

# VENICE IN VARANASI

## Fluid landscapes, aesthetic encounters and the unexpected geographies of tourist representation

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**ABSTRACT:** This article has developed from a broader research project on tourist representations and practices in Varanasi, India's renowned sacred city and popular tourist destination situated by the 'holy' Ganges. Here, a recurring 'sense of Venice' emerged from Western travel narratives and landscape representations, evoked by both visual and more-than-visual encounters. Drawing on cultural geographies of landscape engaging postcolonial, representational and non-representational theories, the article unravels Venice's capacity to exist beyond Venice and to mobilise affectual aesthetic connections across different social, material, spatial and temporal contexts. Through an empirical analysis of aesthetic experiences of 'Venice-in-Varanasi', it illuminates the ontological liminality of Venice as waterland and image and its epistemological capacity to navigate the entangled material, affective and representational modes through which we encounter the world. Advancing relational theories of landscape via an empirical focus on the waterscapes of Venice and Varanasi, the article contributes to water studies and critical tourism by proposing a fluid and mobile ontology of landscape which seeks to destabilise the representational/non-representational binary, thus feeding into growing research in this direction.

**KEYWORDS:** Venice-Varanasi, waterscapes, more-than-representational, landscape-in-relation, more-than-visual-aesthetics

### Introduction

*Long walk at dusk from the orange Raj Ghat bridge shimmering in sunset water, along the ghats riverfront – huge walls & towers & rocks & balconies – a prospect along the bend of the river like Venice along Grand Canal or seen from Judecca. (Allen Ginsberg, Benares<sup>1</sup>, 1962 [Ginsberg, 1990 (1970): 126])*

This article about Venice originated miles away from the lagoon city. It stems from an unexpected encounter as I was investigating tourist representations and practices in Varanasi, India's renowned sacred city and prominent tourist destination, for my doctoral

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<sup>1</sup> The Anglicised name for Banaras, more widely known as Varanasi.

research. As I went about reviewing contemporary and colonial travel literature, visual productions, European and Indian place narratives and tourist representations and as I interviewed Western tourists, interacted with travellers and locals and reflected on my own embodied experiences of the city during my extended fieldwork, a recurring ‘sense of Venice’ emerged from Western travel narratives and landscape representations. From colonial to contemporary accounts, Varanasi appeared to evoke an unexpected sense of ‘being in Venice’. Visually, the picturesque riverscape of the city by the ‘holy’ Ganges has been repeatedly associated with glimpses of Venetian scenes in miscellaneous aesthetic production – from art to literature – from different times and contexts.

Materially, the physical configuration of Varanasi seemed to materialise sensual and affectual atmospheres reminiscent of Venice, an embodied feeling that returned in the accounts of diverse travellers with whom I talked for my research. Empirical evidence of such aesthetic epiphanies, if we can call them that, is discussed in the analysis sections of this article. These analyses have been prompted by a sense that encountering Venice in Varanasi, as odd as it may be, raises interesting questions on the most intriguing of geographical concepts, that is landscape, not least because the visual-material manifestation of Venice in Varanasi interrogates the very duplicitous (Daniels, 1989) ontologies of landscape as “visual image and material world” (Cosgrove, 2003: 254), pointing to the capacity of this ‘quasi-object’ (Latour, 2005) to ‘travel’ through time and space (della Dora, 2009). Drawing on recent and longer-standing geographical debates on landscape engaging postcolonial, representational and non-representational theories, the article explores aesthetic experiences of Venice as a site of epistemological and ontological tensions. Firstly, the article is at once about Venice - *and not*. It unravels the ability of Venice to exist beyond Venice, and to be encountered in *other* landscapes. Secondly, the ontological liminality of Venice as waterland and image also reveals its epistemological capacity to navigate the entangled material, affective and representational modes through which we encounter the world. Thus, the article advances relational theories of landscape via an empirical focus on the waterscapes of Venice and Varanasi, analysed through the lens of tourist representation. In doing so, it engages with, and contributes to current research in the fields of water studies and critical tourism, engaging them both in rethinking landscape as ‘fluid’ and mobile.

The theories framing the analysis are discussed in the next section, which positions the article within extant scholarship on landscape across representational and more-than-representational paradigms (with a focus on Venice), reviewing contextually relevant literature on tourism and water. The following section clarifies the ‘more-than-representational’ methodology adopted for the analysis, before providing background information on Varanasi and its iconic riverscape. The empirical section then discusses the coming into being of Venice in Varanasi both as a ‘way of seeing’ and through embodied and affective encounters. The analysis is developed in the concluding section, which theorises fluid landscapes as a way of thinking relationally with landscape.

## Geographies of landscape

This article is positioned within cultural geographies of landscape, cutting across tourism and water studies. At a more fundamental level, the article is about representation and its predicaments, for the story of landscape in cultural geography over nearly four decades has been one of how representation and its opposites (variously inflected as ‘non-’ and ‘more-than-’ representation) have been questioning, shaping and productively transforming how we think about the world unfolding before and *with* us. It has been the story, ultimately, of how geographical inquiry has been trying to come to terms with the inherent, problematic and yet generative ambiguity of this concept, effectively summarised in the quote by pioneer of representational landscape theory, Denis Cosgrove: “[g]eographically, the idea of landscape is the most significant expression of the historical attempt to bring together visual image and material world” (2003: 254). This ambiguity was further elaborated by another major proponent of representational geography, Stephen Daniels, who refers to this ambivalent ontological and epistemological positioning in terms of the “duplicity” of landscape, which is at the same time, he argues, object and perspective, “solid earth and superficial scenery” (Daniels, 1989: 197).

Interestingly though, much of the so called ‘new cultural geography’ of the 1980s and 1990s, to which Cosgrove and Daniels have significantly contributed and which has been so influential in the development of contemporary landscape theory, tended to only dwell on one of the two terms, i.e. “visual image” and its symbolic meaning (see Cresswell, 2010), leaving the other, ‘material world’ to the deeper speculations of subsequent non-representational and posthumanist thinking. The analysis in this article stems from concern at the limited attention geographical scholarship devotes to theorising the two constitutive terms of landscape *together*. Indeed, the article advocates looking at them dialectically and relationally, rather than developing discrete theories based on a dualistic epistemology of non/representational modes of knowing. This is despite Daniels’ own call to “beware of attempts to define landscape, to resolve its contradictions” and “abide in its duplicity” (1989: 218), as it is precisely such a duplicity, he maintains, that gives landscape its analytical potential. Reviving Daniels’ exhortation in light of more recent developments in the non-representational debate (Anderson, 2019; Skrede, 2020; Waterton, 2019), the article looks at the ‘duplicitous’ nature of Venice and Varanasi’s waterscapes – their aesthetic, material and affective affordances – as a way of extending a relational approach to landscape representation.

