

# IL PIANETA DELL'ACQUA:

## *Aria's* Neo-Venezia as utopian aquapelago

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**ABSTRACT:** Mediatized representations offer a powerful way to explore the imaginary possibilities of waterscapes, with the 2002 Japanese manga *Aria* providing one rich example. Set on a 24th century, terraformed Mars – now named 'Aqua' – *Aria* follows protagonist Akari Mizunashi as she trains to become a gondolier in Neo-Venezia, built to recreate Venice after its 21st century submersion. Though reminiscent of Venice in its cityscape and waterways, Neo-Venezia differs in two key respects which license particular imaginary possibilities: it reimagines the aquapelagic infrastructure of the Venetian lagoon in terms of solarpunk and Slow Life sustainabilities, and its aquapelagic imaginary is imprinted with memories and practices from Venice, Japan, and beyond. Drawing on both *Aria* itself and reader commentaries, this paper explores how Neo-Venezia is constructed and interpreted as a model for a utopian imagined future in the face of climate change. By recontextualising the Venetian aquapelago in terms of global cultural practices and science-fiction sustainabilities, *Aria* invites readers to imagine both Neo-Venezia and Venice as globally-relevant sources for their own creative solutions to climate change.

**KEYWORDS:** aquapelago, Venice, climate change, media, manga

### Introduction: *Aria* and the mediatized aquatic imaginary

The imaginary possibilities of waterscapes are as varied and pervasive as waterscapes themselves and are best understood not only through real-world aquatic geographies, but also through their representations in media. In fact, aquatic imaginaries in and surrounding media offer a particularly compelling way to explore our relationships with water. Media can reveal our anxieties and expectations around water; MacKinnon (2020), for example, examines depictions of seasteading<sup>1</sup> in speculative fiction such as *Waterworld* and *Snow Crash*, and shows how ocean-based communities are often imagined as responses to societal collapse – a last refuge away from the social and environmental catastrophe of dry-land dystopias. Mediatized representations can also play with, recontextualise, and subvert how we imagine water; Jilkén (2021) shows how the manga (Japanese-style comic book) series *Oblivion High* reinterprets the Scandinavian shapeshifting water spirit *nix* as a suburban Swedish high school student, filtered through the heterosexual female gaze and 'pretty boy' tropes of *shōjo* manga (manga aimed at young girls). MacKinnon (2016), meanwhile, explores

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<sup>1</sup> The practice of establishing permanent floating settlements in international waters.

how ideas of 'islandness' can be formed outside of Earth's atmosphere, using the diverse settings of the sci-fi TV series *Stargate Atlantis* to argue that the role of water, not the land itself, is the most influential in crafting the identity of the titular city of Atlantis, even when reimagined as a space-faring city-ship. Finally, media can be a powerful tool to contest different imagined futures for waterscapes; Rossetto (2021) charts how Venetian residents, activists, and authorities draw on cartographic representations of the lagoon city to construct competing visions for the aquapelago, from an ironic Disney-style "Welcome to Veniceland" map used to protest overtourism, to campaign posters against an administrative division between Venice (the islands) and Mestre (the mainland) drawing on the familiar bird's-eye image of the main islands as a fish to proclaim "Venezia NON è un pesce"<sup>2</sup> – 'Venice is NOT [just] a fish.'

One particularly powerful mediated example of the aquatic imaginary that sits at the confluence of these possibilities is the Japanese manga series *Aria* (2002), by Kozue Amano. Set on a 24th century, terraformed Mars – now called 'Aqua' – *Aria* follows protagonist Akari Mizunashi as she trains to become an Undine<sup>3</sup> (gondolier tour guide) in Neo-Venezia, built to recreate Venice after its 21st century submersion on 'Manhome' (Earth). The design of Neo-Venezia is almost an exact replica of Earth's Venice – from a recreated Piazza San Marco and the Marco Polo Airport (reimagined as Marco Polo Spaceport) to the footprint of the historical city and lagoon itself (Figure 1).<sup>4</sup>

On its own, *Aria* is a relaxing slice-of-life<sup>5</sup> manga that has achieved a great deal of success; it was translated into several languages (including English, Italian, Indonesian, Korean, and more), inspired a three-season anime adaptation (also translated and released around the globe), and was reprinted in a deluxe 'Masterpiece' edition in several languages beginning in 2016. But *Aria* is also worth examining for its particular imaginary possibilities, made legible through a combination of *idealised aquapelagic infrastructure* – which reimagines Venetian models in terms of a sustainable future – and an *off-world aquapelagic imaginary* imprinted with cultural memories of Manhome from Venice, Japan, and beyond. Drawing on both the manga itself and reader commentary through online reviews, we show how this particular combination allows *Aria's* Neo-Venezia to be interpreted as a model for an imagined utopian future in the context of our currently unfolding climate crisis.

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<sup>2</sup> This slogan is also a reference to Tiziano Scarpa's (2000) popular travel guide *Venezia è un pesce*.

<sup>3</sup> As a reviewer identified the term 'Undine' (ウンディーネ *undine* in the original Japanese) here is an important one, used elsewhere to refer to female water nymphs or spirits and often carrying the connotation of "the idealised feminine" (Turalija, 2001, p. 9). Though beyond the scope of this paper, the connections between the term 'Undine', the watery feminine personification of Venice as *la Serenissima*, and the notably increased feminisation of *Aria's* Neo-Venezia – where all gondoliers (Undines) are women and the profession is passed down through matrilineal apprenticeships, in direct contrast to Venice, where the first female gondolier was licensed in 2017 after nearly a millennium of only men (Giuffrida, 2017) – are particularly interesting and worthy of further consideration, especially in terms of gender and femininity in manga.

<sup>4</sup> Here and in all examples drawn from the manga throughout, panels and textboxes within each panel are read from right to left, top to bottom, following the original Japanese layout.

<sup>5</sup> A genre of anime and manga focusing on interactions and relationships, where the rhythms and conversations of characters' everyday lives take narrative precedence over any overarching plot.

