Monsters of the Venice Lagoon: Feral Algae and Alien Invaders in Local Fishermen's Stories

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Abstract

Employing an ecocritical and posthuman framework, this article examines the environmental narratives of local fishermen in the Venice Lagoon and their engagement with "monstrous" aquatic creatures. Due to climate change, domestic and industrial pollution, and overfishing, the Venice Lagoon faces multiple threats, including sediment erosion, invasive species, and habitat degradation. After conducting semi-structured interviews with eight local fishermen who have directly experienced the environmental changes occurring in the Venice Lagoon in the past decades, this study analyzes their perceptions of aquatic species they regard as "negative," either due to their impact on fishing activities or their disruption of the ecosystem. The thematic analysis highlights notions of "ferality" and "otherness" in relation to these organisms: macroalgae, sea walnuts, and blue crabs proliferate uncontrollably, obstruct fishing nets, and cause ecological disruption. By exploring the entanglements, risks and possibilities generated by monstrous human/non-human encounters in the lagoon, this research reveals how the "monsters" in fishermen's stories show their agency, challenge anthropocentric narratives, and compel us to reimagine new ways of becoming-with the aquatic more-than-human world.

Keywords: Invasive species, monstrosity, other-than-human, fishermen, Venice lagoon.

Resumen

Utilizando los marcos teóricos de la ecocrítica y el poshumanismo, este artículo examina las narrativas ambientales de los pescadores locales de la Laguna de Venecia y su relación con criaturas acuáticas "monstruosas." Debido al cambio climático, la contaminación doméstica e industrial, y la sobrepesca, la Laguna de Venecia enfrenta múltiples amenazas, incluyendo la erosión de sedimentos, la proliferación de especies invasoras y la degradación del hábitat. Tras realizar ocho entrevistas semiestructuradas con pescadores locales que han experimentado directamente los cambios ambientales ocurridos en la Laguna de Venecia en las últimas décadas, este estudio analiza sus percepciones sobre las especies acuáticas que consideran "negativas," ya sea por su impacto en las actividades pesqueras o por su alteración del ecosistema. El análisis temático destaca nociones de "lo salvaje" y "otredad" en relación con estos organismos: macroalgas, ctenóforos y cangrejos azules. Estos proliferan de manera descontrolada, obstruyen las redes de pesca y causan disrupciones ecológicas. Al explorar los entrelazamientos, riesgos y posibilidades generados por los encuentros monstruosos entre lo humano y lo no humano en la Laguna, esta investigación revela cómo los "monstruos" en las historias de los pescadores muestran su agencialidad, desafían las narrativas antropocéntricas y nos invitan a repensar nuevas formas de "ser-con" el mundo acuático más-que-humano.

Palabras clave: Especies invasoras, monstruosidad, más-que-humano, pescadores, Laguna de Venecia.

Introduction: Monsters of the Venice Lagoon

The Anthropocene is an era of "monstrous" transformations: from alien invasive species to extreme climate events, from toxic processes to ecosystem collapse. In *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, Anna Tsing and her research collective use the figure of *monster*s to "notice landscapes of entanglement, bodies with other bodies, time with other times" (7) and recognize how "modern human activities have unleashed new and terrifying threats" (2). The Venice Lagoon, a unique yet fragile ecosystem, provides a compelling case study of the emergence of "new monsters:" aquatic species that proliferate uncontrollably, obstruct fishing nets, and threaten the lagoon's delicate ecological balance. By employing an ecocritical and posthuman framework of analysis, this paper examines the entanglements, risks, and possibilities generated by monstrous human/non-human encounters in the lagoon.

The Venice Lagoon is a transitional coastal environment in Northeast Italy, constantly exchanging materials between the North Adriatic Sea and the land. Rejecting the dichotomy between *natural* and *artificial*, we can identify the Lagoon as a socio-natural hybrid, shaped by a variety of human and non-human forces (Cavallo et al. 3). Using Haraway's definition in *When Species Meet*, the Venice Lagoon is a "naturalcultural contact zone" (7) where "encounters between *Homo sapiens* and other beings generate mutual ecologies and coproduced niches" (Kirksey and Helmreich 546). The consequences of this co-evolution between water, saltmarshes, urban expansion, fishing activity, petrochemical refineries, and mass tourism is that "Venice is a city that is inscribed into a nature that it has altered and from which it totally depends" (Iovino 8). In fact, over the past fifty years, industrial and domestic waste, intensive fishing practices, and climate change have severely affected the lagoon ecosystem's structure (Solidoro et al.). Moreover, sediment erosion and sea-level rise have increased vulnerability to extreme flooding events (Ferla et al., Madricardo et al.). In addition to this, due to international shipping, tourism, and aquaculture activities, the Venice Lagoon has also become a hotspot for the spread of non-indigenous species (NIS) (Marchini et al.), regarded as one of the greatest threats to local biodiversity in aquatic ecosystems (Halpern et al.).

