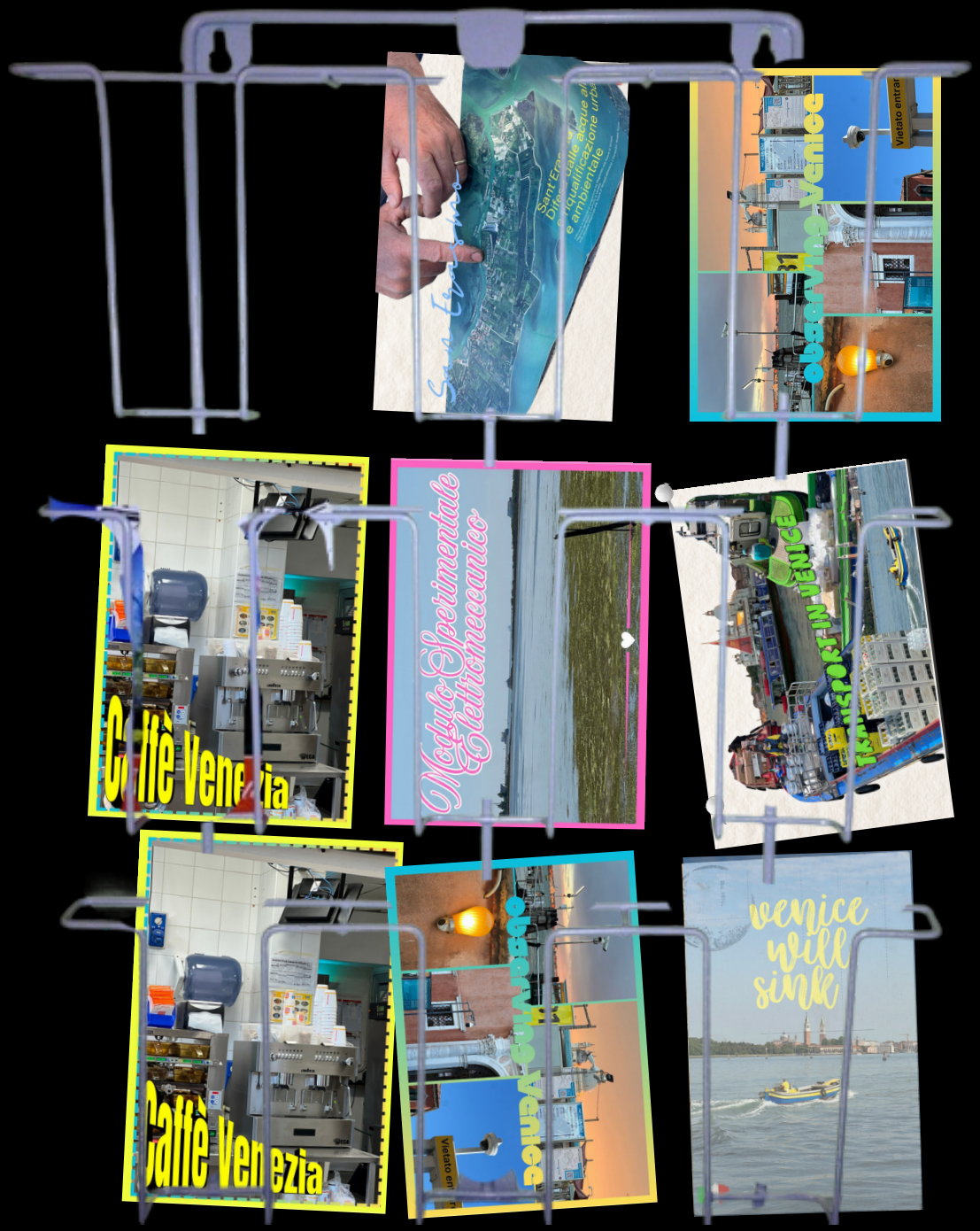
Honest Postcards from Venice



Final Project
Environmental Studies Certificate Programme
Rachel Carson Center (RCC)
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Postcard Cultures







Fig. 1-3: Venice Postcard Stands in Guideca, “Water Cities Seminar” Excursion, pictures taken by Anna Lena Salfer

Common motives observed: *gondolas, flowers, colourful canals, aquarell paintings, turquoise water, AI generated motives, rialto bridge & vaporettos*

Theoretical Frame

My project builds on scholarship that treats postcards not as trivial souvenirs but as active agents in how places and environments get perceived. Tourism and cultural geography scholars argue that postcards don't just depict a destination, they help construct it, circulating as a widely shared "cultural reservoir" of popular perceptions (Pritchard & Morgan, 2003; Cronin, 2006; Waitt & Head, 2002). Winiwarter (2008) and Cronin (2006) push further, showing postcards actively transmit environmental values and shape dominant ways of knowing landscape, so what a postcard shows, or leaves out, is never environmentally neutral.

