

# Climate Change: Eco-Dystopia in Antonio Scurati's *La seconda mezzanotte*

Anna Chiafele

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## Article abstract

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# CLIMATE CHANGE: ECO-DYSTOPIA IN ANTONIO SCURATI'S *LA SECONDA MEZZANOTTE*

ANNA CHIAFELE

*Abstract:* This article offers an examination of the novel *La seconda mezzanotte* (2011) by Antonio Scurati. Classified by the author as a catastrophist sci-fi novel, this work is here defined and analyzed as one of the very first Italian examples of climate fiction (cli-fi), a narrative form especially popular in North America, closely related to anthropogenic climate change. The essay discusses some of the *topoi* that characterize Anglo-Saxon cli-fi, which are clearly present in *The Second Midnight*. Such recurring motifs will also be discussed, in particular, by highlighting some of the rhetorical tools adopted by Scurati, such as, for example, the effect of estrangement. Through such effects, the reader is spurred to adopt an uncomfortable, “oblique” and unusual gaze. This study highlights Antonio Scurati’s skill and originality in dealing with the causes and global effects of climate change. The author succeeds in making the reader perceive the spatial and temporal magnitude of global warming, which in 2072 Venice materializes dramatically in a Big Wave. *The Second Midnight* is a human comedy that expands across centuries and continents while narrating the events of a few men living in Nova Venezia in a specific year, 2092. Distant spaces, remote times, human and non-human corporealities converge in a new Venice, which is a piece of a hologram narrating other people’s stories.

## Introduction

Antonio Scurati is an Italian professor, an accomplished and well-known journalist and writer, and the winner of the prestigious Italian Strega prize in 2019.<sup>1</sup> In 2011, Scurati wrote *La seconda mezzanotte* (*The Second Midnight*), a novel that takes

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<sup>1</sup> Already a finalist for the Strega prize in 2009 and 2014 with, respectively, *Il bambino che sognava la fine del mondo* (*The Child that Dreamed about the End of the World*) and *Il padre*

place in a post-inundation Venice around the year 2092. The city is now owned by TNC, a powerful Chinese information, telecommunications, and entertainment network. In a web interview, Scurati labelled his book as a “doomsayer sci-fi” and “dystopian” novel (“Intervista all’autore Scurati”).<sup>2</sup> I would like to argue that *La seconda mezzanotte* is also a remarkable example of Italian climate fiction or cli-fi,<sup>3</sup> that is to say it is a narrative dealing explicitly with anthropogenic climate change.<sup>4</sup>

In 2007, journalist Dan Bloom forged the term “climate-fiction” and its abbreviation “cli-fi” which, he correctly believed, could be useful as a “short, eye-catching word” in press headlines. The term became popular in 2013 after the NPR radio network broadcast a five-minute audio segment discussing the rise of cli-fi (“So Hot Right Now”). Today in Italy bloggers and reviewers use interchangeably the terms “cli-fi,” “fantascienza climatica” (climate sci-fi) and “narrativa ambientale” (environmental narrative).<sup>5</sup> Due to the fluidity of the term,<sup>6</sup> its foreign origin, and its timing, it should be no surprise that Scurati missed labelling his *La seconda mezzanotte* as “cli-fi.” Nevertheless, the author wrote one of the very first Italian cli-fi novels at a time when, in Italy, global warming was barely being analyzed in literary works.

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*infedele* (*The Unfaithful Father*), Antonio Scurati won this literary award in 2019 with *M. Il figlio del secolo* (*M: Son of the Century*, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Scurati’s words are “sci-fi catastrofista” which, according to the author, belongs to the “dystopian genre.”

<sup>3</sup> In the summer of 2016, Bruno Arpaia published *Qualcosa, là fuori* (*Something, Out There*). It was positively received by the Italian press and labeled as the first Italian cli-fi novel. This designation is not entirely accurate since authors such as Alessandra Montrucchio, Paolo Zanotti, and, indeed, Antonio Scurati, wrote cli-fi prior to 2016.

<sup>4</sup> In this article I will use interchangeably “climate change” and “global warming” in an effort to avoid repetition. However, I am aware of the difference between these two terms. As stated by NASA, “[g]lobal warming is the long-term heating of Earth’s climate system observed since the pre-industrial period (between 1850 and 1900) due to human activities [...]. The term is frequently used interchangeably with the term climate change, though the latter refers to both human-and naturally produced warming and the effects it has on our planet.”

<sup>5</sup> Numerous online reviews in Italian discuss popular foreign climate fiction. The most frequently addressed foreign authors include Amitav Ghosh, Margaret Atwood, Kim Stanley Robinson, Ian McEwan, James Bradley, and Cormac McCarthy. In Italy, the debate around cli-fi is strongly based upon foreign authors and their novels. See Jolanda Di Virgilio, Marco Dotti, Sabina Minardi, and Emanuela Valentini.

<sup>6</sup> For an introduction to the debate around the term cli-fi, see Craps and Crownshaw.

I will not limit my analysis to addressing the main cli-fi *topoi* that can be traced in Scurati's novel; rather, these literary themes will be discussed in relation to narrative and rhetorical devices employed by the author. As Niccolò Scaffai maintains, ecology cannot be addressed separately from the structure of a literary work; therefore, he encourages scholars to investigate how the interconnections between living beings and their physical environment affect the shape of a novel and its broader formal apparatus (14). Similarly, in his compelling *Anthropocene Fiction*, Adam Trexler states that “[c]limate change is not just a ‘theme’ in fiction. It remakes basic narrative operations. It undermines the passivity of place, elevating it to an actor that is itself shaped by world systems” (233). In *La seconda mezzanotte*, Venice is indeed a living character that interacts with all human and non-human beings embedded in it. In my analysis I will focus specifically on the effect of estrangement that dystopian novels often foster in order to prompt readers to look at their present-day environment and at their current *milieu* with a renewed and increased critical gaze (Muzzioli 18). By adopting a rather uncomfortable “oblique gaze,”<sup>7</sup> readers engage in dismantling obsolete, anthropocentric, and hegemonic dichotomies prevalent in Western thought (Iovino, *Ecologia letteraria* 11–23); in fact, contrasting categories, such as human/non-human, human/inhuman, nature/culture, civilized/uncivilized, and male/female are challenged in persistent and powerful ways throughout Scurati's novel. Moreover, lengthy descriptions of bodies and a highly refined vocabulary prompt readers to adopt an unexpected defamiliarized gaze. In the end, perceptive readers may be encouraged to reshape their normative cultural models and embrace less hierarchical values. Finally, I will address the main cognitive and representational challenges of climate fiction, and will analyze how Scurati tackles them. Keeping in mind Timothy Clark's question, “How can a global process, spanning millennia, be made comprehensible to human imagination, with its limited sense of place and time?” (78), I will provide effective examples from the Italian context.