Since habitat degradation, global warming, and NIS are stress factors that negatively impact small-scale fisheries (Marchessaux et al.; Sumaila et al.), this paper critically analyses the narratives of local fishermen who have directly experienced the environmental changes occurring in the Venice Lagoon in the past decades. Specifically, this work will focus on their discussions of "monstrous" aquatic organisms: species that they regard as "negative," either due to their impact on the lagoon ecosystem or their effects on fishing activity. Unsurprisingly, some of the organisms discussed by fishermen are NIS, since monsters do not "respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 4) and are therefore, by definition, *out of place*.

From their liminal—and often frightening—position, monsters challenge order, hierarchies, and classification systems (Mittman 8). In "The Promises of Monsters," Donna Haraway similarly describes monsters as deconstructive figures

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that blur the boundaries between nature and culture, human and non-human. However, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen notes in *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)*, the monstrous body is a cultural construct that "exists only to be read" (38). In this sense, monsters compel us to question epistemological paradigms and reconsider our relationship with the Other—in this case, the Other-than-Human. Ultimately, "they ask us why we have created them" (52).

As Tsing et al. state, "monsters are bodies tumbled into bodies; the art of telling monstrosity requires stories tumbled into stories" (*Arts of Living* 10). Three monstrous figures emerged from fishermen's stories: seaweeds, ctenophores, and blue crabs. First, starting from seaweed stories, the article examines how the algal world, often perceived as monstrous due to its unfamiliarity, elicits feelings of irritation and annoyance among fishermen. Eutrophic waters become toxic for human and non-human lives, while "sticky" and "hairy" entities question established narratives of dominance and purity. The second section then investigates how non-indigenous species (NIS), once displaced from their original ecosystem, may become uncontainable. As mysterious creatures with unknown origins appear, established system of categorization are unsettled, and a sense of uncanniness arises alongside the recognition of mutual vitality. Finally, the third section explores how narratives about invasive alien species may depict these entities as threats to be exterminated, raising fundamental questions about alienness and invasiveness. Ethical considerations emerge when asking which lives are deemed worthy of protection and which are constructed as threatening and hence "killable," while dichotomies such as native/non-native and natural/unnatural are challenged by monsters who move around in space.

By allowing the exploration of themes of *ferality* and *otherness*, as identified through the thematic analysis, the monsters in fishermen's stories disturb our assumptions, disrupts our hierarchies, and challenges us to reimagine our relationship with the aquatic non-human world. Aligning with the emerging field of *Blue Humanities*, this research emphasizes the crucial role of the humanities in raising awareness of marine conservation and promoting sustainable management of coastal ecosystems and fisheries. Moreover, the Italian landscape provides a fertile *material text* of meanings (Iovino) for the Environmental Humanities, allowing to expand a predominantly Anglo-centric framework of analysis.

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Methodology

Fieldwork

Fig. 1. Locations of fieldwork. Map generated with Google MyMaps.

Ethnographic fieldwork was carried out between January 2022 and June 2023 in three main fishing areas of the Venice Lagoon (Chioggia, Lido, and Punta Sabbioni, see fig. 1), as part of a broader ethnobotanical project (Mendoza et al.). Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Italian with commercial fishermen, each lasting between one and two hours. Of the thirty-one fishers interviewed, eight highly experienced fishermen were selected for this paper because they have over twenty-five years of fishing experience (mean forty years of experience), making them direct witnesses to long-term environmental changes and their daily impacts on fishing activities and lagoon biodiversity (Braga et al; Lemahieu et al.). The respondents were asked to discuss aquatic organisms—both native and non-native to the lagoon—that they perceived as negative, annoying, or harmful. Prior to the interviews, written informed consent was obtained for recording and handling personal data, and the study was approved by the Ca' Foscari University of Venice Code of Ethics. To protect participants' privacy, they were assigned anonymized codes ranging from F1 to F8. Six of the interviews were conducted individually, while participants F4 and F5 were interviewed together, as they have been working on the same fishing boat for thirty years. Table 1 summarizes details about each interview's location, the type of fishing activity practiced by the respondent, and their years of fishing experience.

