Rocking the Boat: 

Language and Identity on an Early Modern Gondola

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Scholars’ interest in the history of the gondola has not been matched by a corresponding attention to gondoliers, their social background, or their place in the urban fabric of early modern Venice.¹ Through the analysis of a collective range of sources, ranging from archival records to literary intimations, this chapter offers a first step towards a social and cultural history of gondoliers. Sixteenth-century Venetian gondoliers were infamous for their barbed tongues and their “indecent or derisory words towards passengers.”² Copious archival evidence demonstrates that boatmen were well-known in the city for their insolence, and that their words were regularly perceived as threatening and dangerous. By considering their verbal acts and investigating gondoliers’ use of spoken language in everyday life—as well as the relationships of power inherently embedded and reflected in them—this essay seeks to suggest some of the ways we might begin to better understand boatmen’s identity in Renaissance Venice and shed light on the Venetian patriciate’s complex legal and social relationships with this disruptive yet indispensable community of workers.³

Gondoliers, we argue, were particularly dynamic, valent, and fluid figures in the city. They occupied both visible and hidden physical locations in Venice, and their ubiquitous presence in the city’s canals and key stopping points along them regularly placed them in a position to witness crimes or glean precious information, often by word of mouth.
Moreover, gondoliers themselves were often verbally disruptive. The first two sections of our discussion explore the means by which gondoliers affirmed their social status. By hurling foul language, boatmen carved out a social space of resistance that challenged the political, cultural, and linguistic cohesion of the city. The third part focuses on the gondoliers’ identity, where we hope to offer some potential insights into that which the gondoliers fought for, or against, by means of their disruptive language. Namely, archival and pictorial evidence clearly indicates that gondoliers often came from outside the city, including from around Europe and Africa. They therefore spoke a variety of languages that, we speculate, could have been advantageous when negotiating with non-Venetian customers, or between the Venetian and non-Venetian worlds.

**Witnessing the City**

Sixteenth-century Venetian diarists and writers occasionally remarked on the presence of gondolas and gondoliers in the city. The chronicler Marin Sanudo, for instance, claimed in 1493 that there were fifteen thousand gondolas and that every family owned more than one boat, rowed by “Saracens, negroes or other servants who know how to row.”\(^4\) Francesco Sansovino later noted in his *Venetia città nobilissima et singolare* (1581) that there were between nine and ten thousand *gondole*, and that between four and six thousand could be seen sailing around Venice at any one time.\(^5\) The number of *barcaruoli* grew considerably during the sixteenth century when noblemen began using the services of public gondoliers. Before then, apart from using own private boats, members of the Venetian nobility preferred to travel around the city on horseback.\(^6\) This change of practice must have increased the number of boats and gondolas considerably. It
remains difficult to ascertain the real number of gondolas present in Renaissance Venice, in part because it is hard to know whether recorded numbers referred to gondolas or to boats more generally. Nevertheless, gondolas were everywhere in the early modern city, as fresco cycles by Vittore Carpaccio and the brothers Gentile and Giovanni Bellini attest. There remain just under five hundred today, now almost never used by Venetians, even for weddings or funerals as they were until the late twentieth century.\(^7\)

Sanudo listed a variety of types of gondola rides available to sixteenth-century customers. These were *traghetto del bagatin*, later called *da bezzo*, which offered passage from one side of the Grand Canal to another; *traghetto da soldo* or *da guadagno*, which connected different parts of the city; boatmen available by the hour or the day; and lastly, *traghetto da viazzi*, which today might be termed “extra-urbano,” or for transportation between Venice and the mainland or other more distant islands.\(^8\) According to a 2008 study, in 1500 there existed around thirty-seven gondola stations in the city and eight hundred licenses, for a total of approximately fifteen hundred boatmen, not counting boatmen who worked exclusively in the service of a family.\(^9\) It is impossible today to establish how many of these boatmen were specifically gondoliers.

Linking these numbers to the State Archives of Venice, at the risk of exaggerating, boatmen and their wives turn up in almost every folder of every magistracy related to the prosecution of crime in Venice, whether the Sant’Uffizio (the Holy Office of the Inquisition), the Avogaria di Comun (the Venetian state lawyers), or the Signori di Notte (the Lords of the Night), among other such organizations. For example, in the trials of the
Inquisition in Venice, boatmen or *barcaruoli* were frequently called as witnesses, because they were often in the possession of privileged information, owing to what they saw, but more frequently owing to what passed by word of mouth. Boatmen were everywhere in the city. They transported people day and night, heard them talk, and saw them engaged in all kinds of often illicit acts outside of their homes, especially in boats without *felze* (covers).