### **Utopia and dystopia: fragile Venetian bodies**

In the prelude to the book, readers are informed about a big wave, a “Grande onda” that hit Venice the night of November 8, 2072 (12). This deadly big wave,

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<sup>7</sup> I am here referring to Wu Ming's “oblique gaze” that fosters “unexpected and unusual points of view, including those of animals, objects, places and even immaterial flows” (26). All translations from original Italian texts are my own.

a gruesome phantom of the Venetian *acqua alta* of November 2019, wiped out the entire Laguna, its marvelous centuries-old buildings, and its “amphibious” people, causing death and despair.<sup>8</sup> It exposed a bare and fragile body, reminiscent of New Orleans following hurricane Katrina, when physical and socio-political infrastructures collapsed.<sup>9</sup> This massive wave hit the façade of Palazzo Ducale, and forcefully submerged and swept away all creatures, without distinction: humans, rats, dogs and birds (11). In the aftermath of the deluge, doctors were forced to choose whom they would try to save and cure. After this prelude, readers are encouraged to take a leap into the year 2092 and into a new, reborn Venice. In fact, ten years after the flood, Chinese TNC “purchased the wreckage of the city from the government of Northern Italy” (“acquistarono il relitto della città dal governo del Nord Italia”; 12) and founded Nova Venice. Nova Venice is protected by modern dams, drains and walls properly camouflaged as ancient buildings, and Piazza San Marco is topped with a glass-block hemisphere called the Superdome (13). Beyond these futuristic borders and protective devices, which are state-of-the-art exemplars of geoengineering, the former Venice is now an insalubrious swamp that nobody dares to traverse. When standing too close to the walls that separate it from the new city, one can even smell its mephitic air.

In Nova Venice, the “ancient” Venetians are slowly disappearing and all its male inhabitants have to wear a contraceptive dispenser under their skin so that children are no longer begotten. In the first paragraph of the novel, readers are introduced to the main character, a strong and quiet forty-year-old man. His name is never revealed and he is simply called the Maestro. He trains hundreds of young, sturdy, and courageous men to fight as gladiators during the Carnival season, over six days of brutalities and excess; these fights are the hideous and much-desired entertainment for hordes of rich tourists and for a selected Chinese oligarchy. At the end of the twenty-first century, fierce gladiators replace charming gondoliers. Piazza San Marco hosts the arena, a new Colosseum, which is “a theatre of brutality and fury” (“un teatro della ferocia e del furore”; 14). Sixty pages into the novel, readers discover that the Maestro has breached one of the

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<sup>8</sup> On the night of November 12, 2019, Venice was hit by severe bad weather and the high tide reached 187cm. This caused enormous damage and the death of an elderly citizen. See Vera Mantengoli.

<sup>9</sup> Nancy Tuana argues that a natural phenomenon such as Hurricane Katrina is, in reality, the visible and tangible outcome of an interplay of natural forces and social practices. This argument can also be applied to the “Venetian wave” in Scurati’s novel.

only three laws that must be obeyed in Nova Venice and has become the father of a baby girl. If discovered, he runs the risk of being expelled from the city. The Maestro could abandon the infant in the marshlands of the old Venice, beyond the city walls; he could feed her to pythons, or strangle her with his own hands. These are all options which he briefly ponders. Only in the last pages of the novel readers are offered an open-ended finale and learn that, amidst a bloody social turmoil, the Maestro flees Nova Venice in a desperate attempt to save the infant's life. Closure is therefore hindered and readers are reminded that "One needs to stay alive" ("Bisogna restare in vita"; 343). Due to its open-ended narrative structure, *La seconda mezzanotte* can also be interpreted as a "critical dystopia" (Mehnert, *Climate Change Fictions* 42), a genre that allows for some dim hope despite the dire circumstances depicted. In an interview with Pierfrancesco Matarazzo, the author discusses the ending of the novel and maintains that a dystopian novel cannot offer "a redemptive ending" ("un finale di redenzione") that provides consolation. Therefore, Scurati opts for an open-ended narrative, in which the main characters are on the run in a tumultuous and suffocating city.

In the novel's opening pages, we read of a slow apocalypse which has not caused any clamor; in fact, Western civilization has collapsed due to global warming but no one understood what was unfolding in front of their very eyes, threatening the human species and the earth's overall biodiversity.<sup>10</sup> For years, humankind faced "a catastrophe in slow motion" ("una catastrofe al rallentatore"; 11), but "we did not have eyes to see it nor ears to hear it" ("noi non avevamo avuto occhi per vederla né orecchie per udirla"; 11). Once unfolded, "even the apocalypse had caused little racket" ("perfino l'apocalisse aveva fatto ben poco rumore"; 11). The notion of a slow apocalypse clearly resonates with Rob Nixon's popular definition of slow violence, which is "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (2). Slow violence often characterizes environmental degradation, which lingers and advances invisibly and silently for protracted periods of time. Global warming, however, can engender both slow and sudden natural phenomena; in fact, once tipping points are met and surpassed, "transformations can be dramatic, sudden, not necessarily predictable, and anything but gradual" (Crownschaw 891).

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<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that Scurati has often written about the slow decline of Western civilization, both in his novels and in his essays. The West is gradually decaying, but we are unable to prevent its collapse. Westerners are unperturbed spectators of their final unimpressive extinction. See Antonio Scurati, *Il bambino che sognava la fine del mondo* and *Gli anni che non stiamo vivendo*.

This is exactly what happens in Venice at the time of the big wave, which can be seen as a sudden violent outcome of gradual, slow environmental violence.