Fisherman	Location	Type of fishing activity	Years of fishing experience
F1	Chioggia	*Moeche* (Green Crabs)	45
F2	Chioggia	Oyster farming Dive fishing	27
F3	Chioggia	Artisanal fishing	47

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F4	Chioggia	Mantis shrimps Clam farming	30
F5	Chioggia	Mantis shrimps	30
F6	Chioggia	*Moeche* (Green Crabs)	35
F7	Lido	Artisanal fishing	48
F8	Punta Sabbioni	Cuttlefish Clam farming	35

Table 1. Summary of interviewed fishermen, location, type of fishing activity and years of fishing experience.

Data Analysis

First, the interviews were fully transcribed in Italian (and in the local dialect when used by respondents). A thematic analysis was then conducted using the qualitative analysis software *Atlas.ti*, following the steps outlined by Clarke and Braun. The coding employed a theoretical approach (Clarke and Braun), generating codes relevant for the research question. The codes were subsequently grouped into themes and sub-themes, distinguishing between explicit (descriptive) and latent (interpretative) layers.

At the explicit level, the interviewed fishermen described the aquatic organisms as "negative" either due to their harmful effects on the ecosystem (e.g., their deadly impact on other aquatic organisms) or their disruptive effects on fishing activities (e.g., slowing down work or clogging nets). Table 2 lists the aquatic organisms mentioned, including their common names, the local name provided by the fishermen, and the corresponding scientific taxa, identified based on available samples or respondents' descriptions. The numbers in the table indicate how often each organism was mentioned in relation to its negative effects, including multiple mentions within a single interview.

Common Name	**Local Name**	**Scientific Name**	**Negative effects on ecosystem**	**Negative effects on fishing activities**
Seaweed	*Salata*	*Ulva Rigida* C. Agardh, 1823	9	6
Seaweed	*Peo Oglio; Peo Vischio*	*Chaetomorpha spp.*	1	9
Sea Walnut	*Acqua Grossa*	*Mnemiopsis leidyi* A. Agassiz, 1865	0	11
Blue Crab	*Granchio Blu*	*Callinectes sapidus* Rathbun, 1896	5	6

Table 2. Aquatic organisms mentioned with negative attributes.

The latent themes, instead, required the author's interpretive effort. Drawing on an ecocritical and posthuman framework, two main semantic areas were identified in the fishermen's reflections on "negative" species: *Ferality* and *Otherness*. *Ferality*,

as defined by Tsing et al. in the *Feral Atlas*, refers to bodies of the Anthropocene that have become entangled with human projects and activities, yet have developed and spread beyond human control. *Feral entities* may be *toxic*, either thriving in polluted ecosystems or making the environment unlivable for other beings. They are often *displaced*, moving across space, frequently facilitated by international shipping. Finally, they are *uncontainable*, proliferating uncontrollably and resisting human efforts to manage them. The second theme, *Otherness*, captures the perceived "absolute alterity" and "strangeness" (Keetley 5) of the non-human, also seen as "threatening, a site of danger, of negative feelings" (Hall 238). In fact, the Other can be *sticky*, meaning it is difficult to avoid or disentangle from (Haraway, *When Species Meet* 287). It can be *uncanny*, provoking dread, horror, or discomfort (Ghosh). Lastly, it can become *killable*, when it is constructed as something that must be eliminated (Haraway, *When Species Meet* 80). The themes and related sub-themes are visually represented in Figure 2.

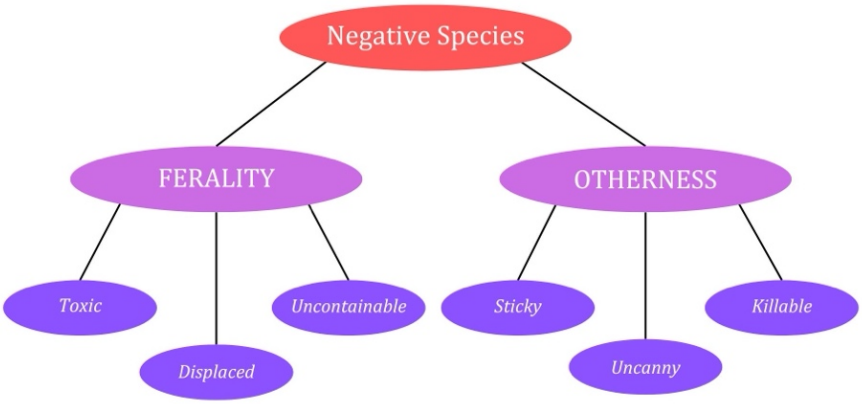

Fig. 2. Ecocritical themes related to "negative" species discussed by interviewed fishermen.

