

MULTIDIRECTIONAL THALASSOLOGY

Comparative ecologies between the Venetian Lagoon and the Indian Ocean

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ABSTRACT: This article merges discourses from Indian Ocean studies, Island Studies, performance art and decolonial methodologies to offer interdisciplinary ways of thinking about La Serenissima and its navigational histories. It is a transdisciplinary speculative entry, part empirical, part analytical, part applied phenomenology. We write this as a collaboration between two members of the Harmattan Theater company, a New York City based environmental performance ensemble applying environmental theory to site-specific performances engaging oceans and islands. The article is driven by the following research questions: What are the historic relationalities between the Venice lagoon and the Indian Ocean? How has the *acqua alta* flooding of Venice, accompanied by the mnemonic histories of the Venetian lagoon, impacted understandings of lagoon cultures in the global South, particularly the Malabar Coast of South Asia? This question has propelled the artistic and academic research of May Joseph and Sofia Varino across environmental history, island studies and performance. Drawing on histories of Venetian navigation and lagoon culture, Joseph and Varino propose a comparative lagoon aesthetics, one that would link two archipelagic regions, the Venetian Lagoon and the extended archipelagic region of the Laccadive Sea of India. While we believe a contemporary archipelagic study connecting these two regions does not currently exist, the historical archives suggest otherwise. We draw on the Venetian Camaldolese monk and cartographer Fra Mauro's *Mappa Mundi* from the 15th Century to initiate this comparative dialogue between North/South island ecologies, seafaring histories and ocean futures affected by climate change and rising sea levels. This research is part of a book that Joseph and Varino are co-writing on islands, archipelagos, coastal regions and climate change, drawing on a ten-year collaboration working with large-scale site-specific environmental performance as research, activism and embodied phenomenology.

KEYWORDS: Indian Ocean, South Asia, Venetian lagoons, islands, maritime history, decolonial performance, ecology

Prologue

In May 2020, Harmattan Theater was scheduled to do a performance on the Ponte del Diavolo (the 'Devil's Bridge'), Venice's oldest stone bridge without a handrail. It was to be the repetition of a performance that we, May Joseph and Sofia Varino, had created together

on the bridge at sunrise on a sunny November morning in 2014 (Figure 1). This repetition was intended to accompany a talk for the “Living, Narrating and Representing Venice and its Lagoon” conference, organised by *Shima* and Ca’ Foscari University. Sometime in early February, as concerns about COVID-19 and the coronavirus pandemic increased in Italy and across much of Western Europe, the conference organisers sent out email messages postponing the event. Within a few days, COVID-19 had gone viral in every possible sense, and what came to be called ‘cancellation culture’ had become pervasive, with social life moved online as Zoom and other similar platforms gradually became the main means of communication for so many.



Figure 1 – Harmattan Theater performance on Ponte del Diavolo, Torcello, Venice (May Joseph, 2014).

Our planned talk and performance in Venice were meant to contribute to a historically informed empirical phenomenology of climate change as it impacts water-bound ecosystems, considering the circuitry of urban infrastructures in a city like Venice. As such, what we often referred to as *Acqua Alta II* or the ‘Venice Project’ was meant to contribute to the fields of environmental philosophy, decolonial history, climate aesthetics as well as embodied phenomenology and artistic research. Soon after the conference was cancelled, the COVID-19 pandemic came to occupy a more and more central role in everyday life, particularly for those living in high density urban areas, where lockdown measures eventually came into effect. Once the links between the pandemic and climate change, deforestation and habitat loss became clearer, as shown in a steady stream of news and scientific articles, the viral contours of climate change structured our daily embodied existence wherever we were, affecting marginalised communities and especially impacting racialised, disabled and ageing minorities. The novel coronavirus had found a way into our collective non/human corpus, coming to literally inhabit far too many individual bodies with disastrous consequences. At the same time, the global Black Lives Matter movement gained momentum, further establishing networks beyond its solid foundation as a US based movement, instigating and supporting racial justice activism on a transnational scale. As our ‘Venice Project’ receded further into the background of managing the daily chaos of that second quarter of 2020, new questions came to occupy our minds and shape our thinking around climate change, maritime histories, archipelagic geographies and the new environmental configurations of our daily lives. How can we respond, how can we

participate, how can we be present in and through the multiplying crises of our times when we are required to stay safe, remain distanced, avoid physical contact and seek protection within the walls of our homes or behind masked faces? We remain exposed within the bounds of our confinement and becoming acutely aware of our own and everyone's vulnerability is precisely what can help us navigate our troubled pandemic times. A multidirectional thalassology began to emerge as our method for thinking capaciously across all these lines of flight.

Venetians in the Malabar

At the centre of a dimly lit room in the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana in Venice hangs the magnificent *geographicus incomparabilis* (Braudel, 1979: 407) of Venice, Fra Mauro's 1450 *Mappa Mundi*. Scalloped at the top of the blue and gold canvas with turquoise and white waves lies the archipelagic global South. Redolent in hues of green, brown and red, the far-flung islands of the Maldives, the Andaman Islands, the Malabar Coast and the archipelagos of Malaysia and Indonesia occupy the upper third of the map. This region, which historian Hiram Woodward (2004) argues was an "integral unit" to Buddhist flows into the 9th Century, included Nusantara Archipelago (Manguin, 1993; Manguin, Mani and Wade [eds], 2011).