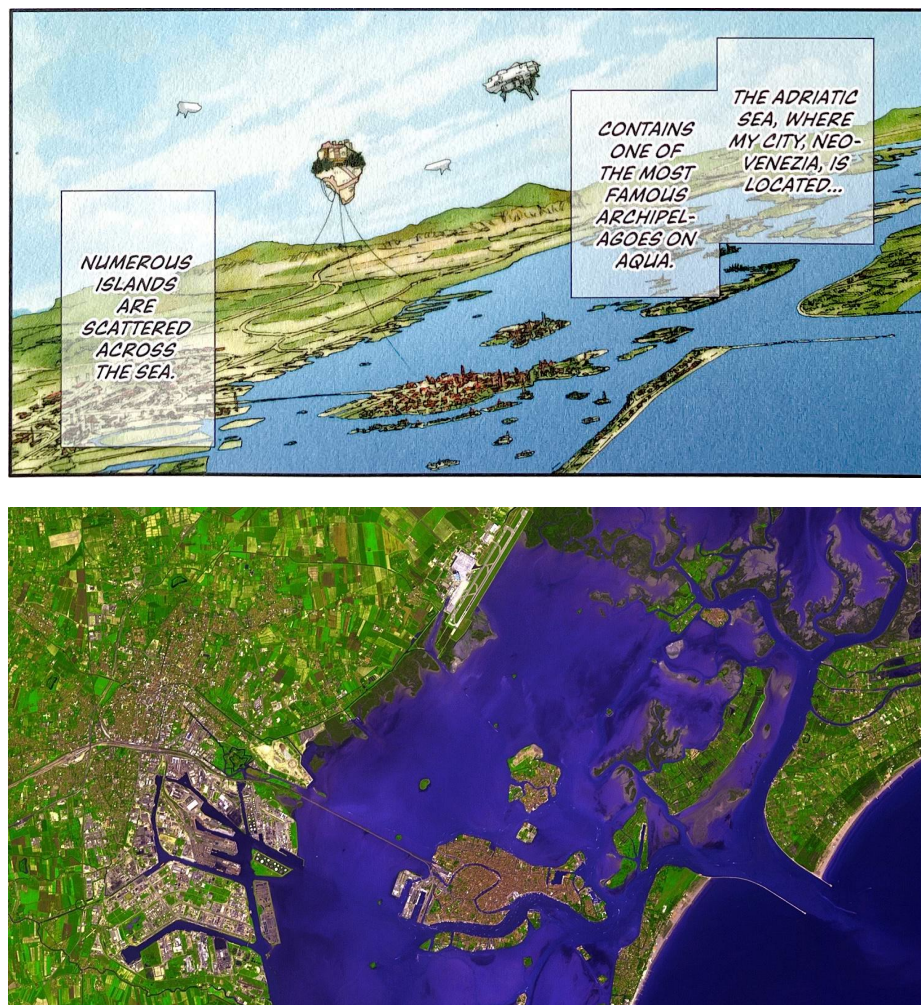


Figure 1 – Neo-Venezia and Venice. (Top, *Aria's Neo-Venezia* [Amano, 2019]; bottom, Manhome's (Earth's) Venice in 2001 [NASA Earth Observatory, via Wikimedia Commons].)

## II. Idealised aquapelagic infrastructure

In conceptualising the aquatic infrastructure which underpins the world of *Aria*, we draw on the concept of the aquapelago (Hayward, 2012), an “assemblage of terrestrial and aquatic spaces generated by human livelihood activities” (Hayward, 2018, p.1). This includes the geography, architecture, and lived-in spaces of Neo-Venezia, as well as everything that might generally be called the ‘infrastructure’ of the lagoon. Neo-Venezia takes Venice’s aquapelagic infrastructure as a starting point but reimagines it in terms of two sustainable themes: solarpunk technologies, and Slow Life.

Solarpunk, a literary and cultural movement, “seeks to answer and embody the question ‘what does a sustainable civilisation look like, and how can we get there?’” (The Solarpunk

Community, 2019). It is characterised by radical optimism, infrastructure as resistance, humanity as part of nature – rather than above or outside it – and the belief in a world where technology and social ecology create a place of collective well-being and sustainable futures (Reina-Rozo, 2021; The Solarpunk Community, 2019). Aesthetically, solarpunk merges the “practical with beautiful, well-designed with green and lush, bright and colorful with earthy and solid” (The Solarpunk Community, 2019). Renewable energy and sustainable technology in the face of human-caused climate change are central to the idea of solarpunk, and solarpunk themes are increasingly present in modern media – from Hayao Miyazaki’s *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* to Wakanda in Marvel’s *Black Panther*, solarpunk introduces audiences to an intersection of nature and technology that prioritises the human experience.

Solarpunk technologies are seen throughout *Aria* – in the wind farms that provide power to Neo-Venezia, the canal locks that let its gondolas travel to and across the mainland, the airships that transport tourists to and from the city – but of particular interest is how *Aria* reimagines the lagoon-controlling infrastructure of Venice for its new off-world context. On Earth, one of the most pressing concerns for Venice is sea level rise and resulting flooding of the city, and the MOSE (*MOdulo Sperimentale Elettromeccanico* ‘Experimental Electromechanical Model’) project – a series of subaquatic dams that can be raised to seal off the lagoon from the ocean during especially high tides – exemplifies the aquapelagic infrastructure which aims to control this phenomenon. On Aqua, Neo-Venezia is faced with a climate challenge on a more fundamental level: the naturally freezing atmosphere and lower gravity of the planet once known as Mars. To overcome these issues in its lagoon, Neo-Venezia relies on two solarpunk interpretations of neo-MOSE-like systems, run by workers known as ‘Salamanders’ and ‘Gnomes.’

Early in the manga, Akari is introduced to Akatsuki Izumo, who works as an apprentice Salamander – a worker whose job it is to maintain and regulate the sunlight and atmosphere on Aqua to ensure its habitability. Akatsuki works on the ‘floating island’ of Ukijima, one of many floating climate control units tethered to Aqua’s surface by massive cables (seen in Figure 1, top). Notably, rather than relying on currently-unimaginable space-age technology, this climate control is performed by manually “tending to a giant kettle” at the top of Ukijima (Figure 2). As Akatsuki tells Akari, Salamanders “aren’t perfect machines,” which means that the climate control units are “not all that precise,” and he asks her to “consider the occasional discomfort part of the charm.”

Later on, Akari also meets Albert “Al” Pitt, who works as a Gnome, regulating the gravity of Aqua from underground. As with the climate control on Ukijima, Al’s work involves no supercomputers or high-tech electronics but instead uses a mechanical system of pipes to hurl ‘gravitational rocks’ towards Aqua’s core to increase the planet’s mass energy and simulate the 1G gravity of Manhome. Likewise, rather than a computer or electronic panel, the entire system is controlled by an ornately decorated pipe organ, which distributes the gravitational rocks around the planet’s core as the Gnomes play on its keyboard and produces a musical sound that Akari likens to “Aqua singing with the voice of a star” (Figure 3).



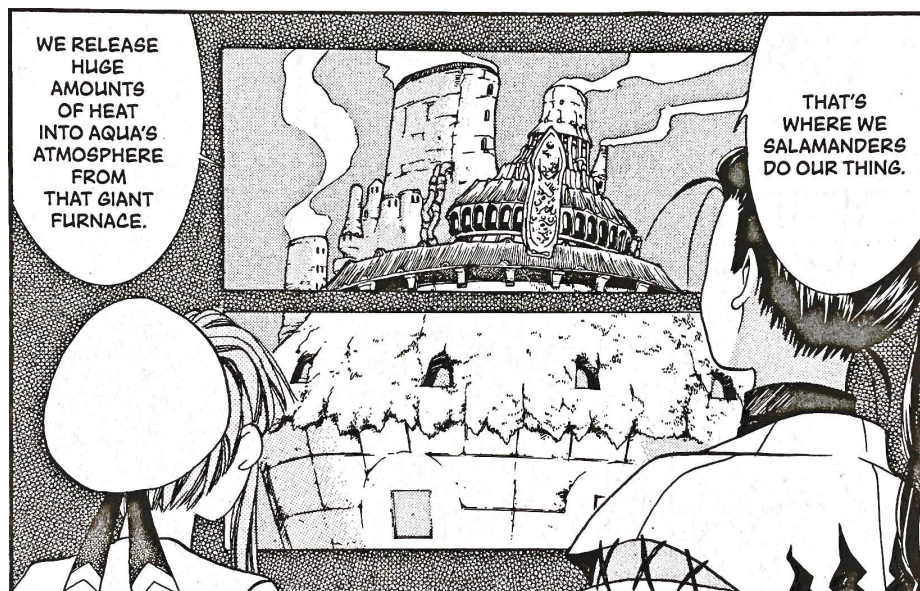


Figure 2 – Ukijima and climate control on Aqua (Amano, 2019).

