INTRODUCTION

In "A SCENE FROM THE VENICE GHETTO," THE TWENTIETH-century poet Rainer Maria Rilke vividly describes the architectonics of Jewish life in Venice: "[The Venetians] reduced the area of the Ghetto … so that its [Jewish] families … were forced to build their houses in the vertical dimension, one on the roof of another. And their city, which did not lie on the sea, grew slowly into the space of heaven as though it were another sea; and all around the square where the well was, buildings rose in dizzy perpendicularity like the walls of some giant's tower."[1] For Rilke, the tiny houses constituting the Venetian ghetto, "jammed in countless stories one on top of the other," created Babel-like towers from which the Jews viewed the Palazzo Foscari, a domed church, the silvery seascape, and the "quivering sky."[2] From this vantage point, the attenuated tenements offered their Jewish inhabitants a unique view of the city's complex rooflines. The ghetto created an architecture of vision that situated the Jews in a unique spatial relationship with the city. Ghetto heights made Venice legible from the city's edge.

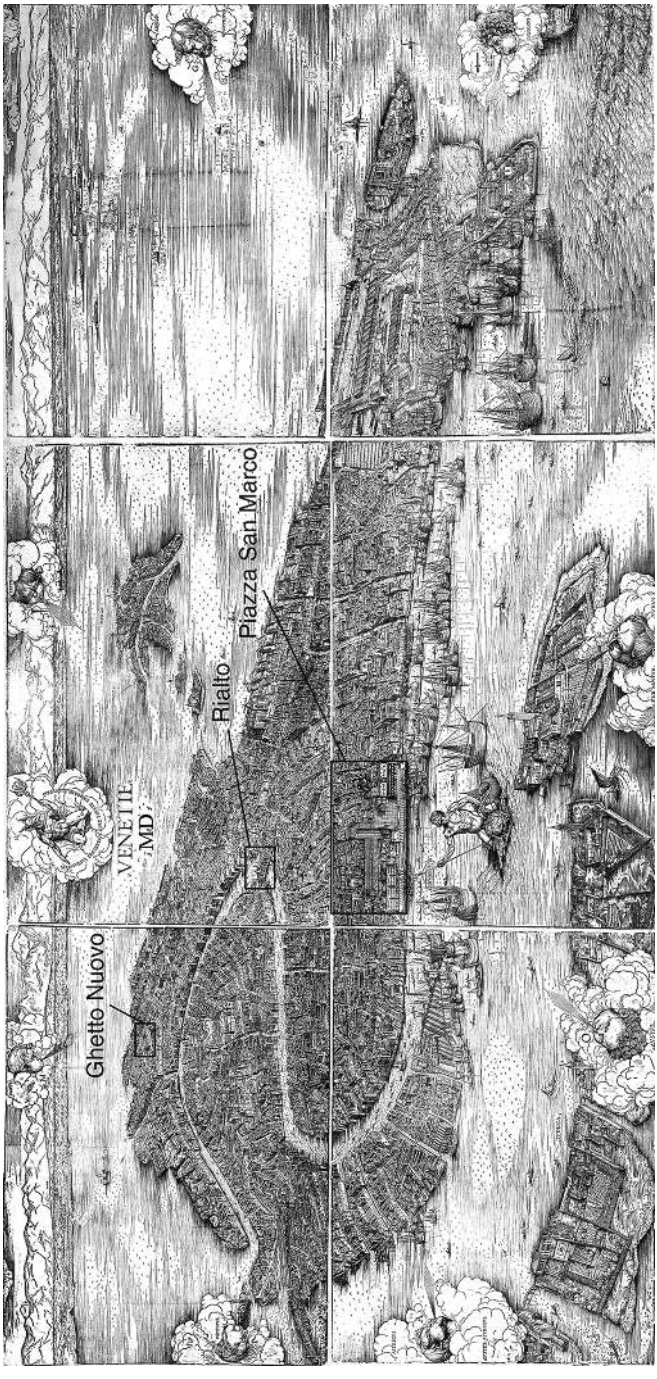
Rilke's tales of ghetto gazing belong not to the twentieth century, however. The story of these multistoried buildings, which remain largely extant today, begins in the Renaissance.[3] In Rilke's spiritual narrative, looking heavenward may have inspired the Jews' humility, but in early modernity their ghetto views represented to the Christian majority the Jews' temerity. An era of ghettoization began in sixteenth-century Venice when authorities reduced Jews to objects of surveillance and supervision.[4] For Venetians, the Jews' social and religious marginality marked them as executors of a defiant, and at times perverse, will that required compulsory and confining accommodations. In other words, Venetian authorities forced Jews into the ghetto to survey their actions and interactions, to make the Jews objects of the Venetian gaze.[5] Yet Venetians were confronted with the reciprocity of that gaze when, as we will see, the Jews returned their look. Ghetto architecture,