Delicately adorned floating islands from South Asia to the South China Seas structure *Mappa Mundi's* startling upside-down orientation. The Malabar coast is prominently marked on it (Joseph, 2019a). Joseph gasps when she finally beholds this extraordinary map in Venice, the reason for her visit. A swirl of seas, the *Mappa Mundi* positions today's East Africa, India and the island of Ceylon in its geographical north. Fra Mauro's rendering of the world was influenced by Ptolemy's *Geographica* as well as the travels of Marco Polo and Nicola Conti through the Malabar region of Koulam (Quilon), Cochin, and Calicut (Bracciolini, 2004; Polo, [c. 1300] 1926). The *Mappa Mundi* is one of the main historical sources for devising the site-specific performance *Acqua Alta* (2014), directed and choreographed by May Joseph, and performed by Harmattan performers Sofia Varino and Marit Bugge on Venice's earliest inhabited mudflat, Torcello.

Fra Mauro's decentring *Mappa Mundi*, gilt with lapis lazuli blue, vermilion red and gold, is a testament to what Fernand Braudel describes as "what the world looked like to an Italian in 1450" (2019a: 29). In the period of what Braudel (2014) delineates as "the long Middle Ages," spanning the Medieval to the Renaissance era, Venice was an archipelago whose origins lay in the history of flight and refuge from its mainland. Its glory as a trading city hinged on its knowledge of the land and sea routes to Asia during the medieval period (Braudel, 1995). The sources of the Murano-born Mauro's *Mappa Mundi* were rooted in the global travels of the two Venetian travellers, Marco Polo and Nicola Conti, from China to India through the Middle East and back to Europe, among other archival references such as Pliny, Ptolemy and Abyssinian visitors to Florence (Cattaneo, 2011).

The 15th Century visually disorienting *Mappa Mundi* allows island theorists to ask questions about comparative geographies in startling ways. It stages the tension between what Bruno Latour (2018) calls the "terrestrial" and the "planetary." Latour argues that the scales of our conversations on climate have been deflected to the Sirius point of view. We speak of the planetary while looking downward from the heavens, losing sight of terra firma from the point of view of the earth beneath our feet and the world around us. Fra Mauro's planetary orbit captures this escalating dialectic between the terrestrial and the

planetary from the vantage point of a decentred, small island perspective, that of 15th Century Venice. It privileges the marine sphere as the planet's foundational materiality. The inverted *imago mundi* documents information on nautical, navigational and commercial knowledge for western epistemic frameworks in its cartouches and legends. The *Mappa Mundi* depicts the world as “a sea of islands” (Hau'ofa, 1994: 1), drawing the spectator into a geopoetics of islands (Balasopoulos, 2008) and situating Venice at the centre of a comparative new thalassology, an emerging archive of the seas preceding Vasco da Gama's sea route to India.



Figure 2 - *Mappa Mundi* (Fra Mauro, 1450)

In their influential article ‘The Mediterranean and the ‘New Thalassology,’ Peregrine Horden and Nicolas Purcell state:

The systematic comparison of real and metaphorical seas can suggest a new configuration of history, and one that might attain a global scale. So promising, indeed, does the notion of a sea or an ocean appear for this task that the term “the new thalassology” has seemed an appropriate coinage to denote it. (2006: 723).

Fra Mauro's *Mappa Mundi* occupies a historically significant position in the emergence of such a critical study of sea and ocean epistemologies by foregrounding islands. It presents a Venetian world view of an island-city that was part empirical and part mythic. Venice was a pivotal centre in the convoluted history of sea empires. Its maritime identity, however, was always situated alongside the unrecorded histories of multiply dispersed ocean journeys across the Global South. This hidden history signalled by the few diaries left by navigators such as Marco Polo, Nicola Conti and Ludovico de Varthema, gesture to the multi-sited repercussions of La Serenissima's global reach. Such a dispersed history of Venice's islandness necessitates imaginative detours across its multilayered navigational pathways. According to Angelo Cattaneo (2011), Fra Mauro's *Mappa Mundi* is arguably the most comprehensive surviving document of how the world was imagined from the perspective of a Venetian in the 15th Century.

To embark on a study of comparative island geographies requires innovative research methods. One approach towards a critical comparative study of a maritime city such as Venice is Michael Rothberg's (2009) concept of multidirectional methodology, which offers an invigorating way into comparative geospatial thinking. He argues that to fully engage with the junctures of minor, erased or vanished histories, the archivist has to forge multidirectional linkages. The violence of colonial pasts necessitates unexpected detours in the construction of a working archive. One has to interrogate *what counts as archive* using a transversal approach that cannot be located in any single site, region or genre of documentation. Rothberg invites the comparative historian to combine empirical history with other forms of accounting for the past. Memory for Rothberg is key to opening up the spheres of multidirectional research.