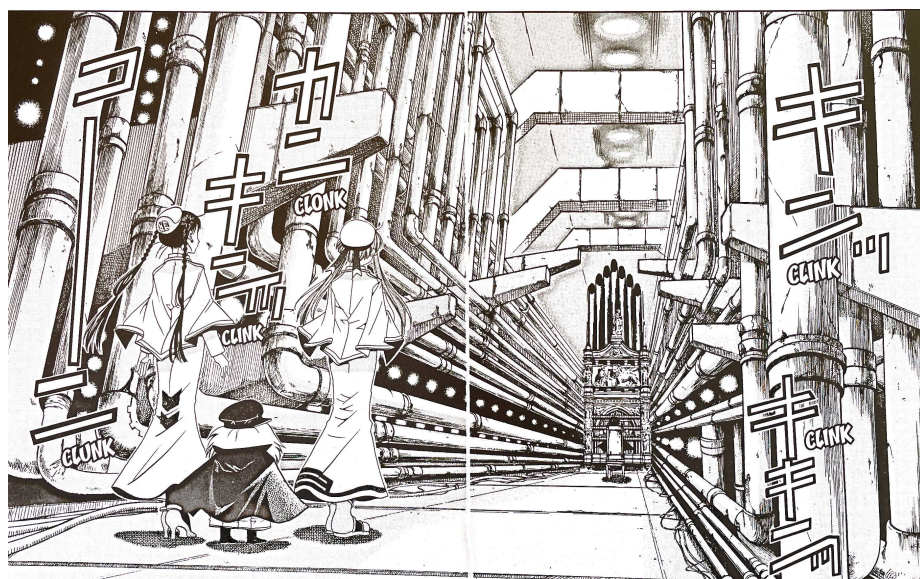


Figure 3 – AI regulating Aqua's gravity via pipe organ (Amano, 2019).

Like MOSE regulating the tides and water levels of modern-day Venice, these systems run by the Salamanders and Gnomes regulate Aqua's climate to make it hospitable for its inhabitants. But importantly, these systems reimagine control of the (Neo-)Venetian lagoon in sustainable, solarpunk terms. In contrast to the “invasive anthropogenic intervention” (Vianello, 2021, p. 94) of MOSE, they leverage technology in a way meant to be deliberately

'low-tech' and unobtrusive, reflecting solarpunk's merging of the "practical with beautiful, well-designed with green and lush" (The Solarpunk Community, 2019); witness the grass roof and ornately decorated top of Ukijima's kettle (Figure 2), and the winged Lion of Saint Mark – the symbol of Venice – which emblazons the top of the gravity organ (Figure 3). The analogue, imperfect nature of both systems – relying on human input and resulting in variation and "occasional discomfort" – further means that they reflect the solarpunk vision of humanity as one part of – rather than the all-important center of – nature; even as Neo-Venezia's residents work to control the climate, they do so in a way meant to steward the lagoon for humans and subaquatic life equally, even if it results in "occasional discomfort."

Importantly, solarpunk technology serves as much more than simply window dressing for *Aria's* Neo-Venezian setting; this ethos and its accompanying "occasional discomfort" are central to setting up a world where Neo-Venezia can reimagine Venetian aquapelagic infrastructure in terms of a central theme of the manga: Slow Life. 'Slow Life,' as both a movement and a philosophy, revolves around an "appreciation of the sensory qualities of everyday life and the environment" (Pink, 2007, p. 64). The origins of Slow Life are traced back to the Italian 'Slow Food' movement, which focuses on preserving and uplifting local food culture with an emphasis on sustainable farming. Purveyors of the movement argue that the capitalist, consumerist ideal of 'Fast Life' "mistake[s] frenzy for efficiency ... disrupts our habits, pervades the privacy of our homes and forces us to eat Fast Foods... [it] has changed our way of being and threatens our environments and landscapes" (Petrini, 2001, p. xxiii), and that Slow Life offers an alternative vision of a life based around natural rhythms, joy and community, and "a firm defense of quiet material pleasure" (Petrini, 2001, p. xxiii). From its initial focus on food, Slow Life has expanded into areas like urban planning (Pink, 2007), fashion (Clark, 2008), tourism (Oh et al., 2016), and even academic scholarship (Mountz et al., 2015).

As a theme, Slow Life features heavily throughout *Aria*, from discussions of slow tourism (the Undines' gondola rides usually turn into all-day adventures and lead to lasting friendships with their clients) to Akari's fascination – often remarked upon by other characters – with the slowly changing rhythms of everyday life through the seasons. Slow Life is also especially apparent in the intentionally-designed aquapelagic infrastructure of Neo-Venezia; its canals are off-limits to motorised watercraft, for instance, and though there are spacecraft and airships floating in the skies above, walking remains the primary mode of transportation for its residents.

One particularly prominent example of *Aria's* reimagining of Venetian infrastructure in terms of Slow Life is in its treatment of the *acqua alta* ('high water') – peak tide events in the Adriatic Sea that results in pervasive and disruptive flooding of Venice's historical city, often completely submerging its pedestrian walkways and rendering many areas impassable. *Acqua alta* has affected Venice regularly since at least the Middle Ages but has increased in both frequency and intensity in recent years, with climate change and globally rising sea levels contributing to this change. In Venice, *acqua alta* is seen as a threat to the city by authorities – the flooding damages buildings, closes businesses, and interferes with tourism – and thus something to be controlled and contained. The MOSE project, for example, intended to guard against the most extreme *acqua alta* events by creating a physical barrier between Venice and the sea, is "premised on a perception of nature as recalcitrant and in need of control" (Vianello, 2021, p. 114).

In Neo-Venezia, however, *aqua alta*<sup>6</sup> is portrayed as a cultural event, on par with the city's many festivals: a dedicated time for relaxation, where businesses close and residents take to the flooded streets to enjoy the city in a new light. *Aqua alta* features in several chapters throughout *Aria* and is never portrayed as a threat to the city or its residents; instead, *Aria's aqua alta* is seen as a way to bring people together in community and an opportunity to slow down and reflect on the beauty of Neo-Venezia from (literal) new angles. As seen in Figure 4, panels during *aqua alta* events are frequently drawn from a bird's-eye perspective that highlights reflections of the sky and surrounding buildings, as well as Akari's expressions of joy and gratitude for the city as she looks up towards the sky (and reader).