After the mortiferous flood, the Chinese government bought Venice in an attempt to transform it into an ideal place where wealthy people could travel and fulfil their unspeakable desires. Nova Venice is a new “Las Vegas,” or better “a sort of perverse and violent Disneyland of the third millennium” (“una specie di Disneyland perversa e violenta del terzo millennio”; Scurati, “Intervista” 56). While persistent famines, droughts, floods and social upheavals have exterminated millions of human beings and animals across the globe, in Nova Venice affluent travelers can still indulge in a cornucopia of rare and tasty food and drink. Here, for example, one can still eat meat, which has been banned for years from the European diet. Moreover, in Venice any sexual desire can be satisfied. In fact, almost anything can be satiated here. Residents and visitors have to obey only three prohibitions: against religion, firearms, and procreation. Anything else is allowed. In Piazza San Marco people can even enjoy a pleasant artificial breeze, thanks to the pioneering see-through superdome that permanently shields the square. Out of the ruins of old Venice, the Chinese government envisions a paradisiacal place, a “eutopia,” a “good place.”<sup>11</sup> With its superdome, St. Mark’s Square is cut off from “the acid atmosphere” (“dall’atmosfera acida”) and “above all, from history” (“so-prattutto, fuori dalla storia”; *La seconda mezzanotte* 13). The superdome confers upon Nova Venice “a new grandeur, a monumentality that is not provisional but aimed at the present. A present instant that can be replicated *ad infinitum*” (“una nuova grandezza, una monumentalità non temporanea ma tutta mirata al presente. Un istante presente replicabile all’infinito”; 13, emphasis added). It is worth noting that Venice lends itself quite well to the idea of a detached, good place; in fact, as an island, it is geographically separated from the mainland. Jameson’s observation on Thomas More’s *Utopia* can be easily employed to describe Nova Venice; here too “closure is achieved by that great trench the founder causes to be dug between the island and the mainland” (5). Walls and trenches also surround Nova Venice: “The furrow, though, had not been dug with the help of sacred oxen but with mechanic excavators” (“Il solco, però, non era stato tracciato con

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<sup>11</sup> In her “The Concept of Utopia” Fátima Vieira provides concise explanations of the terms “utopia” and “eutopia” and their respective origin. Utopia, a neologism coined by Thomas More in 1516, is a “place which is a non-place, simultaneously constituted by a movement of affirmation and denial” (4). In addition, More invented another neologism that can be found at the end of his *Utopia*; the inhabitants and the laws of the island called Utopia “are so wonderful that it should be called Eutopia (the good place) instead of Utopia” (5).

l'aiuto di buoi sacri ma con le scavatrici meccaniche"; *La seconda mezzanotte* 13). A tension between "eutopia" and dystopia is ingrained in the very inception of the novel's storyline and it does not take long to understand that in Nova Venice something is wrong, and that, despite its apparent rebirth, this maritime city is, once and for all, doomed to face its "final ruin" ("la rovina definitiva"; 13). As Francesco Muzzioli reminds us, "utopia and dystopia are linked" ("utopia e distopia sono legate"; 130) and a utopian community can degenerate into a dystopic society.

Scurati's explanations of his decision to set *La seconda mezzanotte* in Venice are significant and insightful. In an interview with Antonio Gnoli, the writer states that he knows Venice very well, since he lived there for twenty years. He is also aware of his daring choice; after all – he notes – from an artistic point of view Venice is "saturated"<sup>12</sup> and almost everything has already been said about this fascinating maritime city. Venice is a real physical place, but it is also "an important site (a topos, a topic) for the European imagination" (Tanner 4). Venice has been both enchanting and repulsing its visitors (writers and artists included) for centuries. Some of the recurrent Venetian *topoi* encompass decay and decadence, and these are indeed present in Scurati's novel. Readers of *La seconda mezzanotte* encounter, for instance, malaria, decaying bodies, sensual bodies, sickness, death, mephitic air, and moral corruption. It is beyond the scope of this article to elaborate on how Scurati employs recurrent Venetian themes and to compare his depiction of Venice with those recounted in other literary works written both by Italian and foreign authors.<sup>13</sup> I would like, however, to underscore Scurati's ability to employ one driving motif among all those mentioned above. In *La seconda mezzanotte* Venice is mainly a city of desire; as Tanner reminds us, "more than any other city it is inextricably associated with desire" (4). This is also the reason why it is doomed to founder. As already mentioned, in the novel Venice becomes a city where all desires are instantly satiated. Throughout this analysis, based upon the tenets of material ecocriticism, Venice becomes a metaphor not only for the disintegration of the West, but also for human annihilation. Scurati's *La seconda mezzanotte* takes its readers into the future in order to disclose to them the many fallacies of our current progress. Growth, often perceived in perpetual linear economic terms, is here questioned and challenged; in fact, its material and immaterial consequences

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<sup>12</sup> Scurati states that Venice is "una città artisticamente satura." However, he felt the urge to return to it and to look at the city again ("Perché ho scelto Venezia per raccontare l'Apocalisse").

<sup>13</sup> For an engaging discussion about the representation of Venice in the works of foreign authors, see Tony Tanner's volume *Venice Desired* (1992).



can no longer be concealed and, like uncollected trash, they begin to pile up, proliferate, and fester in chaos and environmental devastation. In Scurati's novel, climate change is a destructive propelling force that affects lives, cultures, habits, politics, and economies on a global scale. By 2092, nations have collapsed and social upheavals are barely kept at bay. As Richard McNeill Douglas states, "[c]ivilization itself is hastening its own end, by its very advanced development" (203) and by the reckless use and abuse of non-renewable resources. The Maestro realizes this quite well; in fact, he reflects about the old world and "about the promise of infinite expansion" ("alla promessa dell'espansione infinita"; *La seconda mezzanotte* 85). Instead of a reassuring endless expansion, readers are catapulted into a desperate possible world of infinite crisis, where a state of emergency becomes the daily norm.

### **Time: beyond the present moment**

Global warming has become the center of heated debates, both nationally and internationally, involving scientists, politicians, activists, and economists. Some groups even contest the scientific basis of climate change and spread doubts about its existence and its dire effects. In this fierce battle, sophisticated computer model simulations are employed by competing factions in order to gather consensus. Since it is difficult to understand and to discern global warming from a singular, subjective perspective much of the present controversy relies heavily on scientific tools. After all, climate change extends beyond comprehensible scales of time and space, and such graphs may also overshadow and hide as much as they claim to unveil. As Antonia Mehnert maintains, climate change "creates a crisis of thinking or imagining" ("Climate Change Futures" 28); its ecological, economic and social consequences are difficult to foresee. Hence, we need narratives that strive to provide more inclusive and understandable scenarios for all. In sum, literature can help reveal the deepest material and immaterial interconnections and foster a better understanding of our own vulnerability. *La seconda mezzanotte* draws temporal relations that span throughout centuries and binds together our present with past epochs and future times.