Rothberg's methodological suggestions liven up the literary and cartographic possibilities posed by Fra Mauro's *Mappa Mundi*. The world in his map is a relational one of islands linked through the accumulating memories of cartographers and travellers. Attesting to the deep historic, ontological and aesthetic attunement connecting Venice to the oceans of the world, the *Mappa Mundi* captures projected uncertainties about the nature of *mare incognitum*, the unknown sea, with *Mare Indicus* embodying the apotheosis of the Mediterranean seafaring imagination. As Jacques Le Goff (1980) observes, the Indian Ocean, in Fra Mauro's time was impossible to reach and in the 13th Century was a place beyond Europe's imagination. It was a sea that lay on the outer edges of the known and the unknown worlds, a liminal place of fables and terror.

A recent reading by Angelo Cattaneo shows how Mauro's *Mappa Mundi* offers multiple perspectives on the Ocean.

The mappa mundi describes vast marine spaces. The seas represented in the mappa mundi are part of the oikumene, in the sense that they are navigable and their thousands of islands are either inhabited or inhabitable. (2011: 118).

In particular, Mauro suggests an "openness" of the Sea of India through the circumnavigation of Africa, so that it communicates with the western sea, the Sea of Darkness" (Cattaneo, 2011: 117). Cattaneo draws on the following inscription by Fra Mauro on a *Mappa Mundi* cartouche to bolster his point:

Some authors write that the Sea of India is enclosed like a pond and does not communicate with the ocean. However, Solinus claims that it is itself part of

the ocean and that it is navigable in the southern and south-western parts.
(ibid: 118).

According to Cattaneo, Fra Mauro's inscriptions on the *Mappa Mundi* are suggestive of the projected fantasies and fears that *Mare Indicus* invoked for the Mediterranean before the opening of the sea routes to India around the Cape of Good Hope. Mauro was clearly influenced by Nicola Conti's descriptions of the Malabar Coast as a place of serpents and strange amphibious creatures. Conti's diaries describe flying cats and winged serpents in Koulam (Quilon) and he writes of monsters in human form that are fish-like and come forth at night in the water (Major, 1992). The *Mare Indicus* in Mauro's *Mappa Mundi* was a place of untold riches, nocturnal terrors and turbulent seas (Cattaneo, 2011).

A Malabari in Venice

The *Acqua Alta* project was conceived as a theoretical engagement with decentring the Mediterranean world on historically new terms through an embodied phenomenology of the sea. It is a performative experiment in micro-history. As a performance-based artistic research project, the project deploys queer embodiment techniques to explore that which lies outside the conventional narratives of Portuguese and Venetian maritime histories. Embodying the hidden memories of La Serenissima through lived presence, *Acqua Alta* asks forgotten questions about the archipelagic histories of minor seas such as the Laccadive Sea, located outside the imaginary construct of Europe's centre, Venice, yet so prominent in Fra Mauro's rendering in the 15th Century. Through Mauro's *Mappa Mundi*, the performance excavates forms of knowing that fall outside hegemonic readings of Venice's history. *Aqua Alta* achieves this through a series of mobile, speculative encounters around the Venetian lagoon as a means of marking the *carreira da India*, or sea route to India (Cattaneo, 2011: 124).

Acqua Alta is an performative extension of Fra Mauro's precise and fantastical map. It is a staging of the histories of human habitation between the Indian Mediterranean of K.N. Chaudhuri (1985) and the Classic Mediterranean of Fernand Braudel (1995). Creating the performance *Acqua Alta* on the Venice lagoon is a way of marking the multidirectional traces, memories and materialities that shape the most iconic of lagoons in the most historicised sea in the world, the Mediterranean (Horden and Purcell, 2006). For Joseph, *Acqua Alta* is an "open work" (Eco, 1962) examining David Abulafia's notion of the Mediterranean as "the history of human encounters" (2005: 68). As Abulafia writes, "[it] is not just the history of what happened on the sea, but the history of the way the inhabitants of the opposing shores of the sea interacted across the sea" (ibid: 67) that needs to be rethought. Travelling from the farthest shores of *Mare Indicus*, from the lagoon of Quilon in the Malabar Coast, to create this performance on the Venetian lagoon is for Joseph an experiment in the encounters between multiple histories of the seas. It is a processual probing into the navigational histories of Venetian travellers moving among the Laccadive Sea, the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Cape of Good Hope, the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea into the Adriatic Sea and the Venetian Lagoon. Travelling from the Malabar coast to perform in Venice is an exercise in multidirectional thalassology. It is an embodied excavation of multiple seas, a dialogue between historically connected marine spaces.