Gondoliers were empowered by the fact that they heard a lot, and people knew that. For instance, two boatmen were the star witnesses in the 1582 trial of Girolamo Zago, an altar boy at the church of Santa Maria Formosa who was accused of promoting witchcraft and prostitution in the church at night. Every witness called to testify about Zago’s suspicious activities cited the *barcaruoli* Zanetto and Augustin as the source of their information about the altar boy’s transgression. As succinctly expressed by the Venetian dyer Marcus, who lived in the neighborhood, “I never saw this, but […] I heard from Augustin, the boatman at San Severo, that he saw the said Zago lead women into the church at night on more than one occasion.”¹⁰ Several days later, the boatman Augustin himself confirmed to the Holy Office that he had heard “everyone in the campo beginning to talk,” about Zago leading women into the church at night. Augustin went so far as to advise Zago that this was “not a good idea to bring women into the church at night, even if it were your mother.” Such statements attest that gondoliers were known as repositories of aural knowledge, so much so that they came to act as social and community advisors.¹¹
In the 1567 trial of Giovanni Finetti for Lutheranism, a boatman named Luca, who worked at Santa Maria Iubenico, served as a witness. When asked if he had seen Finetti go to confession, Luca said he did not know, because he had stayed in his gondola; he added that Finetti had been in the church for some time, and that he had rowed Finetti to Mass many times. The Inquisitor asked Luca if he knew anything about what Finetti ate, and Luca responded that “in my boat, he easily ate anything and everything, fish and meat,” which he claimed he knew about, because “I rowed him in my gondola.” Although the Inquisitor’s line of questioning here proved fruitless, this brief but telling exchange, common in the archival records of crime, again reveals how gondoliers were understood as sources or safekeepers of community knowledge. In the 1585 trial of a group of Spanish maranos accused of masquerading a Jewish funeral as a Christian one, one witness reported: “I heard the boatmen nearby at the tragheto of S. Gieremia [sic], whose names I don’t know, say to each other ‘thanks be to God that the city is punishing these maranos,’ and the other boatman responded, ‘yes it would be better if they left,’” again revealing that boatmen were aware of events in the community, and offered their commentary on such goings-on.

These examples remain tiny, indeed mere anecdotal fragments, nonetheless such fragments can be found regularly, if not endlessly repeated in file after file in the archives. Famously organized to combat crime and violence, various magistracies of the Venetian Republic heard numerous cases like these on a daily basis, making such stories and their various details seemingly negligible. Yet incidents like these offer a window onto the ways in which spoken language worked in the everyday city. Boatmen were akin
to spiders at the centers of webs of urban information: a fact that both people in the neighborhood and civic magistrates appreciated this when they sought out knowledge of events in the city.

In addition, witnesses regularly reported urban incidents or depicted their understanding of Venetian geography according to a mental map of *traghetto* stops. To offer just a few examples, in the 1587 trial of a witch named Splandiana, the denunciation reads: “I Lucretio appear in front of the Holy Office [...] to denounce a certain woman named Splandiana and her mother, who live in San Polo on the way to the *traghetto* stop of San Benetto in the Calle della Malvasia, because both are awful and irreputable women.”¹⁴ Almost every witness called to testify, including Splandiana herself, marked their location—either their own house nearby, or that of the accused—as “at the *traghetto* of San Benetto.”¹⁵ In a similar case, all the witnesses in a 1588 trial for witchcraft presented themselves as residents of the neighborhood near the *traghetto* of San Tomà.¹⁶ Comparable testimony of numerous Venetians demonstrates the ways in which individuals often organized the city mentally and visually by using boat stops as points of topographic reference, indicating their prominence as nodes of civic activity and urban identity.

**Barbs on the Barca**

Gondoliers were perhaps well-known for their foul language for a reason, because abundant archival evidence points to the barbed tongues of gondoliers. Cases of blasphemy and insults in the city for instance often involved servants and gondoliers.¹⁷
Speaking generally about the population of Venice at large, including but not limited to gondoliers, insults against sexual honor figured prominently in the sixteenth-century city. By far the most popular epithet was *becco fotuo*, or fucking/fucked cuckold. Insults such as whore, son-of-a-whore, bugger, procuress, and sodomite were also popular (*puttana, fatto e ditto, buzerar/buzerona, ruffiana, bardassa*). Insults that challenged honesty and respectability (*furante, mariol, furbo, ladro, traditor*) featured prominently, as did those that compared the insulted to animals (*cane, porco, bestia, vaccha, mullo*).\(^{18}\)

Beyond the general prominence of sexual insults as used widely by many individuals across the city, additional examples demonstrate how people linked gondolas, gondoliers, and sexuality. For instance, the *Censori*—the civic magistracy charged with oversight of servants in Venice—noted in their legislation that those gondoliers should be punished “who insult brides with their oars and mouths as they pass along the canals.”\(^{19}\) In a 1557 trial before the *Avogaria di Comun*, a certain Ursa complained about the verbal injuries inflicted by a neighbor named Magdalena: “My mother told me that she said to the wife of Giovanni Andrea, ‘you whore, you row for all the boats in this city,’” indicating Ursa’s perceived, symbolic link between oars, rowing, and sexuality.\(^{20}\)

In early modern Venice, civic magistrates as well as individual Venetians expressed a profound sensitivity to obscenity and insults in general, but the insults that received the greatest attention and backlash tended to follow two major patterns: verbal injury against nobles, and insults spoken against the interests of the state as a whole. The foul language of gondoliers, and their insults, tended to reflect these general patterns. For instance, in
1592, a certain Dario Sartor lodged a formal complaint with the *Avogaria di Comun* for physical and verbal injury by a boatman, although no explicit language is recorded. In 1591, the nobleman Giovanni Contarini initiated a trial against the boatman in his employ for verbal insults. According to Contarini, his personal boatman Francesco left his service without his permission, with two months’ salary and “a great quantity of stolen wood.” This gondolier was about to be severely punished by the *Avogaria di Comun*, when Contarini requested a pardon, allowing the boatman to leave prison after six days instead of a month. But rather than express gratitude, Francesco proceeded to slander Contarini around town. In Contarini’s own words:

> The thing that bothers me the most is that he is going around with one person and another saying that I am a person of bad conscience, saying that I took money that wasn’t mine, and having eaten his blood *[mangiato il suo sangue]*, disparaging at once both charity and mercy. I must confess that truly, I have never been so violently opposed by a man, because the good I did him became my dishonor, my charity became my punishment, and releasing him from prison […] became my dishonor.

