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Touring the Hidden City: Walking Tour Guides in Deindustrializing Genoa

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Abstract

Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in Genoa, a northern Italian city whose deindustrialization process began in the early 1970s, this paper explores how the city's high levels of intellectual unemployment have given rise to the profession of walking tour guides. These are highly educated women, and more rarely men, who, working independently of the financial and political powers that usually drive urban revitalization processes, utilize their cultural capital and talents to spin itinerant tales of concealment and discovery around the master narrative of Genoa's decline and its tourist potential. Through an analysis of their professional histories and experiences as well as the ways they present the city, I argue that the guides comprise a *sui generis* "creative class" (Florida 2012) that helps transform Genoa into a city worth visiting. In their attempt to boost cultural tourism, tour guides inhabit a liminal space from where they vie for legitimacy, build professional personas that both challenge and reinforce gender norms, and straddle contested lines between high and popular culture, and between amateurism and professionalism. I contend that, compared with Richard Florida's (2012) upwardly mobile "talents," Genoa's walking tour guides form a residual creative class that emerges out of necessity and struggles to survive by creatively exploiting the "hiddenness" of a densely layered cityscape. [Italy, tourism, tour guides, creative class, middle-classes, deindustrialization]

Introduction

It is Sunday afternoon and I am among a group of 21 Genoese women and men following a woman in her mid-40s who leads a tour titled "*Cattedrale Segreta*" (Secret Cathedral). Usually, the general public is denied access to the sanctuary's innermost quarters; however, this tour promises to take visitors into spaces that are remarkable and infrequently visited. Leaving from a familiar and readily accessible corner inside this magnificent medieval cathedral, we are led up flights of stairs that culminate in a sumptuous internal balcony overlooking the altar. This is where, centuries ago, Genoa's Doge would listen to the

Sunday Mass while keeping a safe distance from commoners. We take pictures, crack a few jokes about Genoa's aristocratic families, and move on. Our next and last stop is the lodge on top of a tower where one of Genoa's most famous cardinals practiced his contemplations. The lodge offers a breathtaking view of the city framed by a blue stripe of sea on one side and by hills on the other. The tightly-knit mosaic of ancient slate roofs appears to float above Genoa's *centro storico* (historic center), making it difficult to locate even the most familiar markers in the landscape (see Figure 1). As we all struggle to identify well-known monuments and the silhouettes of our own homes, the guide smiles and patiently helps us make sense of the landscape.

Every day, Genoa's walking tour guides lead groups in the discovery of an intricately layered city that is both familiar and foreign to local tourists. Largely compelled by the scarcity of employment opportunities, but also by their educational backgrounds in history and art as well as their aesthetic sensibilities, self-employed tour guides help transform formerly industrial Genoa into a "city of culture." Working against the backdrop of a densely layered and barely legible cityscape, Genoa's guides contribute to enhancing this city's tourist potential by creatively spinning tales of mystery and discovery around its landmarks. Drawing on an analysis of walking tour guides' professional histories, experiences, and narratives of the city, I argue that these protagonists of Genoa's newly-found tourism vocation form a *sui generis* "creative class" (Florida 2012): one that contributes to remaking the city by cultivating Genoa's image as a cultural tourism destination. I also suggest that, unlike Florida's yuppies, Genoa's guides inhabit a liminal space. As they build their professional personas by drawing on a repertoire of skills, knowledge types, and behaviors that both challenge and reinforce gender norms, Genoa's guides straddle contested lines between high and popular culture, and between amateurism and professionalism. Just as importantly, Genoa's walking tour guides benefit from the "hiddenness" of this city's densely

layered cityscape even as they are constrained by it. Hence, if compared with Richard Florida's (2012) upwardly mobile "talents," Genoa's walking tour guides form a residual creative class that works independently of the financial and political powers that usually drive urban revitalization processes, and struggles to make a living in the face of their city's relative marginality in mainstream tourist circuits.¹