## Vision, power and travel: Venice and the European landscape project

The study of Italian landscape art formed an important basis for the iconographic critique of landscape in cultural geography. From Renaissance Florence, where the linear perspective was arguably invented, to 16th Century Venice and the Palladian landscape – an important focus of Cosgrove’s empirical research (1993) – Italian art provided the aesthetic archetype for the development and circulation of a distinctively European tradition of perspectival

landscape representation, which flourished in Dutch and Flemish Renaissance painting and continued through to 19th Century German and British Romantic landscape art. With its cultural vibrancy under the patronage of the long-lived Venetian Republic, Venice was an important centre of innovation for landscape art. Venetian Renaissance painters from Giacomo Bellini to Giorgione, Titian and Veronese, influential architect Andrea Palladio and 18th Century *vedutisti* (view painters) Canaletto and Francesco Guardi paved the way for the establishment of landscape canons and techniques which were appreciated, experimented with and disseminated in the European artistic scene and contributed to the formation of a specific Western “way of seeing” (Cosgrove, 1984: 1), a particular way of representing, constructing and appropriating space (Cosgrove, 1984, 1985) based on a relation of dominance and subordination between the viewer and what is seen. Originally, this expressed the vision of 16th Century Venetian elites projected onto idealised Arcadian landscapes, where picturesque beauty worked to disguise the unjust socio-material relations producing those very landscapes (a critique later expanded by Mitchell [2003] in the context of migrant labour and the construction of the contemporary Californian landscape). Interpretive landscape analysis, informed by Marxist cultural materialism, theorised landscape as a “visual ideology” (Cosgrove, 1985: 47) deployed by hegemonic classes to conceal and naturalise socio-economic inequality (Cosgrove, 1984, 1985; Daniels, 1989; Mitchell, 2003) and to impose their own epistemological, moral and aesthetic values, which were incorporated in specific genres of landscape representation such as the picturesque, the idyllic, the sublime, the exotic (Wylie, 2007; Duncan, 1999).

Travel has been in many ways central to the landscape project. As an early form of cultural tourism, the Grand Tour was conducive to the diffusion of aesthetic sensibilities that informed European art and culture from the early modern period throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Picturesque landscapes were experienced, studied, painted, purchased and exchanged by European elites, travelling to France and Italy especially, in pursuit of culture, art and an immersive aesthetic experience. Aristocratic visitors commissioned prominent local artists to paint views of Venice and Rome – essential stops in the Grand Tour. Among the artists were the Venetians Canaletto and Giambattista Piranesi, who contributed to shaping European ways of seeing with their popular *vedute* (views) – especially waterscapes – and fine etchings. Not only was the Venice landscape embedded into the European gaze from the early days, Venetian *vedutisti*'s 18th Century landscape school, with its combination of imaginary elements in realistic scenes, like Canaletto's famous *capricci*,<sup>2</sup> also influenced a particular way of envisioning and transfiguring the world, where real images and imagination conflate and where the viewer is given the power to project and naturalise visions and values onto the space-as-scenery. Looking at the transfiguration of Venice in Varanasi in this light, then, helps unpack not just the aesthetic resemblances between the two cities, but the representational power of Venice and the visual tradition inherited and enacted by Western tourists as travelling gazing subjects.

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<sup>2</sup> A type of landscape art juxtaposing real architectural forms and fanciful elements.

Such visual tradition was deeply shaped by, and circulated through, colonial travel and exploration. Feminist and postcolonial scholars have deconstructed this tradition through a critique of the gaze, which theorised gazing as the projecting of male (Rose, 1992), European imperial (Pratt, 1992) visions and subjectivities onto a supposedly inert, blank and feminised landscape, thus exposing the violent asymmetries of Western binary thinking. Mitchell questioned the instrumental role of landscape in the European imperialist project, defining landscape as “the ‘dreamwork’ of imperialism” (2002 [1994]: 10), a powerful visual device extended internationally to appropriate non-European, unfamiliar sights by recasting them within landscape canons of order and proportion. Crucially to this article’s inquiry, Said’s (2003 [1978]) critique of Orientalism showed how landscape served Western binary epistemology by visually and discursively constructing ‘the Orient’ as a space of aestheticised difference, of tradition and spirituality, exotic pleasure, but also disorder and chaos, opposed to the modern, rational and scientific West (Arnold, 2005; King, 1999). Essentially, landscape became the visual vehicle for affirming a Western worldview.

Extending this analysis to contemporary leisure mobilities, critical tourism research argues that the visual order granted by landscape and the colonial legacy embedded in it are still alive within modern tourism and travel (Minca, 2007; Zara, 2020). The representational power of the tourist landscape has mainly been framed around Urry’s (2002 [1990]) influential concept of the tourist gaze, which theorises tourism as a primarily visual phenomenon, placing representation as pivotal in the travel process. However, whilst visual and ideological, gazing is ultimately an act, an embodied and situated *practice*, which involves the senses, emotions, objects and spatialities in the construction of the tourist experience. This expanded notion of the gaze (Urry and Larsen, 2011) resonates with recent calls to extend tourism research into “the more-than-visual experiences of tourism” (Edensor, 2018) and to open up to sensory and emotional encounters with the world that the gazing tourist is immersed in and affected by. Indeed, the interplay between representation, practice and the body theorised in more-than-visual cultural geographies of tourism (Crouch, 2005; Edensor, 2001; Jokinen and Veijola, 2003; Prince, 2019; Zara, 2015, for example) underpins the analysis of the practices of vision connecting Venice and Varanasi. This research is further enriched by interaction with non-representational theories of landscape discussed in the next section.

### Rematerialising landscape

It has been suggested that what makes the Venice landscape so pictorial and charming is a particular combination of material elements that create the distinctive Venetian atmosphere captured in many representations of the city. At a fundamental level, it is matter in the form of light, stone and importantly, *water* – and their physical reactions to each other – that makes the Venice landscape (Cosgrove, 1982; Dominiczak, 2017; Savoy, 2012). These materialities speak of “the actuality of representation” (Dewsbury et al, 2002: 438), rather than the meaning and ideology underpinning it, pointing to the material capacity of landscape to move and actuate representation.

It is the (relatively) recent emergence of more-than-representational (Lorimer, 2005) and non-representational (Thrift, 2007) cultural geographies of landscape (Dewsbury, 2015; Waterton, 2019; Wylie, 2006) that allow us to capture the constitutive materialities of landscape in a new light and to experiment with approaches which foreground materiality (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010), embodiment, practice and performativity (Butler, 1993), affect and emotion (Anderson, 2009) and, broadly speaking, relational and flat ontologies (Ash, 2020) as models for reality and understanding thereof. Scholars working within this framework have been questioning predominantly visual, textual and discursive analyses to rethink landscape to include a range of non-cognitive experiences that exceed representation and intellectual gasping and account for the material, embodied, habitual, affective and more-than-human processes through which we engage with and ‘witness’ the world (Dewsbury, 2003). In this vein, the landscape ‘way of seeing’ appears to be telling only half of the story, neglecting, as it does, to account for the material agency of landscape and the lively encounters by which it comes into being. Thus, a new wave of research has emerged that theorises landscape not so much as a bounded aesthetic object, or historical ‘product’, but as a constant and unfinished *process* of human and nature co-becoming (Ingold, 2011; Wylie, 2005, 2006). These theories have proven particularly useful to capture perceptual, emotional and material affordances of landscape as emerging in the empirics of Western tourist representation of Varanasi.