The Anthropocene<sup>14</sup> and, specifically, global warming force us to think "of human life at much broader scales of space and time, something which

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<sup>14</sup> The term Anthropocene designates the current geologic epoch in which human beings have been affecting Earth's geology and ecology significantly. For Crutzen and Stoermer, the

alters significantly the way that many once familiar issues appear” (Clark 13). Considering the extremely elusive nature of climate change and its ramifications, fiction writers need to conceive new ways to portray effectively this material and immaterial disruptive phenomenon. After all, novels are usually set within a limited horizon of time and place that is inadequate to encompass the magnitude of global warming (Ghosh 59). *La seconda mezzanotte* successfully takes up this challenge and avoids reducing climate change to an isolated local flood happening within a limited span of time.

As already noted, *La seconda mezzanotte* takes place in 2092, after a brief prelude, which sketches some prior events from 2072. This projection into the future fosters an effect of estrangement that allows for an “unusual ‘vision’” and critical distance (Velotti 285). In a fresh new perspective that unveils the flaws and limits of our society, readers can – for instance – witness group binge-eating and connect it to our unhealthy contemporary dietary patterns. This novel is a marvelous example of what Richard Crownshaw labels as “fiction of the Anthropocene”, which is fiction that aims to:

[...] stage near, middle and far futures in which the effects of the unfolding Anthropocene are more discernible if not catastrophically realized and, from that future, the cultural remembrance of how this catastrophe came to be. In other words, what is remembered is an aetiology of the conditions that are imagined in the future but which are unfolding in the present of this literature’s production and consumption. (889–90)

The memory of the Maestro often unveils, briefly, abruptly, but accurately, the etiology of our current conditions leading up to future social outbreaks and environmental disasters; i.e. unrestrained production and consumption that are at the very core of petro-capitalism. The Maestro, for example, thinks about the old world and about “the ability to produce proteins” (“la capacità di produrre proteine”; *La seconda mezzanotte* 85). He reflects on how cheap meat used to be and how much of it a European man used to eat, a quarter kilo of meat per

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Anthropocene began at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century; they chose this date because “during the past two centuries, the global effects of human activities have become clearly noticeable” (17). They recognize, however, that other chronologies about the commencement of the Anthropocene are possible.

day. In schizophrenic loops, the production of meat required tons of animal feed, nitric fertilizers, and water, which resulted in soil erosion. Not to mention, as he indeed does, entire fleets of factory-fishing vessels that depleted the ocean and exterminated the fish (86).

Despite severe environmental degradation, the Chinese oligarchy in Nova Venice strives to recreate a perennial opulent present. Through expensive geoengineering, as we have seen, parts of the town are sheltered from the malodorous air, a “mephitic breath” (“alito mefitico”; 87) that is oppressing the Po Valley. Moreover, in St. Mark’s Square, the AC system produces an “eternal false spring” (“eterna falsa primavera”; 48). In addition, an appearance of youthfulness is highly valued and Chinese prosecutor Xiao Ming has undergone several surgical procedures in order to eliminate wrinkles and smooth his skin; his face and body are constantly remodeled by cosmetic surgery, and his back, chest and arm muscles are made turgid through the recurrent use of steroids. Finally, in order to satisfy their immediate corporeal needs, the wealthiest travelers in Nova Venice eat compulsively and then vomit; this way they can start binging all over again. Wealthy people visit Nova Venice because they want to experience a perennial luscious present and instant gratification. Instant gratification is what nowadays credit cards promote and promise; therefore, readers are encouraged as well to reflect upon how easy it is, in our present times, to quench desires thanks to an immaterial flow of cash that is easily accessible through credit cards. This lack of interest toward the future reminds readers of our very obsession with the present and of our noxious short-term thinking, which is one of the primary causes of environmental deterioration and, therefore, of global warming. In her volume on American cli-fi, Antonia Mehnert argues that “contemporary societies increasingly focus on the present – a present that is unbound from past or future” (*Climate Change Fictions* 94). However, climate fiction does not allow its readers to concentrate exclusively on a disentangled present; in fact, it expands time frameworks beyond their restricted vision and fosters multidirectional interpretations and readings.

With an analogous aim, *La seconda mezzanotte* denounces such a narrow-minded attitude, underscoring how our present civilization, and thus climate change, are the results of human beings’ past deeds. Throughout the novel, climate change appears to be a “hyperobject,” which, according to Timothy Morton, is one of the many “things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans, and which defy overview and resist understanding” (1). Although “[o]ne only sees pieces of a hyperobject at any one moment” (4), hyperobjects linger for millennia across the globe. Moreover, they are “*nonlocal*” (38), so we can only

deal with their partial, most visible effects. This is why the initial “Big wave” in *La seconda mezzanotte* is connected to and entangled with all the other daunting natural phenomena that are broadcast daily during the “meteo killer” (36), the “killer weather news,” the “oracle of death” (“l’oracolo di morte”; 96) that everyone eagerly awaits, and are linked to decades-long processes of environmental degradation. The final flood in Venice is provoked by the gradual melting of glaciers located far away; their melting reached a point of acceleration, “but it had been going on for over a century” (“ma andava avanti da oltre un secolo”; 206).

Scurati’s novel defies any illusory temporal linearity. Despite futuristic technological achievements, readers are reminded that progress has slowed down and has come to a final halt. Some ancient diseases have also reappeared in Nova Venice. Commenting on a resurgence of malaria, for example, the Maestro remarks that “sometimes what comes after is more ancient than what comes before” (“A volte ciò che viene dopo è più antico di ciò che viene prima”; 61). *La seconda mezzanotte* interrogates our erroneous belief in infinite progress and makes us wonder, “When did time stop moving forward?” (“Quand’è che il tempo ha smesso di svolgersi in avanti?”; 104). In Western culture, time appears to be unequivocally conceived as linked to material progress while unfolding in a permanently linear way. Scurati’s readers are instead enveloped in “deep time” (Dimock 3), which, according to Dimock, is “a set of longitudinal frames, at once projective and recessional, with input going both ways, and binding continents and millennia into many loops of relations, a densely interactive fabric” (3–4).

Despite the Chinese government’s efforts to establish a Nova Venice immersed in its everlasting present, people’s memories and the city’s materiality speak of ancient deep times; memories and materials triumphantly persist, and offer resilient counter-narratives to the dominant story. In the old Venetian taverns, elderly people narrate ancient legends: “On Warrior Island, the men sit around the fire. Like every night, they smoke and tell stories. It is the ritual of memory, the ‘guardianship of the dead.’ Sometimes they are stories of old times. More often tales of the arena [...]” (“Sull’Isola dei Guerrieri, gli uomini siedono attorno al fuoco. Come ogni notte, fumano e raccontano. È il rito della memoria, la ‘custodia dei morti’. A volte sono storie di vecchi tempi. Più spesso racconti dell’arena [...]”; 66): the gladiators’ Maestro remembers a former Venice when seasons alternated harmoniously; Matilda, a Venetian dancer, remembers an old Carnival from her past; Spartacus ponders some of the legends told by the elders. In short, the entire city is populated by storytellers who keep narrating thanks to their memory and to the information carved in their city, because, as Scranton maintains, memory is

“our greatest treasure and most potent adaptive technology” (95). Hence, recounting fends off oblivion and helps preserve lives.