The new Genoa and its creative class

Genoa's economic crisis began in the early 1970s, and it was driven by the failure of its state-subsidized steelworks, its shipyards and its electromechanical sector to compete on increasingly international markets (Arvati 1988). Soon enough, high unemployment rates earned Genoa the sobriquet "*meridione del nord*" ("the South of Northern Italy"). Between 1971 and 2001, out-migration made Genoa's population drop from approximately 800,000 to about 600,000.² For many of those who remained, self-employment became the only option. Dismissed port and factory workers used their severance packages to start small businesses, and even educated middle-class residents often resorted to small-scale entrepreneurship in order to earn a living (Arvati 1988).³ Genoa's walking tour guides were to emerge from this context.

Following a European trend in urban planning (Richards 2000), in the 1980s Genoa's administrations began conceptualizing tourism as a means to revive the ailing local economy. Great events such as the Colombian Expo of 1992, the Group of Eight summit of 2001, and the Capital of European Culture program of 2004 were held for the sake of boosting Genoa's image. With each event, government and European Union funds were used to carry out extensive interventions on the built environment (Hillman 2008), thus giving the city a substantial make-over. By the early 2000s, Genoa's centro storico had been partially gentrified, and the old port had been replaced by a stylish waterfront. Many historic buildings

were undergoing restorations, and in 2007 42 of them received UNESCO World Heritage status. In the meantime, shopping malls and big box stores sprouted on dismissed industrial grounds. Formerly disenchanting by industrial modernity (Weber 1958), Genoa became re-enchanted as a site of delectation and leisure (Dicks 2004; Richards and Wilson 2006; Ritzer 2010; Zukin 1996).

The revitalization of deindustrialized cities has often been described as the creation of “voodoo” (Harvey 1988) or “fantasy cities” (Hannigan 1998) characterized by capital-intensive phantasmagorias (Bauman 1994). The latter are concocted, displayed, and consumed on a large scale, and they are sustained through the exploitation of service workers supplying cheap labor (Crick 1989; Handler 1997; Nash and Smith 1991). Genoa’s revitalization, too, has been shaped by top-down administrative choices that have played into the hands of developers and corporations, such as the restoration of degraded historical areas and the hosting of great events. However, this process has also given rise to an independent cottage tourist industry (McCannell 1976) that developed at the margins of Genoa’s architectural revitalization. I suggest that this industry is comprised of workers who, similarly to Richard Florida’s “creative class” (2012), draw on their cultural capital to transform the public image of the city.

According to Florida (2012:8), cities with vibrant, highly tolerant, and technologically-advanced environments attract talented individuals who, in turn, creatively utilize their knowledge to promote their cities and boost their revenues. Florida’s thesis has drawn considerable criticism for its hyperbolic advocacy (Peck 2005: 741), its elitism (Gornostaeva and Campbell 2012), and its tendency to obscure the negative consequences of the exclusionary forms of urbanism generated by the rise of a creative class (Markusen 2006; Peck 2005). Yet, if approached with caution, Florida’s notion of the creative class can help broaden anthropological understandings of the role of educated individuals in changing cities.

In urban studies, middle-class individuals are often narrowly cast as eager consumers of whatever cultural products are made available to them through corporate capitalism (Featherstone 2007). As Florida suggests, however, creative classes are significant producers of urban cultural goods and services as well. Hence, Florida's notion of a creative class invites a reflection on those who participate in urban revitalization at the capillary level. In the Genoese context, this contribution is a form of "poiesis" (Calhoun, Sennett and Shapira 2013) or "worlding" (Ong 2011) that shapes the experience of the city from the bottom up by creatively manipulating existing circumstances; as it does so, it carves productive niches at the margins of large-scale urban transformations.