The following sections elaborate on the results of the thematic analysis, discussing how these concepts relate to the specific "negative" aquatic organisms discussed by the interviewed fishermen (see Table 2). All quotations from the interviews in the text are translated in English by the Author, with local terms reported when relevant.

Results and Discussion

Feral Algae: Toxic and Sticky Entanglements

The seaweed species more frequently mentioned by respondents for its negative effects on the ecosystem was *Ulva rigida* (C. Agardh, 1823) (see Table 2), which they locally call *salata* due to its resemblance to salad (see Fig. 3). A recurrent negative attribute in fishermen's descriptions was its role in creating a toxic environment for fish. Indeed, this macroalgae often undergoes eutrophication,

experiencing exponential proliferation in high temperatures and nutrient-rich waters (Gao et al.). Moreover, the decomposition of *Ulva* causes oxygen depletion and sulfide release (Viaroli). The deadly consequences of this phenomenon were explained by a fisherman from Chioggia: "When *salata* decomposes, it causes disasters. There is no sign of life left. From the clam to the razor shell" (F2). He then went on, recalling a particular episode in which it was impossible to arrest the threat of *Ulva* in his oyster farm:

> It was quite a few years ago, inside the basin where I have my oyster aquaculture, they had opened a drainage channel from the fields after the fertilizer season. These fertilizers certainly fueled the growth of this algae; massive, huge algae sheets formed that were frightening. That time, they truly caused a massacre. (F2)

Fig. 3. "Salata" (*Ulva rigida*). Photo from fieldwork in Chioggia. Credits: Jimlea Nadezhda Mendoza.

The description of a killer seaweed that left "no sign of life," of "frightening algae-sheets," and an algae-driven "massacre" suggests a *creepy* element in this story, which is worth analyzing more in depth. In *Six Theses on Plant Horror*, Keetley, drawing on Cohen's influential *Monster Culture* (*Seven Theses*), examines why plants so often serve as unsettling and monstrous figures in horror fiction and movies. She argues that "at its most basic, plant horror marks humans' dread of the 'wildness' of vegetal nature—its untameability, its pointless excess, its uncontrollable growth" (1). The inherent "absolute alterity" and "strangeness" (5) of seaweed, with their life cycles and reproductive modes that often defy human understanding, evokes "horror, terror, and wonder" (Daston 33). Historically regarded as "the lowest level of vegetal life in a taxonomy based on the flowering capacity of plants" (Hendlin et al. 3), seaweeds were portrayed as liminal, esoteric, and largely *invisible* counterparts to terrestrial plants (Zwamborn). However, accelerated global change has made them more than visible: sudden algal blooms increasingly threaten marine and human life (Thomsen et al.), revealing their *ferality* (Tsing et al. *Feral Atlas*).

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During the 1980s, this macroalgae showed its *feral qualities* in the Venice Lagoon. At that time, the abnormal discharge of industrial, agricultural, and domestic waste led to an excess of phosphorus in the water, which, combined with particularly high summer temperatures and altered water currents, triggered the uncontrollable spread of *Ulva* (Sfriso et al.). According to a newspaper article from 1989, "a state of emergency" was declared because the Venice lagoon was "invaded by tons of decaying algae and the air became unbreathable" ("Emergenza Alghe"). Recalling this episode, a fisherman from Lido commented:

> During those summers, *salata* condensed and multiplied, it increased with heat and began to proliferate. It progressively took possession of the lagoon and started to rot, generating a smelly gas […] the fish could no longer find oxygen, and the water began to turn white. (F7)

In this description, the fisherman seems to attribute *agency* to the *salata* within the context of the deadly process. The personified *salata* transforms into a central character, an active lethal element seizing control of the lagoon. Some feral entities "like human disturbance," thriving within toxic, polluted, or altered ecosystems (*Feral Atlas*), just as *Ulva* flourishes specifically during episodes of agricultural or industrial runoff. Moreover, they "alter their environments in ways that make life unlivable for others" (*Feral Atlas*): out of control, the macroalgae created an unlivable environment for people ("the air became unbreathable") and the entire ecosystem. By suffocating aquatic life, it caused long-term damage to the lagoon's biodiversity, with consequences lasting over twenty years (Sfriso et al.). However, the *ferality* of "green tides" and "killer algae" points back "toward the monstrosities of modern Man" (Tsing et al. *Arts of Living* 2). Anthropogenic changes, such as pollution and increasing water temperatures, are the triggers of these monstrous phenomena.