When human memory falters and words are missing, Old Venice speaks through its own materiality. As Iovino claims, Venice should be read as a text (“From Thomas Mann” 350); textually interpreted, Venice tells ancient stories of its settlers, of stonecutters and sailors, of painters and merchants, of clergymen and sinners, of fishermen and slaves, and – overall – of a prosperous maritime Republic that lasted until 1797, when it lost its independence and the city was turned over to Austria. All these stories of long-lasting cohabitation are ingrained in the city walls and in its buildings, in its rich architecture and magnificent art, even in its urban flora. In the garden of a convent, Spartacus, a fleeing gladiator, stands in awe while looking at a luxuriant vineyard: “there the friars, in the heart of a salty lagoon, have preserved the vine for centuries” (“Li i frati, nel grembo di una laguna salmastra, per secoli hanno preservato la vite”; *La seconda mezzanotte* 146). This pleasant vineyard does not symbolize a safe *locus amoenus* in which one can hide. On the contrary, it represents an ongoing conflict between civilization and nature; the brothers, in fact, have managed to grow their vines by creating a balance between nature and culture.<sup>15</sup> This is how Venice was able to prosper for centuries, until the fragile balance between humans, animals, and their environment was broken. Above all, Venetian stories are embedded in its sediment and pilings, when the “fishermen started stacking wooden piles into the muddy seabed, driving them until they reached the *caranto*” (Iovino, “From Thomas Mann” 352). The foundations of Venice are clearly carved into the bottom of the sea. In his escape from Nova Venice, Spartacus’ feet are engulfed by the mud; his “mind for an instant is plunged back into the nightmare of that slime that the founders of the city had dispelled, many centuries before, by paving a lagoon with chisel strokes” (“la mente per un istante ripiomba nell’incubo della melma che i fondatori della città hanno fugato, molti secoli prima, a colpi di scalpello pavimentando una laguna”; *La seconda mezzanotte* 176). Here readers can sense the deep eerie imbrications between nature and civilization that made *la Serenissima*. As Iovino states, “to create a city suspended on a lagoon [...] is an exercise in hybridity not only because it mixes water and land into a new elemental combination, but above

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<sup>15</sup> In her fascinating article, Danila Cannamela questions the concept of *locus amoenus*. She maintains that this site should not be identified with an escape into a comforting and benevolent nature; instead, a *locus amoenus* is an “obscure space” (305) where desire and loss are elaborated.

all because it is an act of *hubris*, a violation of ontological pacts” (*Ecocriticism* 49, emphasis in original).<sup>16</sup>

Through the gladiators, readers are reminded of the passage of time and of its connection to the present. In Nova Venice, there is an arena where gladiators train for the Carnival season, in a revisitation of ancient Rome. Once a year, young gladiators fight in ghastly duels at the end of which nobody is saved and every one of them is doomed to die. After a bloody selection, gladiators are recruited to combat against men or animals. They choose ancient names and are told that most of them will die after the first fight, while only a few will survive the first battle. In an interview with Antonio Gnoli, Scurati explains that he wanted to associate the spectacular violence of gladiators with the brutalities that are broadcast daily on television screens. Therefore, through this analogy, the author questions the temporal distance between ancient Rome and the year 2092. Despite the efforts of the Chinese government to erase time, to promote instant gratification and to focus only on the present, Nova Venice and its body unveils perennial time spanning through years and centuries, and restores temporal continuity between distant epochs.

### **Space: the globe in one spot**

Global warming is difficult to grasp also due to the variety of cumulative effects distributed across the globe. Hence, despite its omnipresence, it is not easily felt or understood by the average layperson. As Mehnert states, “climate change is a crisis caused by forces that *transcend the local* and thus can only be adequately understood from a global perspective” (*Climate Change Fictions* 54, emphasis added). Therefore, climate change has to foster a discussion whereby interactions between local, regional, national, global forms of living and living creatures must be acknowledged and investigated. Whatever is experienced locally is inevitably intertwined with habits embraced somewhere else, far away on the globe, and human beings’ behaviors often have material repercussions everywhere on earth. No climatic event can be severed from the entire compass of extreme weather patterns. Therefore, the big wave that hit Venice in 2072 is both a local and a

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<sup>16</sup> These ontological pacts are breached daily, and not only in Venice. According to Ghosh, human beings have lost their “instinctive awareness of the earth’s unpredictability” (25); therefore, nowadays, many cities all over the globe, hosting millions of people, reside dangerously in very close proximity to the water (36–37).

global phenomenon; it is spatially located in Venice, but it originates far away from it. As Scurati writes: “Somewhere up north, accompanied by the rumblings of glacial lakes emptying into Arctic rivers, the polar ice cap was crushing into the sea. Further south, much further south, another sea had plunged into the lagoon. The lagoon had drowned” (“Da qualche parte, su a nord, accompagnata dai rombi di laghi glaciali che si svuotavano nei fiumi artici, la calotta polare precipitava a mare. Più a sud, molto più a sud, un altro mare si era tuffato in laguna. La laguna era affogata.” *La seconda mezzanotte*; 12). Similarly, the Venetian Big wave and the melting of distant glaciers are connected with other meteorological calamities that the TNC network broadcasts daily: floods, hurricanes, droughts, earthquakes, and landslides invade the large screens of Venetian pubs and squares. When the Maestro meets Xiao Ming, he walks into a room filled with monitors; there, in his company, he sees “[i]mages of disasters” (“[f]otogrammi di disastri”; 50) from any latitude on the globe, which alternate with security camera footage of Venice. Causes and effects of climate change are dislocated spatially and feed on each other in perturbing schizophrenic loops.