If Genoese administrations have carried out extensive restorations and have pursued UNESCO World Heritage status for some of Genoa's landmarks, walking tour guides have contributed to animating its public space through itinerant storytelling practices that turn Genoa into a lively and enjoyable city. Yet, if compared to Florida's "talents" (2012), Genoa's walking tour guides are part of a creative class that is quite vulnerable. Their profession is a result of the precarity (Butler 2009) that began in the Italy of the early 1970s and hurled Genoa's working and middle classes into a state of redundancy. It is also a product of deeply ingrained social inequities reproduced through nepotistic and clientelistic dynamics that co-opt access to jobs and resources (Guano 2010; Zinn 2001). Last but not least, while Florida's (2012) creative classes are highly mobile, the creative vocation of Genoa's walking tour guides is born out of the impossibility or unwillingness to relocate, often due to strong family ties. For the guides, the creation of professional opportunities has thus become both a challenge and a necessity. In order to earn a living, they have to showcase a city that, until recently, was regarded as not worth visiting. Their strategy is to concoct skillful elaborations of the narrative of Genoa as a "hidden city" (Gazzola 2003), thus enticing potential visitors through the lure of mystery and discovery.

Narrating a hidden city

Visitors exploring Genoa can choose from a selection of tours that are offered all year round by a well-known local guide association. Below are excerpts from a few tour descriptions:

Unusual Genoa: A different stroll for understanding the past of a true and intense Genoa, one you never imagined before. You will hear the most unexpected stories—stories of commoners, great doges, Risorgimento heroes, war stories etched into the stone by arrows, and love stories...

Hidden Genoa: Genoa is a city that hides its secrets behind its façades, behind the apparent strangeness of curious names of streets and squares. All of a sudden you will find yourself in an unknown city that, alley by alley, palace by palace, will reveal its most intimate essence, whispering to you its hidden and fascinating secrets....

Things Never Seen Before: Even those who know Genoa very well will notice, little by little, how small secrets hidden in grand monuments and unknown aspects of the old city reveal themselves....Traces of the past await eyes capable of seeing it and reading its fascinating stories through the filigree of time.⁴

Narratives shape experiences and mold memories as well as expectations (Beauregard 1993; Somers 1994), and so do tales of Genoa's "hiddenness" and its potential to be "discovered." The tour themes described above emerged from a master narrative about power and Genoa's cityscape. According to residents, 20th century industrialization was pivotal in occulting the city and creating a "hidden Genoa" (Gazzola 2003). At that time, not only did Genoa have to surrender its pleasant western seaside neighborhoods to shipyards and highly polluting factories, but its cityscape was also marred by a rationalization of urban space (see Lefebvre 1978) that consistently prioritized industrial production and the interests of developers over residents' wishes and needs (Gazzola et al. 2014). When Genoa's industrial prowess declined rapidly in the 1970s, its modernist cityscape came to be regarded as a liability that had occulted this city's natural and historical magnificence.⁵

Yet, following a trend common to several Italian cities undergoing revitalization (Cavanaugh 2009; Dines 2012), the master narrative of hidden Genoa entails not only the theme of loss, but also that of a potential that can be profitably tapped through revitalization. In Genoa, this potential is seen in the degraded *centro storico* (historic center) as a shrine that holds much of this city's heritage. This narrative also involves a tale of class and wealth accumulation in the Genoa of centuries bygone. According to it, this city's complex cityscape lacks the grand plazas of other Italian cities due to the intentional concealment operated by a dominant class that eschewed ostentation, preferring instead to invest its wealth in lavish decorations for the interior of their homes. Thus, Genoa's *centro storico* developed a peculiarly occult quality whereby the vestiges of local history remain concealed in its dark and narrow alleys (see Figure 2). However, if on one hand this city's limited legibility (see Dicks 2004: 12) accounts for its peripheral position in highly profitable national tourist circuits, on the other hand this hiddenness may also contribute to Genoa's appeal.