Fig. 4. "Peo oglio" (*Chaetomorpha spp.*). Photo from fieldwork in Punta Sabbioni. Credits: Agnese Martini.

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A respondent from Punta Sabbioni stated, "All seaweeds are annoying" (F8), referring to the general nuisance that macroalgae pose to fishing activities. Respondents highlighted the "sticky" nature of *peo oglio* (which translates to "oily algae") (see Fig. 4) and *peo vischio* (which translates to "sticky algae"), likely referring to *Chaetomorpha* spp. These seaweeds adhere to or clog fishing nets, slowing down or even interrupting fishermen's work, and were in fact mainly mentioned for their negative effects on fishing activities, particularly on nets, rather than for their impacts on the ecosystem (see Table 2). The fisherman from Punta Sabbioni, who also manages a clam farm, further explained: "What causes problems now is this *peo oglio*. It forms an actual carpet. In the lagoon, there's an overwhelming amount of it. Every time you fish with the *rasca* [a traditional fishing tool used to extract clams from the sediments], you can't fish anymore" (F8). A fisherman from Chioggia shared his concerns about "*peo vischio*:"

> Six, seven years ago, this *peo vischio* started appearing, in quantities I can't even describe. Fishing became nearly impossible. What would happen is that the nets would get coated with these algae, and the fish wouldn't go in. And even if some fish did get inside, you couldn't get them out because everything was enmeshed together. (F6)

Peo oglio and *peo vischio* challenge the seemingly straightforward relationship of extraction between the fisherman and the "product," which becomes *enmeshed* (quite literally) in a problematic scenario. Using Haraway's (*When Species Meet*) terminology, they weave "sticky" and "messy" knots that prevent us from engaging with the other "in purely regulatory or disengaged and unaffected ways" (72). Hermant and Latour describe "hairy entities" as risky due to their capacity to create attachments and networks that are difficult to disentangle ourselves from. Interestingly, respondents referred to these algae as "*peo*," the Venetian term for "hair." By contrast, "bold entities" pose no risks, as their clear boundaries ensure there is no danger to be contaminated, affected, or transformed by them. Indeed, sediments need to be "bold," clean from seaweeds and aquatic plants, to allow for clam harvesting.

In this sense, "sticky" algae question the dream of purity and man-made order (Bauman) in which the non-human has no ability to *re-act*. Instead, this entanglement is annoying because it disrupts "the inherited Aristotelian understanding of plants as nonresponsive, nonperceptive organisms at the bottom of life's hierarchy" (Sandilands 164). By showing *agency* and turning against human activities, these seaweeds expose as arbitrary the presumed "human right" to exploit natural resources.

Acqua Grossa: Uncanny and Uncontainable Aliens

The interviewed fishermen consistently mentioned a non-native species of sea walnut because of its perceived negative effects on fishing activities. Conversely, no negative effects on the ecosystem were reported (see Table 2). It was referred to as

"*acqua grossa"* (literally "big water") or "*acqua morta*" ("dead water"), with a link to its water-like and gelatinous appearance (see Fig. 5).

Mnemiopsis leidyi (A. Agassiz, 1865) is a highly invasive ctenophore which was accidentally introduced in the Black Sea in the 1980s, likely because of international shipping, and later spread in the Mediterranean (Fach et al.). Its proliferation is accelerated by elevated temperature and salinity levels. First recorded in the Venice Lagoon in 2016 (Malej et al.), this organism has disruptive effects on the lagoon ecosystem, as it feeds on the larvae of crabs, mussels, and clams (Schroeder et al.). However, respondents largely overlooked its ecological impacts, instead emphasizing its interference with fishing nets and fish catches. A fisherman from Chioggia explained: "*Acqua grossa* is annoying because it stops our nets. It gets tangled in the mesh, and you can't fish anymore. And then, even the fish […] when we catch these, the fish is already dead. The fish get suffocated" (F3). Another fisherman from Chioggia underlined how much it was threatening his commercial interests:

> The *acqua grossa* has been causing destruction for about five, six years. Now we started seeing it because the water temperature increased. When it appears, it becomes impossible to fish. The *bertovelli* [fishing nets] become completely filled with *acqua grossa*. Basically, you can't even pull them up. The fish doesn't go in. Everything gets blocked. This is a major problem for our fishing. And there are no alternatives. We've tried in every way, but we can't work. (F6)

Fig. 5. "Acqua Grossa" (*Mnemiopsis leidyi*). Photo from fieldwork in Lido. Credits: Agnese Martini.