rising high above the horizon line, placed Jews in the position of urban onlookers whose viewing point did not necessarily degrade them to passive objects but rather animated the Jews' status as observing subjects. Through its vertical ascendancy, the Venice ghetto inadvertently granted its Jewish inhabitants visual recognition in a city that required their marginalization.

In *The Jewish Ghetto and the Visual Imagination of Early Modern Venice*, I study the ghetto as a paradox of urban space.[6] The ghetto marginalized Jews to the periphery to denote their civic subordination; yet it was precisely this practice of peripheralization that put the ghetto on display for Christian and Jewish eyes. Venice's oligarchic government differentiated land use to organize the city's constituent neighborhoods, zoning the ghetto to the northernmost district at a far distance from the political center of the city at the Piazza San Marco and the economic center at the Rialto Bridge (Figure 1). Pushed to the periphery to minimize their visual presence, Jews erected towering tenements that made that marginal community highly visible (Figure 2). The verticality of ghetto architecture deviated from conventions in Venetian urban planning to yield sites of visual disturbance that disrupted the well-ordered social fabric of Venice. Ghetto urbanism, marked by its exaggerated elevations and architectural asymmetries, created a crisis of visuality in that its singularity drew attention from Christians and Jews alike. The ghetto became an imposing monument that heightened the Jews' visibility both from within its walls and from without.

Ghettoization began in Venice on March 29, 1516, when the Senate ordered all Jews residing in the city to move behind the walls of the Ghetto Nuovo (Figure 3).[7] The decree stipulated that the Jews would be locked into the ghetto at night behind gates and would undergo continual surveillance (Figures 4–6). Jews could not own ghetto property; therefore, they rented their high-rent apartments in perpetuity.[8] According to the senatorial decree, ghetto enclosure was necessary to avoid the improprieties and illegalities that surfaced when Jews spread throughout the city:

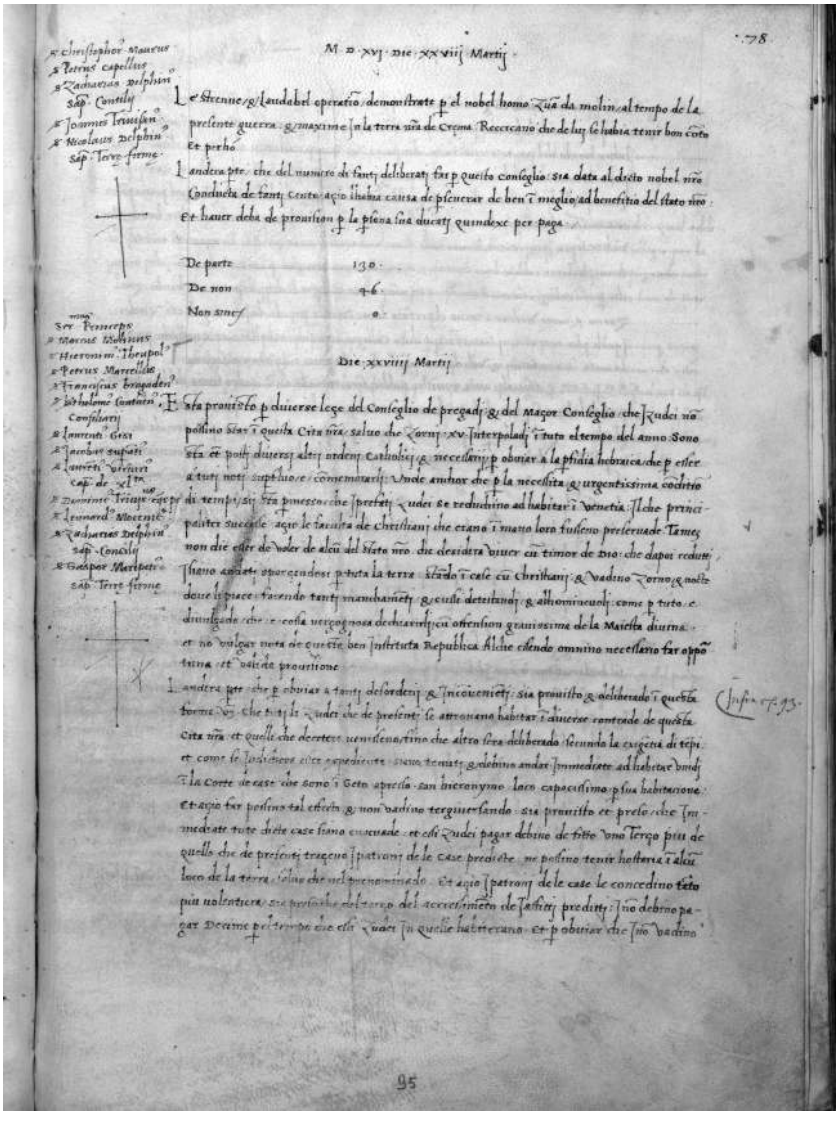
> Given the urgent needs of the present times, the said Jews have been permitted to come and live in Venice, and the main purpose of this concession was to preserve the property of Christians which was in their hands. But no godfearing subject of our state would have wished them, after their arrival, to disperse throughout the city, sharing houses with Christians and going wherever they choose by day and night, perpetrating all those misdemeanours and detestable and abominable acts which are generally known and shameful to describe, with grave offence to the Majesty of God and uncommon notoriety on the part of this well-ordered Republic.[9]