The narrative of Genoa's untapped potential was destined to gain momentum in the late 1980s. This is when, in a city that had lost most of its factories, the new rhetoric about tourism as an "industry with no chimneys" gained increasing popularity, and the very same hiddenness that had kept Genoa at the margins of Italy's tourist circuits began to be acknowledged as a source of opportunities—not just by administrators, developers, and corporations, but also by residents. As the process of giving the city an architectural makeover began, the "hidden city" narrative solidified as a marketable object. It also illuminated a need for cultural intermediaries (see Bourdieu 1984; Featherstone 1991; Wynn 2005; Zukin 1991) who were capable of selling this product by offering compelling interpretations of Genoa's complex landscape: a *sui generis* creative class that contributed to crafting a new image of the city and to promoting it in an emerging tourist market.

The early 1990s: from aspiring teachers to walking tour guides

“The job they offered me may have given me stability, but I would have had to sit behind a desk in a small room for eight hours a day. Being a guide is a beautiful profession, why should I give it up?” This is what Michela told me after declining a permanent administrative position, perhaps feeling that, given the precariousness of employment in Italy (Molé 2011), such a decision required some defending. Michela, whom I have known since 1987, is one of the “founding mothers” of the walking tour guide profession in Genoa and the initiator of the first walking tour association, *Genova insieme* (Genoa Together), which now has a stable clientele and a regular schedule of tours (see Figure 3). In 1992, Michela earned a Master’s degree (*laurea*) in modern languages with a minor in art history. Her studies instilled her with a passion for visual and literary culture as well as an ability to see the city through a unique lens (see Reed 2002). Like most of her fellow women graduates, Michela had initially planned on becoming a teacher, thus hoping to practice a profession that, due to its flexible schedule and social motherhood aura, had been traditionally dominated by women. However, faced with the dismal job market caused by Genoa’s crisis, Michela had to find a different way to earn a living. One day she convinced a group of friends to post an announcement in the local newspaper advertising a tour of the centro storico:

The phone operator I talked to was hesitant, and she asked me whether I was really sure I wanted to do this. “What if I post the announcement and then you won’t do it?” she asked me. “We’ll do it,” I told her. Come Sunday, we approached the meeting point with some anxiety, expecting not to find anyone. Lo and behold, we turned the corner and 80 people were there waiting for us!

Michela and her friends realized that the time was ripe for developing local tourism. In the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, Italy’s cities of arts (Florence, Venice, and Rome) had become favorite, if still affordable, destinations for Italian tourists: a growingly educated middle-class population keen on honing its cultural tastes. In those years, public schools began taking their students to Italy’s cities of art; even families with limited means would

visit the same destinations, often by taking advantage of friends' hospitality. After enjoying cultural tourism at the national level, many became eager to pursue similar experiences in their home town. Michela and a few other women were among the first to recognize the value of promoting tourism at home.⁶ Up until the day Michela posted her newspaper announcement, Genoa's tour guides had catered exclusively to cruise passengers in transit to other cities. They would pick them up at the airport or the port and then they would show them the Fascist architecture of Piazza della Vittoria, a view of Genoa's rooftops from Castelletto, and the exterior of the San Lorenzo cathedral. Since Genoa was thought to be less attractive than Florence, Venice, or Rome, it was assumed that there was no need for tourists to step out of the bus. As a 60 year old guide reminisced,

Back in the 1970s, there were only about six guides in Genoa. None of them had a college degree. A middle or at most a high school diploma was sufficient to memorize those two or three pieces of information for those few tourists who would disembark in Genoa for a quick tour. Back then, the city had little to offer.

As of 2015, however, Genoa has approximately 100 active licensed walking tour guides. The majority of them are university graduates, and several of them—especially among the older guides--started by chance as they grasped at an income-generating opportunity while waiting for stable employment. As members of a rising *sui generis* creative class, Michela and the other guides had to exercise their inventiveness in order to establish a new market. They conjured a “hidden Genoa” out of its concealment for the enjoyment of national and foreign visitors, but above all for local tourists. In order to do so, they had to both challenge and exploit gendered discourses about safety whereby hiddenness frequently rhymes with danger.