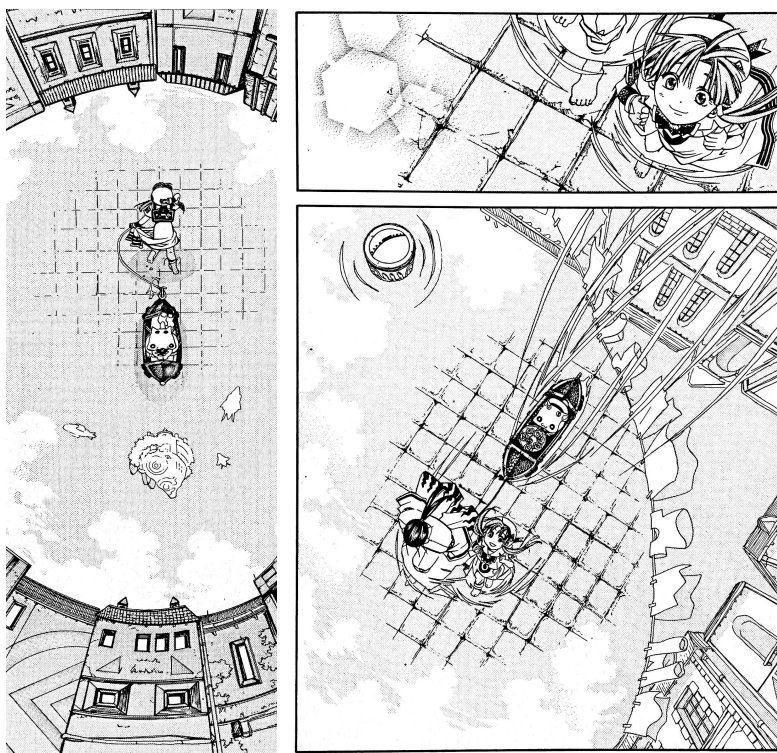


Figure 4 – *Aqua alta* in Neo-Venezia (Amano, 2019).

The Slow Life philosophy of Neo-Venezia can also be seen in the city's postal infrastructure, highlighted by an early chapter in which Akari helps an elderly postman with his daily mail rounds. In modern-day Venice, letters are delivered by mail carriers using small-wheeled carts on the city's pedestrian pathways. In Neo-Venezia, however, the post is delivered via gondola – mail is hoisted up from the canals using a special pole to reach the mailboxes positioned at the walkway level (Figure 5).

<sup>6</sup> While the phenomenon is known as *aqua alta* in Italian (and in the Italian translation of *Aria*), in *Aria's* English translation it is rendered as '*aqua alta*', possibly referring to the planet Aqua.



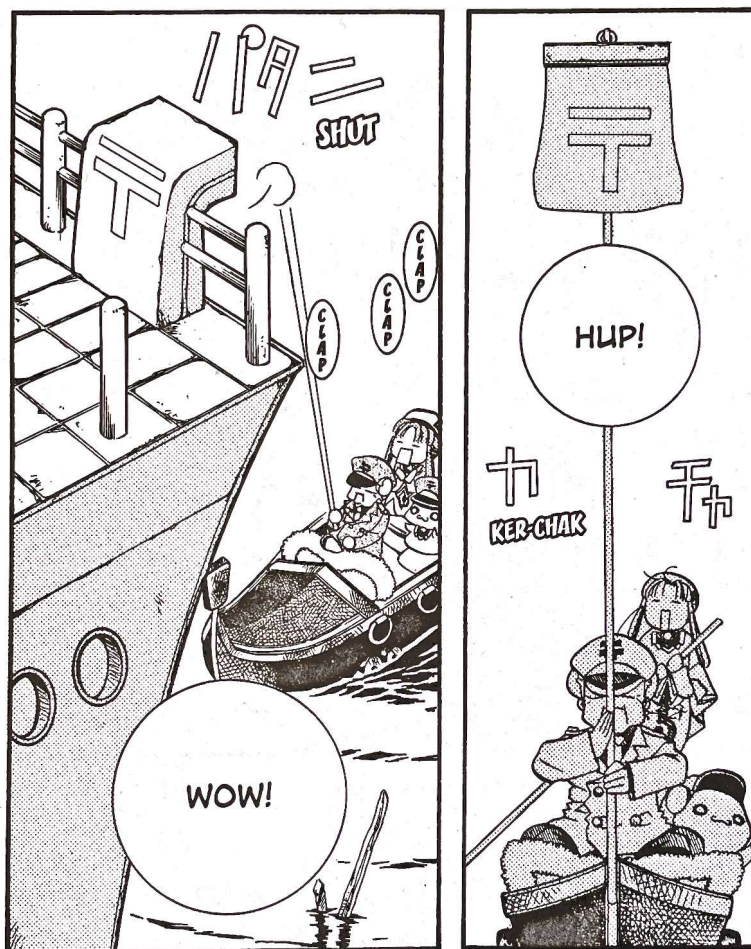


Figure 5 – Mail delivery in Neo-Venezia (Amano, 2019).

During her time with the postman, Akari remarks that she had never noticed how many mailboxes line the canals of Neo-Venezia. The postman responds that “people [in Neo-Venezia] still prefer letters over digital correspondence. They don’t really send emails. I guess it’s because... letters give off a different feeling.” The residents’ embrace of Slow Life in their postal infrastructure – preferring slowly hand-delivered mail over instantaneous email – is then expanded on in the postman’s comment about Neo-Venezia as a whole (Figure 6): “Everyone in this city wants to do things the slow, troublesome way. It’s so inconvenient and hard to get around,” he muses, to which Akari – channeling the textual authority of a narrator – replies “But that’s... what makes this city wonderful.”

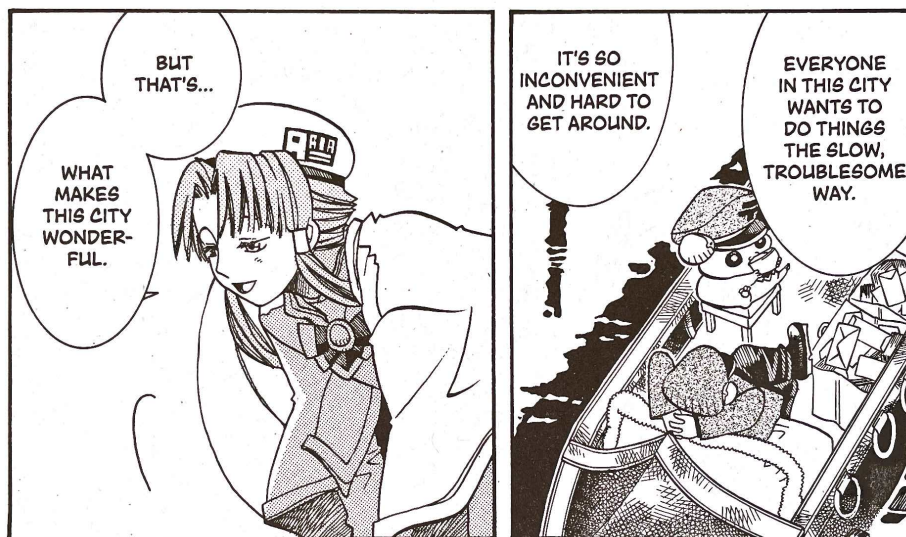


Figure 6 – Slow Life as a central feature of Neo-Venezia (Amano, 2019).

