

Memory as Resistance: Contesting Climate Crisis and Identity in Antonio Scurati's *La seconda mezzanotte*

GIULIA BERNUZZI

University College Cork

A city is constituted by two interdependent elements: the *ville*, its physical environment, and the *cit *, its lived and experiential dimension¹. While the former includes tangible spaces such as streets, buildings and infrastructures, the latter reflects the relational modes shaped by perceptions, memory and beliefs. In the context of climate crisis, both these elements are profoundly impacted by atmospheric transformations, with significant consequences for personal and communal identity. The climate crisis, understood in this article as a *hyperobject*², in Timothy Morton's terms, is a phenomenon so massively distributed in time and space that it defies total comprehension and whose effects, though planetary in scale, manifest locally, altering how cities are inhabited, experienced and remembered. Indeed, as a phenomenon that overwhelms traditional scales of perception and disrupts the boundaries between natural and cultural system, the climate crisis reshapes not only the material configuration of urban spaces but also the ways in which they are represented, interpreted, and imagined.

In order to emphasize the gravity and urgency of the challenges facing humanity, in this article I employ the term climate crisis rather than global warming or climate change.

¹ This conceptualization can be found in numerous studies from different fields of research. For an urban planning perspective see Sennett Richard, *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City* (Farrar, 2018) whereas for a sociological approach refer to Martinotti Guido, *Sei lezioni sulla citt *, ed. Vicari Serena (Feltrinelli, 2017).

² Morton Timothy, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. University of Minnesota Press (ProQuest Ebook Central, 2013). <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ucc.idm.oclc.org/lib/uccie-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1477347>.

Referring to the phenomenon as a crisis acknowledges that we are already experiencing a global emergency that necessitates immediate and transformative actions rather than merely speculating about potential outcomes. I argue that such language better captures the existential peril at hand and more effectively calls for strong measures, even though it may run the risk of provoking alarmism or polarized reactions.

This article outlines a process of urban and community metamorphosis as depicted in Antonio Scurati's *La seconda mezzanotte*³, an eco-dystopian novel⁴ that reimagines Venice in the aftermath of a devastating flood and that I situate within the broader context of climate fiction (*cli-fi*) – a term coined by journalist Dan Bloom in 2007 and further refined by Goodbody and Johns-Putra in 2019⁵, who describe it not as a genre with fixed conventions but rather as a thematic focus on climate crisis and its social, ethical, and psychological dimensions.

Unlike Scurati's better-known historical narratives, of which the award-winning *M: Son of the Century* is a clear example, this novel interrogates the entanglement of climate crisis, corporate dominance, and urban identity in the form of a speculative fiction in which the city's physical and social fabric undergoes multiple transformations. Before proceeding, it is important to acknowledge that the novel's representation of the Chinese occupiers is deeply problematic: as Mark Chu has convincingly shown,⁶ it relies on a racialized, homogenizing imaginary that casts them as a criminal, culturally inassimilable invading mass, while also reproducing, in ways that Malvestio link to eco-dystopian fears of “reverse colonization”,⁷ troubling colonial undertones that complicate my reading of memory as resistance to forgetting in the context of the climate crisis.⁸

In the text, the metamorphosis begins with the retrospective description of the ‘Grande Onda’, a catastrophic climatic event set in 2072 that obliterates Venice, followed by a

³ Scurati Antonio, *La seconda mezzanotte* (Bompiani, 2011).

⁴ Malvestio Marco, ‘Climate Migrations and Reverse Colonisation in Italian Eco-dystopias’, *The Italianist*, 43.3 (2023), p.375. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614340.2023.2182069>; Chiafele Anna, ‘Climate Change: Eco-dystopia in Antonio Scurati's *La seconda mezzanotte*’, *Quaderni d'italianistica*, 42.1 (2022), pp. 5–30. <https://doi.org/10.33137/qi.v42i1.38478>; Malvestio Marco, ‘Sognando la catastrofe. L'eco-distopia italiana del ventunesimo secolo’, *Narrativa*, 43 (2021), pp. 31–44. <https://doi.org/10.4000/narrativa.421>.