Hidden danger, hiding danger

A common representation of Italy's port cities is that they are crime havens, and Genoa is no exception. In the past, a transient population of masculine sailors, widespread

poverty, and the presence of illegal trafficking partly facilitated by Genoa's convoluted *vicoli* (alleys) all fed into the image of Genoa's centro storico as a dangerous place that one should avoid—especially women (Leone 2010). Back in the 1950s and 1960s, a stroll through a centro storico that still bore the ravages of World War II used to be regarded as a “descent to the *inferi* (netherworld)” (Fusero et al. 1991: 86). As the port began to decline in the 1970s, the prostitutes and smugglers of the centro storico were joined by a sizable population of drug dealers and heroin addicts. The latter, in particular, frightened many Genoese due to their habit of aggressively panhandling—and occasionally robbing—people in the streets. Starting in the early 1990s, a partial gentrification rearranged the map of crime in this neighborhood; if safety improved in some areas, all prostitution, drug-dealing, and smuggling shifted to others. Nowadays, the area surrounding Piazza delle Erbe comes to life every night with revelers attracted by bars and restaurants. Drug dealers haunt the nearby vicoli, and prostitutes have predominantly moved to the Maddalena area, a formerly thriving community of small businesses that is now regarded as a mafia haven.

Despite the centro storico's transformation, a perception of danger still lingers in the public's mind. This shady halo is compounded by this neighborhood's contribution to Genoa's reputation as Italian capital of purse-snatchings (*scippi*),⁷ and especially by gendered narratives of crime whereby male *scippatori* snatch women's purses and jewelry and then disappear in the labyrinthine vicoli of the centro storico. Traveling by word of mouth, such stories create patterns of individual and collective avoidance in which the centro storico is marked as especially dangerous for women. Until the early 1990s, women from the rest of the city rarely ventured into this neighborhood. Today, some Genoese women continue to feel ambivalent about visiting the historic center. According to Gabriella, a guide in her 40s,

There are still women who are afraid of going to the centro storico. I went out for dinner with a group of friends a month ago, and there were women who said they would never go to the centro storico because it is dangerous. I looked at them and

thought “poor things” (*poverine*). It’s all a question of culture. If you are not well-educated you have no idea of what is there in the centro storico. Obviously, if you have never taken an art history class in your entire life, you don’t go to the centro storico.

Gabriella is one of the many Genoese women who earned college degrees in the humanities in the early 1990s and then turned to tourism to make a living. However, in order to mine Genoa’s hidden heritage, she and other walking tour guides had not only to adjust their gendered avoidance patterns and their perceptions of the neighborhood, but they also had to devise ways to safely access the centro storico. In Italian society, performances of middle-class femininity are regulated by dress codes and behavioral norms meant to produce a *bella figura* (positive impression, see Del Negro 2004 and Guano 2007). Exploring Genoa’s centro storico, however, requires keeping a low profile; hence, accessories signifying femininity and class are best left at home. As one tour guide explains,

When I am designing a new tour, I put on flat shoes, take off all jewelry, leave my purse home, and go for a walk in the centro storico to look at places and create an itinerary. Nothing has ever happened to me. It’s all a matter of what you wear and how you carry yourself. Obviously if you look like you know where you are going and you know what you are doing nothing really happens to you.

In their role as urban explorers, Genoa’s walking tour guides acknowledge the existence of an embodied discourse of sex and danger (Mehta and Bondi 1999) whereby displaying proper middle-class femininity exposes them not just to unwanted sexual attention, but also to robberies. By removing highly visible accoutrements of middle-class femininity, the guides become androgynous flâneurs who move through the neighborhood like “viewpoints in flux” (Keith and Pile 1993: 33). On one hand, downplaying their classed femininity empowers women guides to stroll through places where few others would dare to go. On the other hand, their gender still allows them to elude the close attention that men receive from sex workers and drug dealers. As Giovanna puts it, “Prostitutes harass men, but if you are a woman they leave you alone. And drug dealers don’t give a dime about a somewhat drab-looking woman staring at medieval friezes and taking notes,” especially if

she looks self-possessed, “like someone who has her bearings.” Walking tour guides’ strategic manipulation of visibility and gender categories adds to their ability to build their professional authority. Not only do they become street-wise enough to protect their clients from the antics of the occasional pickpocket, but they also have the competence required to decry clichés about danger in the centro storico.