The postman's comment is perhaps even more telling of the importance of Slow Life in Neo-Venezia in the original Japanese (Amano, 2002), reproduced and translated below<sup>7</sup>:

この町の連中はわざわざ面倒なことをやりたがるんだよな。

*Everyone in this city intentionally does things the troublesome way.*

A few differences from the English translation further highlight the Slow Life philosophy in the Japanese original. First, the adverb わざわざ *wazawaza* 'intentionally / deliberately / going out of one's way' implies that not only do Neo-Venetians *like* doing things slowly, they do it with *intentionality*, even going out of their way to do so. Second, the *kanji* (Japanese characters) translated here as "troublesome" – 面倒 *mendō* – carry the secondary meaning of 'care' or 'attention', as in 'to care for' or 'to look after', reinforcing the idea that the "occasional discomforts" of Neo-Venezia are an essential part of how its residents care for the city and each other.

This intentionality is central to *Aria's* Slow Life: everything on Aqua is deliberate. While the residents of Neo-Venezia have access to technology like computers and email – and even spaceships – they choose to write letters instead of emails; the Salamanders are in complete control of Aqua's climate, but the *aqua alta* is allowed to take place – in fact, it is *made* to take place. It is precisely this mix of hypertechnological and hypotechnological elements – the solarpunk and the Slow Life – that makes the aquapelagic infrastructure of *Aria* so utopian.

<sup>7</sup> Here and throughout, translations from Japanese are by the second author.

### III. Off-world imaginaries

While this combination of hyper- and hypotechnological elements – of solarpunk and Slow Life – makes Neo-Venezia's infrastructure utopian, what makes *Aria* readable as a *utopian imagined future* also has to do with its *aquapelagic imaginary*: the “figures, symbols, myths and narratives generated by human engagement with [the aquapelago]” (Hayward, 2021, p. 18). Neo-Venezia resembles Venice in its cityscape and waterways, but crucially, it is not simply ‘Venice on Mars.’ Its infrastructure is interpreted in terms of a distinct cultural configuration: an aquapelagic imaginary imprinted with memories and cultural practices from Venice, Japan, and beyond.

First, Neo-Venezia's aquapelagic imaginary does borrow heavily from Venice. As an Undine tasked with guiding tourists around the city on her gondola, Akari tells her clients stories about (recreated) Venetian landmarks and their associated legends, like the *Ponte dei Sospiri* (‘Bridge of Sighs’), where convicts passing from their sentencing to prison would be afforded one final view of Venice (Figure 7). But more than simply retelling stories of Venice's history on Manhome, Akari and her friends keep its traditions alive on Aqua, by participating in Neo-Venezian adaptations of Venetian festivals (Figure 8). They race gondolas in the *Vogalonga*, receive roses from suitors during the *Festa del Bòcolo*, watch fireworks from floating feasts on the lagoon for the *Festa del Redentore*, and ceremonially wed themselves to the sea in the *Sposalizio del Mare*.

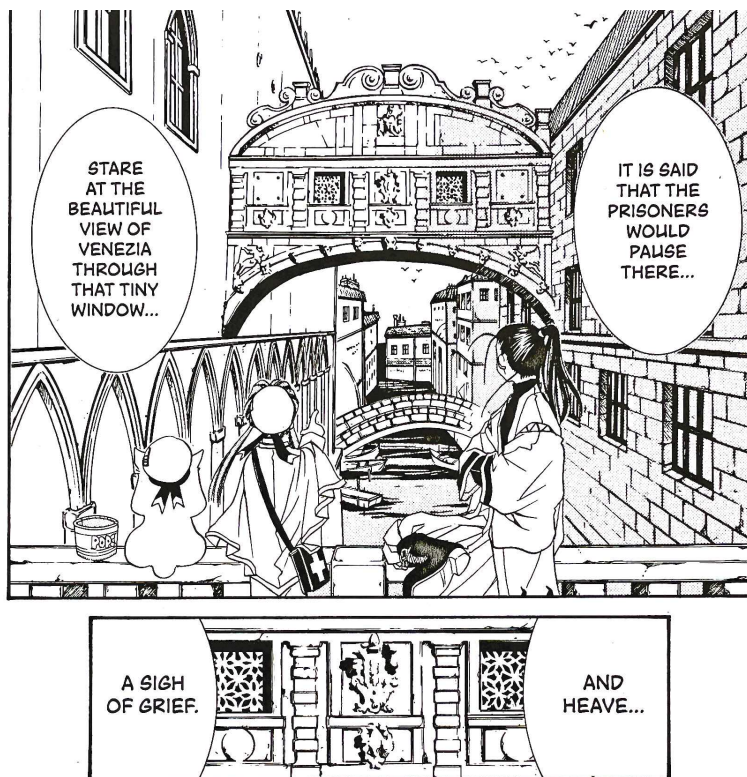


Figure 7 – The *Ponte dei Sospiri* (Amano, 2019).



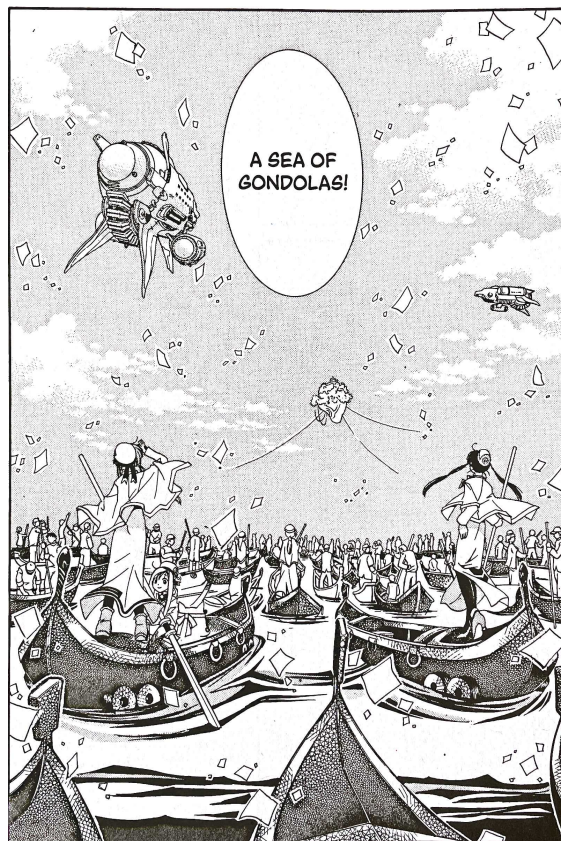


Figure 8 - Venetian festivals in Neo-Venezia (top: the *Vogalonga*; bottom: the *Festa del Redentore* [Amano, 2019].)

