scaricati davanti le latterie da *batele* or grandi *sandoli*. . . Rumorosissime erano le messe in moto dei primi motori diesel installati sui *burci*" (16).

the city spaces that is inherently local, adaptive, and "grounded in labour and daily practices" (Ingold 6).

In the resident narratives, Venetian is used to identify places such as *squero*, *fondamenta*, and *rio terà* (Albertotanza 16, 19), terms that reflect the unique history and topography of Venice as a city built on water. The *squero* is a traditional Venetian boatyard where gondolas and other small wooden boats are built and repaired; a *fondamenta* refers to the walkway that runs alongside a canal in Venice; *rio terà* refers to a stretch of land which was once a *rio* ("small canal") and was claimed back ("interred"—*terà*) during prosperous times when the city's population was increasing by the thousands. The dialect also names specific types of boats integral to the city's functioning—*burci*, *batèli*, and *sandoli*—and the types of fish caught only in the lagoon waters—"*I go, le anguee, i gransi*" (16)—which reflect the residents' intimate connection with its natural resources.

The memories of childhood games and social interactions deepen the depiction of Venice as a vibrant, living community: "We would race around on bicycles and play games like *la ghe* or *piera alta*. The girls would hop on one leg over chalk marks drawn on the ground, and we boys would improvise tracks, drawn on the paving stones with chalk, where we would spin our wooden tops (*cimbani*)"[3] (18). These playful moments, narrated through the lens of Venetian dialect (in italics) and intimately connected to the city's geography—such as *piera alta*, where children avoid being caught by taking refuge on wells, bridges, and stone thresholds—represent how denizens translate the city's spaces into the language and experiences of local childhood. The word *piera* means "stone" in Venetian, and this particular game was named after Venice's abundant stone structures. This playground game, known in English as "the floor is lava" and in other parts of Italy as *rialzo*, in Venice becomes shaped by the city's geography, with its stone streets, bridges, and thresholds influencing how children play. This centuries-old tradition, passed down through generations, reveals a profound local engagement with Venice that, while unimportant for travel narratives, becomes central to the articulation of the residents' relationship to the spaces of the city. It shows how denizens translate their urban environment into a cultural text through their daily practices, embedding the city's stones into their play, memory, and language.

Through the resident narratives in *Quando c'erano i Veneziani*, we encounter a Venice that is inhabited, worked, and lived in ways on which travel narratives rarely focus. The residents' deep connection to the city—

[3] "Si scorrazzava in bicicletta e si giocava a *la ghe* o *piera alta*. Le bambine saltavano su una gamba superando i segno per terra fatti col gesso, e noi maschi improvvisavamo piste, disegnate sui masegni col gesso, in cui spingevamo i *cimbani*" (18).

expressed through their use of dialect, their daily routines, and their practical knowledge of the city and its multiple landscapes—paints a picture of a city that is not merely a destination, but a dynamic, interwoven community. By maintaining the diglossic relationship between vehicular and vernacular language, Italian and Venetian, the residents' stories enable the Venetian dialect to remain a space of alternative expression. In doing so, they offer a counterpoint to the tourist gaze, reminding us that Venice is not just a backdrop for aesthetic pleasure, but a place filled with lived histories, sounds, and rhythms that define a different way of inhabiting the city.

While *Quando c'erano i Veneziani* captures a forgotten Venice defined by the rich, daily sounds of a closely-knit microcosm of the past, *Ascolta Venezia* moves beyond memory to advocate listening as an active, deliberate engagement with the city in the present. Published in 2021, over ten years after *Quando c'erano i Veneziani*, it reflects a new phase in the Venetian community's journey of self-awareness, responding strategically to the social and political pressures of overtourism and the municipal government's mismanagement of the city's urban planning (Zanetti 29–32). By shifting the focus from recollecting a forgotten past to a conscious engagement with the city's present-day challenges, *Ascolta Venezia* offers the act of "listening" (*ascoltare*) as a form of quiet resistance, as a way to forge and affirm an enduring, resilient connection to place that challenges the reduction of Venice to a visual spectacle.