Horden and Purcell write that Sea and ocean history "is more novel than it sounds... its scope and its methods are so distinctive as to make it an exciting – and quite unpredictable

– area of reflection and research” (2006: 722). For Joseph, this journey from the hemispheric South to the hemispheric North stages Fra Mauro’s cartographic inversion. It performatively foregrounds “what matters – what makes these seas new and exciting historiographical categories – is the density and variety of human connections across them” (Horden and Purcell, 2006: 739). *Acqua Alta* participated in this historical rethinking and contributed to an expanding archive of ocean histories through a return of Venice’s own repressions in the form of two historically bound social subjects: Joseph, a Malabari living in New York, and Varino, a queer Portuguese Jew formerly based in New York and now living in Berlin. *Acqua Alta* conjoins histories of colonisation with decolonial reworking of embodied memories through the iconic crossroads of Lisbon, Venice and Quilon, which Conti describes as one of the biggest ports in India in the 15th Century.

‘Venetian Gulf’

The 2014 *Acqua Alta* performance took place in the Venice lagoon and involved an hour’s boat ride from Cannaregio to Torcello, stopping at Murano and Burano *en route*. For Joseph and Varino, the boat journey was part of the process of the lagoon performance. Its duration brought to the fore the multiple imperial thalassographies of *Mare Indicus* that haunt the Venetian lagoon. The duration of the *vaporetto* ride invoked the seafaring empire of Venice as multidirectional methodological praxis. The Venetian Lagoon is a liminal place encapsulating the merging of the Indian Ocean with the Mediterranean Sea. The lagoon functions as a node where the shared aquatic ecologies, histories and cultures of the two island regions come together, intermingling. The Lagoon, known to medieval writers as the “Venetian Gulf” (Abulafia, 2013) invokes the primal space of *Mare Indicus* depicted by Fra Mauro, while also suggesting a more interconnected lagoon aesthetics (Finch, 1983; Le Goff, 1980). Venice’s lagoon was one of the crucibles of the world in the 15th Century. To look into the Lagoon’s waters is to imbibe the rich, often violent and deadly, intersectional histories of the Silk Road, the Spice Routes, the Indian Ocean trade routes and the era of colonial expansion into the Southern hemisphere. Global trade through land and sea routes transacted through the city of Venice *en route* to Istanbul. Likewise, the impact of Venice on the outer reaches of the then geographies of the Southern hemisphere were multiple but less documented, as the Portuguese and the Dutch dominated the many colonised *entrepôts* of Asia and Africa by the 1500s (Le Goff, 1980). However, journals and reports of Venetians in the Malabar Coast remain among some of the more detailed coastal and oceanic descriptors of seafaring knowledge of the Malabar from the period (Major, 1992; Polo, 1926; Varthema, 1997).

Drawing on the layered histories of the Indian Ocean, Portuguese maritime records and Dutch sources, we reach across the oceans from the 15th Century to retrieve Venice’s multiple mnemonic markers of the global South that have since been erased or forgotten. The origins of Fra Mauro’s map is one such reminder, where the Maldives, the Andaman Islands and the Malabar Coast of India hold the geopolitical, affective and material power of being located towards the visual north of the canvas. The waters between the Maldives, Ceylon and the Malabar in Fra Mauro’s map refer to the Laccadive Sea, lagoon-like in its cartographic depiction between the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal.

Reading Mauro’s map from the frog’s eye perspective of the Malabar Coast while traversing the Venice lagoon, Joseph speculates about Le Goff’s notion that Fra Mauro renders *Mare Indicus* as a closed space. For Joseph, Le Goff’s observation presents a metaphysical tension in the *Mappa Mundi* between the open sea outside Venice’s lagoon and the vastness of the

closed ocean represented by Mauro at the top of *Mappa Mundi*. According to Joseph, Fra Mauro's map is not so much closed as Le Goff suggests, but is rather depicted as lagoon-like. Fra Mauro's rendering of *Mare Indicus* projects a lagoon aesthetic into the ocean that captivated the imagination of Medieval Europe. Joseph suggests that Mauro's map projects a material and metaphoric connection between the lagoon culture of Venice and its Malabar coast influences from the 13th to the 16th Century. The Laccadive Sea becomes a scaled-up Venetian lagoon, with Taprobane (Ceylon), the Malabar and the Maldives framing the centrepiece of the Andaman Islands. This lagoon aesthetic provided the philosophical thread for our performance on Torcello Island in 2014.

Multidirectional Thalassology

In the 13th Century, Marco Polo visited Quilon along the Malabar Coast in India and in the 15th Century Niccola Conti stayed in Quilon, as did Ludovico de Varthema subsequently. All three explorers wrote of Quilon in ways that invoke Venice. The site of Conti's and Polo's visit, Quilon, is the archipelagic lagoon town where Joseph and her mother grew up on the Ashtamudi Lake, similar in structure to the Venice lagoon. Polo referred to Quilon as "the residence of many Christians and Jews, who retain their proper language" (1926: 377). It is a lagoon culture of interconnected small islands open to the Arabian Sea through barrier islands. The city of Quilon is located inside the lagoon of Ashtamudi, amidst other barrier islands similar to the Lido of Venice. Consequently, Quilon made a perfect military port, as Polo observes in his diaries. It was the primary base for the Portuguese and later the Dutch in the Southern Hemisphere, as it was located on an archipelago with immediate access to the Indian Ocean. There was something Venetian about the geology of Quilon, an archipelago protected by barrier islands and the first safe harbor coming across the Bay of Bengal from Malacca. Coming from Portugal, it was the last big port leaving the Malabar across Cape Comorin towards Aceh. This was why in the 15th Century the Portuguese and later the Dutch set up Quilon as the largest colonial port in South Asia at the time. It was a place where all travellers had to stop by to refuel *en route* to Africa from Asia. It was also strategically protected by islands and treacherous currents. (Varthema, 1997; Major, 1992; Polo, 2003).