Copious civic legislation also regularly arose from the perceived problem of gondoliers’ language in Venice: public insolence that was perceived as a threat to the state. Much legislation regarding boatmen focused on guild regulations, controlling how one could become a boatman, fees, acceptable prices, and the common habit of overcharging passengers. Later in the eighteenth century, these directives sought to address
overspending on gondolae and their decoration. Among the variety of laws governing gondoliers’ work, however, a surprising amount of regulation focused on gondoliers’ unruly public outbursts. Indeed, aside from courtesans, perhaps no other single or identifiable group in the city drew such attention for the words they spoke.\textsuperscript{24} The *Provveditori Sopra le Pompe*, for instance—the magistracy charged with overseeing sumptuary legislation—often betrayed anxiety about workers’ and servants’ language (the gondoliers often belonging to both groups).\textsuperscript{25} By the middle of the sixteenth century, the insults of servants and gondoliers in particular had become frequent and disturbing enough to draw the attention of the Council of Ten, the city’s most powerful, central security council:

There are multiplying daily so many complaints to the heads of this council concerning the ill condition, the assemblies, and the gatherings that the boatmen and servants of this city continuously form, and the ill words that they publicly use, besides their other insolent and dishonorable habits, showing no respect for noblemen and noblewomen, or for men and women citizens, or for other persons, and with a most evil example and little honor for the city, that if something is not done, their insolence will grow even greater as they see that it goes unpunished.\textsuperscript{26}

The Ten were clearly worried about servants’ public speech and its perceived effects on the status of Venetian nobles and the city itself. It determined that servants’ public behavior had become so disruptive that on 17 August 1541 it transferred all authority
over Venice’s domestic servants to the magistracy of the Censori. Much of the work of this magistracy, in turn, was dedicated to prosecuting the perceived increase in servants’ violent language, especially that of gondoliers. This censoring body was granted the full authority of the Council of Ten, including the power to inflict torture or the death penalty if necessary, attesting to the serious attitude taken towards servants’ crimes. The Censori determined that any servant who used insulting language in public would be branded, whipped, and dropped by the cord.  

No trial material exists from the magistracy of the Censori in the sixteenth century, but such a transfer of authority over the city’s servants (including gondoliers) and their language to this specific, powerful magistracy offers incontestable evidence of the perceived problematic nature of gondoliers’ language.

Later, on 16 January 1570, the Avogaria di Comun posted a proclamation over the steps of the Rialto Bridge noting that porters and boatmen around the German warehouse had been regularly pronouncing “indecent words, and at times began to fight, which creates a notable disturbance to the calm of the merchants.” The Avogaria declared a fine of fifty lire for anyone who dared to argue “either in deeds or in words, or in any way pronounce indecent language” around the warehouse. In 1614, the Avogaria di Comun announced that boatmen would be fined if they used “inappropriate or derisory words towards passengers, or spoke any obscenities.” The same magistracy reissued similar announcements during the seventeenth century, and the language of such proclamations from 1646 neatly reveals the continued problem of keeping a lid on gondoliers’ language.

The Avogari di Comun, having heard the repeated complaints of the German merchants that the porters, boatmen, and other servants around
the German warehouse have, against the fear of God and justice, with little respect, dared to pronounce indecent words, and at times come to blows, which creates a notable disturbance to the peace of these merchants. So to ensure that this does not continue, and to ensure that they can go about their business in peace, we pronounce publicly that all porters, boatmen, and servants around the warehouse [...] will not dare to begin fights or offend anyone in deeds or words, or in any way pronounce indecent words under the punishment of 50 lire.30

Contemporary literary observations confirm archival evidence of gondolier’s foul mouths, and many observers of sixteenth-century Venetian street life reported that gondoliers as a group were particularly insolent. Pietro Aretino wrote that he never tired of hearing boatmen’s insults outside his house on the Grand Canal, laughing “at the hoots, whistles, and catcalls which the gondoliers hurled at those who had themselves rowed about by servants without scarlet breeches.”31 The vast collection of essays about contemporary professions and trades contained in Tomaso Garzoni’s La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo (1585) described the boatmen of Venice as “always in the public square with some lie, blasphemy, buffoonery, scandalous bad word, curse, [or] boast [...] and all of them are the lowest people [...] They always have dirty words and vain oaths of every kind in their mouth.”32 The Englishman Thomas Coryat noted in his travel account that the boatmen under the Rialto in particular were “the most vicious and licentious varlets [sic] about the city.”33
Venetians high and low, as well as visitors to the city, clearly identified gondoliers and boatmen as a social group with specific qualities, manners, and talents. That is to say, they endowed gondoliers and boatmen with particular qualities—namely verbal impertinence—that almost surely became self-reinforcing. Gondoliers, we can imagine, both reflected and constructed their described identity as quick-tongued and foul-mouthed. The repetitive reissuing of legislation regarding their language indicated its ineffectiveness in the face of such a clear and powerful form and means of identity construction. It is also conceivable that rules to suppress base language paradoxically worked to extend and amplify such speech. Much like other attempts to regulate cultural expression—censorship or sumptuary laws, for instance—insults and foul language became all the more meaningful, if not desirable, as means of social and cultural protest after they had been legislated against. Therefore, attempting to control unmannered speech could have the opposite effect, instead inadvertently working to encourage verbal outbursts. Indeed, archival evidence suggests that boatmen’s verbal aggression could substitute for political action and function as a means of subversion by which otherwise relatively weak and powerless social groups could assert or avenge themselves. Servants, laborers, and gondoliers surely gained local standing for their ability to insult and swear: insults could destroy honor, but also create it, especially when a group of men, like gondoliers, became distinguished for verbal prowess. In this way, control over the tongue was not merely imposed “from above,” and speech remained a constitutive element of gondoliers’ power and shared identity. If oratory and rhetoric famously conferred distinction upon early modern urban elites, foul language arguably conferred forms of distinction upon non-elite groups as well.34
Sixteenth-century efforts to discipline insults and control public speech coincided with an array of additional initiative aimed at limiting social gathering in general. The *Esecutori Contro la Bestemmia* and *Censori* both passed laws intended to limit social organization in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The *Provveditori Sopra le Pompe* also passed different laws to regulate and monitor gatherings such as banquets and theatrical representations, because these were sites where “lascivious and disrespectful words and deeds happen[ed].” Laws regulating congregation varied significantly in scope and purpose, hoping to prevent political insurrection, limit sumptuary display, or simply to encourage the flow of traffic in canals and narrow alleyways. Nevertheless, such legislation accompanied formal efforts to eradicate unruly speech. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have stated, “new kinds of speech can be traced through the emergence of new public sites of discourse and the transformation of old ones […] [T]he history of political struggle has been the history of the attempts made to control significant sites of assembly and spaces of discourse.”