There is an alarming parallel between the Big wave of water and debris that inundated Venice in 2072 and the constant flow of images that have been flooding Nova Venice since its purchase by the Chinese telecom company TNC. The suffocating supremacy of media is a recurrent theme in Scurati’s novels, essays, and interviews. *The Child that Dreamed about the End of the World* illustrates how mass media contribute to collective hysteria and widespread paranoia.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, global virtual communication numbs viewers and transforms them in apathetic spectators that constantly witness violence from the dull comfort of their living rooms.<sup>18</sup> Floods, avalanches, soil erosion are all visible material events deeply entwined with the immaterial global flows of images that desensitize viewers. In the pubs of Nova Venice, clients and baristas watch eagerly the global weather news, labelled as “killer” news, but in the end they gloat over such disquieting images and end up pushing them to the back of their minds. The daily violence of the weather news benumbs viewers who, ironically, feel safe within the walls of a Venetian pub inside a walled city. Such behavior urges readers to reflect upon the connection between material and immaterial flows that perpetuate global warming. The Chinese TNC comforts its inhabitants and welcomes its

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<sup>17</sup> For an analysis of the novel, see Anna Chiafele and Andrea Di Consoli.

<sup>18</sup> For Scurati’s views on mass media, see *Gli anni che non stiamo vivendo* and *La letteratura dell’inesperienza*.

visitors with a shiny slogan on giant screens: “ENJOY THE INNER WORLD,” as if a meaningful inner world were still possible. On the other hand, “[i]n the era of global warming, nothing is really far away” (Ghosh 26), and TNC screens broadcast images of remote places, which create the illusion of a radical divide between Nova Venice and the rest of the world. This generates an estrangement effect for the reader, who is invited to view the TNC images with a critical mind, and to dismantle such misleading divide between the inner world of Venice and an outer world. The close-ups of faces of people in war zones, for example, do not seem so far away in an imagined future; instead, they allow readers to detect similarities with desperate people who appear on our screens nowadays. In *La seconda mezzanotte*, Venetians appear like trapped mice rather than safe spectators, and the weather news intimate the daunting impossibility of finding a safe space in which to dwell. As Scurati remarks, “under the forty-fourth parallel the world is sliding down” (“al di sotto del quarantaquattresimo parallelo il mondo smotta”; *La seconda mezzanotte* 52), and it is easy to predict that soon also above that parallel the world will crumble. Because of extreme weather calamities, social upheavals have already profoundly disrupted the life of nations; in fact, many powerful Western nation-states have collapsed and new geopolitical powers have emerged, albeit temporarily.

Scurati's Nova Venice is a microcosm that becomes a metaphor for the entire globe. Here, in fact, within a radius of a few miles, people from many nations and cultures meet, leave their foul ecological footprint, and alter Venice's fragile body. Thinking back to one of the past Carnivals when she was a teenager, Matilda realizes that she and her friends did not need to travel around the globe, “because the world would come to lie down, drunk, at their feet” (“perché il mondo veniva a stendersi, ubriaco, ai loro piedi”; 186–87). Nowadays, in Nova Venice one can eat rare animals from the most remote places, drink German beer, meet foreigners, and experience traditions from all around the globe, such as running with the bulls, an event strongly reminiscent of the Pamplona *encierro*. Venice becomes a hologram containing the entire globe; as Morton states, “cut a little piece of hologram out, or shine light through a little piece of it [...], and you still see a [...] version of the whole object. Every piece of the hologram contains information about the whole” (46). Readers are even prompted to think about holograms and their function when they are presented with one replicating Spartacus' exultation on the façade of a building. A hologram is a powerful textual reference if read through an ecocritical approach that aims to unveil human entanglement in the world in order to promote ecological awareness. According to Serpil Opperman,



“reality is structured like a hologram,” and is in a “constant state of change and flux” (13). Hence, the hologram underscores our profound and inescapable interconnectedness with the earth. The entire planet appears to be flowing into an “orgasmic” Venice and to inundate it, along with the many rivers that merge into its wide and low gulf.

According to Inger-Anne Søvting, in post-apocalyptic cli-fi, “place is no longer a vehicle of cultural specificity; there is no diversity, neither in terms of culture nor in terms of natural variation, to stamp its identity on the landscape; everywhere is the same” (706). This is not the case in Scurati’s novel. Without losing its charming character, Venice becomes a tiny globe rich with multiple cultural identities; Nova Venice is still Venice, several of its buildings are mentioned, and, although run down, its architecture is clearly visible and recognizable. As already pointed out, its marbles, stones, and sediments speak of ancient times and stories; thousands of people still populate the city’s characteristic alleyways and small stores. The narrator identifies and names with accuracy its palaces, churches, islands, basilicas, squares, and districts, and, at the beginning and the end of the book, readers can even look at a map of Nova Venice. In a process of unprecedented acceleration, Nova Venice and its porous body have absorbed other cultures in a transformational process of global interconnection. In the cosmopolitan neighborhoods of the city one can find the local colour “from all five continents. East and West, sorghum spirits and apple cider. The whole world in a glass” (“di tutti e cinque i continenti. Oriente e Occidente, distillati di sorgo e sidro di mele. Tutto il mondo in un bicchiere”; *La seconda mezzanotte* 70). Walking along its alleyways, readers can sense distant places: for example, Asian wet markets, North African and South American slums, exotic spice markets, slave markets, prostitution alleys; they all mingle with Old Venice begetting Nova Venice.

In this depiction of the cosmopolitan and multicultural make of the city emerges Scurati’s prowess in elaborating a recurrent theme in contemporary Italian culture and literature. Venice has long been depicted as a gateway to the East, a “Western city saturated with the East” (Tanner 368). Scurati’s Venice is not only saturated with the East; it is, in fact, owned by the Chinese TNC company. *La seconda mezzanotte* can therefore also be read as an investigation in the representation of Chinese immigration in Italy.<sup>19</sup> Gaoheng Zhang maintains that

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<sup>19</sup> Mark Chu’s reading of *La seconda mezzanotte* is centered on crisis and conflict, which are connected to Scurati’s editorial on the newspaper *La Stampa* “Non voglio morire cinese” (“I do not want to die Chinese”).

this work belongs to “an outpouring of Italian novels [...] that place Chinese immigration to Italy, or Chinese immigrant characters, at the center of their narratives” (1). Many of these novels exploit the motif of fear of the other felt by Italians in a society that is moving fast toward a profound anthropological mutation. As Mark Chu notes, in the “Italian *imaginaire*” Chinese immigration is often associated with mafia, loss of jobs, and low quality of goods (131). In short, the Chinese community is often depicted as a threat to the Italian population and its deep-rooted culture. Scurati employs such motifs in *La seconda mezzanotte*,<sup>20</sup> where he ends up articulating the anguish and paranoia of Italians toward the multitude of Chinese. According to Chu, Scurati’s ideology is openly expressed in his editorial “Non voglio morire cinese” (“I do not want to die Chinese”) written for *La Stampa* in 2011. Here Scurati gives voice to his concern about the Chinese economic power that has been threatening the entire Western economic world and its culture (Chu 139).