Marco Polo (2003) wrote expansively about the "multitude of islands in the Indian Sea" (1926: 397). He observed: "I have heard, indeed, from mariners and eminent pilots of these countries, and have seen in the writings of those who have navigated the Indian seas, that they amount to no fewer than twelve thousand seven hundred, including the uninhabited with the inhabited islands" (ibid: 397-398). This lagoon region of island ecologies on the Laccadive Sea that Polo invokes includes Quilon, Zeilain (Ceylon), the Maldives and the Laccadives. This medieval seafaring connection between the lagoon of La Serenissima and the Malabar archipelago, with its Italian traces from Ostia (Roman trade) to Venice (Polo, Conti and Varthema) opens up the influence of Venetian navigation on Indian Ocean networks and vice versa (the impact of Malabar Coast spices, silks and coastal ecologies on Venetian culture) which were considerable during the Medieval period (Abu-Lughod, 1989; Braudel, 1989; Braudel, 2019; Chaudhuri, 1985; Das Gupta, 2004; Subrahmanyam, 2004; Vadakkekara, 2007). Revisiting the medieval histories of thalassology unpacks the hidden networks of modern ocean-bound thinking. The turbulent and dilated travels of Venetians like Marco Polo and Niccola Conti informed cartographic mappings of the Global South. The archipelagos of the Laccadive Sea region are given prominence in Fra Mauro's map in a manner that surprises the contemporary viewer. What catches the eye is how the

archipelagos of the Global South were deemed of cartographic significance to the maker of the map, from his island sanctuary of S. Michelle di Murano.

In the era of climate change and the much-contested Anthropocene, Venice's lagoon culture and its history of *acqua alta* mirror the Laccadive Sea as a lagoon around which an extended archipelagic imaginary contends with rising oceans. Varino and Joseph's 2014 performance on the Devil's Bridge in Torcello explores these connections. We plan to return to repeat a performative ethnography in 2022. Our project will be threefold: to deepen our study of the Venetian lagoon in light of the Venice storm surge of November 2019; to probe the ecologies of Venetian navigation; and to create a performance piece that engages with our preoccupations across global lagoon cultures: Jamaica Bay in New York, the Laccadive Sea and the Venice Lagoon. A desire to learn from and interact with the Venice Lagoon is the core catalyst for our project. The Venetians have been dealing with the challenge of storm surge for centuries and continue to struggle with inescapable damage. San Marco was flooded as we prepared for our performance in 2014, with the gangways raised above the water in the piazza demonstrating the provisionality of Venice's own reckoning with its unfolding calamity. Our performance, in solidarity with the quintessential island city of the world, is a marking of Venice's vulnerability and painful resilience. What happens in Venice will eventually happen in other low-lying regions like the Malabar Coast. How can Venice help us prepare for the inevitable coastal precarity impacting much of the Global South? What are the lessons the world can learn from Venice? These are the questions driving the *Acqua Alta* project.

Lagoon Ecologies

The COVID-19 pandemic encapsulates many of the current crises and consequences of our times: ecological devastation, scientific uncertainty, bio(in)security and brutal disparities in access to healthcare. We are now living in an age of social distancing, perhaps more accurately described as *physical* distancing. Island cities like Venice with its lively lagoon ecologies have experienced these restrictions in distinctive ways. What has it meant for Venice's island city to be locked inside its own lagoon during the COVID-19 pandemic? Venice's lagoon dwellers have experienced particular hardships redefining how they socialise in open, public spaces in a culture dependent on and driven by the tourist economy. The future of Venice's lagoon landscape will demand creative and improvised use of waterfronts, shorelines, plazas, parks and streets that are closely aligned with Harmattan aesthetics. For island cities like Venice, the isolation of many months of quarantining and social distancing has been extremely challenging both economically and culturally. As commercial flights were cancelled and boat services and water-bound transportation scaled back, the new implications of what it means to be La Serenissima in the age of COVID-19 are beginning to emerge. The tools and strategies Harmattan Theater deploys in its environmental research are informed by an ethos of uncertainty aligned with experimental forms of knowledge production that island cities like Venice and New York will have to draw upon, especially after COVID-19.