Theaters, banquets, open *campi, botteghe, quays, traghetto* and gondolier stops were sites where verbal exchange could easily lead to outbursts of violent language. They represented potential spaces for popular expression and protest, as evidenced by the Republic’s efforts to regulate gathering in such places. Like the prosecution of insulting language by the *Avogaria* and the *Censori*, legislation limiting social congregation also sought to discourage the spoken expression of the underclasses. To reduce social
gathering and verbal exchange was to reduce the likelihood of divulging the “hidden transcript”: James Scott’s term for the critique of power and the contesting of subordination.37

This is a somewhat more speculative reading of laws forbidding congregation; a reading that goes beyond the laws’ stated justification. However, magistracies punishing verbal insults specifically and social congregation more generally both conformed to new discourses of civic order promoted by the state in the sixteenth century. The work of all these magistracies, the Esecutori, the Pompe, the Avogaria, and the Censori, was closely in keeping with Doge Andrea Gritti’s well-known efforts to create a more decorous civic center. During his term as doge (1523–38), Gritti enacted numerous architectural and civic reforms to clean up the city and make it more respectable. In the early sixteenth century, the Piazza San Marco had been cluttered with money-changing booths, food stalls, hostels, and latrines. Gritti adhered to the tenets of Domenico Morosini’s 1497 architectural treatise De bene instituta re publica, which argued that civic beauty and decorum were political instruments capable of both generating civic order and earning the respect and fear of enemies. Gritti hired renowned architect Jacopo Sansovino to remove the sordid wooden stalls that had infested the Piazza San Marco and to replace dilapidated buildings with new ones, with a view to presenting a more civilized, classicizing facade to the outside world. Gritti similarly revamped Carnival rites, prohibiting the vulgar throwing of pig’s ears in the Piazza San Marco in favor of more noble, modest spectacles.
Venice as “a new Rome” emerged out of the dark years following the Battle of Agnadello (1509), when foreign powers squarely defeated Venice in military engagement and pushed back the limits of its territorial empire almost to the edge of the lagoon itself. Similar civic and architectural reforms continued throughout the sixteenth century. Sixteenth-century legislation against foul language went hand-in-hand with Gritti’s renovatio; both programs aimed to replace the unbecoming, ugly, filthy, and overflowing—whether bodies or buildings—with the modest, impervious, clean, controlled and classicizing, reflecting the civilizing process as described by Mikhail Bakhtin and Norbert Elias. The tongue—a powerful site for the formation of popular culture and counterculture—needed to be controlled, just as squalid buildings were cleaned up and public spectacles became more decorous. As a part of this process, attempts to civilize the language of Venice’s boatmen took center stage in the sixteenth-century city.

Rocking the Boat

In his Discorsi morali contra il dispiacer del morire (first published in 1596), the Brescian physician Fabio Glissenti narrates the discussions of a Philosopher (Filosofo) and a Courtier (Cortegiano) while roaming the calli of Venice. Discussing death as they walked towards the Dogana traghetto, they jump in a gondola and enter into a conversation with the gondolier. The philosopher idealizes the gondolier’s aquatic world, imagining that closeness to water helps to temper passions and irascible behavior. In short, the philosopher appears to talk down to the gondolier by extolling his simple and unpretentious existence and praising his seemingly pure and virtuous life. In response, the
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gondolier does his best to convince the philosopher that his life is in fact full of sacrifices and dangers. Life on water, he asserts, is either too cold or too hot, and the risk of falling into water or worse, drowning, is always present. However, as soon as the philosopher tries to convince the gondolier that death is the only escape from a life of hardship, the gondolier admits that, after all, his life is not so bad: he can always obtain some tips or food from his customers, and there is always plenty of work for him and his fellow gondoliers.