An important drive to rethink the constitutive sociomaterial and more-than-human relations that make the world came from a substantial body of work concerned with political ecologies and hybrid ontologies of water and waterscapes (Budds, 2009; Gandy, 2004; Loftus, 2011; Swyngedouw, 2004, for example).<sup>3</sup> Informed by a posthumanist and feminist approach (Bull, 2011; Neimanis, 2016; Strang, 2014), scholarship within this field exposed the embodied, entangled and hybrid nature of watery relations, drawing attention to the materialities, consistencies and ‘agentic capacities’ of water (Coole and Frost, 2010: 9, in Strang, 2014: 139), and to affective and material engagements with it (Hadfield-Hill and Zara, 2019). Research on the geographies of water is wide-ranging, spanning cultural, material and representational analyses of waterscapes (for example Vallerani and Visentin, 2018), more markedly posthumanist and political ecological work, and integrated social, cultural and more-than-human approaches (Gibbs, 2009). Bear and Bull’s (2011) special issue of the journal *Environment and Planning A* on ‘Water Matters’ offers a comprehensive understanding of geographies of water, whilst Chen et al (2013) and Krause and Strang’s (2016) collection provide useful insights into the possibilities of thinking with water. Scholarly insights on the cultural, socio-economic and historical geographies of Venetian waterscapes specifically, are offered in the extensive work by Cosgrove (1982; 1984; 1993), the legacy of which has been collected by Vallerani (2018) in his touching and intellectually engaging account of shared Venetian waterscapes.

Engaging with this vast literature, and with a focus on waterscape, the article builds, in particular, on three analytical articulations. Firstly, it considers the visual and discursive

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<sup>3</sup> See Karpouzoglou and Vij (2017) for an overview of waterscape in the political ecology tradition.

capacity of waterscape in a performative framework, that is, it looks at how iconic, picturesque and literary constructions of waterscapes ‘make things happen’, how they travel, move bodies and feelings and how they are performed through embodied visual practices (Duggan, 2021; MacLeod, 2013; Peterle and Visentin, 2016). Secondly, it attends to the shifting and fleeting material and affective qualities of water, conceiving of it as non-human *actant* capable to ‘act’ in a “relational materiality of things and persons” (Strang, 2014: 139). Thirdly, it is therefore inspired by the fluid and liminal capacities of waterscape (Swyngedouw, 2004; Strang, 2014) and by the elemental (and imaginative) transformative force of water, which “is constantly in flux, thereby perpetually shifting through physical geographies... but also cultural, social, and symbolic landscapes” (Karpouzoglou and Vij, 2017: 2).

Although it has never been the purpose of non-representational theory to remove representation from social analysis altogether, nor was materiality ever absent from the cultural iconographic approach to landscape, geographical research has tended to be distinctly positioned in, or orientated towards one or the other framework. Even in the more positive ‘more-than-representational’ orientation, the ‘more’ seems to have outbalanced the representational. Realigning it to a more-than-representational analysis of Venice in Varanasi, this article seeks to overcome this epistemological divide and contribute to the growing body of work engaging both paradigms in making sense of the world (Latham and McCormack, 2009; Jokinen and Veijola, 2003; Rossetto, 2020; Skrede, 2020; and Wylie, 2006, for example). A key drive to rethink landscape representation relationally came from Anderson (2019), Crouch (2010), and Dewsbury et al (2002), who inspired this article’s theoretical positioning. Indeed, I argue that a relational approach to landscape helps reframe representation as something alive and agentic (Anderson, 2019; Mitchell, 2005), able to mobilise material and immaterial connections that reconfigure and actualise landscape as ‘event’, something that happens and ‘unfolds’, or as Anderson (2019: 1123) suggests, as a series of “events [that] (re)make space-times rather than only happen ‘in’ space and time”. It is within this fertile theoretical tension between representational and more-than-representational analyses that the empirical discussion that follows is set.

## Methodology

Reflecting the theoretical tension of the article, the methodology extends representational analysis into sensory oriented and reflexive ethnographic writing (Pink, 2013; Skrede, 2020), experimenting with *doing* more-than-representational research. The article draws on data produced through my doctoral research on Western tourist representations and spatial practices in Varanasi, carried out between 2009 and 2011 and subsequently updated, looking, in particular, at the city’s riverfront as the place where tourist, ritual, and day-to-day activities are played out and negotiated, and where the aesthetics of landscape is met with the materialities and the practices inherent to this place. Based on in-depth ethnography combining participant observation, semi-structured interviews with tourists and relevant local stakeholders, a package tourist targeted questionnaire, visual data collection and discursive analysis of popular tourist and both contemporary and colonial travel literature, the research has produced a rich and multi-layered dataset revealing Western and local

representations of Varanasi as well as the situated practices re-producing, uprooting, complexifying and adding depth to those very representations.

Drawing from this diverse empirical material, the discussion sections of the article make use of visual and textual data, interview extracts and field notes as evidence and prompts for the analysis. In line with the article's 'more-than-representational' orientation, here I experiment with less conventional methods of presenting qualitative data, using autoethnography, free association and ethnographic creative writing as ways to provide insights into sensory and affective processes of knowing. In the first of the two empirical subsections, spontaneous visual associations and aesthetic suggestions are used to elicit the non-representational reach of representations and their capacity to create aesthetic connections that whilst ideologically laden, have affecting intensities of their own.

My embodied field observations as a tourist-researcher in Varanasi and my perceptual and emotional experiences of Venice form the basis for the other subsection, together with discussion of further interview and textual material. Here I use autobiographical narrative to present vignettes and self-reflection pieces written from sparse field notes and personal experience, in order to convey more-than-visual insights of 'being in Venice, in Varanasi'. Whilst this may still be regarded as a representational exercise, the intuitive and creative assembling of body memories, affective and aesthetic assonances and material connections (from texts to textures) that inspired this section is meant as an attempt to experiment methodologically with subconscious and embodied forms of cognition attuned to a more-than-representational approach to landscape.

### The *ghatscape* of Varanasi

Sitting on the Ganges' riverbank in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh in the Ganges valley, Varanasi, an urban agglomeration of 82 km<sup>2</sup> with a population of over a million, is widely acknowledged as the holiest city of India, a symbolic site of spirituality and cultural heritage attracting ongoing flows of visitors, both foreign and domestic, tourists and pilgrims. Considered the capital of Hinduism, the city is believed to grant liberation from the cycle of reincarnations, making it the most auspicious place for Hindus to die. Cremation rites performed in the open air by the sacred Ganges, day and night, are a focus of ritual, socio-economic, and tourist activities in the city. Varanasi is known worldwide for its iconic *ghatscape*, the extended riverfront lined with the picturesque *ghats*, the flights of steps descending into the river, a lively space of Hindu daily rituals, mundane goings-on and tourist hustle bustle. The 'Ganga'<sup>4</sup> has a central place in the city's life, a centrality reflected in the Sanskrit etymology of Varanasi as the land between the two Ganges tributaries, Varuna, to the north, and Asi, to the south. The very holiness of the city is bestowed by the river, "a liquid *axis mundi*" (Kinsley, 1987: 193, in Singh, 1994: 211) along which Hindu lifecycle rites take place.

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<sup>4</sup> An affectionate Sanskrit/Hindi name for the Ganges, personified into goddess Ganga.