Once again, we are faced with an organism that has gone *feral*. The *Feral Atlas* defines "*industrial stowaways*" as "beings that travel with cargo ships and planes and along railroads and highways with industrial shipments. Many species carried in ballast water have disrupted marine ecosystems" (*Feral Atlas*). Community Ecology differentiates between *native* and *non-native* species. Native species are those that

"naturally" inhabit and flourish within a specific ecosystem. Conversely, non-native species (also referred to as *exotic* or *alien*) originate from different ecosystems and can enter a new ecosystem through migration or intentional/accidental introduction by human activity. Moreover, once *displaced*, these species often exhibit a quality of "*uncontainability*" (*Feral Atlas*). Ranked among the world's 100 worst invasive species, *Mnemiopsis leidyi* causes no harm in its native environment, where predators regulate its population (Mianzan et al.). However, lacking predators in a new ecosystem, exposed to eutrophication and warming waters (Oguz et al.), these gelatinous organisms become uncontainable. Transformed into monstrous invaders, they spread and proliferate, challenging human fantasies of control over the non-human world: "Most of the feral entities in this atlas exhibit some kind of uncontainability, but the atlas only marks it when it shocks and surprises. Shock and surprise, in turn, come from expectations of imperial and industrial control" (Tsing et al., *Feral Atlas*).

Moreover, *Mnemiopsis leidyi*, as fundamentally *Other*-than-human, provokes feelings of estrangement. Some of the interviewed fishermen struggled to fit this organism within their framework of categorization and established well-known groups (algae or fish). One fisherman, likely drawing from its morphological resemblance to jellyfish, referred to it as a "micro-jellyfish" (F3). Another fisherman attempted to trace an *odd* genealogy: "jellyfish produce a sort of liquid, the *acqua grossa*, we call it" (F1). This alien invader generates an irreducible sense of *uncanniness.* Indeed, the *uncanny*, as Freud defines it, is "the opposite of what is familiar" (60) and "undoubtedly related to what is frightening—to what arouses dread and horror" (59). Extending beyond psychology, Amitav Ghosh argues that "the environmental uncanny is not the same as the uncanniness of the supernatural: it is different precisely because it pertains to non-human forces and beings" (32). Just as algae blooms, also sea walnuts blooms "have no human referents at all" (32). However, "despite their radically non-human nature, are nonetheless animated by cumulative human actions" (32)—in this case, international shipping and climate change. Furthermore, Ghosh adds that the sense of *uncanniness* emerges from a "moment of mutual recognition" (29) of agency and liveness: "who can forget those moments when something that seems inanimate turns out to be vitally, even dangerously alive?" (3). One fisherman expressed this moment of "mutual recognition:" "The *acqua grossa* is alive. Inside it, there's an organism that swims, and it's not just carried by the current. I don't know what it is, but it's alive. I mean, you can't see much with the naked eye. As the biologists told us, it's a living animal" (F8). In this sense, the monstrous appearance of this alien organism questions human exceptionalism, and this is frightening. As Ghosh observes,

> No other word comes close to expressing the strangeness of what is unfolding around us. For these changes are not merely strange in the sense of being unknown or alien; their uncanniness lies precisely in the fact that in these encounters we recognize something we had turned away from: that is to say, the presence and proximity of non-human interlocutors. (30)

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The uncanny recognition of liveness of this organism forces us to confront the leaky boundaries between human and non-human life, revealing our entanglement with the very beings we once thought to control or ignore.

Blue Crab: Displaced and Killable Bodies

Another non-native organism regarded as "negative" by the interviewed fisherman was the blue crab (see Fig. 6). In contrast to the "acqua grossa", fishermen highlighted not only the negative effects on fishing activities but also the broader impact of the blue crab on the lagoon ecosystem (see Table 2).