The philosopher then claims that gondoliers always manage to extort more money from their customers than they rightfully earn. By the gondolier’s own account, they use good manners first: “customers either pay us what we kindly (amorevolmente) ask, or they will pay us by force (ci danno lo stesso per forza). Gondoliers never dock their gondola until they receive what they wish (se non ci pagano a nostra voglia).” “And what if the customers refuse to abide?” asks the Courtier. “Impossible,” is the gondolier’s reply: “we rock the boat until the customer almost falls into the water.” In sum, whatever the reaction of tourists, local passengers, or masters, gondoliers could get away with anything, “because this city cannot function without us.” The gondolier proceeds to explain how he makes even more money when taking foreigners for an excursion and a meal on the boat, or when accompanying punters to the famous courtesans of Venice, once again emphasizing the high quality of his life. In this way, the philosopher (and the readers of Glissenti’s account) learns of gondoliers’ pride in their profession.
As we have seen, Garzoni’s *La piazza universale* paints a similar, albeit more sinister picture of the profession. Glissenti’s and Garzoni’s representations of the life and language of gondoliers are colorful and entertaining, but should be read with caution. The moralistic undertones of the *Discorsi* and *La piazza* reflect patrician perspectives and show little sympathy towards the underclasses, which they appear to discuss for sheer amusement. Yet if Glissenti and Garzoni exaggerated their portrayal of the gondoliers and ridiculed or patronized them in doing so, their narratives raise questions about the role of language and rhetoric in the Venetian world. In particular, Garzoni’s account betrays moral concerns about the gondoliers’ potential for social disruption.

Venetian society was famously impermeable to social change or upheaval. The 1295 *Serrata* of the Great Council restricted political participation in the city to the city’s established patrician families, placing the Venetian aristocracy permanently in control of the political and financial life of the Republic and excluding everyone else. Knowing this, what did gondoliers fight for or against, if not for an official political voice? What might they have stood to gain from adversarial speech and behavior? Why did Giovanni Contarini’s gondolier (potentially) so defame him? Were gondoliers most concerned to earn more money, as Glissenti’s gondolier suggests, or were there other social or economic issues at stake?

Records from the *scuole* or associations of gondoliers offer tentative answers to such questions. As Kate Lowe’s research has demonstrated, statute books or *mariegole* from the numerous associations of *traghettatori* date back to the fourteenth century; eighteen still exist from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century and indicate that many
different kinds of people worked as gondoliers, including several free sub-Saharan Africans.\textsuperscript{47} These documents show that membership of the associations needed to be purchased, and places were very limited. However, once admitted, men and women shared meals, supported one another financially, and voted to select new members or leaders (gastaldi). In the statutes several gondolieri are described as “nero,” “negro,” “moro.” There is mention of a gastaldo called “ser Ioanis Ethiops” who had been a slave working for the Capello family.\textsuperscript{48} The support and protection offered by the associations of traghettatori gave individuals of the lowest and most troubled backgrounds a unique means to enjoy certain freedoms.\textsuperscript{49}

With its sea-based economy, Venice, like other major port cities on the Italian peninsula, offered employment opportunities to a wide range of peoples from the Mediterranean basin and sub-Saharan Africa. The abovementioned paintings by Gentile Bellini (Miracle of the True Cross, c. 1500) and Carpaccio (Hunting on the Lagoon, 1490, and Miracle of the Cross at the Ponte Rialto, c. 1496), have long attracted scholarly attention, often focused on their inclusion of black men presented as private boatmen or gondoliers.\textsuperscript{50} Another representation of black men as gondoliers can be seen in Anton Weinhemayer’s Stammbuch (Songbook), dated 1585.\textsuperscript{51} Lowe has demonstrated that at least some of the slaves who worked for Venetian families became free men and women after the death of their masters, or after completing a number of years of service. Take, for instance, the case of two black slaves named Marco and Maria, described in their master’s will as “Ethiopians.” The will stipulated that Marco would work for his master’s sons for four years, after which he was to be purchased a position at a traghetti (ferry station) for a
sum of twenty to twenty-five ducats. Maria would work for the executors for five years before being married, indicating that some slaves did eventually work as barcaruoli or traghettatori.\textsuperscript{52}

All gondoliers’ scuole or traghetti introduced rules into their mariegole or statutes that often reveal gondoliers’ anxieties and concerns. Most basically, for instance, the statutes recorded the names and identifying features or descriptions of their members, and organized and controlled the traghetti del bagattin (or da bezzo) for the Grand Canal crossings and the traghetti da soldo or da guadagno for the transportation of people around the city. Unregistered gondoliers or abusivi occasionally worked in the city, to the disgruntlement of the regularized boatmen.\textsuperscript{53} The use of gondoliers’ licenses or liberties similarly generated worry among the city’s gondoliers. Licenses were often passed on from father to son, or to close relatives; however, in the case that there existed no offspring to inherit a license, other citizens or foreigners could come forward and purchase them. As we have seen, wealthy patricians could purchase licenses in anticipation of freeing their slaves. There is also evidence of licenses being leased to third parties, which complicated the social fabric and cohesion of the associations of traghettatori.\textsuperscript{54}

In response to the government’s control measures, traghetti tried to avoid selling licenses that had become available, thereby reducing insurance costs and increasing work and profit for the remaining gondoliers. The traghetto of Santa Maria Zobenigo for instance ruled that only males aged fifty years or older, with at least six years of experience, could
apply to become a gondolier, surely amounting to a very small pool of men eligible to be paid for rowing boats. In 1514, the Court of Avogadori, the gastaldo (or owner) of the Traghetto of Santa Maria Zobenigo, and the Provveditori engaged in a bitter dispute. It soon became clear that the traghetto were not assigning vacant licenses because they wished to increase individual gains. As a result, the Provveditori ordered the gastaldi to inform the government every time a new licence became available. Failing to do so would entitle the Provveditori to allocate the licenses without the approval of the traghetto.