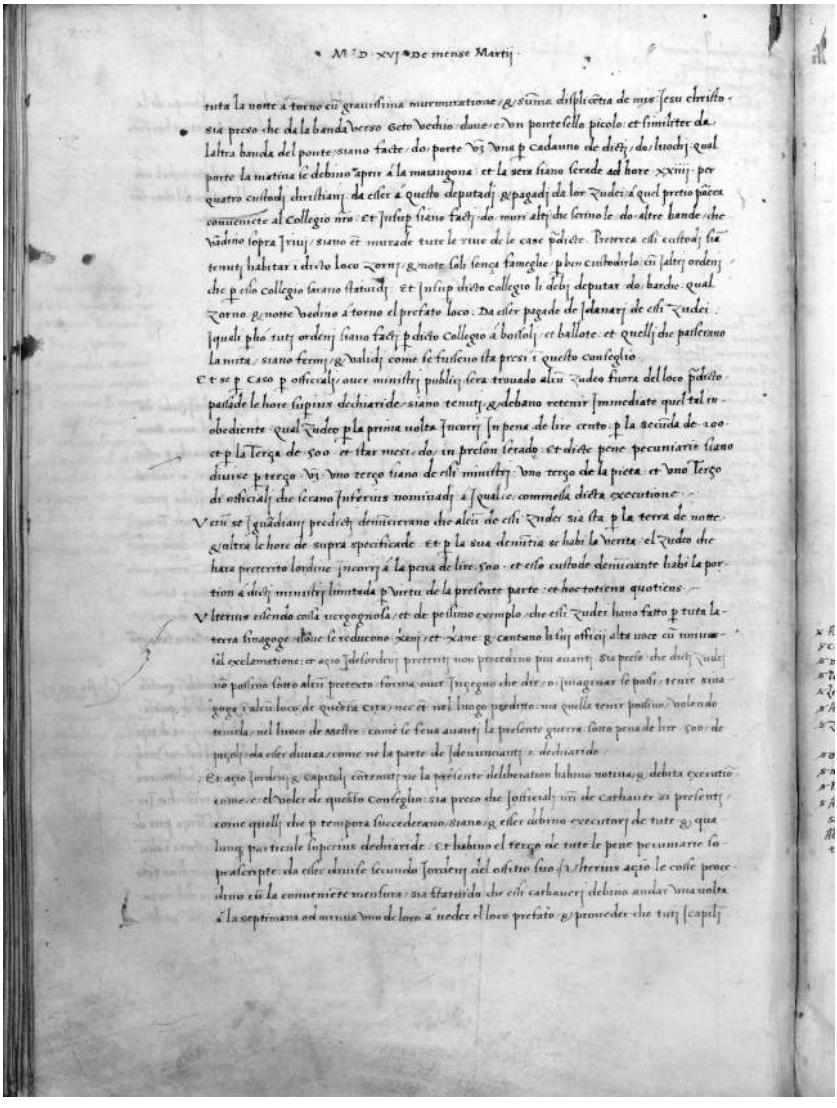
1. Jacopo de' Barbari, *Venetie*, 1500, monument indications added to original by author. Photo courtesy Novacco Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago.