As an environmental performance ensemble, Harmattan is oriented towards the lived environment as the necessary condition for art, and indeed all living things, to emerge. The case of Venice, with its body of water combined with the phenomenon of *acqua alta*, or seasonal flooding due to higher than usual water levels, is unique across the Mediterranean. Venice's high water is an urgent problem. No longer merely confined to the

winter months, flooding regularly inundates the city, creating a devastating ecological bind for the vulnerable archipelago. Some of Venice's most pressing challenges include how to manage the flow of the Adriatic into the Venetian lagoon, how to cope with rising ocean levels, and how to adapt a transformed human-made landscape of mudflats into a vision for the future,

Our phenomenologically and historically attuned exploration of Venetian aquapelagic geographies links the phenomenon of *acqua alta* to other sites of flooding and water-bound precarity like New York City, Lisbon, Amsterdam, the Maldives and the Malabar Coast. The deep connections of the Venice lagoon to the Laccadive Sea region are historical, geographical and ecological. One of our points of departure is that contemporary studies of lagoon and island cultures tend to be so localised that they omit the vast global networks across which aquatic aesthetics and geographies elsewhere in the world were historically shaped by European navigation. The relevance of the Venetian lagoon for an ecology of precarity across the Global South is of considerable importance. What happens in Venice will happen, and in many instances is already happening, across the Global South, although it may currently draw less attention. This is why it is urgent that communities across island cities of the world collectively participate in the interconnected present and future of their water-bound sites as performative ecologies.

At the core of Harmattan's approach to examining geographical space ecologically has been an insistence on the multiple temporalities of performance in real time colliding with historical temporalities. In this liminal space between historical past and present, a tension begins to emerge (Joseph, 2020). Our embodied engagement with the Venice lagoon and our approach to researching islands, archipelagos and coastal areas is ethnographic, participatory, immersive and performative. We engage with Venice through site-specific environmental performances, immersing ourselves in the outer islands to study the waterlines and find out what they can tell us about Venice's lagoon life today, linking Venetian navigational routes to Dutch and Portuguese ones. Harmattan's *Acqua Alta* project catalyses the (un)learning humans must undertake to reckon with the volatile nonhuman forces and colonial histories haunting archipelagic choreographies.

Aquatic Activity & Coastal Performatives

According to Jonathan Pugh, the relational and archipelagic turns in island studies have forged a sense of interconnection and "foregrounded how we live in a world of relationality rather than 'static' islands of the world" (2018: 94). Drawing on this notion of interconnected relationality enables us to articulate how the agency of Venetian waters extends well beyond their local lagoon geographies, performatively rippling over to aquatic activity alongside the Malabar Coast and the Global South in unexpected entangled (re)enactments. The interconnection at the core of Venice's fluid geographies gestures towards a viral mode of exponential transmission whereby streets, islands, streams, bodies, objects, are continuously touching, where contact is non-negotiable, air is shared and airborne droplets may carry enough viral load of genetic material to generate an immune response.

The aquatic life of Venice is lived underground as well as on its visible, gutted surface. The seasonal floods tie into a much vaster network of climacteric activity, whereby the city becomes a semi-aquatic environment. Oceanic histories dispersed across colonial networks

have fostered incommensurate, rapidly shifting geographical and temporal scales. At the nodal intersection of postcolonial studies, political ecology, experimental geography and island studies, Harmattan Theater has devised a transdisciplinary method for situating bodies in real time in relation to these large scale geographical and temporal frameworks, using the medium of site-specific performance to demonstrate the implication of distant times and places into the lived materiality of climate change events.

Writing about Haiti in particular, in *Island Futures*, Mimi Sheller deploys the phrase “coloniality of climate” (2020: 8) to propose deep and vast connections between climacteric phenomena and the colonialist projects of modernity, encapsulating the many ways in which (neo)colonial forms of violent and exploitative extraction come to produce the very conditions of social inequality and environmental degradation that then amplify apparently “natural” disasters like earthquakes, floods, storms or volcanic eruptions. In *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), a phenomenologically attuned analysis of embodied experiences of racist and sexist violence, Sara Ahmed mobilises the concept of “orientation” to formulate the ways in which geopolitical and historical structures become sedimented over time in our everyday lives, coming to shape how we occupy space and move through the world. In *Acqua Alta*, we similarly sought to re-orient ourselves toward older mappings and networks of water-bound environmental practice, excavating the multidirectional topographies of the lagoon to re-enact them across the Devil’s Bridge in Torcello. Performatively engaging with these networked systems, Harmattan has continuously returned over the course of a decade of environmental art to the rich theoretical arsenal of phenomenology for a materially oriented, situated account of historical processes whose sheer magnitude cannot be fully grasped without aesthetic involvement. The phenomenological focus on the sensory and the kinetic alongside the linguistic has informed the aesthetic experience of a Harmattan performance for both audiences and performers.

From the fluvial conditions of Venice’s geographies to the economic exploitation necessary for the enduring success of colonialist capitalism, the conditions are always impossible. Thinking about *acqua alta* and flooding requires flexible modalities of thought and action that encompass resilience and endurance as well as fragility and vulnerability. We are permeable, water-made and water-bound. Even for those residing far from ocean shores – as we have seen with the snowstorms and power cuts in the US state of Texas in February 2021, climatic conditions, water consumption and energy resources regulate and permeate the commonality of our living bodies, with fluids circulating among our internal viscera and mucous membranes and orifices interacting with and filtering solid, liquid and airborne particles. The aqueous, interstitial capacities of water are a pre-condition for the emergence and sustenance of planetary life as we know it. Around the lagoon of Venice, water acquires an imminent urgency sounded by the siren bells at dawn during *acqua alta*.