⁵ Goodbody Axel & Johns-Putra Adeline, *Cli-Fi: A companion* (Peter Lang, 2019), pp.1-2.

⁶ Chu Mark, “Non voglio morire cinese”: crisi e conflitto in *La seconda mezzanotte* di Antonio Scurati’, *Narrativa*, 35–36 (2014), pp. 129–141. <https://doi.org/10.4000/narrativa.1158>.

⁷ Malvestio, “Climate Migrations”, p. 385.

⁸ Although these dynamics inform my reading of memory as resistance against obliterating corporate control, a comprehensive examination is beyond the scope of this article, and I intend to dedicate a separate, more detailed article to this theme.

corporate-led reconstruction that distorts both its *ville* – through structures like a dividing wall that separates it from the ‘Città Perduta’, the submerged ruins of the original Venice, and a gladiator arena built in Piazza San Marco – and its *cité*, as the city is turned into a playground for a global elite whilst its residents are confined to a ghetto and relegated to roles of servitude or prostitution. These radical disruptions fracture urban and social identity, yet the novel demonstrates how reconnecting with the city’s foundational elements – through rituals, narratives, and ecological critique – becomes a means of transformative resistance and reclamation.

I will investigate how *La seconda mezzanotte* uses the intricate temporality of memory to highlight the invisible effects of climate crisis⁹ and I will outline a process of urban and communal metamorphosis, demonstrating how memory serves as a conduit for reclaiming both personal and collective identity through spatial reconnection. My investigation is framed by two primary questions: how does Scurati’s depiction of memory function as a mechanism for resisting the erasure of cultural and urban identity? And how does speculative cli-fi, through its imaginative lens, engage with memory practices to critique ecological and societal destruction? I will answer these questions by concentrating on and analyzing three main ways, that intersect and reinforce one another, in which memory functions as a multifaceted catalyst for agency for both the novel’s characters and its readers.

Prior to delving into these modalities, it is crucial to contextualize the societal framework in which the characters operate and look at how the company that runs Nova Venezia actively manipulates its memory and its connection to the past. Near the novel’s conclusion, the Procuratore of Nova Venezia explicitly articulates this deliberate attempt to obliterate historical memory:

No, Maestro, nessuna rievocazione. L’arena è una macchina sterminatrice. Qualunque pezzo di passato noi ci buttiamo dentro, lo riduce in polvere. Già oggi, sugli spalti e dall’altro lato dello schermo, moltissimi non sanno più che stiamo tornando indietro. Tempo una generazione, e non saranno

⁹ Discussions around the apparent invisibility of the effects of the climate crisis and how to try to make them perceptible are central to contemporary criticism. I refer here in particular to the arguments made by Goodbody Axel & Johns-Putra Adeline, *Cli-Fi: A companion*, pp.10-13; Mehnert Antonia, *Climate change fictions: Representations of Global Warming in American literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p.4; Schneider-Mayerson Matthew, ‘The Influence of Climate Fiction. An Empirical Survey of Readers’, *Environmental Humanities*, 10.2 (2018), p.484. Doi: 10.1215/22011919-7156848; Andersen Gregers, ‘Cli-Fi and the uncanny’, *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 23.4 (2016), pp. 857–858. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isw068>.

nemmeno sfiorati dal dubbio che tutto questo sia già esistito. No, Maestro, noi siamo contrari alla memoria. Noi organizziamo attivamente l'oblio¹⁰.

The Company purposefully created a system of active oblivion to annihilate historical memory and guarantee that the past is not only forgotten but completely obliterated. It emphasizes how historical pieces are crushed and devoid of significance by using the arena as a literal and metaphorical 'macchina sterminatrice' ('exterminating machine'). Through this systematic erasure, the Company enacts what Paul Connerton calls repressive erasure¹¹: a deliberate and structured elimination of memories deemed inconvenient to maintain existing power relations. In doing so, it engineers a shifting-baseline syndrome¹², whereby each generation accepts a further degraded present as normal because the original state has been obscured. Organized oblivion is thus weaponized as a tool of domination, directly opposing the restorative potential of memory that Svetlana Boym describes in her exploration of nostalgia and resistance¹³. Despite this, resistance emerges within the novel where pockets of opposition to the Company's agenda of erasure arise, are nurtured, and generate acts of defiance. These moments of resistance are firmly anchored in memory, which functions as a means of regaining agency, identity, and cultural continuity even under the threat of obliteration.