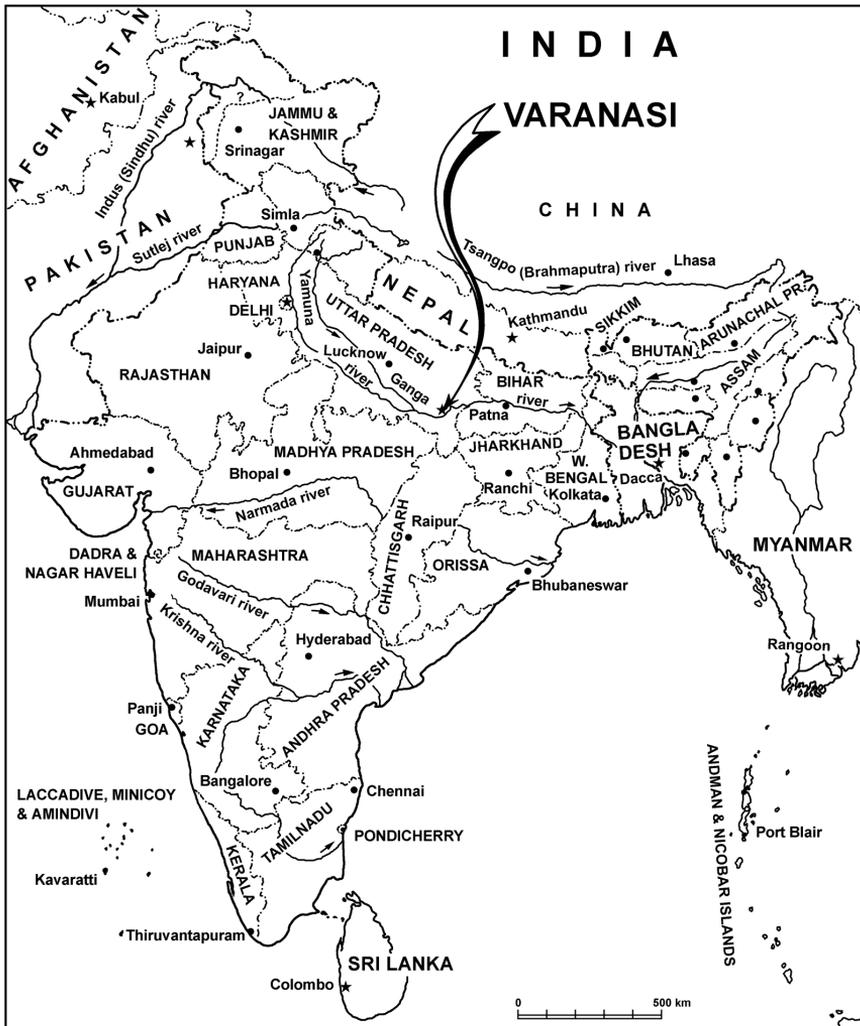


Figure 1 – Varanasi’s location in India (Singh, 2010, reproduced by permission).

The socio-cultural spatialities of water in Varanasi are very different from Venice. The two cities have distinctive hydrographies. Venice is a group of small islands connected through an intricate canal system – an aquapelagic assemblage (Hayward, 2012). Varanasi is a riverine landscape revolving around the Ganges, with an ancient network of inland water bodies – ponds, rivulets, tanks and wells, many now neglected or filled up – which follow the ebbs and flows of the monsoon and retain important religious-ritual meaning. Historically, both cities derived their economic prosperity, political significance and cultural identity from water, though their socio-cultural histories differ significantly.

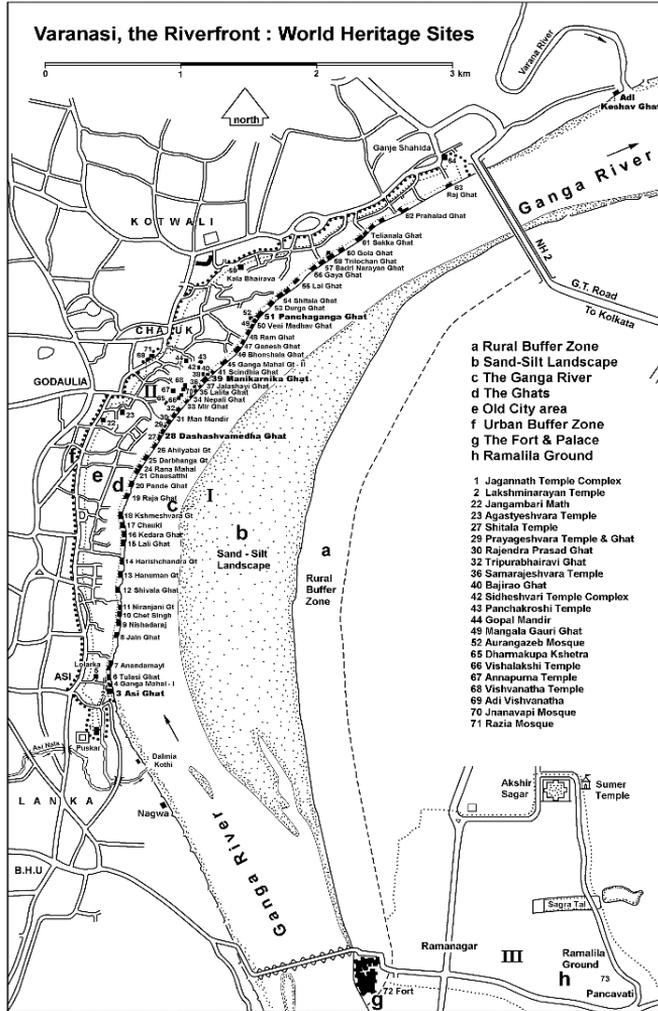


Figure 2 – Map of Varanasi’s riverfront (Singh, 2013: reproduced by permission).

It is beyond the scope of this article to delve into a comparative discussion of the rich and complex hydrosocialities of Venice and Varanasi (for scholarly insights into these waterscapes see Singh, 1994; Lazzaretti, 2017 on Varanasi, and Ciriaco, 2006 on Venice). What is of interest to this article is the commonality they share as scenic cities – their waterfronts developed into heritage tourist attractions – and the watery aesthetic seduction they exercise, Venice with its “water-oriented urban scenography” (Savoy, 2012) and Varanasi with its picturesque sacredscape. An aestheticised object of the tourist gaze, imbued with Orientalist tropes, Varanasi’s *ghatscape* is traversed by intriguing socio-spatial processes of cultural encounter, which I endeavoured to unpack in my research through an exploration of the visual, discursive and embodied practices by which it is constituted. I discuss the empirical evidence of this investigation in the next section.



Figure 3 – Venice map, 2016 (courtesy, Christian Fleury)

### Venice-in-Varanasi: travelling landscapes and relational geographies

The last thing I expected to find when I first set out for India, heading to Varanasi, was Venice. In hindsight, I should have seen that the connection was there from the start. Venice is in fact where I first learned about ‘the holiest city’ of India as an undergraduate student in Oriental Languages and Literatures at the University of Venice. From the very beginning, Benares – that’s how I liked to call it then, long before postcolonial theory and my field studies taught me to decolonise the anglicised Benares toponym into its original indigenous names of Banaras,<sup>5</sup> Varanasi or Kashi – drew me into its landscape by means of uncanny assonances which would return as my research progressed. My geographical imagination of what was to become the case study site of extensive academic research began to form in, and to be enmeshed with the atmospheres of the *calli* and *campi*<sup>6</sup> that I walked through every day when at university. The exotic sound of the name of Benares<sup>6</sup> uttered by my Hindi teacher as she was lecturing us on modern Hindi literature would reverberate in my mind, mixed up with the background noise of steamboats coming in from the classroom window overlooking the canal. As I walked home from lectures, stories of Shiva<sup>7</sup> and Tulsidas’ *Ramcharitmanas*,<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Banaras is how the city is called by its inhabitants. Through fieldwork, I became acquainted with this nomenclature and I use it in the empirical section to denote affection for and attachment to place.

<sup>6</sup> Characteristic narrow alleys (*calli*) and squares (*campi*); together with *fondamenta* (canal-side walking banks), *sottoporteghi* (passageways underneath buildings) and *corti* (common courtyards), later referenced in the text, compose Venice’s typical urban layout.