Few things annoy walking tour guides more than exaggerated claims about crime in Genoa’s historic center. Tour guides especially dislike hearing these comments when they are leading a group through the neighborhood. For example, as Michela put it,

Once I was walking a group and two young men approach us. They show us their police badges, and they say “be careful, because they reported a lot of scippi and pickpockets in this area.” I got really upset. I mean, how dare you? Don’t you see I am walking a group of visitors? We [guides] are going out of our way to convey a positive image of the city, and you come and tell us these things? Sure, every now and then some kids will pickpocket a Japanese tourist, but that’s not an everyday occurrence.

Representing the Japanese tourist as an alien whose lack of familiarity casts him as a preferred victim, Michela reiterates her expert belonging in the centro storico: a belonging that combines topographical knowledge, cultural capital, and a performative confidence that allows her to navigate an unsafe terrain either alone or in the company of vulnerable visitors in need for protection. “Just be aware of your surroundings” is her customary suggestion—an encouragement that both reassures visitors and reinforces her authority. On a different level, the same social fear guides shed whenever they take a field trip to the centro storico protects their findings from a public gaze that may make them *too* well known and accessible. For excessive accessibility not just of local landmarks, but also of the tales that surround them may posit a challenge for the guides, too. Even though they are adept at creatively exploiting the dangerous aura that goes along with Genoa’s hiddenness, guides often find themselves vying for legitimacy in fields that are traditionally claimed by others.

Betwixt and between

“How many of you are from Genoa?” asks Maria Teresa, a diminutive but energetic woman in her late 20s. Almost all of the about 30 people in the group raise their hands. A couple from Turin cracks a joke about being a minority, and everybody looks at them and chuckles. Maria Teresa is leading us on a tour of the main sites in the history of a local aristocratic family. The first site is a 16th century church dedicated to a saint that was born into the family in the 15th century. Although the church is located in downtown Genoa, it is off the main sightseeing paths. As Maria Teresa begins expounding on a painting, an elderly woman passing by shouts to her, “You better do a good job here because these are all Genoese with a very good handle on history!” One of the tourists in the group winks to his friend; Maria Teresa blushes for a moment, but she immediately regains her poise and continues with her explanations. Talking with me after the tour, Maria Teresa conceded that dealing with local tourists is more challenging than guiding tourists from other cities:

Generally speaking most Genoese know more about their city than the average tourist from elsewhere. They ask a lot more questions, and you occasionally also find the smartass who seeks to contradict you to show off his knowledge. You have to prepare a lot more when you take locals on a walking tour, but you also need to be ready to gently contain [overbearing individuals] because you are still the one who is leading the tour after all.

If, to use Pierre Bourdieu’s (1993) terminology, local history is a “field,” it is a contested one where different actors compete to establish domination. While a review of how historical knowledge relates to authority (see Stewart 2003) is beyond the scope of this paper, it bears mentioning that the study of local history is particularly popular in Italy--not just among academics, but also and above all among amateur historians. Working solo or as part of a cultural association, the latter conduct archival research, organize small symposia, and publish their own books.⁹ This field is predominantly masculine: a gendering that may

negatively impact the legitimacy of women walking tour guides. In the face of such potential challenges to their authority, women tour guides bolster their professional identities by drawing on other talents such as a “natural” proclivity to interpersonal relations. As Doretta, a guide in her 60s, put it,

[The guide is] the hostess who knows how to deal with guests; [she] needs to be flexible and to be able to relate to all sorts of people; you have to intuit what to say and what not to say. For example, for each Italian group [from each region of the country] there are things that are appropriate to say, and things that are not appropriate... Men, instead, just stand there and pontificate, regardless of who stands in front of them. They may know everything about every single building, but they are unable to convey it.