WHISPERS AGAINST SILENCE

The gladiators' actions on the Isola di San Giorgio, also known as the 'Isola dei Guerrieri' within the novel, provide a clear example of how memory may be used as resistance. The island hosts an alternative social structure, complete with its own rituals that explicitly oppose the imposed order of the corporate regime. Among these practices is the 'rito della memoria', also called 'la custodia dei morti', described as follows:

¹⁰ Scurati Antonio, *La seconda mezzanotte*, p. 325.

¹¹ Connerton Paul, 'Seven Types of Forgetting', *Memory Studies*, 1.1 (2008), pp. 60-61. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698007083889>.

¹² Pauly Daniel, 'Anecdotes and the shifting baseline syndrome of fisheries', *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*, 10.10 (1995), p. 430. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0169-5347\(00\)89171-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0169-5347(00)89171-5).

¹³ Boym Svetlana, *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2001).

A volte sono storie dei vecchi tempi. Più spesso racconti dell'arena, di combattimenti vinti o combattenti morti, oppure ricordi di terre lontane. Uno racconta, gli altri ascoltano, poi il narratore tace. Sovente trascorrono parecchi minuti prima che a un altro torni la voglia di parlare dopo quanto è stato detto [...]. Per fortuna, alla fine, c'è sempre qualcuno che riprende la parola, che rompe il silenzio. Allora ci si rianima, si torna a mettere assieme quel poco che si sa del mondo, quel poco che ne resta¹⁴

The ritual of memory functions as an act of resilience against the city's systematic erasure of history. Storytelling, as a communal practice, becomes a means of preserving and reconstructing memory, fostering both individual and collective agency. Drawing on Griselda Pollock's notion of memory as resistance¹⁵, in which marginalized groups reclaim control over their narratives through acts of remembrance, and Paul Ricoeur's dialogical conception of memory¹⁶ as an exchange of recollections that creates and sustains meaning, the passage illustrates how ritualized acts of remembering can work as a force resisting oppressive power structures, ensuring the survival of cultural identity. By sharing stories, the gladiators not only sustain individual agency but also foster collective resilience, countering the city's active effort to erase its history. Memory here transcends the role of a passive repository, becoming an active, living force of opposition and survival.

The spiritual practices that continue on the Isola di San Giorgio in spite of the corporate authorities' ban on religious worship serve as more evidence of this disobedience. Prayers are recited, lead tablets with curses and invocations to underworld deities are deposited¹⁷, and the deceased are buried¹⁸. Each of the actions represents a unique yet interconnected method of memory preservation, whether it be material, ritualistic, or embodied, and together they constitute a spiritual protest against the city's systematic erasure of the past.

Among these practices, Fenice's prayer is particularly significant. His whispered fragment of the Paternoster – 'liberaci dal male' ('deliver us from evil') – can be interpreted as both a request for collective deliverance and an act of personal redemption. Building on

¹⁴ Scurati Antonio, *La seconda mezzanotte*, p.77.

¹⁵ Pollock Griselda, *After-affects | After-images. Trauma and Aesthetic Transformations in the Virtual Feminist Museum* (Manchester University Press, 2013).

¹⁶ Ricoeur Paul, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, transl. by Blamey Kathleen & Pellauer David (The University of Chicago Press, 2004), p.131.

¹⁷ 'Non tutti dormono. In un angolo remoto del chiostro dei Cipressi, dove un tempo c'era un giardino, scorge un'ombra inginocchiata tra le ceppaie. È Dolone, il Lupo, che scava la terra. Vi depone le tavolette di piombo incise a punta di coltello. Contengono maledizioni per i nemici e invocazioni agli dei degli inferi, perché è a loro che il Lupo si vota e si consegna' Scurati Antonio, *La seconda mezzanotte*, p.159.