In effect, gondoliers passed on their licenses to family members, or sold them privately to individuals outside the family. By 1530, according to Kate Lowe, most licencees were given to “foreigners, masons, dyers, boot makers, priests, gentlemen, and women,” many of whom had never before held an oar. The Provveditori accused these newcomers of leading disreputable lives, and permitted new gondoliers to obtain a license by election to a chapter of the scuola, through a brother’s renunciation of a license, through an exchange between two members of different traghetto, or by order of the Provveditori (filling a vacancy unfilled by the scuola, or by order of the same, often as a reward for good naval service). Sometime after 1530, all vacant licenses were auctioned at the Milizia da Mar and sold to the highest bidder.

Considering this enduring tussle between the Venetian government, license holders, traghetto and scuole that pitted state officials against the multilingual and diverse community of barcaruoli (a stark contrast from today’s strictly Venetian community of
male gondoliers) allows us to hazard a few tentative speculations about gondoliers’ linguistic capacities. The foul language used by gondoliers as a group may have aided them in overcoming linguistic and social differences. That is to say, as a code of behavior, verbal intemperance may have bound their otherwise diverse community together and functioned as a means of cohesion. Perhaps gondoliers took advantage of their multilingualism to extort money from foreigners. Knowing their valent position in the city, perhaps the Venetian state used gondoliers’ linguistic abilities to obtain information coming from outside the city, and perhaps customers found it useful to use gondoliers as interpreters while visiting the lagoon. Although we cannot know if any of these phenomena happened for certain, the integration of archival evidence with extant secondary literature suggests that they might have. In 1824, Catherine Hyde Marquess of Govion Broglio published a literary account of the customs and people of Venice. In her work, the author describes the gondoliers as both informers for the Venetian government and close allies of the local nobility. Gondoliers, she writes, are presented as “ministering to the inclinations of the nobles […] as well as a sort of mouchards [undercover spies] of the government, each of them fancied himself in the secrets of the state”. 59 Another nineteenth-century literary source presents gondoliers of this time as “different from the other inhabitants, they form a distinct population, and the cause may be attributed to the fraternity or union which subsists among them. […] They have discovered that they are without a country.” 60 That the gondoliers were able to speak several different languages is suggested by another nineteenth-century source: here the foreigners (“forestieri”) are said to “enjoy hearing them tell so many jokes and witty anecdotes”. Gondoliers tend to sing “mostly Italian verses”, thus implying that they also recited in other languages. 61
This brief consideration of the identity of some of the gondoliers who worked in Renaissance Venice, the various strategies their associations to protect them, and the initiatives of the Venetian government to control their language and business reveals the complex negotiations that occurred in Venice between the state, its inhabitants, and foreigners. Gondoliers represented an extremely diverse and multi-ethnic community (purporting to operate under a strictly organized system) of former slaves, foreigners, and possibly even women or wives of indisposed gondoliers, who perhaps used language to taunt, converse with, and communicate between a wide range of people. Clearly, the Venetian government understood that despite their propensity towards violent language, boatmen were essential to the workings of everyday life in Venice: it also understood the visibility of this group of workers, which could be, for many travellers to Venice, their first contact with the city’s inhabitants. For this reason, the government sought to regulate not only the business (for obvious reasons concerning taxation and public order), but also the language used by this community.

On the one hand, violent language consolidated the identity of a multilingual and ethnically diverse community of boatmen. On the other hand, their outbursts of foul language in the soundscape of Renaissance Venice affirmed sixteenth-century gondoliers as disruptive and pervasive witnesses and performers of violent language. Speech represented therefore, in sixteenth-century Venice, a fundamental form of empowerment for the socially marginalized or ostracized. Only further research, including research...
extending into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, will reveal if gondoliers’ diverse origins, backgrounds, and linguistic abilities had the potential to mediate between different populations and speech communities in the lagoon.


3 On language and power see Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performatve* (New York: Routledge, 1997); J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 62. Social control is understood here in terms of behaviour conditioned by phenomena such as gossip, reputation, etc. See Donald Black, *Toward a General Theory of Social Control* (Orlando: Academic Press, 1984), 1–29. Social control was also enacted through the administration of justice where social control more than punishment was the key objective. See Claudio
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5 Francesco Sansovino, Venetia città nobilissima et singolare. Descritta in XIII libri (Venice: Giacomo Sansovino, 1581), 173: “hoggi fra quelle che sono al servitio de’ nobili, & delle persone commode, & quelle che stanno a traghetti, o che vanno a guadagno per la città, sono 9 ò 10 mila [...] Ma bellissimo è lo spettacolo di quattro o sei mila gondole insieme.”


7 Mary McCarthy noted that “nothing delights Venetians as much as a free gondola ride […] when the gondola for funerals, a large boat decorated in black and gold, stopped near a fondamenta, it was an occasion of ecstatic pleasure.” See McCarthy’s Venice Observed (Paris and New York: G. & R. Bernier, 1956), 19. In this chapter we use the terms “gondoliers” and “boatmen” interchangeably, with the understanding that all gondoliers were boatmen whereas not all boatmen were gondoliers. Similarly, gondolas are often described as boats (“barche”) but not all boats are gondolas. See also the following note.