Bearing the weight of its historical past and of its status as an iconic ‘sinking’ city and tourist destination, the centre of Venice in 2014 was so filled with the presence of human sociality that we had to find an alternative performance site, looking for the reverberation of its dense history at its geographical margins, dispersed and distributed. The formative impact of Torcello in the emergence of Venice guided our choice of the island as our performance site. We made our journey there as a group of performers ready to improvise, collaborating with human and nonhuman life forms, with the elements, the build environment, and the climacteric conditions of the day. As we moved further into the island looking for the famous Ponte del Diavolo, the architectural minimalism of the design proved a source of further estrangement and enchantment. Catherine Chin mobilises the concept of “historical radiance” (2017) to account for how the radical, unknowable

difference of ancient cultures and events can summon a sense of alterity that is as unsettling as it is wondrous, shaking habitual thought patterns and disrupting expectations. The solid stone structure without railings provided us with a 12th Century open stage charged with history and filled with ghosts. Thick with stories, it invoked an uncanny liveliness we could not resist as we crossed it, an ensemble of bodies moving in tandem, deploying the meditative slow walk of Harmattan performances and following the improvised musical arrangements of Girardi's blues folk guitar. As Joseph and Varino have previously observed, "Venetians have dealt with the challenge of storm surge for quite a long time now and have managed to accept its inescapable damage yet remain flexible in the face of ensuing calamity. This performance was a marking both of their vulnerability and remarkable resilience" (2017: 162). It also enabled us as an ensemble to performatively interact with the volatile qualities of water, its agentic activity, and the myriad ways in which human and nonhuman populations have historically tried to harness and/or control its power to both sustain and annihilate life in any given ecosystem.

Along the lines of Jane Bennett's political ecology of things in *Vibrant Matter* (2010), Harmattan prefers tales where the agency (understood here to encompass *both* activity and passivity) of matter and the visceral materiality of human lives takes precedence over the supposed mastery of "human" action and reason. The ecosociality of Harmattan's performance projects suggests in its methodological and aesthetic directions an engagement with a viral logic of contact, transmission, relationality. We are performing contagion in how we traverse and activate specific sites, how we collectively transform them, how we respond to immediate circumstances by fostering ties and relating to others. This is, of course, a metaphorical manner of considering how the novel coronavirus and the COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to be far less physically enmeshed while demanding an imaginative effort of participation and presence in other, perhaps digitally mediated or distanced, but nonetheless observant, responsive, lively ways. Harmattan's environmental performances are closer to landscape art than theatre, closer to large-scale installation than performance art. Our site-specific performances are conceived as political, geographical, philosophical and aesthetic interventions on public space and the lived environment. We seek to performatively engage with the colonial past not to mechanically re-enact it but to tentatively begin to acknowledge its ghosts, its perpetual haunting, its inevitable, brutal hold on the non/human lives that can be lived in the present. In a Harmattan project, performance then functions as an interruption, affording a way to physically and cognitively occupy the embodied present, both in a spatial and in a temporal sense. Performance provides us an aesthetically and socially attuned method for multispecies collaboration in public space. It is a practice of historical (re)enactment with a difference, oriented towards a more democratic, inclusive, accessible future, liveable for all living beings rather than for a selected few.

Conclusion: Learning from *Aqua Alta*

In his persuasive book *If Venice Dies* (2015), Salvatore Settis asks unsettling questions: What is a Venice without Venetians? If the soul of a city is its people, then what does it mean to have a city without a soul? Settis is hard-nosed about his questions, observing that the lagoon of Venice is the ecosystem that maintains the city's sustainability. The lagoon was Venice's 'countryside'. It was also the city's extended natural resource, where vegetables, fruit, fish and salt were derived from and which nourished the city. Venice's lagoon was an interdependent ecosystem of monasteries, hospices, leper colonies,

boathouses, and spaces for alternative industries that supported the peripheral island economies of the city. The systematic decimation of the human and nonhuman cultures of the Venice lagoon through the slow emptying of the city's population over decades has destroyed this delicate ecology, Settis documents. Settis highlights the contradictory tensions between the erasure of Venice's culture as Venetians have known it, and the escalation of Venice's real estate value in the distorted market of international speculative economies. This Venice that has been emptied out of its Venice-ness, is a place of loss. It is this mournful habitation, this site of haunting, that Joseph and Varino summon in *Acqua Alta*. As the human crisis exacerbates an ecological catastrophe, the soul of Venice is at stake.