¹⁸ 'la sepoltura permane. Notturna. Oblita. Inconsolabile. Questo siamo. Siamo quelli che seppelliscono i propri morti' Scurati Antonio, *La seconda mezzanotte*, p.104.

Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory¹⁹, Fenice's capacity to recall and preserve the prayer creates a bridge between the past and present, fostering resilience against both external erasure and internal erosion of identity. In this sense, postmemory is employed not as a transmission of trauma but as a model of mediated memory that actively resists oblivion. His act of remembrance serves as a shelter, guaranteeing that remnants of the past persist in spite of systematic efforts to eradicate them. In these ways, the act of remembering is not merely reflective but deeply oppositional. Every act of reminiscence, whether tied to the communal rituals or spiritual practices, resists the erasure of the city's identity and asserts the enduring power of memory as a form of resistance against not only the destruction of a city but also the obliteration of its soul.

ORAL TRADITIONS AS RESISTANCE

Popular stories and oral traditions embody the second form of memory as resistance of the book. Throughout *La seconda mezzanotte*, the characters share stories that have passed down through the years, tales that maintain both personal experiences and collective memory. These stories are imbued with values, histories, and identities that resist both the ecological devastation and the commercialization of the city by the powerful elites who seek to control its future as well as its present and past. Popular tales in the novel are more than nostalgic recollections; they are radical acts of preservation. In a world where Venice is rapidly transforming under corporate control, these stories provide characters with a framework for resistance, reminding them, and the reader, of what Venice was, what it could still be, and what has already been lost.

The character of Spartaco, a gladiator who is adored by the few remaining Venetians, exemplifies this dynamic. Based on the elders' oral traditions, his resistance against the company that controls Nova Venezia is both symbolic and practical. Initially bound by an oath to fight until his death in the gladiator arena, Spartaco abandons his role following a traumatic event and embarks on a daring escape. His journey is literally guided by the 'storie

¹⁹ Hirsch Marianne, *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (Columbia University Press, 2012), p.5.

dei vecchi' ('the stories of the elders') which provide him with knowledge essential to orient himself within the 'Città Perduta':

Spartaco non sa niente della storia di quella città al di là di ciò che gli hanno raccontato, a memoria, i suoi vecchi [...]. Quando incontri la strada maestra vai sempre avanti, tira dritto fino alla fine. Ti condurrà a Santa Lucia, alla vecchia stazione ferroviaria. Segui i binari e sarai sul ponte. Gliel'hanno detto i vecchi. Lui non sa niente di quella città, niente del resto del mondo, ma così gli hanno detto i vecchi²⁰

Spartaco therefore relies on external knowledge as an essential basis to express his dissent. Folk tales, most often referred to by the nomenclature 'le storie dei Vecchi' ('the stories of the Elders') or 'leggende' ('legends'), function as literal maps for resistance against institutional power and actively guide Spartaco as he moves through the utterly unfamiliar space of the 'Città perduta'. Jan Assmann's concept of communicative memory²¹ is particularly relevant here, as Spartaco's reliance on these orally transmitted fragments highlights how small groups sustain resistant knowledge outside institutional frameworks. Not only, through the act of walking and exploring a section of the city that is prohibited by the company owning Nova Venezia, Spartaco is applying, in a personal and more radical way, Michel De Certeau's notion of walking in the city as a form of resistance to top-down structures²². Rather than engaging with visible, everyday structures, the character ventures into hidden, at times legendary, spaces beneath the city, guided by oral traditions only. Unlike de Certeau's walkers, who undermine structures by moving through them in unintended ways thus creating their own rhetoric of walking, Spartaco is uncovering and reclaiming a lost 'altra Venezia', metaphorically challenging the city's deep, structural power. This act is transformative, driven by a conscious, almost mythic rebellion against institutional control over space and memory. In this way memory is framed not as a nostalgic looking back, a longing for something that will not be anymore, but rather as a vehicle for agency, transformation and defiance.

²⁰ Scurati Antonio, *La seconda mezzanotte*, p.255 and p.301.