2. Ghetto Nuovo, established in Venice in 1516. Photo courtesy Graziano Arici.

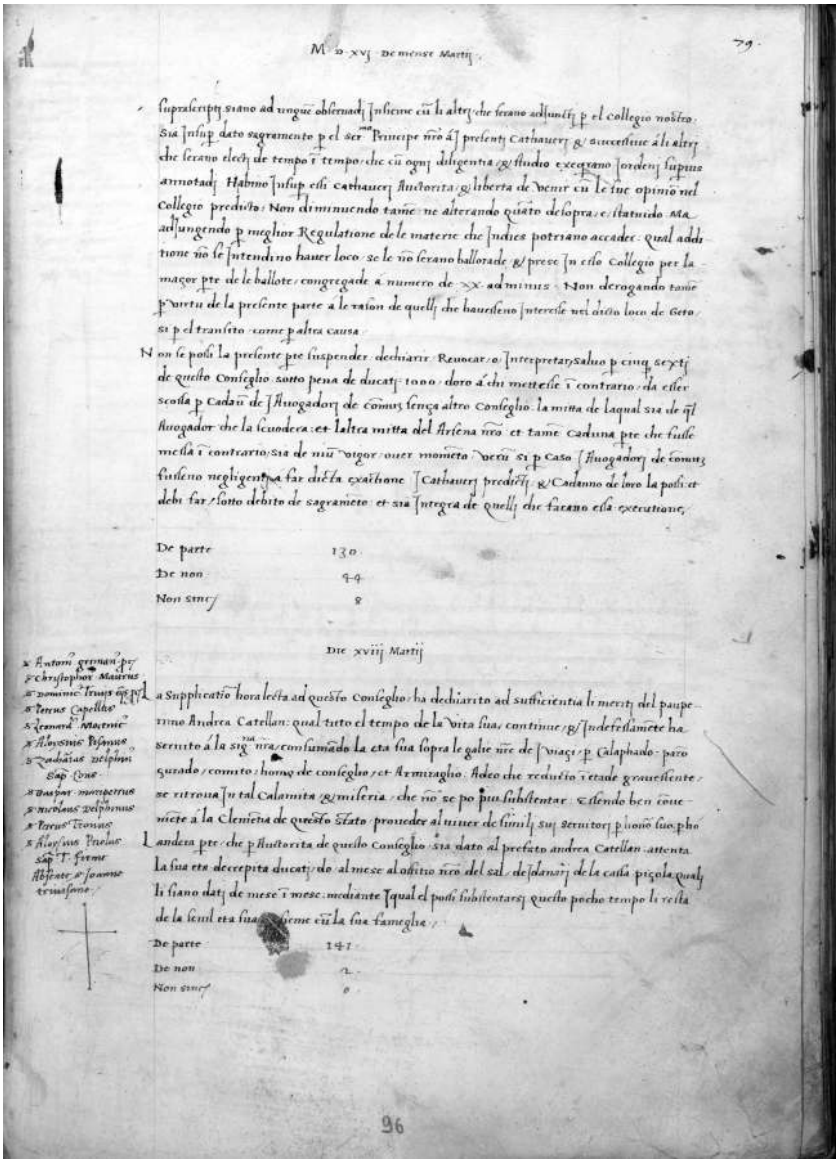
3. Ghetto Nuovo, view from the Campo del Ghetto Nuovo, Venice. Photo: author.



4. Senate decree establishing the Ghetto Nuovo in Venice, March 29, 1516. Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Senato, Terra, registro 19, fol. 78r. Photo courtesy Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali, n. 30/2016.



5. Senate decree establishing the Ghetto Nuovo in Venice, March 29, 1516. Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Senato, Terra, registro 19, fol. 78v. Photo courtesy Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali, n. 30/2016.