In this widely accepted narrative about Chinese people, I would like to point out a significant aspect that is particularly relevant to cli-fi and that has not yet received proper attention. “China is the world’s top energy consumer and CO2 emitter, accounting for 30% of global emissions” and is deeply connected to global warming (Shan). Also, China’s economic power is often associated with technology<sup>21</sup> and this is the case in Scurati’s novel as well, where TNC aims to be the embodiment of high-tech progress. TNC’s screens, its Superdome, its powerful AC systems and comfortable airplanes on which the Chinese elite travels, all serve as the ideal example of a better, futuristic society. This is, however, a jarring and alarming image when analyzed within the context of cli-fi. As previously discussed, anthropogenic climate change is a complex natural-cultural phenomenon; unfortunately, it is often addressed solely in scientific or technological terms. Some may even argue that global warming will be solved through geoengineering processes such as carbon capture or storage. However, implementing new technology may also lead to unexpected, undesirable, and irreparable consequences. The attempt of the Chinese government to found a high-tech Nova Venice is eerily reminiscent of the myth of industrial progress advocated by Italian Futurism. In fact, in a speech given in Venice in 1910 Filippo Tommaso Marinetti expressed

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<sup>20</sup> Scurati already used the motif of the “Chinese invasion” in the novel *The Child who Dreamed about the End of the World* (2009). At the time, in Bergamo and its province Italian stores were shutting down because of relentless Chinese competition.

<sup>21</sup> About China’s aim to reach global technological supremacy within 2035 see Patrizia Licata.

the Futurists' will "to cure and heal this putrefying city," and "to prepare the birth of an industrial and military Venice that can dominate the Adriatic Sea, that great Italian lake" (67). The industrial myth of Futurism is replaced in the novel with the myth of technology. As the Chinese TNC fosters the myth of progress through technology, readers ponder how sustainable it is. In his escape from Nova Venice, Spartacus reaches the train station of Santa Lucia, which now stands outside the city. The gladiator walks through an abandoned train station and along its tracks. Beyond the bridge, he was told, there is the outer world. Once he reaches the railroad bridge, he halts in dismay because it has vanished. "Its arcade of concrete, bricks and stone break into the void" ("La sua arcata di calcestruzzo, mattoni e pietra si spezza nel vuoto"; *La seconda mezzanotte* 251). In front of this scenario, readers start to question all the unsustainable promises fostered by technology. A high-tech society, in fact, exploits and squanders limited non-renewable resources; hence, readers wonder how long the Superdome and the AC systems will last before they too collapse into the void, just as the railroad bridge did a few years before. They can focus on the fallacies and dangers of technology and realize that we are all entangled in matter; in such a scenario, all divides collapse, even those between Chinese and Venetians, between conquerors and conquered. This becomes particularly evident when one pays close attention to bodies and their representation.

### **Corporeality and humiliation**

In the age of the Anthropocene, "[t]he privilege of not thinking of oneself as embodied [...] is a privilege lost to all humans" (LeMenager 229); in the current era, humans are constantly reminded of their own corporeality and fragility. In Scurati's novel all human beings appear painfully exposed in their own materiality. From the novel's incipit, readers are faced with the immense body of the Maestro and are provided with a detailed description of its aches, pains, and fluids: "There he is, the Maestro. In the mirror there are a hefty hundred kilograms of strong bones, elastic nerves and swollen muscles" ("Eccolo, il Maestro. Nello specchio ci sono un quintale abbondante di ossa robuste, nervi elastici e muscoli gonfi"; *La seconda mezzanotte* 22); and "emaciated flesh" ("carne emaciata"; 22). This is an example of how Scurati employs defamiliarization. When thinking about a sturdy athletic forty-year-old man of one hundred kilograms, one would hesitate to associate his body with "emaciated flesh" (22). Instead, the author reveals what lingers behind the strong body of the Maestro. Shortly after, in fact, the narrator underscores that physical degeneration is starting to transform his manly body

into that of a female, hence erasing gender differences; the detumescence of his once virile chest unveils a maternal sagging breast (23). Similarly, his stomach is awkwardly protruding, evocative of a pregnant, but sterile womb: "Two centuries of pesticides, agrochemicals and additives are transforming the male into a modification of the female" ("Due secoli di pesticidi, fitofarmaci e additivi stanno trasformando il maschio in una variante della femmina"; 170).

Bodies emerge regularly in *La seconda mezzanotte*, filling page after page; sometimes, they are young and beautiful, most of the time they are damaged or deteriorating. Walking by shared urinals, the Maestro can smell "profound illnesses" ("profondi malesseri"; 132), such as infections, prostate cancers, and gallstones. In Venice, affluent people want to transcend their bodily limits in order to soar freely beyond nature's laws. Ironically, they strive to erase their own materiality by satisfying all their corporeal needs. One night, rich men gather at Palace Grimaldi to celebrate the Carnival season with a sumptuous banquet, "a paroxystic orgy" ("un'orgia parossistica"; 235) that is strongly reminiscent of Ferreri's *La grande abbuffata*. While prostitutes glide silently across the floor, men eat and drink with fury: appetizers, soups, pasta and rice, fish and meat are all washed down with sophisticated wines. During this meal, women's bodies are indirectly compared to cats. When women are first introduced, the reader is tricked into thinking that there are cats under the dining table: "But now a soft, warm body is rubbing against the Maestro's shins" ("Adesso, però, un corpo morbido e caldo si sta strusciando contro gli stinchi del Maestro"; 233). He does not need to peer under the table, since he knows what it is. It is only at this point that readers discover that a dozen women, on all fours, are crawling around the men's legs. This is another example of Scurati's ability to supply unusual perspectives. During the supper, many guests pause to tickle their throat with a feather in order to empty their stomach; and, in the middle of this banquet, a strange machinery is brought in for the enjoyment of the emir. Sitting on a raised throne, he will receive a "ceremonial enema" ("clistere cerimoniale"; 238) made with a foamy liquid mixed with *grappa*. Through the rectal canal, alcohol proceeds directly into the blood stream causing no nausea, but a sensation of immediate bliss. Ironically, in the attempt to surpass bodily limits, these men significantly accelerate their corporeal deterioration through unhealthy practices of obscene excess. In this ecocritical analysis, it is worth establishing an analogy between the intoxicated body of the emir and Venice's fragile body, where an intoxicated rectal canal stands for the

many polluted canals of the city. In this novel, Venice emerges as highly inebriated and the behavior of its inhabitants and visitors affect its material existence.