²¹ Assmann Jan, 'Communicative and Cultural Memory', in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. by Erll Astrid, Nünning Ansgar (De Gruyter, 2008), pp. 109-118.

²² De Certeau Michel, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, transl. by Rendall, Steven F. (University of California Press, 1984), pp.102-119.

Spartaco's transformation from a passive recipient of memory to an active participant in its transmission is further emphasized by his confrontation with returning seagulls, creatures steeped in the elders' oral tale:

I vecchi, ancora i racconti dei vecchi. Spartaco ricorda che fin da bambino lo hanno ammonito a diffidare dei gabbiani. Non avrebbe mai dovuto addormentarsi su una barca o su un pontile in mezzo alla laguna, gli hanno detto e ridetto [...]. Ma da Nova Venezia, dopo la bonifica della TNC, sono quasi spariti. Sterminati quelli che c'erano e respinti dalla cortina di ultrasuoni quelli rimasti all'esterno del Muro di separazione. Ora, però, i gabbiani sono di nuovo lì – schierati in cima al muraglione, in attesa del momento propizio per attaccare – e Spartaco è di nuovo entrato nelle leggende dei vecchi²³

The elders' warnings about the seagulls, rooted in oral tradition, serve as a reminder of how tenacious memory and nature are to systematic erasure. The seagulls' comeback in spite of attempts to eradicate them, represents the tenacity of the things that corporate domination seeks to obliterate. By confronting these creatures, Spartaco transcends his role as a mere recipient of memory, becoming a living embodiment of the legends he once absorbed, reflecting Assmann's view of communicative memory as a dynamic, interpersonal transmission that connects past and present²⁴. Spartaco thus becomes a living symbol of the tradition's resistance, reclaiming space and continuity amidst the oblivion imposed by corporate control.

EMOTIONAL RESONANCE AND ENGAGEMENT

The emotional connection that *La seconda mezzanotte* may arouse in some of its readers is the third and most subtle form of memory as resistance. The novel challenges readers to confront their own recollections of locations in danger by portraying a flooded and destroyed Venice. Memory is positioned as a collective tool of resistance, and the reader is invited to actively participate in reimagining their own world. This emotional engagement transforms reading into a shared act of remembering.

²³ Scurati Antonio, *La seconda mezzanotte*, p.140.

²⁴ Assmann Jan, 'Communicative and Cultural Memory', p. 117.

I will show how this process takes place by looking at the urban landscape of Nova Venezia and, more specifically, at its significant transformation in its relationship with the vegetal realm, as highlighted through a representation *in absentia* and a lexicon that underscores this absence in a negative framework. This textual approach is underlined by the alternation of past and present verb tenses that establishes a dynamic interplay between the pre-Onda era, corresponding to the contemporary reality of the readers, and the current state of desolation and decay, the moment where the novel is settled. By doing so, Scurati draws readers' attention to existing lush areas in Venice today, urging them to recognize their potential impermanence. This evokes a dual form of memory: first, a nostalgic recollection of the present – a time when nature is still part of the urban fabric – and second, a reactive memory that encourages change and promotes awareness of ecological issues.

For instance, the desolate portrayal of the 'Chiostro dei Cipressi', once shaded by tall cypresses now reduced to stumps, juxtaposes a verdant past with a burnt present:

Supera il Chiostro dei Cipressi, un tempo ombreggiato da quattro esemplari di quelle piante ad alto fusto, di cui ora rimangono soltanto i ceppi radenti il suolo [...]. Lo slargo che in passato ospitava il grande parco privato [...] è ridotto a una spianata riarsa.²⁵

The sharp chronological contrast between a thriving past and a desolate present is introduced since the opening line.

The adjective 'ombreggiato' ('shaded') invokes the *locus amoenus* that is immediately disrupted by the 'spianata riarsa' ('parched esplanade'), a burnt area that conveys ecological collapse. Such a juxtaposition elicits a form of prosthetic memory²⁶, wherein readers, though temporally and spatially distanced from the event, are viscerally affected by the vivid imagery of loss and degradation. The use of 'ceppi' ('stumps'), a term that carries strong implications of devastation and severance, enhances this emotive approach even further. The remnants of once-majestic trees evoke both the drastic alteration of Venice's natural landscape and a more profound criticism of anthropogenic interventions that have changed the city over time, such as the clearing of forests for the construction of its

²⁵ Scurati Antonio, *La seconda mezzanotte*, p.28.