6. Senate decree establishing the Ghetto Nuovo in Venice, March 29, 1516. Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Senato, Terra, registro 19, fol. 79r. Photo courtesy Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali, n. 30/2016.

Although previously permitted to visit Venice for a maximum of fifteen days a year, Jews settled permanently in the city following the Venetian Republic's military defeat by the League of Cambrai in 1509. The economic opportunities of Jewish settlement benefited the republic by replenishing the treasury depleted from the war and promoting the development of private credit markets and public finance.[10] William Thomas, writing the first English book on Italy in 1549, briefly describes the economic presence of the Jews in Venice: "It is almost incredible what gain the Venetians receive by the usury of the Jews, both privately and in common."[11] Authorities never embraced Jews as full members of the community but as traders in money and merchandise, occupations that induced economic prosperity in the early modern city.[12] Jews thus were tolerated for their *utilitas*, as they, in the words of Jacques Le Goff, helped "to propel the economy and society . . . ahead toward capitalism."[13]

The economic motives for Jewish settlement in Venice often clashed with concerns over religious difference. Following their arrival in Venice, Jews settled in the parishes of San Cassiano, Sant'Agostino, San Polo, and Santa Maria Mater Domini, which, writes the Venetian noble and diarist Marin Sanudo in April 1515, "is a very bad thing. No one says anything to them because, with these wars, they need them; thus they do what they want."[14] As allegations circulated of ongoing Jewish misconduct and blasphemy, the Senate decree of March 29, 1516 tightened restrictions on the Jews: "that all the Jews who are at present living in different parishes within our city, and all others who may come here . . . shall be obliged to go at once to dwell together in the houses in the court within the Geto at San Hieronimo, where there is plenty of room for them to live. . . . The Jews may not keep an inn in any part of the city, save the Geto."[15] The Senate further mandated that the Jews, who would come to reside in the ghetto for nearly three hundred years, would be responsible for paying the salaries of their Christians guards, four of whom would live inside the ghetto and two would patrol the surrounding canals by boat.[16] The spatial practices of community in Venice disenfranchised Jews with the perpetual gaze of surveillance embedded in the Jews' enclosure.

The material effects of the ghetto changed the urban physiognomy of Venice when authorities legislated the Jews' compulsory residence.[17] Restoration of the buildings was continually necessary because of the poor quality of ghetto construction. Bricks were the principal building material used in the ghetto, as elsewhere in the city. Brick, together with a soft mortar of lime, could withstand the structural movement typical of Venice.[18] Istrian stone, a white limestone significantly lighter than marble, was used for the sills, gutters, and doorframes. To avoid excessive loads, Jews constructed all public stairways, ceilings, and partitions separating rooms of timber (Figure 7).[19]

7. Stairwell in the Venetian ghetto complex, Ghetto Vecchio, Venice. Photo: author.

8. Banco Rosso pawnshop in the Ghetto Nuovo, Venice. Photo: author.

Shops, stores, and lending institutions occupied the ghetto's ground floor (Figure 8). To maximize space, this floor was often divided horizontally into two, creating an extra floor with ceilings just under six feet that could be used for storerooms, kitchens, or servant quarters.[20] The elevation of ghetto structures further compounded the buildings' fragility. Overcrowding, resulting from natural population growth and immigration, caused the Jews to expand their tenements vertically, constructing buildings up to nine stories around the central *campo* (public square). Ghetto elevations, anomalous in Venice given the fragility of the soft lagoonal terrain, produced architectural instability. Venice was a city founded on a pliable substructure of silt, sand, and clay that could not easily accommodate multistory structures. Jews, therefore, could not trust the load-bearing strength of their vertical structures, built, in the words of Rilke, "with such flimsy stones that the wind no longer seemed to take notice of the walls."[21] These poorly constructed hovels present the structural debilities inhering in Venice's ghettoized space, the conspicuous architecture exposing the Christian preoccupation with Jewish difference.

Authorities expanded the ghetto complex in 1541 and 1633 with the establishment of the Ghetto Vecchio and Ghetto Nuovissimo on land adjacent to the Ghetto Nuovo (Figures 9–10). These extensions to the ghetto complex sought to accommodate the residential needs of Levantine and