Banerjee and Dunaway (2023) extend this into conservation politics: postcard-style imagery has helped normalize an "untouched wilderness" myth that erases the people who inhabit a landscape, a dynamic paralleled by how Venice is marketed as a timeless, uninhabited stage rather than a lived, environmentally stressed city.

A second strand treats postcards as banal, mobile media that slip past scrutiny because they seem trivial, becoming near-invisible carriers of ideology (Schrire, 2023; Symes, 2019). Recent research by Gugganig and Schor (2020) uses "what is erased?" as a teaching question for postcard analysis, and Irons (2024) shows postcards can become a tool of collaborative, decolonial ethnography rather than one direction like marketing.

My project sits in that tradition, using the postcard's familiar, disarming format precisely because that familiarity is what makes the critique land where I want it to be.

“Picture postcards are a rich cultural reservoir of popular perceptions of peoples and places” (Pritchard, 2003)

“Postcards transmit environmental values” (Winiwarter, 2008)

“Postcards are a form of travel writing” (Symes, 2019)

Background and Motivation

This project consists of six postcards designed from photographs I took during a field excursion during the “Water Cities” Seminar to Venice in May 2026.

The postcard is not a neutral object. As a mass-produced, mass-circulated artifact, it has historically functioned as a tool of place-branding: it selects, crops, and idealizes a location so that it becomes desirable, collectible, and repeatable. Postcards flatten complex places into a handful of recognizable, sellable images, and in doing so they actively participate in shaping how audiences imagine and consequently treat and talk about a destination. Venice is a particularly clear case, its postcard imagery almost never shows cruise ships crowding the lagoon, the ecological cost of over-tourism, flooding linked to rising sea levels, or the daily reality of residents navigating a city increasingly organised around visitors rather than inhabitants. By using the postcard format itself as the vehicle for critique, the project asks viewers to notice the gap between the genre's promise and what it habitually leaves out, and what “honest postcards” could look like?

Each one uses the postcard's own format, framing, and material conventions to show a different, less marketable Venice: the one shaped by mass tourism, ecological strain, over-crowding, and the everyday friction of a city that is simultaneously a UNESCO heritage site, a stage set, and a place where people actually live. Read as a set, the six postcards work through two related but distinct strategies.

I want to cover the two basic ways a dominant image can misrepresent a place:

→ by distorting what it does show (romanticizing infrastructure, aestheticizing risk, editing out control and labor)
→ and by omitting what it doesn't show (agriculture, working boats, the people who keep the city running).

Surveillance, contested infrastructure, tourism-driven commercial change, sea-level rise, working transport, and agricultural land are not six unrelated observations, they are six different pressure points where Venice's environmental and social present pushes against its postcard image. None of them are hidden or secret; they are all visible to anyone who spends more than a few days in the city.

What the postcard format normally does is not lie, exactly, but select and my project's six cards simply select differently, treating the postcard as a frame that can be pointed anywhere, not only at what is already agreed to be beautiful. That is ultimately my project's claim: the postcard is not a neutral record of a place but a genre with its own rules about what counts as worth sending home, and once those rules are visible, they can be used against themselves.

Methodology

The project follows a practice-based, photographic-ethnographic approach rather than a purely theoretical one:

Fieldwork and observation. During the excursion, I photographed infrastructure for visitor management, queues, litter, flood barriers, construction for tourism logistics, locals going about ordinary business alongside tourist crowds, and the visible tension between the city as heritage spectacle and the city as inhabited place.

Selection. From this material, I chose six postcard motives that each capture a distinct facet of this "hidden Venice", sometimes in coordination of a few, for example, flood protection, ecological vulnerability, the commodification of everyday life, waste and maintenance labor. Choosing six rather than one allows the set to function almost like a counter-catalogue.

Design language. I intentionally kept the format of a conventional “trending” postcard, rectangular card, front image, reverse side with space for a stamp, address lines, colourful design, the city being named, and country flag visible.

The subversion happens at the level of content, not form: familiar packaging, unfamiliar content. Where relevant, I added short captions or a fabricated "greeting" text on the reverse, mimicking authentic postcard messages but pointing toward what the image is really showing, to sharpen the contrast between the touristic script and the reality depicted.

Framing as critique. The intention is to make the mechanism of the postcard visible: how selective imagery produces expectation, and how expectation shapes both tourist behavior and the material pressures on the city itself. The project treats the postcard as a case study in the broader Environmental Humanities question of how cultural representation and ecological/social reality feed into one another, or can also work as an educational standpoint to learn more about the cities backstories and current challenges?



Postcard Nr. 1, "OBSERVING VENICE”

Image: Five photographs of CCTV cameras in public space, mostly mounted at vaporetto stops, some concealed inside street lamps. The card shows a saturated, vivid colour retro postcard design.