²⁶ Landsberg Alison, *Prosthetic Memory. The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (Columbia University Press, 2004), p.28.

foundations. These interwoven allusions might inspire readers to use memory as a tool for resistance and cultivate a reflective stance toward humans' impact on the environment.

This concept is further supported by the description of the 'Teatro Verde', a former sanctuary of architectural and environmental harmony that is now reduced to lifeless stone under a burning sun:

Arriva nell'anfiteatro [...]. I progettisti lo avevano battezzato Teatro Verde perché, imitando l'uso delle ville di terraferma di un'epoca successiva, avevano intercalato gradoni di pietra bianca a spalliere di bosso. Teatro Verde. Ora anche il nome era diventato obsoleto e le siepi sono bruciate da decenni. Non c'è più traccia di verde in quella conca infuocata. Rimane soltanto la pietra bianca sotto le fauci di un sole che pare voglia inghiottire l'intero pianeta.²⁷

The poignant line 'non c'è più traccia di verde' ('no trace of green remains') denotes the disappearance of not only vegetation but also the cultural and symbolic meaning it formerly possessed with the text's emotional resonance prompting readers to consider the ecological effects of human activity and envision alternative futures.

In this sense, the memory of Venice is not just the memory of the characters but is shared with the reader. As the narrative unfolds, the reader is encouraged to oppose the same erasure of identity and history that the characters are battling. The text's emotional resonance becomes a form of collective memory-making, a resistance against the forces that aim to destroy not just the physical city but also the memories of what it once was. The reader's own sense of nostalgia and loss becomes intertwined with that of the characters, creating a powerful collective experience of memory as resistance.

TALES FROM THE SHADOWS: REMEMBERING AS REVOLT IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

In *La seconda mezzanotte*, memory operates as a dynamic and multifaceted form of resistance and transformation, asserting itself through rituals, narratives, and ecological critiques. The gladiators perform subversive actions of recollection on the Isola di San Giorgio, including praying, burying the dead, and writing curses on lead tablets. These actions oppose the institutional forces that want to obliterate the past by transforming

²⁷ Scurati Antonio, *La seconda mezzanotte*, p.28.

remembrance into a collective performance of dissent. Spartaco's journey, guided by oral traditions and popular tales, underscores the subversive potential of communicative memory. In addition to helping him find his way around Venice's abandoned areas, these generation-old tales serve as a counternarrative to the repressive rule of Nova Venezia's oppressive regime. Memory here becomes an act of reclamation, where unofficial histories empower individuals to resist spatial and cultural domination. Finally, the novel's vivid portrayals of ecological decay, as in the 'Chiostro dei Cipressi' and the 'Teatro Verde', invite readers to engage in a reactive memory, transforming nostalgia into collective ecological consciousness. By juxtaposing Venice's lush past with its desolate present, Scurati critiques anthropogenic destruction and compels readers to consider their role in preserving vulnerable urban and natural landscapes.

Through these interwoven dimensions—ritualized defiance, generational storytelling, and ecological awareness—*La seconda mezzanotte* positions memory as both a lens through which to navigate the transformed city of Venice and a catalyst for promoting transformation. The novel illustrates how reconnecting with Venice's intrinsic characteristics becomes a means of resistance, demonstrating that even in a fractured and corporatized landscape, the potential for metamorphosis remains. By unsettling dominant perceptions of space, history, and agency, the text reveals memory not as a static recollection of the past but as an active force, one that resists erasure, reclaims urban and social identity, and asserts community agency in the face of corporatization and climate devastation. In doing so, memory becomes more than a mechanism for understanding transformation in the Anthropocene; it fosters it, becoming an insurgent tool and offering a blueprint for reimagining and reshaping the city's future.