<sup>7</sup> Hindu god, patron of Varanasi.

<sup>8</sup> *Ramcharitmanas* is an epic poem, a vernacular retelling of famous Sanskrit epic Ramayana. It was composed by Tulsidas, one of the greatest poets of Indian literature, who lived most of his life in Varanasi.

set in Varanasi, prefigured the city shaping up in my imagination, drenched in the water vapour of misty Venetian wintery evenings. In a sense, the emotional landscapes of Venice and Varanasi were already connected through my lived experience and affectual imaginations before I actually went there. It shouldn't have surprised me, then, that these connections – which I shall better exemplify – were immediately activated through sensory and affective resonances as I eventually, physically, got to Varanasi. But that was me, and my personal relational geographies. What did surprise me even more, was to find similar connections in a varied set of representations and narratives. There are, of course, obvious similarities between Venice and Varanasi. They are both cities on water, famed for their waterscape; both are heritage cities (despite Varanasi not yet being on the UNESCO World Heritage list), important cultural centres and popular tourist destinations. They are both ancient, with an aesthetic of nostalgia and decay emanating from their regal palaces and facades. Called the 'gateway to the Orient' for its past close trade and cultural relationships with the East – from Marco Polo's Medieval travels along the Silk Road to the city's long-lasting bonds with Constantinople – Venice bears an historical connection with the Eastern world (Pedrini, 2020). Yet, that peculiar 'feeling of Venice' expressed by many in Varanasi, a place which is in fact profoundly different from the lagoon city, does not simply testify as to the similarities of the two cities; rather, it opens up productive theoretical insights into the ways we encounter the world and know *with* landscape. Thus, this section analyses empirical examples of 'Venice-in-Varanasi' in the light of postcolonial, representational and more-than-representational critical theories of landscape discussed earlier, to show the entangled epistemic affordances of landscape. At the same time, it illuminates Venice's inherent aesthetic agency, showing its ability to mobilise peculiar iconic, perceptual and affective correspondences that enable travellers to make sense of Varanasi and, conversely, Venice to come into being with them in (and with) Varanasi.

### Venice as way of seeing

We shall start this exploration looking away from Venice for a moment, to focus on Western travel representations of Varanasi from diverse sources at different points in time. In the following excerpts we are introduced to Varanasi through personal impressions of the city by two very different Western travellers. The first one is Reginald Heber, Bishop of Calcutta from 1822 to 1826, a well-known travel writer within the vast colonial literature on India. The second one is a young French backpacker whom I interviewed in Varanasi.

*On our way to and from the school, I had an opportunity of seeing something of Benares, which is a very remarkable city, more entirely and characteristically eastern than any which I have yet seen, and at the same time altogether different from anything in Bengal. No Europeans live in the town, nor are the streets wide enough for a wheel-carriage. (Reginald Heber, from his *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India* [1828] in Mahajan 2003: 79)*

*People come here and search for dépaysement, the difference... if we come here we want to see something different... Indian culture is different, Hindu religion is very different from our country, from Christianity, Islam... (French traveller, 22, male, 2009)*

Even though speaking from distant epochs, travel traditions and through distinct textual forms – travel literature and interview – there appears to be something very similar in the two travellers' accounts: Varanasi strikes them both as a very peculiar city, “characteristically eastern” and yet “altogether different”, a city where tourists come in search for *dépaysement*. But how can a place be anomalous and ‘typical’ at the same time? The two accounts shed light on a crucial aspect of the way Varanasi is represented: the city is perceived as the epitome of otherness, of all that is alien to the West; it strikes and attracts because it is ‘different’, and through its difference it embodies and typifies the ‘strange’ and ‘mysterious’ Orient, encapsulating the characteristics of the Oriental other (King 1999). Nourishing this narrative, the *Rough Guide* confirms:

*Western visitors since the Middle Ages have marvelled at the strangeness of this most alien of Indian cities – at the tight mesh of alleys, the accoutrements of religion, the host of deities, and at the proximity of death. (Rough Guides, 2001: 340)*

Varanasi is utterly ‘other’, so peculiar even within the Indian landscape that it has become the symbolic *locus* of the ‘peculiar’ Hindu culture as a whole, as if what makes Varanasi typically Eastern to the Western eyes is its own ‘strangeness’. One need not look far to find the orientalist echoes at work in this representation: oddness, peculiarity and difference stand in a binary relationship with what is deemed logical, intelligible and normal – typically associated with the ‘rational’ West (King, 1999; Said, 2003 [1978]).

Landscape plays a powerful role in Western representations of Varanasi. I argue that the visual construction of the city continues an established tradition of landscape representation imbued with colonial visions. In order to convey this idea visually, I have played around with images and composed an evocative, perhaps provocative, and certainly surreal ‘Venice-in-Varanasi’ landscape (Figure 4) as an attempt to render, aesthetically, that ‘sense of Venice’ that colonial and contemporary travellers have associated with Varanasi. We might (rather pretentiously) call it a *capriccio* in the manner of 18th Century Venetian *vedutisti*, blending, as it does, fanciful vision and realistic depiction in bringing together at a glance places otherwise apart.

As arbitrary and bold as this juxtaposition may be, it does convey a sense of the work of landscape in constructing and reproducing the Western gaze on Varanasi. To compose the scene, I selected and compared four images, each one ‘typical’ in its own way; a ‘typical’ colonial depiction of Varanasi showing a view of the *ghats*, by James Prinsep (top-left); a ‘typical’ contemporary tourist depiction by *Lonely Planet*, portraying again the sight of the

ghats (bottom-right), and two canonical landscape *vedute* of Venice by Canaletto (top-right and bottom-left).



Figure 4 – Venice-in-Varanasi: landscape correspondences.

Let us look at the images in more detail, starting from Prinsep's representation of Varanasi (Figure 5). James Prinsep was an English orientalist scholar and esteemed Assay Master at the mint of Varanasi. He lived in the city for ten years, greatly contributing to its cultural development and dissemination to European audiences. He was part of the cohort of colonial scholars, artists, travellers, scientists and explorers that between the 18th and 19th centuries helped codify, write and represent – essentially, *translate* the Orient for the European public, feeding their scientific, literary and artistic production into the Orientalist enterprise which profoundly shaped European understanding of the East. The representation of India and 'Indianness' by and for the British empire was at the forefront of this enterprise (Arnold, 2005; Ray, 2013). The image presented here shows a view of Dasashwamedh Ghat, now commonly known as 'the main ghat', and is taken from Prinsep's famous *Benares Illustrated in a Series of Drawings*, a collection of watercolours and drawings of local scenes painted by the author and then lithographed in England in 1831.



Figure 5 – ‘View of Dasashwamedh Ghat, Benares’, James Prinsep (1831) (British Library).