In addition to these traditions from Venice, however, the aquapelagic imaginary of Neo-Venezia is also conspicuously shaped by traditions, legends, and landscape of Japan. Early on, for instance, Akari and her teacher, Alicia, row to an island in the lagoon renowned for

its fall foliage. The island's landscape resembles Kyoto's Fushimi Inari-taisha shinto shrine, with its distinctive path of tightly packed *torii* gates rising up steep hills towards the top of the island (Figure 9, left). As Akari climbs, she loses sight of Alicia, and they become separated during a powerful sunshower – a weather event known in some parts of Japan as *kitsune no yomeiri* ('the fox's wedding'), for its unexpected and somewhat supernatural nature. Disoriented, Akari begins to see lights floating in the distance – a phenomenon *also* known as *kitsune no yomeiri* in parts of Japan, for its resemblance to the paper lanterns of a wedding party seen from a great distance, and for foxes' predilection for playing tricks on humans in Japanese folklore. Beyond this metaphor, however, Akari actually experiences the legend behind the expressions, as a series of escalating supernatural occurrences culminate in her stumbling on an actual ghostly wedding procession of figures wearing *kitsune* ('fox') masks (Figure 9, right):

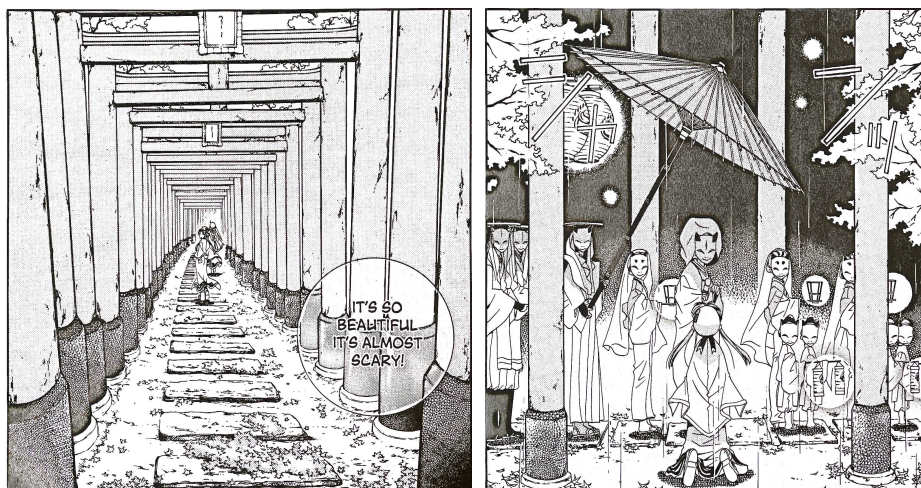


Figure 9 - Akari discovers the *kitsune no yomeiri* (Amano, 2019).

Later on, when Akari and her fellow apprentice-gondoliers go to train with Neo-Venezia's most renowned, now-retired Undine – known as 'Grandma' – they meet her at her home in a landscape heavily inspired by the Japanese countryside; the train stop where they alight is framed by a roadside Buddhist shrine, for instance. Then, after their day of training, consisting of activities pulled from an idealised Japanese childhood summer vacation itinerary – picking corn in the garden, catching insects, stargazing – the Undines are seen sleeping in Grandma's house in a scene that similarly evokes the collective nostalgia of a quintessential Japanese countryside summer: sleeping on futons arranged on *tatami* (mats woven from rush grass) flooring, enclosed in a *kaya* (large mosquito net protecting several sleepers) with the room's sliding doors open to the outside (Figure 10).



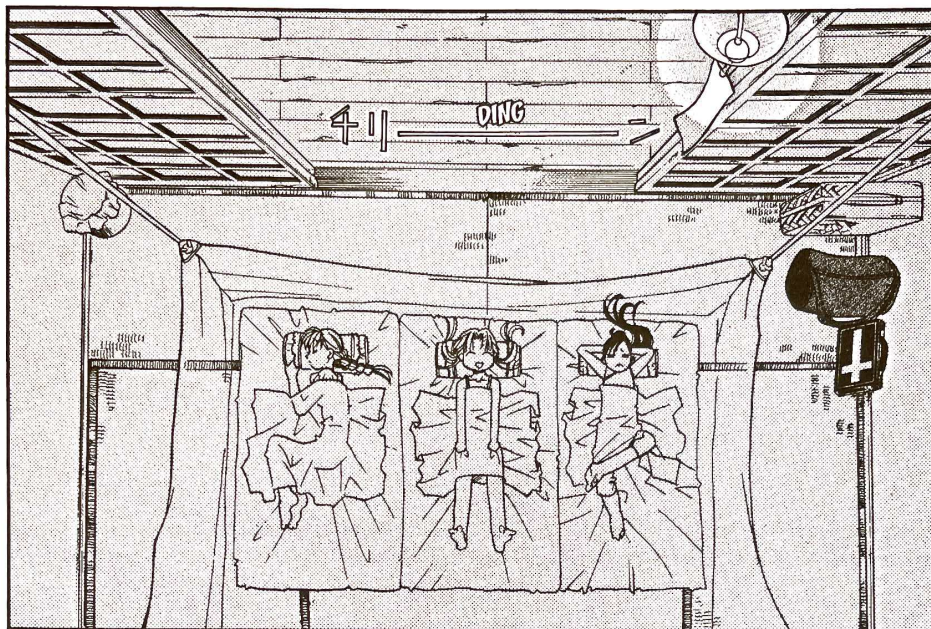


Figure 10 – The Undines at Grandma’s home (Amano, 2019).

Along with traditions imported from Venice and Japan, the Neo-Venezian aquapelagic imaginary also tends to blend the two together in novel ways. One early example is in the cultural significance of *fūrin* – Japanese wind chimes – in Neo-Venezia. In Japan, these small glass chimes are often placed outside in summer, with paper ribbons hanging from the bell to catch the breeze. In *Aria*, the *fūrin* is reimagined as a specifically Neo-Venezian tradition – a “special product you can only get on Aqua” – with a bioluminescent stone made from a mineral found only at the bottom of Aqua’s oceans replacing the traditional metal bell of the Japanese version. These Neo-Venezian *fūrin* even have their own festival: stalls (with Japanese-language signage) line the central Piazza San Marco selling all kinds of *fūrin* (Figure 11, left), which are then rowed out to the lagoon at night, where hundreds of the glowing stones are returned to the bottom of the sea at the same time, just as their light begins to fade (Figure 11, right).

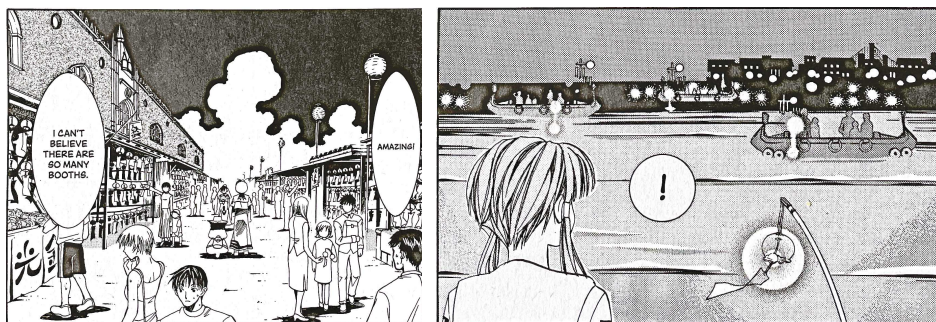


Figure 11 – Neo-Venezian *fūrin* festival (Amano, 2019).