In *La seconda mezzanotte*, bodies are also persistently exposed. Through defamiliarization, human and animal bodies are portrayed in unfamiliar ways and their vulnerability is showcased; readers are encouraged to think about mortality and one's final hours, even in the presence of a newborn. Spartacus realizes that he can easily become food for dogs and seagulls while escaping from Nova Venice: for centuries, seagulls ate fish, insects and carcasses, "But then, the atrophy of marine life made them move to the city and they became more aggressive" ("Poi, però, l'atrofia della vita marina li ha inurbati e resi più aggressivi"; 118). Now, seagulls take aim at Spartacus' eyes and attack him like fierce vultures. Human and non-humans alike strive to stay alive even if badly injured. It is mainly during the gladiators' fights that corporeality is exposed and dissected with scrutinizing eyes, as if under a magnifying glass. In the arena, humans and animals are beaten and mutilated with extreme cruelty. Battle after battle, readers witness gruesome slaughter, during which all these bodies behave in the same way, no matter whether they are human or not; despite being dismembered, they hold on, tight, to life. Dogs, cats, elephants, wolves, bears are destroyed by potent gladiators: "[...] a disemboweled lioness, although already lying in her own blood, insists on biting the femur of a donkey" ("[...] una leonessa sbudellata, sebbene già riversa nel proprio sangue, si ostina ad addentare il femore di un asino"; 221). Not far away, from the open womb of a dying sow, a litter of piglets is born. On the street, Matilda sees a beheaded duck; once on the ground, the animal seems relieved to be free again and "she staggers a bit more before realizing she is dead" ("barcolla ancora un po' prima di accorgersi di essere morta"; 187). Human beings' behaviour resembles that of animals; in his duel against Dolone, in the end Kabatar succumbs and perishes. He lies on the ground with his perforated skull; his body twitches, and, with his hands, he scratches at the bloodstained ground, trying to hold the dust in his fist, in what is probably only "a nervous reflex" ("un riflesso nervoso"; 224). These are only a few examples of the obstinacy of living matter. Bodies fill up the pages of this novel and are described in morbid detail. The narration slows down in order to linger on parts, limbs, mouths, wounds and holes, thus providing readers with unforgettable "pornographic" close-ups. These precarious bodies become narrative devices propelling the plot toward the final social disorder and another eruption of blood, in the ultimate effort to safeguard life. Scurati's descriptions are often engorged and hypertrophic, like the bodies of the gladiators he portrays. His language is unfailingly polished and refined; at times it can be demanding. To reach

the end of the novel, readers need patience and determination; it is draining and painful to go through some of the crudest scenes, such as, for example, Spartacus' slaughtering of the dogs. Ultimately, Scurati's slow-motion violence mirrors the slow violence of climate change.

In his book *Hyperobjects*, Morton poses one essential question: "What if hyperobjects finally force us to realize the truth of the word *humiliation* itself, which means being brought low, being brought down to earth?" (17). *La seconda mezzanotte* brings readers down to earth, a few feet below ground level, in an effort to teach them how to die. This novel challenges humans' hubris and reminds us of our final destination: to rest in the burial grave. Since the 1930s, in Italy death has been concealed away in nursing homes and hospitals (Maggi 15); as a consequence, for decades we have been neglecting the *ars morendi*, and deceiving ourselves with our hubris. However, dwelling in the Anthropocene has made it impossible, more than ever before, to overlook mortality. Scurati's novel embraces death and brings it daringly to the foreground, reminding us that as soon as we are expelled from our mother's body, we are doomed to die. That is why the Maestro chooses not to kill his infant daughter: "He will not be the one to expose her to death. She is already exposed to it" (Non sarà lui a esporla alla morte. Vi è già esposta"; *La seconda mezzanotte* 82). In the presence of a healthy infant we are forced to foresee her demise, and then ours as well.

## Conclusion

*La seconda mezzanotte* invites readers into the future, pulls them back into the present, and lures them into violent and sensual past epochs; it places them on a small island and, simultaneously, forces them to travel across the globe to unknown and, at times, unwelcoming places. Readers witness a contemporary Venice where vices and violence transform human beings into inhumane creatures and where everyone is forced to think of themselves as embodied, as affected, and as affecting matter. Venice becomes an exuberant and decaying hologram into which all cultures, stories and histories flow. The original "eutopia," the much-desired "good place," cannot exist on its own and is profoundly affected by what happens beyond its borders. Through this carnivalesque Venetian hologram, Antonio Scurati is able to address the large-scale causes and effects of global warming and make them tangible and conceivable; the local is connected with the regional and the global, and Scurati's story turns into a contemporary epic journey stretching time and space beyond insular horizons. Through the literary process of defamiliarization,

the author encourages the adoption of unusual perspectives that underscore the materiality of human beings; each body, human and nonhuman, emerges from the pages of this novel as an interconnected body in a tangle of matter, space, and time. Scurati's persistent attention to bodies, his "hypertrophic" and embellished language, and his dense descriptions, allow him to present objects and scenarios in an unusual and productive critical way. *La seconda mezzanotte* does not simply speak about the collapse of Western civilization, as many reviewers state, but questions anthropocentric exceptionalism in general. This novel hints at a possible mass extinction that encompasses humanity as well. In the novel, on the night of November 8, 2072, Venice collapsed and suffered greatly; this was its first midnight, a night of anguish and despair. Since its acquisition by TNC, Venice has been agonizing through a second midnight; this time, nobody is able to arise, and no longer is there any dawn on humanity's horizon.

Scurati's *La seconda mezzanotte* is a book that needs to be widely read and taught;<sup>22</sup> it also serves as an example of why the humanities are needed more than ever within universities. We cannot keep addressing climate change through the myth of a techno-fix fiercely promoted by an unsustainable capitalistic system. Global warming seeps through the pages of this thought-provoking Italian cli-fi<sup>23</sup> and shows how powerless we are within this deep-seated system. Climate change reaches us powerfully through literature and unveils, beyond sophisticated charts and statistics, all its natural and cultural implications. Interpreting global warming through cli-fi, and more in general through the humanities, encourages a transnational and multidisciplinary dialogue that opposes the supremacy of technocracy and promotes a cultural awakening.

*Auburn University*

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<sup>22</sup> The novel should be also translated and made accessible to a large readership in order to foster a fruitful transnational debate.

<sup>23</sup> In her "Fire and Ice," Elena Past encourages us to "read unexpected texts in unexpected ways" and to see climate change "in places and with texts that are not the ones that you expect" (27–28).

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