8 “Questi sono li traghetti dove sono le barche che, con uno bagattino per uno, si passa il Canal Grando […]. Questi sono altri traghetti dove stanno barche per guadagnare […]. Qua stanno barche per andar ali viazi, et tutte hanno il suo loco deputato”—as given in Marin Sanudo the Younger, De origine, situ et magistratibus urbis Venetae, ovvero la città di Venezia (1493–1530), ed. Angela Caracciolo Aricò (Milan: Istituto Editoriale Cisalpino-La Goliardica, 1980), 54–55.

9 See Marzo Magno, La carrozza di Venezia, 22.

10 “Io non l’ho visto, ma […] ho inteso che da agustin barcarol che sta a s severo che l’ha visto che detto hier.mo ha menato piu volte donne di notte in chiesa,” “che fosse tua madre non sta bene a quell’hora menar donne in chiesa.” Venice, ASV, “Girolamo Zago,” testimony of 12 September 1585, bu. 49, Sant’Uffizio.

11 “Cominciando a dire tutte quelle del campo,” Venice, ASV, Sant’Uffizio. “Girolamo Zago,” testimony of 13 September 1585, bu. 49,
12 “Io in casa non so quello che si mangiasse, ma in barca el mangiava volentiera pesce che carne,” “io l’ho vogato con la mia gondola,” Venice, ASV, Sant’Uffizio, testimony of 3 April 1567, bu. 21.

13 “Io intesi ragionare li barcaroli al tragheto del s. hier.a di quali non so el nome, che l’uno diceva rengratiamo iddio che si smorberano questi marani di questa terra, e un altro barcarolo respose ci hano lassato el megio,” Venice, ASV, Sant’Uffizio, testimony of 13 November 1585, bu. 56.


15 For example, “around the eighth or tenth day of this past Lent, this friend of mine came with this Polonia to my house at the tragheto of San Benetto”: “su li otto o 10 di xl.ma passata vene ditta mia amega con questa polonia in casa mia al traghetto di S. Benetto,” Venice, ASV, Sant’Uffizio, “Splandiana” testimony of 11 June 1587, bu. 59.

16 The denunciation, for instance, states, “I Angela appear […] to denounce a sad and horrible woman called Viena Castelana who lives at the tragheto of San Thoma”: “comparo […] io Anzala […] querelando una trista et pessima donna dimandata viena castelana habita al tragheto de s. thomao,” Venice, ASV, Sant’Uffizio, “Viena Castella,” denunciation, n.d., bu. 61.


18 See Horodowich, Language and Statecraft, 125. Many of these same terms were also noted or used by contemporary Venetian writers and chroniclers. See, for instance, Andrea Calmo, Le lettere, ed. Vittorio Rossi (Turin: Loecher, 1888), 274; Marin Sanudo, I diarii di Marino Sanuto: 1496–1533; dall’autografo Marciano Ital. CLVII codd. CDXIX–CDLXXVII, 58 vols. (Venice: Fratelli Visentini, 1879–1903), vol. 35, 140.

20 “Mia madre […] me ha dito che Magdalena […] disse a quella mogier de Zuane Andrea putana remena per tutti i burchi et barche di questa terra,” Venice, ASV, Avogaria di Comun, Penale, “Cerchier Pietro ingiurie, 1557,” 20 March 1557, bu. 142, fasc. 11.


22 “Ma quello che mi affligge et conduce ad empia deliberatione, e che egli va deseminando, quando con uno, quando con l’altro, che io sia persona di mala conscientia, dicendo, che li ho tolto danaro che non mi venivia, et mangiato il suo sangue, infamiando in un tempo medesimo la caritta et misericordia istessa…confesso veramente che mai piu son stato un così mala dispositione contra alcun huomo, poiche il bene che ho fatto mi e infamia, la pietà che ho usato mi e dolore, et finalmente il sangue che mi è stato rubbato et che ho donato col quali si ha liberato di pregione questo scelerato […] faccia tant’offesa all’honor mio,” “Giovanni Contarini contro il proprio barcaruolo per ingiurie, 1591,” Venice, ASV, Avogaria di Comun, Penale, bu. 134, fasc. 1.

23 Government control extended also to the fees that gondoliers imposed upon their customers. From 1577, the government began specifying the fees that gondoliers could charge. Further, from 1660 the gondoliers’ stations were obliged to display the fares approved by the city’s Provveditori, much as they are today. See Dennis Romano, “The Gondola as a Marker of Station in Venetian Society,” Renaissance Studies 8 (1994): 359–74, at 369.

24 See Horodowich, Language and Statecraft, 166.

25 For instance, when inspecting banquets, they occasionally warned cooks and servants to speak politely. “Et che li ingiuriassero di parole, over fatti, oltra che in tal caseo li schalchi et cuoghi siano tenuti subito partirsi di là,” Venice, ASV, 8 October 1542, bu. 1, capitolari 1505–94, f. 1r, Provveditori Sopra le Pompe.