Elsewhere, activities more typical of either Japanese or Venetian culture are often infused with elements from the other, mixing these two aquapelagic imaginaries into a new, Neo-Venezian model. When Akari and her Undine friends visit an *onsen* – Japanese hot springs – for instance, the bathhouse keeps the familiar trappings of the Japanese model – the *noren* (暖簾) curtains with the *kanji* separating the women's (女) and men's (男) bathing areas, the wooden buckets used to pour water over oneself – but exchanges traditional *onsen* architecture for an abandoned Venetian *palazzo* ('palace') (Figure 11, top left, bottom left). And in celebrating the *Festa del Redentore* – a Venetian festival where spectators watch fireworks while feasting with family and friends on boats in the San Marco basin off the Piazza San Marco – Akari and her friends dine in a traditional Japanese style, at a low table seated on floor cushions and sharing communal dishes (Figure 12, right).

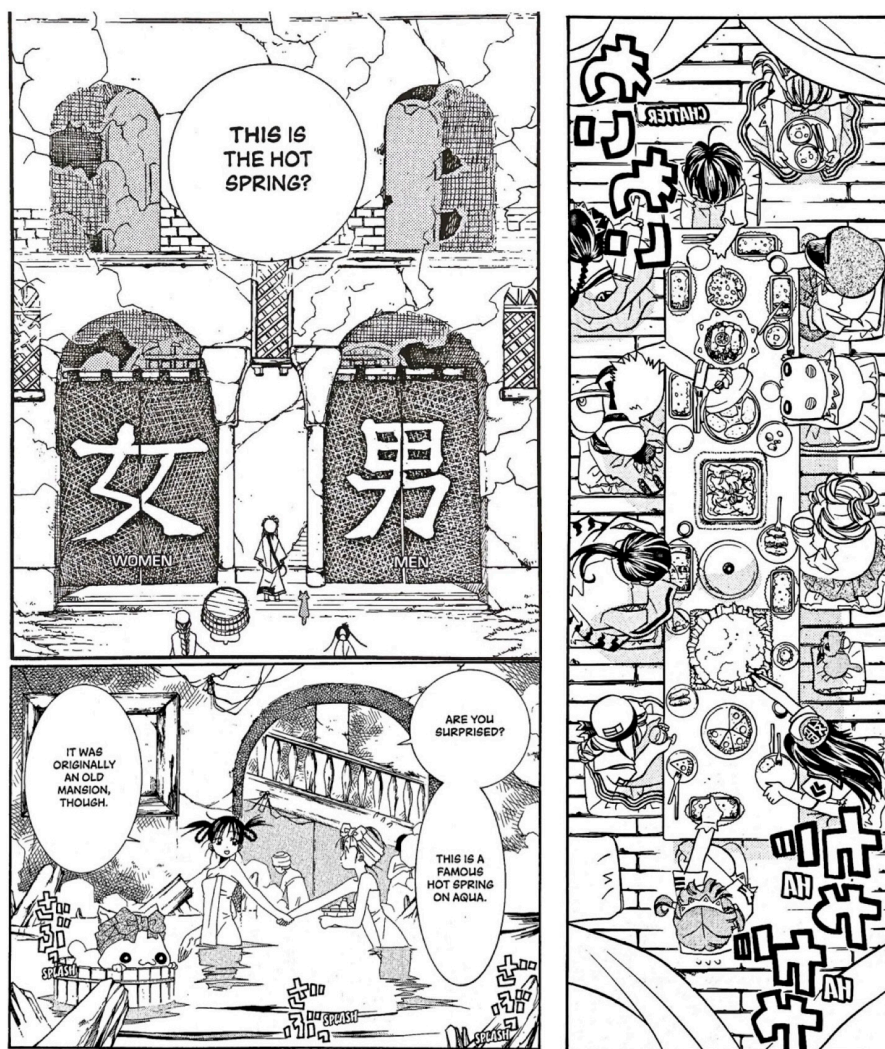


Figure 12 - Neo-Venezian *onsen* (top left, bottom left), and the *Festa del Redentore* (right) (Amano, 2019).



Beyond festivals and special events, the rhythms of everyday life on Neo-Venezia echo this unique aquapelagic imaginary. As one example, Akari's mail run with the postman described above begins with the entire postal team performing *rajio taisō* ('radio calisthenics') – 'warm up' exercises that often take place before group labour – (Figure 13, left), and the Cannaregio Post Office where they work prominently sports the Japanese postal code mark (〒) on its Venetian façade (Figure 13, right).

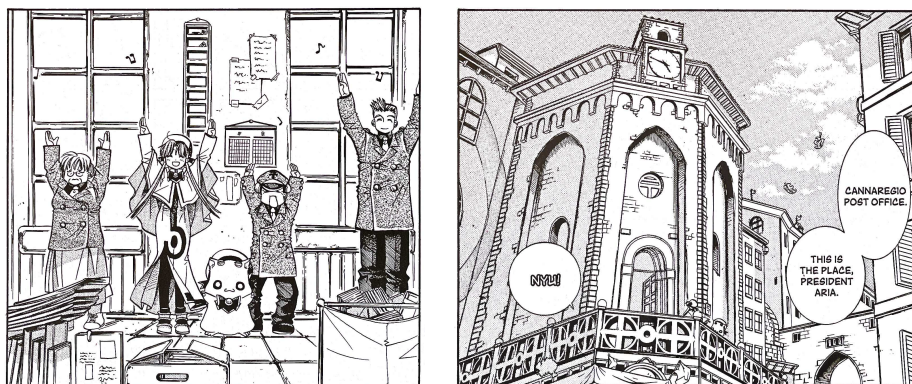


Figure 13 - *Rajio taisō* (left) at the Cannaregio Post Office (right) (Amano, 2019).

The effect of this particular aquapelagic imaginary is that the ideas and promises of Venice – as filtered through the imagery and cultural configuration of Neo-Venezia – are no longer reserved solely for Venice, for a specific time and/or place, or even for a specific planet; rather, these ideas are something that can work for humanity as a whole – for all of 'Manhome' – to live harmoniously, slowly, and joyfully in a climate-changed future. In other words, while the idealised aquapelagic infrastructure of Neo-Venezia invites readers into a utopian aquapelago, it is its aquapelagic imaginary – expanded well beyond that of simply 'Venice' – that invites them to imagine this utopia as a *possible* sustainable future.

#### IV. Imagining a utopian aquapelago

The waterways of Neo-Venezia, then, frame an imagined world where life has successfully adapted to a climate-changed future, not just for Venice, but for all of 'Manhome.' Looking beyond the text itself, we can examine how the readers of *Aria* have interpreted Neo-Venezia as a utopian aquapelago through fan discourse surrounding the manga, in Japanese, English, and – because of the series' popularity in Italy – Italian. In particular, manga fans often circulate and discuss their readings of texts via online 'reviews' on message boards and dedicated websites (such as Goodreads and MyAnimeList), from which we draw reader quotes here.