I would like to accompany Prinsep’s image with another coeval colonial account, which could well be a commentary to the landscape painted by Prinsep. This is an excerpt from colonial writer Emma Roberts’ travelogue, describing her encounter with Varanasi:

*No written description, however elaborate, can convey even a faint idea of the extraordinary peculiarities of a place which has no prototype in the East. Though strictly oriental, it differs very widely from all other cities of Hindostan [sic], and it is only by pictorial representations that any adequate notion can be formed of the mixture of the beautiful and the grotesque, which, piled confusedly together, form that stupendous wall which spreads along the bank of the Ganges at Benares. (1835: 228)*

Besides the reference, again, to the difference and typicality of the “extraordinarily peculiar” and “strictly oriental” Benares, and to the *ghats*, “that stupendous wall” which runs along the river displaying the contradictory beauty of this city, a key aspect here is Roberts’ suggestion that such a beauty can only be captured by pictorial representations. This idea is reminiscent of another illustrious travel account, that of Gustave Flaubert in Cairo, in 1850, cited in Mitchell’s (1988) work on colonial discursive formations about Egypt. Mitchell noted that Flaubert’s disorienting experience of the hustle-bustle of a Cairo street was “expressed as an absence of pictorial order”, and that only by regaining perspectival distancing from the view, could he come to terms with the disorientation and grasp the whole, for “the world arranges

itself into a picture and achieves a visual order, in accordance with the laws of perspective” (1988: 21-22). Similarly, Roberts’ account seems to suggest that “the mixture of the beautiful and the grotesque... piled confusedly together” may only make sense composed in the quaint scenery of the *ghats*, and that only by reframing it in pictorial terms can “any adequate notion be formed” of this otherwise incomprehensible, incoherent place. Very often, as Mitchell suggests, what is referred to as chaos and disorder is actually the lack of “pictorial order”, that is to say that we are unable to understand reality out of landscape canons.

It is perhaps because the landscape tradition is so ingrained within the Western way of comprehending the world that the association of Varanasi with Venice appears as a recurrent theme within different travel narratives over time. This association returns repeatedly, for example, in Allen Ginsberg’s accounts of Benares (1990[1970]). Continuing the play of associations and juxtapositions, if we were to represent visually the *ghatscape* described by Ginsberg in the opening quote of the article – “a prospect along the bend of the river like Venice along Grand Canal or seen from Judecca” – then Canaletto’s *veduta* of Venice from the Giudecca (Figure 6) would be a suitable landscape to conjure up the scene.



Figure 6 – ‘The Bacino di San Marco, Venice, Seen from the Giudecca’, Canaletto (1726)  
(Wikimedia Commons, NTII UPH 4468o6.jpg).

The reference to picturesque Venice returns in another colonial account, by French travel writer and photographer Louis Rousselet:

*We entered an elegant gondola, and soon were gliding gently in front of the city, gazing on the long succession of admirable pictures unfolding themselves before us. Seen at little distance from the river, the ghat of Dasasvamedh forms a*

*picture no painter could wish to heighten by a single touch.* (Louis Rousselet, *India and its Native Princes* (1876) in Mahajan, 2003: 83-84)

Again, to a Westerner's eyes, the city's picturesque riverscape, seen from a *gondola*<sup>9</sup> – a metonymy for Venice – seems to reproduce Venetian sceneries, typified in Canaletto's paintings (Figures 6 and 7).



Figure 7 – 'Return of the Bucintoro to the Molo on Ascension Day' (1732), Canaletto (Royal Collection, Windsor).

As discussed above, the visual power of the *veduta* – and of landscape representation more generally – is deeply embedded in the Western gaze. This is reflected also in contemporary tourist iconography of Varanasi, which makes extensive use of landscape to convey meanings, imaginaries and tropes connected with this 'special' city. Thus, this section concludes with *Lonely Planet's* image of Varanasi (Figure 8), which exemplifies a typical representation of the city in tourism advertising. The picture, published on the *Lonely Planet* website in 2011), shows an iconic view of Varanasi – which engages in many ways with both Canaletto's paintings and Prinsep's period image – to suggest that Western travellers have internalised a 'Venetian way of seeing', which they project onto the city, and through which they frame Varanasi and harness its otherness. These examples demonstrate that the visual representation mobilised within contemporary narratives of Varanasi re-actualises a long tradition of Western colonial gaze codified in landscape iconography, which still exerts great influence on the way modern travellers look at the city today.

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<sup>9</sup> A traditional Venetian boat embedded in the iconography of Venice.



Figure 8 – Varanasi’s Main Ghat (*Lonely Planet*, 2011: online).

### Being in Venice... in Varanasi

The aesthetic resonances conjuring up Venice in Varanasi do not unfold only through the visual. They emerge, in fact, out of deeper sensory involvement, noncognitive experiences and vibrant materialities (Bennett, 2010) that reveal the eventful nature of landscape and representations (Anderson, 2019; Wylie, 2006). Not only is the Venetian landscape embedded in the way Western travellers gaze upon Varanasi, it also ‘occurs’ to them through the mundane activities they carry out, the matters and things they encounter and the embodied interactions they have with the city. For example, if the iconic riverfront of the Indian sacred city, as we have seen, easily evokes the sight of Venice, to many it is the *galis*, the maze of alleys winding through the old town just behind the *ghats*, that remind of the characteristic atmosphere of the Venetian *calli*, as this tourist’s comment suggests:

*When I arrived in Varanasi – it was at sunset – I went straight to the old city and walked through its narrow lanes. Surprisingly, my first thought was: I’m in Venice!* (Italian tourist, 43, female, 2007)

The impression reported in the quote, which exemplifies a common perception, transcends the visual sphere and engages with a series of material, corporeal and affective processes that continually re-generate landscape not just as a way of seeing, but as a way of “being-in-the-world” (Ingold, 2000: 173;). The quote foregrounds walking, strolling and being immersed *in* (rather than looking at) the city as kinaesthetic practices that prompt the epiphanic appearance of Venice in the tourist’s first encounter with Varanasi. As she roams around the

tangle of alleys-*calli* of the inner city, the respondent says she feels like she is in Venice; she does not just say that the place looks like Venice. The haptic quality of this embodied immersion is vividly expressed by a remark of another tourist; in our conversation he described how he felt enveloped in the city, as if tight in an urban embrace, both warm and suffocating: “this city clenches you... when I walk in the narrow *galis* of the old town I feel like I’m tight all around, compressed in space... the city hugs me” (Brazilian tourist, in his 30s, male, 2009). Here the respondent expresses a trans-subjective experience of landscape, which *emerges* with the intertwining of the sentient body and the lively “fabric” of the world it is “caught in” (Dewsbury et al, 2002: 439). The inner city reaches out to the feeling ‘I’ through its materialities – the city *hugs*, it has a body and own forces; it has agency – an experience similar to that of being channelled into the reticular interior of Venice, as described later in my ethnographic accounts. This encounter – this configuration of self and landscape – is best articulated through the notions of affect and percept as “that through which subject and object emerge and become possible, they speak to the emergent eventuality of the world” (Dewsbury et al, 2002: 439).

The distance granted by sight, here, collapses. No longer converging towards a perspectival vanishing point, freezing the gazing tourist into spectator and the viewed *ghatscape* into spectacle, the space of aesthetic encounter expands to affective resonances and more-than-visual correspondences. Landscape is set in motion with the moving and sensing body of the strolling tourist; it unfolds as they move through it, destabilising the fixity (and authority) of sight into an embodied and mobile gaze engaging freely with, and being affected by, the materialities of the surrounding environs. From fixed perspective, to mobile vision; from detached gazing upon, to ‘being in’ and ‘becoming with’. Similarly, expressing an emotional involvement with the evocative Venetian atmosphere of Varanasi, another tourist speculates on the more-than-human connections that bring Venice alive in Varanasi: “I feel Varanasi is like Venice, maybe for the water, the spirituality” (Polish tourist, 22, female, 2010). Again, the reference here is more than the visual; this tourist *feels* that Varanasi is like Venice; and this feeling is materially actualised through – or at least articulated by the respondent via a material reference to – water, and experienced as a particular affective atmosphere (Anderson, 2009; McCormack, 2008) that she frames as spiritual. In this quote by photographer and essayist Richard Lannoy from his 1955 text *India*, such a particular atmosphere is conveyed through a *sense* of (Venetian) calmness, which he seems to derive from a contrasting rhythm of noise and calm, a sense that is more aural and sensorial than visual: “in the midst of noise there is a calm, even on the most crowded ghats, reminiscent of the Venetian Lagoon” (Mahajan, 2003: 86).