The value of the guides’ alleged predisposition to emotional labor (Hochschild 1983) is compounded by additional supposedly feminine qualities such as the ease with which women are said to learn and speak foreign languages. The passion for art history, too, is often interpreted as an extension of women’s taste in fashion and decorating. At the same time, however, guides need to master masculine skills such as a knack for fearless urban explorations as well as assertiveness. Take for example Ginevra, a petite 30 year old who is capable of projecting a remarkably stentorian voice for hours in a row without ever tiring, and who during her tours likes to joke: “I can speak like this all day long for the whole week, and nobody can ever shut me up.” Ginevra’s confidence and her swagger contribute to bolstering her authority as a walking tour guide even in the face of the most difficult publics.

Genoa’s guides are also transgressing academic boundaries. The majority of guides have advanced degrees (in some cases, even aborted academic ambitions), and their research leads them to spend long hours in libraries as well as bookstores, attending conferences and public lectures, and keeping abreast of the most recent developments in local history and archaeology. Not to mention that some of them, like Marisa, even publish their own history books. As “thinkers, intelligent historians, and passionate storytellers of the urban landscape” who straddle the line between scholarship and entertainment (Wynn 2005: 400-402), guides

can earn the attention of even the most authoritative publics. Sabrina, for example, regularly leads a group of local professors on walking tours of the city: “We have been doing these tours for years. [The professors] know me, and they appreciate my work. This recognition is very gratifying for me,” she said, reporting with pride how she has earned the academics’ respect as a skilled researcher. Yet, not all of the local cultural establishment is willing to recognize the guides’ competence. Marisa’s repeat brushes with a local edutainment conglomerate are indicative of the guides’ tenuous legitimacy:

On occasion of Rubens’s exhibition, I had an idea: I organized a dinner with baroque recipes at [a local restaurant]. I pored through ancient cookbooks in the library and then modified the recipes to fit our tastes. I then proposed this to [a famous local edutainment conglomerate]... I would not make any money on the dinner, because I did not feel comfortable asking for a kickback; however, my profit would come from the guided tour. I wrote a nice presentation, which [the edutainment conglomerate] published on the local newspaper; however, even though the text was mine my name did not show anywhere and they claimed this initiative as their own. At the end of the day, they made a handsome profit, but I did not get a penny. I called [the edutainment conglomerate] and they blamed the newspaper. Then [a well-known television show] shot an episode in Genoa, and they were interested in baroque dinners. An acquaintance of mine who works at [the edutainment conglomerate] gave my contact info to the crew. They asked me to attend the dinner and to explain the dishes. I was happy because being on national TV during prime time is good publicity, but when I got to the restaurant I bumped into professor Bidalco who had been my thesis advisor and is a culinary history expert. I smiled at him and asked him, “What are you doing here?” He had been called by the [edutainment conglomerate restaurant] to present my recipes in my place. The TV crew had called a different office which informed them that I was not qualified and nobody knew me, and they needed a famous historian instead. But nobody ever bothered to inform me.

“This is what we are to them: just unskilled labor (*bassa manovalanza*),” was Marisa’s bitter conclusion in the face of how nonchalantly her intellectual property had been handled.