26 Venice, ASV, Censori, bu. 1, capitolari 1541–1790, ff. 1r–1v, as cited in Romano, Housecraft and Statecraft, 43.

27 Romano, Housecraft and Statecraft, 55, 246–47.

28“Havendosi doluto li signori console della Magnifica Madion Alemana che li fachini Barcaroli, et altra qualita di gente che di servitio di detta Natione della mercantie capitano nel fontico da loro habitato contro il timore del signor Iddio e della Giustitia, et con poco rispetto sono così arditli che prononziando parole indecente, et alle volte vengono alle mani, il che viene anche con notabile disturbo alla quiete de signori
mercanti […] . Non ardisca di trovar risse ne offender in fatti ne in parole alcun’altro ne in acuna maniere pronontiare parole indecenti et cio in pena di L50,” Venice, ASV, Avogaria di Comun, Penale, “Boldon Antonio,” 17 May 1646, bu. 200, fasc. 11. This proclamation is reissued in Italian following the original Latin proclamation from 16 January 1570. A plaque reissuing this ordinance in 1670 still hangs in the south entrance of the Fondaco dei Tedeschi today.


30 “Di ordine dell illustissimi l’avogadori di comun, havendosi doluto li s.ri console della mag.ca Madion Alemana che li fachini Barcaroli, et altra qualita di gente che di servitio di dettaa Natione della mercantie capitano nel fontico da loro habitato, contro il timor del s.r Iddio e della Giustitia, et con poco rispetto sono cosi arditi che pronontiando parole indecente, et alle volte vengono alle mani, il che viene anche con notabile disturbo alla quiete de signori mercanti. Pero per provedere che simili inconvenienti non continuano ma che si vivi con quiete, pace et unione, come si conviene fanno publicamente intendere che alcuno sii chi si voglia, fachini, barcaroli, o altra sorte di gente tanto habitanti in fontego […] non ardisca di trovar risse ne offender in fatti ne in parole alcun'altro ne in alcuna maniere pronontiare parole indecenti et cio in pena di L50,” Venice, ASV, Avogaria di Comun, Penale, “Boldon Antonio ingiurie contra Chengher Giovani 1570,” 17 May 1646, bu. 200, fasc. 11.,


32 Tommaso Garzoni, La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo, e nobili e ignobili, ed. Paolo Cherchi and Beatrice Collina, 2 vols. (Turin: Einaudi, 1996), vol. 2, 1396–67. We shall return to Garzoni’s text in the following section.

33 Thomas Coryat, Coryat’s Crudities, 3 vols. (London: Printed by W[illiam] S[tansby for the author], 1611), vol. 1, 311. See also Fabio Glissenti, Discorsi morali contra il dispiacer del morire. Detto


40 Glissenti, *Discorsi morali contra il dispiacer del morire*, 138–44.

41 Glissenti, *Discorsi morali contra il dispiacer del morire*: “Stiamo sempre su l’acque, pendenti da questa poppa, appoggiati a questo remo, co’ piedi tal’hor agghiaccicati, con le mani rincide dal freddo […] con cader anco in acqua, e con rimore d’affogarvisi.” (140).

42 Glissenti, *Discorsi morali contra il dispiacer del morire*, 142.

43 “perché di noi non si può far di meno in questa città; e se pur ci caccia [sic], non ci viene meno in nollo di ventura, in cui troviamo sempre che fare.” (Glissenti, *Discorsi morali contra il dispiacer del morire*, 142.

45 See note 33 above.


49 Several other men of non-Venetian origin worked as gondoliers: they were boatmen or experienced swimmers from the north Italian lakes district, or from the Dalmatian coast. The humble origin of the small boats described by Glissenti (used first and foremost by fishermen, peasants and low-income citizens who could not afford other means of transport) reveals also a common but not exclusive background among the *barcaruoli*: families of former fishermen or oarsmen who, for centuries, handed down the skills and licenses from father to son or from uncle to nephew. See Lowe, “Visible Lives”, 422–3, and 436.


51 This illustration is titled “The Venetian Love of Display and Magnificence.” This image is discussed by Lowe, “Visible Lives,” 438–9.


53 Caniato, “Traghetto e barcaroli a Venezia,” 166.

54 Caniato, “Traghetto e barcaroli a Venezia,” 159.

55 Horatio Brown, *Life on the Lagoons* (London: Rivingtons, 1900), 104; Brown’s book was first published in 1884. Brown’s unsystematic use of archival material means that the information below requires further investigation and cross-referencing. We aim to do so as part of our future history of gondoliers project.


56 Conrad Malte-Brun, *Universal Geography or Description of All the Parts of the World, on a New Plan* (Edinburgh and London: Adam Black, 1829), VII, 634.

61 *Nuova Geografia Universale, Antica e Moderna Cosmografica, di Commercio e d’Industria, Politica, Statistica, Ethno-grafica, ed Istorica, Secondo W. Guthrie Mentelle, Brun Busching, Pinkerton, Galanti, ed Altri*, ed. C. A. Barbiellini (Milan: Bigli, 1806), 256: “i forestieri si dilettano in sentir profferir loro tante barzellette, ed arguti motti [...] e cantano per lo più i versi italiani”.

62 This hypothesis needs to be strengthened by further archival research. There is evidence, however, that from the late fourteenth century men and women who enrolled in the Scuola of San Geremia had to be members of the same traghetto or gondola station. See Francesca Zanelli, “La mariegola della scuola di S. Giovanni Battista in Santa Sofia a Venezia (secc. XIV–XV): da confraternita a corporazione”, *I Quaderni del M.AE.S.*, V (2002), 31–55, at 43–44. There is also evidence that women worked as gastalde in various Venetian confraternities. See Giuseppina De Sandre Gasparini, “Per lo studio delle confraternite basso-medievali del territorio veneto: note su statuti editori e inediti”, *Ricerche di storia sociale e religiosa*, 17–18 (1980), 29–50.

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