As we have seen, literary reference to the lagoon city is found in various narratives of Varanasi; most recently in Geoff Dyer’s (2009) wittily constructed, specular tale of the two watery cities. In Ginsberg’s (1990 [1970]) accounts of Varanasi, the reference to Venice keeps returning in a hallucinatory play of precognitive associations which exemplify a non-representational use of representation, where picturesque Venetian iconography is mobilised to convey a sense of surreal, incoherent and dreamlike quaintness amidst obsessively realistic if not disturbing scenes. Ginsberg suggestively re-produces a

transfigured landscape that is neither Venice nor Varanasi, and yet expresses their inherent capacity to affect, to unsettle or soothe, enchant or haunt. He does so by juxtaposing incongruous elements, which combine to create an indeterminate, poignant atmosphere with a character of its own, like in the following quote, where the improbable scene of a Hindu ascetic meditating on the ghats is described as “rather Venetian”: a “saddhu in orange robes sitting up on a stone porch on the embankment under turrets of an old small castle – rather Venetian the scene” (Ginsberg, 1990 [1970]: 130). The episodic coming into being of the conflated landscape of Venice and Varanasi is something I experienced on several occasions in my fieldwork. It was more a transient assembling of sensory prompts and affective associations than a stable landscape of resemblances. I have collected some of these impressions in short pieces of creative ethnographic writing boxed below, the first one telling of surprising coincidences and aesthetic apparitions (Extract 1), the other expressing aural assonances composing a sort of ‘Vara-netian’ rhapsody (Extract 2).

#### Uncanny connections

This thing about Banaras and Venice keeps coming back. I was browsing books as usual at the Harmony Bookshop in Assi Ghat earlier this afternoon and a book caught my eye. It was clearly sitting there for me, speaking at me with its eloquent title: “*Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi*, by English writer Geoff Dyer. Here we go again, Venice in Varanasi; the association of the two cities evoked once again. As I speak with people, read travel literature, I am surprised at how often Venice is brought up. I bought the book immediately, of course. Now I can’t wait to see what the points of connections are for Mr Dyer. For me it’s something impalpable. It’s more about feelings and impressions than real resemblances. Like the other day, I was roaming in the shady narrow *galis*, lost in the intricate belly of the old city. I turned a corner and suddenly found myself up Nepali Ghat, overwhelmed by the uplifting aesthetic vision of Ganga-ji<sup>10</sup> flowing slowly and majestically in front of me – more like a revelation than a view. Indeed a *darshan*<sup>11</sup> of Ganga-ji. A feel that took me straight across time and space to Venice, to that so often lived experience that I would call “the Piazza San Marco vision”, when I would (inevitably) get lost in the alleys on my way to San Marco, my body tortuously channelled through the maze of *sottoporteghi*, *calli* and *corti*, to be eventually delivered to the open, luminous and intoxicating landscape of Piazza San Marco facing the sea (gloriously shimmering or poetically misty); a vision which would enter my body far more than just through the eyes. It always felt like a fill-up of energy and beauty. Perhaps that’s what this Venice-Varanasi connection is all about, a fill-up of watery, luminous and vibrant beauty through the body. Enchantment. Which in both cities comes with intricacy, disorientation and psychophysical demand. (Written up from sparse fieldnotes, February-April 2009)

#### Extract 1: ‘Uncanny connections’, ethnographic record

<sup>10</sup> An honorific for the holy Ganges river.

<sup>11</sup> In Hinduism, the beholding of a deity, typically in the form of a god effigy, but also of a sacred object, individual or landscape. From the Sanskrit term for ‘viewing’.

Assonances

Footfalls echoing in empty *calli*. The acoustics of inner *galis*. That particular reverberation of the sound in stony narrowness.

The washing of waters on sandy shores, and against the stony banks of *ghats* and *fondamenta*.

The soundscape of watery routines punctuated by the gurgling of motorboats – *vaporetti* and fishing boats. The splashing and creaking of rowboats and *gondolas*.

Lapping water and bell sound – solemn from churches and hypnotic from temples, annoying or uplifting, obtrusive or tuned in with daily groove.

The screeching of seagulls, the chirping of birds. Lack of cars. Calmness. Unexpected urban silences. Then voices of children, of people at work. Chatting of tourists, travellers and guides; ensemble of foreign utterances. Mundane noises of chores and routines, expanding in the air freed from traffic.

An idle drumming of bongos, lending the ambience an exotic tone, hinting that this is not Venice, after all.

(Written up from embodied memories of Venice and Varanasi)

Extract 2: ‘Assonances’, ethnographic record

In the second vignette, Venice and Varanasi merge through sound and rhythm. The sonic routines that shape the everyday landscapes of the two cities recall each other in a play of assonances that exceed any bounded notion of these places. It is the landscape reaching out with aural capacities, making and unmaking itself in fleeting configurations of sounds, self, matter, objects, bodies and rhythms. Likewise, in the first account, correspondences are activated by enchanting encounters and sensuous connections, where vision is transfigured through embodied memories, absences-presences (Anderson, 2009) and more-than-human evocations. The aesthetic experience of Venice-in-Varanasi comes as an atmosphere that “creates a space of intensity that overflows a represented world organised into subjects and objects or subjects and other subjects” (Anderson, 2009: 79). This experience highlights the agency of matter – the capacity of stone, water, air and light to assemble, affect, move and act upon humans and non-humans. It is a responsive, lively matter – the stony *galis/calli* reverberating the sound, creating acoustics, constraining bodies in narrowness or releasing them in openness; the waters reflecting light, condensing in misty vapours, enveloping bodies in wintry humidity, rising and lowering along the rhythms of monsoons and *acqua alta*<sup>12</sup> tides, designing new patterns for moving beings, impinging or diverting; the air carrying sounds and moist smells. Venice and Varanasi are also “obliterated” (Cresswell, 2003) by similar practices; the absence of cars and the intricate layout of their waterscapes and inner parts make walking and boating preferred means of moving around and experiencing the urban environment.

The relational connection of Venice and Varanasi has become such a common motif in Western representations, that it seems to have been assumed by the local community, too. The ethnographic extract concluding this section (Extract 3) shows how this trope is

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<sup>12</sup> An Italian term for the tidal peaks that periodically flood Venice.

deployed in the tourist encounter, used by a local hawker to connect with the perceived other, the Western tourist.

Venice like Banaras

At Manikarnika Ghat<sup>13</sup>, in one of my ethnographic walks. Met a guy claiming to work for a charitable hospice which attends to cremation rites for the poor. He strikes up a conversation:

- You sit here madam, you can watch, you no come here every day! Every day here two, three hundred bodies burning.

He sees me taking notes in my red notebook, and goes on... He speaks some Italian, which shows his acquaintance with tourists and tourism business.

Then he asks me where I am from, I say Italy, he says:

- Where in Italy?

- Venice

- Oh, Venice! Venice like Banaras!