Background: The postcard carries a deliberate double meaning. As a postcard, the object's whole function is to let the sender say "look what I'm seeing", the tourist as the one who observes, who collects views. But the image itself reverses that position: the tourist is also constantly being observed. By making the cameras the subject of the postcard rather than incidental background clutter, the card exposes an entire layer of the city's infrastructure that souvenir imagery systematically renders invisible.

Pictures of CCTV in Guideca, San Marco, Zattere, Water Cities Seminar” Excursion, pictures taken by Anna Lena Salfer



Postcard Nr. 2, "MODULO SPERIMENTALE ELETTROMECCANICO, MOSE"

Image: The MOSE flood-barrier system (Venice's mobile tidal-defense infrastructure) in the background, styled on a pink, saccharine card with a pink heart.

Background: MOSE is one of the most contested infrastructure projects in Venice's recent history, and so called “ahistorical” for Venice. Plagued by a major corruption scandal, decade-long delays, enormous cost overruns, and real disagreement among Venetians and scientists about its long-term ecological effectiveness and consequences for the lagoon. Presenting it in the visual language of something "cute" or nostalgically charming, the same register normally used for gondolas, I want to mimic how tourist-facing media aestheticizes infrastructure. Turning something genuinely disputed and consequential for the city's residents into a pretty, consumable image.

Pictures of MOSE I taken from the ferry, Water Cities Seminar” Excursion, pictures taken by Anna Lena Salfer



Postcard Nr. 3,"Caffé Venezia"

Image: The kitchen backroom of the Burger King at Venezia Santa Lucia, showing an elaborate, high-end Italian espresso machine installed inside a global fast-food chain.

Background: The card stages the collision between an imagined, "authentic" Italian ritual (the espresso, the café) and the reality of a tourist economy so large that even a fast-food chain finds it commercially necessary to install serious Italian coffee equipment to meet visitor expectations. Showing and mimicking the fantasy of local coffee culture.

Pictures of Espresso Machine, Burger King Santa Lucia, Water Cities Seminar” Excursion, pictures taken by Anna Lena Salfer



Postcard Nr. 4,"Venice Will Sink"

Image: A yellow blue boat passing the lagoon, the campanile of St. Mark's Square visible in the background.

Background: This card works through contrast between form and content rather than through an unexpected image. The photograph itself could pass as a normal, attractive souvenir shot; the romantic lettering is styled exactly like a nostalgic postcard greeting. But the sentence spells out a well-documented climate fact, mimicking how climate risk is often aestheticised or softened into a picturesque, almost charming inevitability.

Pictures of Venice skyline taken from San Servolo Vaporetto station, Water Cities Seminar" Excursion, pictures taken by Anna Lena Salfer



Postcard Nr. 5,"Transport in Venice"

Image: A cut-out composite of five different boats, backgrounds removed and isolated against a plain ground, echoing the way transit maps or metro-system postcards display their vehicle fleet (the way a city might print "our subway cars" as a collectible set). The boats shown aren't gondolas or vaporetti alone but include garbage boats, cargo/supply boats, and other working vessels.

Background: Venice's iconic mode of transport, in postcard imagery, is almost always narrowed down to the gondola or, at most, the vaporetto. This card treats Venice's boats the way a transit authority would treat a metro system: as infrastructure, catalogued and displayed functionally rather than romantically. By including garbage boats and cargo boats alongside passenger boats, the card makes visible the logistical backbone that keeps a car-free city running: e.g waste collection, deliveries, maintenance. Infrastructure that is completely necessary but never appears in the postcard version of Venice.

Pictures of garbage boats, cargo/supply boats, and Vaporetto taken in Marina San Giorgio, Water Cities Seminar” Excursion, pictures taken by Anna Lena Salfer



Postcard Nr. 6, "Sant'Erasmo. Saluti dall'isola degli orti di Venezia"

Image: A map of Sant'Erasmo, Venice's "vegetable island," alongside a close-up photograph of a farmer's hands, visibly a working farmer's hands, pointing to a location on the map. The farmer is someone met and spoken to during the excursion.

Critique: Venice's postcard image is built almost entirely around water, stone, and monuments, a city imagined as having no agricultural land, no farmers, no green space at all. Sant'Erasmo quietly contradicts that image: it's a real, functioning agricultural island within the Venetian lagoon, with actual farmers growing actual organic produce for the city. Centering a farmer's hands insists on a person and a livelihood rather than a view. The card works less through irony than through simple visibility, a reminder that "Venice" is not only the historic center but also a wider, more ordinary, cultivated lagoon landscape that the postcard genre has no vocabulary for.

Pictures of farmer taken in San't Erasmo, Water Cities Seminar" Excursion, pictures taken by Anna Lena Salfer

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observing Venice
Vietato entrare


Caffè Venezia


TRANSPORT IN VENICE


Modulo Sperimentale Elettromeccanico


venice will sink


San Erasmo
Sant'Erasmo
Difesa dalle acque alte
e riqualificazione urbana
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