One common theme that reader reviews of *Aria* often touch on is the prevalence of nature within the series, and how its representation is used to provide commentary on the relationships we have with nature in our modern lives. User 'highig' on Japanese review site 読書メーター ('Book Meter') comments that:

現在急速に失われていく、人の感情と自然の織り成す “情景” をそこに感じられるのだ

*In this work, readers can feel human emotions and nature woven together, something that has been rapidly disappearing in the modern day (highig, 2016).*

Unlike the origins of some other mediatised representations of water-based societies, such as how “seasteading often originate[s] as reactive adaptations to catastrophic events rather than an attempt to purposefully design and attain a form of utopia” (MacKinnon, 2020, p. 37), Neo-Venezia as a mirror of modern Venice highlights the minute differences that create meaningful utopian imagery. Embracing the beauty of the natural world and tying that beauty to the heart of *Aria*’s story allows those who consume this media to consider why this connection is “rapidly disappearing in the modern day.”

In a review on their personal blog entitled 天野こずえの漫画『ARIA』は人生のバイブル (“Kozue Amano's ARIA is my life's bible”), reader “Marooon45” explicitly argues that the purpose of *Aria* is to encourage readers to reflect on their relationship with the world we currently inhabit:

美しい風景を描く人（天野こずえ）は作品中だけでなく、今を生きる視聴者達に作品外でも世界の美しさを再認識してもらうことを目的として、作品を作っていると僕は勝手に考えている。

*I believe that the goal of the people who create works with beautiful scenery, such as Kozue Amano, is to have the audience reexamine and reaffirm the beauty of the world outside of their work (Marooon45, 2021).*

By examining the places in which nature and non-technological human activity are allowed to thrive in *Aria*, Marooon45 further interprets the relationship between infrastructure and Slow Life as an *intentional* distinction made by Amano.

そこは天野こずえが、「効率化された近未来」と「自然的で人間的な営みを大事にする世界」とあえて2つのギャップを狙って作っているのだと思う。

*I think that Kozue Amano dares to create a gap between a technologically optimized future and a world that prioritizes fundamentally natural human activity (Marooon45, 2021).*

Marooon45’s word choice further emphasises this deliberateness. The adverb あえて *aete*, ‘daringly’ or ‘purposefully,’ acknowledges the consequences or challenges of the action taken – in this case, that the implicit meaning behind the explicitly distinct “technologically optimized future” and the “world that prioritises fundamentally natural human activity” may be being lost or misinterpreted by the readers of *Aria*. By contextualising the places in which Slow Life is accessible as those created by the technological optimisation on Aqua, readers of *Aria* are compelled to scrutinise this intersection in their own lives: how can we sustainably ‘technologically optimise’ our future in a way that prioritises ‘natural human activity’, rather than technological advancement for its own sake? This question is at the heart of both the solarpunk and Slow Life movements, and *Aria* offers Neo-Venezia as one inspiring model to follow.



Similar readings are not limited to Japanese-speaking fans. Reader “AndreBB,” posting on the Italian review website AnimeClick, argues that by reading *Aria*<sup>8</sup>:

*ci si è resi conto del mondo che scorre attorno a noi e ci si è potuti fermare e farsi catturare da esso, apprezzandolo un po' di più*

*we become aware of the world that passes around us and we can stop and be captured by it, appreciating it a little more* (AndreBB, n.d.).

The act of consuming this story inspires readers to slow down and take in the beauty of what we do have, instead of only idealising fictional imaginaries. Being able to see what a sustainable future might look like allows for the appreciation of what the world looks like now. AndreBB continues this argument in their post:

*Neo Venezia [è] ... costruita sulla vecchia impronta di Venezia, riducendo però la tecnologia al minimo indispensabile, e proprio qui sta il messaggio ... per apprezzare [la quotidianità] al meglio, non c'è la necessità della tecnologia e delle innovazioni, ma proprio la semplicità.*

*Neo-Venezia is built on the old footprint of Venice, but reducing technology to the bare minimum, and this is exactly the message: to appreciate everyday life to the fullest, there's no need for technology and innovation, only simplicity* (AndreBB, n.d.).

Again, Neo-Venezia is interpreted here as not just a utopia, but an *attainable* utopia, one that is relevant to the world around us and within our reach, which makes us as readers reexamine what we can do with the world we have now, taking the Neo-Venezian model as a starting point. Technology in Neo-Venezia is used in ways to encourage people to live without it: the infrastructure underpinning the city allows its residents to relax during the *aqua alta*; to choose to write letters instead of send emails; to live in a place where the subtlety of technology allows the beauty of nature to be at the forefront of their lives. User “Gundroog” writing on MyAnimeList puts this idea into simple terms:

*Amamo's got a real talent to capture beauty of both nature and industry as well as their uncommon harmony* (Gundroog, 2017).

Neo-Venezia, using the familiar landscape of Venice as a backdrop, is both written and interpreted as commentary on our relationship with technology, nature, and how those two are inextricably intertwined. And, as reader “lisen” shows in their Goodreads review, even just the act of reading *Aria* is enough to inspire change, and a genuine appreciation for “the sensory qualities of everyday life and the environment” (Pink, 2007, p. 64):

*Aria truly touched my heart ... without being too serious it touches on topics such as ... our relationship with nature. this just made me so happy and made me want to go outside and look at the trees* (lisen, 2023).

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<sup>8</sup> Here and throughout, translations from Italian are by the first author.

## Conclusions: Towards a brighter future

In both its text and readers' reactions to it, *Aria* illustrates how mediated representations of waterscapes have the potential to reimagine sustainable futures through the particular affordances of (science-)fictionality and their media. The (science-)fictionality of *Aria* allows Kozue Amano to reimagine the aquapelagic infrastructure of Venice as Neo-Venezia: a utopian vision for living in a climate-changed future, in which solarpunk technologies set up a world where Slow Life is not only possible but embraced and celebrated. Fictionality also allows for the particular aquapelagic imaginary – imprinted with memories and cultural practices from Venice, Japan, and beyond – that lets Neo-Venezia be read as a tangible imagined future, inviting readers to take the city as a starting point in imagining sustainable solutions for our own planet. Finally, the medium of manga – with its focus on reader-paced exposition, page-filling linework art, and “an array of graphical and linguistic strategies to engage readers, bodily as well as mentally and emotionally” (Jude, 2017, p. 35) – lets readers explore Neo-Venezia in a way that mirrors the Slow Life at the heart of those imagined sustainable futures: joyfully, slowly, and with an appreciation for the beauty in every day and every panel.

Finally, it is worth noting that, for *Aria*, the waterscape itself may be thought of as central to how – and why – readers interpret Neo-Venezia as a vision for a sustainable utopian future. Venice occupies a special position in the global imagination: at the paradoxical confluences of the local and global, modern and historical; at once a victim of overtourism and rising sea levels, and a symbol of resilience and idealised living on a human scale. Venice “can be considered as a unique place on which the world's eyes are focused: a desired mirage, a benchmark, a *laboratoire*, a model to strive for or an example not to be followed” (Cavallo et al., 2021, p. 13). In this context, *Aria's* reimagining of the Venetian aquapelago in terms of global cultural practices and sci-fi sustainabilities is particularly powerful, because it invites readers to imagine both Neo-Venezia and Venice itself – and aquapelagic imaginaries more generally – as globally-relevant sources for creative solutions to climate change.

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