The force of this gentle resistance is encapsulated in the collection's trilingual subtitle, "*shemà, 'scolta, ascolta*" (Benzoni 14)—meaning "listen" in Hebrew, Venetian, and Italian. The title subtly evokes Venice's layered cultural heritage, highlighting the enduring influence of the city's Jewish community, whose presence has contributed to its linguistic and cultural landscape over centuries. Each language in the title invites a layered mode of listening, with *shemà* bringing a sacred resonance from its association with the prayer *Shemà Yisrael* ("Hear, O Israel"). As Giovanni Benzoni explains in the introduction to the collection, *shemà* resonates beyond its liturgical roots, to daily life, where the verb is commonly used to signify attentive listening between people (14). Similarly, the Venetian term *'scolta* evokes an intimate, communal way of listening, recalling the expression *'scolta che te conto* ("listen, I am about to tell you [a story]"), traditionally used by grandparents when they are about to tell their grandchildren a bedtime story. This choice of words, bridging the sacred and the familiar, invites readers to engage with Venice as a community rather than a backdrop, framing listening as an act of recognition and service. In this sense, the subtitle also adopts a translational logic, inviting readers to dwell within the linguistic textures of the city and to engage with Venice through a mode of understanding grounded in mutual recognition, listening, and the careful negotiation of difference.

Interpreted through the lens of denizenship, these multilingual practices of listening reinforce the notion that Venetian identity, as articulated in these texts, actively counters ideas of origin, authenticity, and ethnicity. Rather than presenting identity as a static, heritage-based claim, this multilingual articulation of voices reflects an inclusive, fluid understanding of belonging rooted in active participation and relational engagement with place. The layering of Hebrew, Venetian, and Italian in the subtitle embodies a denizen's approach to place, where identity is not restricted by birthright or ethnicity, but constructed through a shared, ongoing practice of listening and community connection. By framing listening as central to the experience of Venice, the collection presents a vision of identity that resonates with the denizen's adaptable, dialogic relationship with their surroundings, affirming a sense of belonging grounded in the daily realities of dwelling within the city's complex, multicultural landscape.

In *Ascolta Venezia*, the term *caranto* serves as a powerful metaphor that speaks to the themes of the collection. *Caranto* refers to a prehistoric layer of soil beneath the Venetian Lagoon, formed during the Pleistocene. This dense, compact layer acts as a solid foundation beneath the more recent, softer sediments. By drawing on the concept of *caranto*, the Venetian resident community aligns their voices with this enduring geological layer, suggesting that their narratives are fundamental to the city's history, much like the "stones of Venice" once symbolised the enduring authenticity of its architecture and identity. This act of identification suggests a reimagining of identity as dynamic, shaped by the community's desire to assert its place in a rapidly changing Venice. As Benedict Anderson argues, communities—whether national, regional, or local—are imagined and continually reconfigured in response to social, political, and economic pressures (4). By aligning themselves with the solidity of the *caranto* and simultaneously with their multilingual heritage, Venetian residents are not merely referencing historical continuity, but actively engaging in a discourse of inclusivity, resilience, and resistance, asserting their place and responsibilities amidst the city's transformation into a tourist spectacle.

This sense of community rooted in responsibility lies at the heart of the collection, challenging authors and readers alike to confront their roles in the city's decline. As Benzoni emphasises, memory is not conceived as a neutral or passive act of recollection, but an active, subjective engagement with the past. It is a practice that is inseparable from present-day ethical imperatives: "In this book, the intent to remember is clear. As Tzvetan Todorov says, it does not mean recalling in an indistinct manner, but making a conscious, subjective choice in light of our responsibility toward

the challenges posed by the events we have witnessed" (Benzoni 10).[4] The collection foregrounds the idea that structural forces such as mass tourism, transnational capital, and policy failures are undeniably responsible for Venice's commodification. However, they do not fully explain the city's condition. Instead, the text calls for a form of civic introspection that highlights personal accountability. This is articulated most clearly in the questions posed by Nono: "What have I done for my city? What have I done for my community? Was I thinking about the community or my own personal interest? Did I take care of the spaces in which I moved?" (23).[5] These are not merely reflective prompts; they function as ethical provocations, demanding that residents reassess the relationship between their everyday practices and the broader processes of overtourism and urban decline.

A sense of profound urgency also runs through the collection, with multiple authors warning that Venice is on the verge of dying—not just physically, due to climate change and the threat of rising sea levels, but also culturally, as a community. As Cantilena poignantly notes, "Venice isn't dying just from high tides. But who, beyond [us inhabitants of the lagoon], truly realizes that this slow death is coming?" (62).[6] This reflection on Venice's slow death draws attention to how the denizen's life—beyond the tourist gaze—is rarely acknowledged, both in Italy and abroad. The focus on Venice as a place of spectacle has blinded outsiders to the life of its denizens and the existential threats which it faces.