This ongoing crisis at the heart of Europe illustrates what Bruno Latour (2017) calls the relationality of the terrestrial, an embodied situatedness at a human scale that is earthbound rather than merely planetary. It is a relational site already proposed by Fra Mauro in the 15th Century as a marine space where the "thick" waters of the sea differ from the "thin" waters of the rivers (Cattaneo, 2011: 115). In Fra Mauro's time, the understanding of the rhythm of the tides and "the delicate balance between land and water and the phenomenon of the "boiling of the waters," had special significance" (Cattaneo, 2011: 115). Cattaneo notes that the lagunar city of Venice was one place where the volatile tides were most evident during Fra Mauro's time. These "boiling waters" now persist as the catastrophic phenomenon of *acqua alta*. It is a condition of inundation, of submergence that connects La Serenissima once again to its historical fascination with the islands of the Indian Ocean. Only this time, the archipelagic connection is bound to climate change and rising sea levels. The conversation this time is not about that which is unknowable, but rather that which is terrifyingly predictable, the progressive warming of the oceans.

Why do we insist that it is important to think about the similarities between the marine ecologies of the Laccadive Sea and the Venetian Lagoon? One reason is that if we are to understand the shared commonalities and find solutions to grapple with our current environmental crises, efforts need to be made to dispel the illusion of a radical distinction between the Global North and the Global South, especially regarding the impact of climate on a global scale to be understood in terms of a terrestrial relationality, as Latour proposes (2017). The Laccadive Sea ecology is one that is ringed by thousands of islands strung along the Laccadive Islands including the Maldives, Sri Lanka and the near shore archipelago of the Malabar Coast. Joseph has conducted fieldwork across this region for the last two decades, studying local coastal communities in Kerala and the Maldives. Her conversations with fishing and shoreline communities, coastal residents and non-governmental actors underscore the infrastructural differences between hemispheric climate preparedness. There is a deep bifurcation between the large-scale technological solutions to climate threats that are currently being developed and implemented in the global North, and the fragile accommodations undertaken by coastal and island communities in the global South. The infrastructural approach to managing climate in the global North centres around adaptation (Bush, Pilkey and Neal, 1996), raising habitats and coastal embankments, (re)imagining flexible amphibious environments and bolstering sea level infrastructure for the 100-year and 500-year floodplain (Keith, 2017). For regions around the Laccadive Sea, particularly along the Malabar coast, it is primarily one of low-tech adaptation and mitigation. Coastal and island regions are under-resourced in South Asia (Rajagopalan, 2008), with much of the current environmental discourse centring around agriculture, forests, land and population demographics. The ocean has only come into public discourse in the region over the course of the last two decades (Balakrishnan and Alexander [eds], 1988). Consequently, islands like the Maldives, the Puttalam region of Sri Lanka, and the

barrier islands of Kerala do not have the material sources for adaptation that would be necessary for the scale and scope of climate change impact over the course of time.

The town of Kollam (Quilon), once the transit home of Marco Polo, Niccola Conti and Ludovico Varthema, among others, is a case in point. Today, the lagoon in the Ashtamudi Lake region is in deep trouble. Marine degradation, overfishing, and the anthropogenic impact of land and water use have produced a fragile ecosystem in need of more stringent environmental management (Kadekodi [ed], 2004; Sengupta, 2001; Bhattacharya, 2001; Pereira, 2007). Corruption, illegal sand mining and aggressive real estate development interests have depleted the delicate balance of island ecologies along the Malabar coast that Polo, Conti and Varthema wrote extensively about (Venkataraman, 2005). Coastal flooding, sinking islands and storm surge communities that are devastated by monster waves populate the region (Pande, Singh, Jasmine et al, 2014). The prevalent assumption that vulnerable communities along the lagoon fringe will draw on their resilience in order to continue living in low-lying barrier island environments is one underlying thread weaving this precarious intercoastal region into a lagoon ecology. There is plenty of creativity there, but the ecological catastrophe of waters rising in this delicate archipelagic region of South India is largely a tragedy waiting to happen (Joseph, 2019b).

The Global North has made little attempt to address the rising water levels and climate change issues affecting places like Quilon and its Ashtamudi Lake (Sallée, 2018). International climate mitigation agreements in the Global North remain sadly inadequate to address the environmental challenges faced by cities like Venice and Quilon. As a climate concerned performance ensemble, we do not know what kinds of performances might be (im)possible in the near future. The new choreographies Harmattan are yet to design will continue to grapple with vulnerability and resilience, haunting and loss. We are now in a hiatus, waiting, writing, researching and assembling ideas for upcoming interventions. For how long will physically distanced digital formats remain the norm, especially once vaccines are widely available? We may have to find ingenious ways to work across hybrid formats, welcoming technological platforms alongside live, outdoors, distanced modes of public gathering. After all, what the coronavirus crisis brought upon is nothing new but rather a halo of clarity on what has always been: the porosity and fragility of our bodies, our living condition of constant exposure to death and disease, the limitations of western(ised) medical and scientific knowledge, the immense social disparities in access to healthcare and clean air, and how climate change and environmental devastation carry very real, concrete consequences right now, rather than hanging suspended in a future dystopian fantasy, waiting to unfold.

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