First introduced into the Mediterranean in the 1940s, the blue crab's[1] population has increased dramatically in the Adriatic Sea over the past decade, driven by rising water temperatures and abundant food resources (Gavioli et al.). Interviewed fishermen described how it now poses a significant threat to lagoon fisheries, particularly clam farming, since it feeds on bivalves.

Fig. 6. Blue Crab (*Callinectes sapidus*). Photo from fieldwork in Punta Sabbioni. Credits: Agnese Martini.

Two fishermen from Chioggia elaborated together on the threats posed by the blue crab to the lagoon's fisheries:

> The blue crab is bringing disruption in the lagoon and even out at sea. They cause significant damage. It's not just that they eat the fish; they also consume habitats, nets, and anything they encounter. (F4)

[1] *Callinectes sapidus* (Rathbun, 1896).

> In addition to this, they don't have a predator, they have no one which preys on them. I don't know what predator they had there, but here they don't have any; they are in charge. So, they eat our crabs, they eat clams, they eat everything. (F5)

In these accounts, blue crabs are portrayed as "killing machines" that disrupt everything that they encounter, unchecked by any predator. Once removed from their "proper" place, they turned aggressive, preying on "native" species and "taking charge" of the lagoon. However, both ecologically and ethically, invasion ecology cannot simply be reduced to the axiom "native good, alien bad" (Goodenough 13). This negative portrayal of the crab overlooks the human agency behind its movement. As *Feral Atlas* remind us, movement itself should not be condemned; instead, it is essential to consider "the perspective of those who are being violently displaced" (Tsing et al.). The crab's disruption of the lagoon ecosystem is a direct consequence of its forced and arbitrary disconnection from its native environment—a spatial displacement caused by human actions. When discussing invasive species, we often forget that it was humans who made them "*relatively inappropriate/d*" (Haraway, "Promises of Monsters" 300) in the first place.

In the Venice Lagoon, clams—now a key economic resource for fisheries—were themselves once considered "alien." Manila clams[2] were introduced into the lagoon in 1983 for commercial purposes, and their overfishing through hydraulic dredges has since caused irreversible damage to lagoon sediments (Monti et al.). Concepts of alienness and invasiveness are inherently relative: the theoretical boundary between native and non-native species often serves to simplify the complex matter of conservation and justify the indiscriminate extermination of certain "threatening" species.

In fact, the first, seemingly straightforward, solution proposed to manage the blue crab in the Venice Lagoon was its commercialization, given that it is an edible species. A fisherman from Chioggia reported:

> Blue crabs are voracious eaters. Initially, we didn't pay much attention to them when we caught them, thinking they were a species that was disappearing. However, they multiplied excessively, and they consume everything. They particularly pose a problem for clams, as they pierce them. In fact, some clam farms are fenced off to prevent the blue crabs from getting in. These crabs are edible and hold value in the market; they taste good. Yet, they are a disaster for the lagoon. They are caught and sold, but they are a problem here. (F3)

In the summer of 2023, journalists and politicians jumped on the trend of selective fishing and cooking the "tasty blue crab" to "save" the Northern Adriatic (Loreti and Mosello). Following petitions to declare a state of "national emergency," the Italian regions of Emilia Romagna and Veneto were aiming to transform a crisis for the marine ecosystem into an *economic resource* for the fish market. No other ways of co-existing with the "alien" were considered outside of commercialization and extermination. As noted by Ana in "Like an animal I was treated," an essay on anti-

[2] *Ruditapes philippinarum* (Adams and Reeve, 1850).

immigrant metaphors used in American public discourse, the "alien" can only be integrated as a *resource*, thereby inherently rendering it huntable/killable. A distinct moral and xenophobic dimension permeates discourses on alien species, as underscored by studies on the perception of invasive birds, such as pigeons, which are not only regarded as hygienically contaminating but also as carrying a "moral" contamination (Jerolmack).

Haraway as well argues that "the very use of the term *invasive species* makes killable, whether you're talking about immigrants from Central America or rats and cats on an island" (Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway* 234). After attending a conference in California centered on species recovery plans and habitat regeneration strategies, Haraway confronted the biologist leading the talk, asking: "Why do we pretend to ourselves that this is not an extirpation, a killing? What sort of innocence is this?" (235). By making invasiveness a property of killable bodies, humans absolve themselves from relational responsibilities, avoiding the risks associated with becoming entangled with the non-human. Instead, we should acknowledge human impact on ecosystems and reject convenient and simplistic terminology such as "alien species."