CONCLUSION. RECLAIMING VENICE: TRANSLATION, DWELLING, AND CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

In this article I have explored the unique dynamics of Venice as a translational city, where global narratives and local experiences intersect to produce a space of tension and negotiation. By bringing travel writing and resident narratives into dialogue, I have shown how Venice is

[4] "In questo libro è esplicito il proposito di fare memoria, come dice Tzvetan Todorov, non significa ricordare in modo indistinto, ma applicare sempre una scelta soggettiva in funzione della nostra responsabilità di fronte alle problematiche poste dagli eventi di cui siamo stati testimoni" (Benzoni 10).

[5] "Che cosa ho fatto per la mia città? Che cosa ho fatto per la mia comunità? Pensavo alla comunità o al mio interesse personale? Ho avuto cura degli spazi in cui mi muovevo?" (Nono 23).

[6] "Venezia non muore solo di acqua alta. Ma di questo, di questa morte, chi si rende conto seriamente al di fuori della laguna?" (Cantilena 62).

caught between forces of visual consumption and embodied dwelling, between the language of global tourism and the intimate knowledge of local denizens. The city's identity, often reduced in travel writing to a spectacle for the tourist gaze, is far more complex and is continually negotiated through competing translational acts. Brodsky's portrayal of Venice reflects the detached, highly visual orientation of the global citizen, where language difference is flattened and the city becomes an object of aesthetic contemplation. His erasure of Venetian as a living language, and the transformation of the city's spaces into scenes to be consumed, reveal the risks inherent in travel writing that aestheticises urban complexity.

By contrast, resident narratives foreground Venice not as a painting or spectacle, but as a lived, multisensory environment. Through the sounds of work, the textures of the lagoon, the everyday navigation of canals, and the use of the Venetian dialect, these accounts offer a powerful counterpoint to the tourist gaze. They articulate a different mode of urban belonging: one based on dwelling, local language practices, and the active transmission of memory across generations. As *Quando c'erano i Veneziani* vividly shows, the canals and stones of Venice are not simply aesthetic markers but living elements of community and labour, deeply inscribed with social meanings. The Venetian dialect is presented not as a quaint artifact but as a vibrant, active force through which the inhabitants connect with their city's spaces and histories. In this sense, the Venetian dialect and other languages of the community, such as Hebrew, serve as powerful forms of resistance: a productive diglossia that challenges the homogenising forces of global tourism and commodification.

Ascolta Venezia extends this engagement into the present, proposing listening as a new civic practice. The collection's translational call to "listen" ("*shemà, 'scolta, ascolta*") reframes urban engagement from spectacle to attentive relationality. It positions identity not as a static inheritance, but as an ongoing, dialogic process rooted in a responsibility to place and the recognition of the value of translation as attention to difference. Yet the narratives also pose hard questions, refusing to frame Venice's crisis solely in terms of external forces like mass tourism and globalisation. Instead, they prompt critical reflection on local agency: What have residents done—or failed to do—to preserve the city's social and cultural fabric? In this sense, Venice's survival is tied not only to resisting the external tourist gaze, but also to cultivating ethical practices of care, memory, and shared stewardship.

As Venice continues to serve as a site of cultural and linguistic translation, the challenges which it faces raise broader questions about the ethics of travel writing, the commodification of urban spaces, and the role

of local communities in shaping the future of their cities. In this article I have sought to deepen our understanding of the translational dynamics at work in Venice today—where the politics of language, travel, and community are in constant negotiation. The implications extend beyond Venice, shedding light on how language, travel writing, and local narratives shape perceptions of urban life in an age of global tourism. Central to this discussion is the ethical responsibility of travel writing to recognise the voices which it translates or silences. By giving visibility to local voices and languages, we can move beyond superficial consumption and begin to appreciate Venice—and cities like it—not as static objects of the tourist gaze, but as vibrant, translational spaces where different forms of knowledge, language, and memory converge.

Ultimately, the survival of Venice as a living, thriving community depends on our ability to recognise and protect its local communities amidst the overwhelming pressures of global tourism. This calls for a more nuanced and critically engaged relationship with cities which acknowledges the multiplicity of perspectives that shape their identities. By listening to the voices of its residents, we can begin to appreciate Venice not just as a "city of the eye," but as a complex, translational space where different forms of knowledge, language, and histories continue to converge.

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