(Fieldnotes, 26/12/2009)

Insert 3 – ‘Venice like Banaras’, ethnographic record

The Venetian landscape is referenced here to signify a presumed commonality, a meeting ground between subjects, and indeed worlds otherwise apart. It is discursively appropriated by the host gaze to re-present itself in relation to the other; in this particular instance, possibly used as a seductive tactic to approach the tourist and attract profit. Thus, if the empirical discussion began with a focus on the representational power of the Venetian landscape, the closing vignette suggests the “force” of this representation (Anderson, 2019), that is what it *does* “in the midst of relations” (ibid: 1126), what people do with it, how it is performed and reworked on the ground. A reflection that takes us to the final section of the article.

Fluid landscapes: towards a theory of ‘landscape-in-relation’

The analysis presented in this article has been leaning towards a productive overcoming of binary non/representational thinking about landscape to propose a mode of inquiry that stays with representations (Anderson, 2019), whilst engaging with the lively and eventful ways by which they come about, assemble, make and unmake landscapes. One way of achieving this task has been to revive attention to duplicitous (Cosgrove, 2003; Daniels, 1989) and paradoxical (Minca, 2007) epistemologies of landscape by centring the discussion on what we might call, after Minca (2007), ‘the Venice landscape paradox’, that is the coming into existence of Venice elsewhere from Venice, the messy representational and non-representational configuration of an aesthetic ‘event’ expressing the typical Varanasi landscape through typical Venetian scenes. Venice is presented here as a site of epistemological and ontological tensions, which yields new possibilities of thinking with

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<sup>13</sup> The city’s main cremation ground.

landscape to illuminate the processual and emergent nature of the world. On the one hand, Venice's landscape encapsulates a longstanding European visual tradition that enables Western travellers to reframe the unfamiliar Oriental(ised) landscape of Varanasi within recognisable aesthetic sensibilities. On the other, it works as a frame of reference connecting atmospheres and sensorial perceptions through "traces of presence" (Dewsbury, 2003: 1907) shaping travellers' experience of place. By looking at Venice as transfigured in *other* landscapes, the article reframed the city as an aesthetic quasi-object sitting at the threshold between visual consumption/embodied experience; presence/absence; here/elsewhere; familiar/unfamiliar, European/'Oriental' aesthetics. In so doing, it showed Venice's ability to mobilise aesthetic affective connections, prompting a rethink of its spatialities topologically, as exceeding physical boundaries and connecting socio-material contexts and spatio-temporal experiences far apart. Whilst this advances the landscape debate empirically by expanding understanding of the Venice waterscape, it also extends the intervention into landscape theory, prompting a more 'fluid' interaction across analytical frameworks. Indeed, a central claim of the article is that it takes the vocabulary of both interpretive and non-representational paradigms – from vision to practice and the body, from prospect to relation, from seeing to witnessing – to truly grasp the complex ontologies of landscape.

Sight is of course deeply involved in the experience of Venice in Varanasi; it is primarily the sheer glance of the waterscape that conjures picturesque resemblances between the two cities – *déjà-vus*, quite literally, the 'already seen'. These sights are, however, thickened with perceptual engagement, immersive gazing and affective intensities. It is a trans-subjective landscape that which we have seen coming alive through embodied memories of an immersed and diffused self, entwined with the live textures of Venice-in-Varanasi. As Deleuze and Guattari vividly evoke:

*If resemblance haunts the work of art it is because sensation refers only to its material: it is the percept or affect of the material itself, the smile of oil, the gesture of fired clay, the thrust of metal, the crouch of Romanesque stone, and the ascent of Gothic stone. (1994: 166)*

Among the vibrant materialities of Venice and Varanasi – from reverberating light and sound, to the constraining spatialities of stone – water takes centre stage. Whether flowing pictorially along the waterfront, shimmering back to sunlight, mixing up with air to blur things in mystical mist, evaporating in ethereal watery atmosphere, decomposing human and non-human remains, fashioning land and urban life in seasonal weaves of tides and floods, moving boats and bodies throughout mundane routines, enchanting spectators, inspiring emotions, enfolding bodies, or connecting physical and transcendental realms, what water *does* to the trans-subjective landscapes of Venice and Varanasi is a constitutive part of their coming-to-be. Here – empirical evidence has shown – water is affective matter, prompting material and emotional connections and eliciting the liminal nature of these waterscapes, not just as thresholds between water and land, material and spiritual spheres (as extensively theorised by waterscape research), but also as fluid configurations assembling and disassembling across time and space, through multifaceted social, material, discursive

and noncognitive processes. For as MacLeod (2013: 40) avers, “the material and sensual qualities of water... are always mingling with individual and collective associations”.

Thus, inspired by the fluid capacity of water to change state, to affect and be affected, to engage human and non-human agents in fluid relations (Strang, 2014), this article calls for attending to the liquid epistemologies of landscape, delving deeper into its capacity to flow across paradigms. Fluid landscapes demand a closer attention to the way they form through relations – watery, haptic, aural, aesthetic, material, evocative or else, as exemplified in this analysis. Responding to Anderson’s (2019) invitation to reinvigorate the force of representations by thinking them through a ‘representations-in-relation’ framework, the article has reconsidered Venice’s representational force as entangled in mobile, trans-scalar and trans-temporal relations encompassing representational *and* non-representational registers. Staying with representations, with what they *do*, the article has sought to demonstrate Venice’s aesthetic agency, its inherent ability to mobilise iconic experiences. It has shown how the Venice landscape has the capacity to generate correspondences, to act as a model for particular visual and perceptive manifestations typified as ‘Venetian’. This is not to essentialise Venice as a discrete aesthetic object with an agency of its own. Rather, this analysis reconfigures Venice as continuously emerging from situated socio-material relations and distributed agencies, thus moving towards a theory of ‘landscape-in-relation’ that recognises that landscapes, like representations, “only ever act and effect in and through relations” (Anderson, 2019: 1125). Through the case of Venice-in-Varanasi – hyphenated to signal the relational ontogeny of the entity – I argue in this article that just as Venice can be further understood and enlivened via its transfiguration into Varanasi (and vice versa), so the conceptualising of landscape can gain traction from scholarly insights into the relational processes through which it is constituted.

The article makes a distinct contribution to ‘mobilising’ landscape, conceptually and empirically, in four interconnected ways. Firstly, through the example of Venice, it has illuminated the mobile and fluid nature of landscape as a shifting visual-affective-material configuration travelling across time and space. Secondly, and consequently, it has shown a landscape’s ability to weave together representational and more-than-representational spheres of human experience and understanding of the world, contributing to recent emerging literature that seeks to destabilise the binary epistemologies in which much landscape research has been trapped in the past. Thirdly, theoretically, it has mobilised landscape as a fixed-and-frozen object of representational analysis to reconfigure it as an emergent spatial event, repositioning it within relational theory, without dismissing the potential of discursive analysis. Fourthly, methodologically, it has experimented with forms of imaginative and affective interaction with, analysis and presentation of, research data oriented towards ‘more-than-interpretive’ suggestions and dispositions.

Advancing landscape as a liquid field of inquiry (Daniels, 2018: 19), the article has hopefully contributed towards an epistemology that seeks to comprehend not just “how we think about the landscapes that surround us, but how they in turn *force us to think and feel* – through

their contexts, prompts and familiarity (or not)” (Waterton, 2019: 99, emphasis in original). Just as Varanasi forces one to think of and feel like one is in Venice.

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