Furthermore, all non-native species have the potential to gradually become native species over time. A respondent suggested that a new ecological equilibrium might be reached in the Venice Lagoon: "Nature, in my opinion, manages itself, sooner or later an equilibrium is reached. So perhaps, if the blue crab is more attracted to *acquadella* [*Atherina boyeri*], instead of catching 100 kg, you might get 30 kg, but fish reproduce quickly" (F2). This is particularly relevant in the context of climate change, which is forcing species to migrate in search of more hospitable conditions (Robinson et al). Yet, as Braverman notes, the concept of "animobility" is often dismissed, as if animals were incapable of movement beyond human intervention. In reality, species have always migrated. The same fisherman emphasized this point: "In water, where everything is always connected, it's normal that over time a species from one place ends up on the opposite side of somewhere else, so there's nothing predictable in the water" (F2). Unlike terrestrial environments, where physical borders shape migration patterns, water—with its fluid, unbounded nature—allows for a different kind of movement. In this open space, it is easier for monsters to "go around." The aquatic element, with its inherent fluidity, thus opens the way for the *monstrous turn*.

Conclusions: The Promises of Monsters

This study critically examined why certain aquatic organisms were perceived as "negative" by the interviewed local fishermen. Seaweed, sea walnuts, and blue crabs were described negatively, primarily due to their disruptive impact on fishing activities, especially on nets. In some cases, their harmful effects on the ecosystem were also acknowledged—but mainly as they affected fish populations, and thus the fishermen's commercial activities. This highlights the predominantly economic-utilitarian character of the fishermen's knowledge about aquatic fauna and flora

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(Vianello 322). However, precisely this anthropocentric perspective was challenged by the "monstrous" creatures they discussed, and this disruption unfolds within two interrelated semantic fields: *Ferality* and *Otherness*.

Ferality captures the ways in which these organisms are products of human-altered environments that have nonetheless escaped human control: the "negative" species discussed by fishermen emerge as displaced, toxic, proliferating, and uncontainable. Their feral character lies not in an intrinsic excess, but in their entanglement with industrial, fishing, and climatic processes that amplify their capacity to disrupt ecological relations and economic practices. In this sense, ferality points back to human infrastructures and decisions, and it materializes as a loss of control over the non-human world.

At the same time, these organisms are consistently positioned within the semantic field of Otherness. They appear as radically unfamiliar, uncanny, or threatening. Seaweeds become monstrous through their excessive growth and sticky entanglements; the sea walnut resists incorporation into established classificatory frameworks through its gelatinous, water-like body; and the blue crab is depicted as an aggressive invader whose displacement renders it killable. Across these cases, Otherness generates irritation, fear, and hostility, which ultimately justifies practices of control, eradication, or commodification.

What links Ferality and Otherness is the recurring breakdown of a utilitarian and extractive relationship between fishermen and the lagoon. The organisms become "negative" precisely when they interfere with smooth extraction, blur boundaries between human and non-human, or display forms of agency that contradict inherited hierarchies positioning plants and animals as passive resources. This is why monsters are *promising*.

This *monstrous* exploration was a *turn* (Haraway, "Promises of Monsters" 304) rather than a straightforward path, a deviation that excludes any notion of progression or salvation. As Elvia Wilk points out, while conservation efforts are crucial, there's no possibility of return to an idealized "natural state" or "Garden of Eden:" "There can be no direct reversal of the Anthropocene and its processes of enclosure. Symbiosis cannot be re-created where it has been lost. […] There are toxic materials in the soil and the air […] and this is now the baseline; there is a dire need for preservation and conservation work, but there is nothing to go 'back' to" (54). Adopting a "compostist" approach means taking care of the even *unforeseen* consequences of our *monstrous* natural-cultural compositions (Timeto 136). In an effort of "staying with the trouble" (Haraway), we need to develop a *politics of relation* (Timeto), which involves the socialization of Nature itself and the recognition of our mutual *response-abilities*. This web of accountability includes not only the human responsibility for the destructive impacts on the environment and non-human others, but also the agency and *ability* to *respond* of non-human entities. A More-Than-Human Anthropocene (Tsing et al. *Arts of Living*) requires practices of multispecies care, *becoming-with* non-humans in "monstrous" and "off-category" (Haraway, *Staying*

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with the trouble 209) relationships. In this sense, to be human is not to remain separate or pure, but to inhabit entanglement as an ethical and political condition.

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