The tension between producing high and popular culture also haunts Alberto, a poet and semiotician with a day job at the local Heritage Management Office and a passion for designing and leading walking tours. Alberto is a former student of Umberto Eco’s, and after earning a graduate degree with a thesis in semiotics, he wanted to continue doing research. However, his family was not wealthy enough to support him while he volunteered his time as

a research and teaching assistant; therefore, he had to find a job. Hence, Alberto accepted a position as a railway employee in Genoa. Years later, he managed to transfer to his current job as a computer technician at the Heritage Management Office. When he moved back to Genoa after his university studies, Alberto went through a full-fledged culture shock. While Umberto Eco's Bologna was a vibrant and stimulating city, the Genoa of the 1980s came across to him like a cultural wasteland. Trying to connect to and foster whatever intellectual life was there in the city, in 1995 he designed and launched the first edition of Genoa's Poetry Festival. For this occasion he wrote and led the first two Poetic Tours (*Percorsi poetici*) of the city. By 2005, he had designed and led a repertoire of nine tours of the centro storico, the uptown neighborhoods, the Staglieno monumental cemetery, the seaside Nervi promenade and park, and the fortresses that surround the city. During these tours he and his partners (whom he recruited among fellow poets, actors, professional walking tour guides, academics, and assorted literary buffs) read poems and excerpts from novels to help visitors gain a new appreciation of the ties between literature and Genoa's cityscape. Given his commitment to helping others see Genoa through the lens of literary culture, Alberto wrote a book where he conceptualizes his tours:

In the Poetic Tours, poetry and fiction authoritatively complement traditional descriptions of art and history, and, not rarely, they include information on the surroundings, both natural and urban. This is not simply a game of citations; instead, it is one of the thousand ways in which one can broach the inexhaustible theme of the relationship between *literature* and *reality*... our tours are a quest for *scrittura toposensibile, toposensitive writing* of any kind, level and form, a quest for the writing of/in/on the "territory" in its broader sense of "inscription," from oral *traces* to elevated poems through the mediation of historical, journalistic writing as well as freer connections. [Nocerino 2013: 13, emphasis in the original]

During his tours Alberto leads his visitors to explore unusual sites, and he has them pause to peruse urban objects that often go unnoticed: a tombstone, a marble bust, a ruin, or even graffiti. Through the rediscovery of these material objects and the evocative power of

his words, Alberto generates an aesthetic experience that involves the senses and the intellect (see also Reed 2002: 138; Richardson 2008: 141). Alberto's goal is to encourage

residents (*cittadini*) and strangers alike [to be] "tourists" in a more conscious and productive sense than usual. For one tries to go beyond the surface of things, beyond the *monuments* as illustrious islands of historical memories and beautiful vestiges, for the sake of 'seeing' places rather than 'sightseeing' in them, to experience them again through the images, the emotions and the ideas that they have variously inspired at different times, and that have become *literature, writing* in the broader sense of the word. [Nocerino 2013: 13, emphasis in the original]

As a superficial "sightseeing" becomes a "seeing" charged with aesthetic potential, everyday life is bracketed out to allow for a focus on alternate experiential dimensions. It prompts a shift in consciousness that, unlike traditional tourism, interrupts ordinariness without the need for a geographic elsewhere (Lengkeek 2001: 178).

Such a feat is made possible by Alberto's background as a semiotician and a poet, his in-depth knowledge of literature, and his flair for the power of language. Yet, Alberto's Poetic Tours are also partly enabled by his position at the Heritage Management Office: a job that, while short of his academic ambitions, still gives him first-hand access to relevant architectural and artistic information about the city. "I had to learn to be pragmatic and make do with what I have" he often comments while reflecting on his personal and professional trajectories. Embodying a kind of neoliberal flexibility that merges one's education and talents with the opportunities and the limitations provided by life circumstances (Freeman 2014; Guano 2006; Richards 2011), Alberto's efforts to design walking tours was a way to reconcile giving up his academic ambitions and returning to Genoa:

On one hand, the tours originate from the fact that I did not know Genoa all that well. I did not know the centro storico, and I did not know the local poets, either, but I had a historical frame for the literature. The tours were a way for me to get to know the city as well as local literary history. But I also felt I had something to express, and the tours are a way to communicate it to people in the hybrid form of a mix between theater and walking tour.

Just like professional walking tour guides, Alberto invests much of his own background, talents, and above all passion into the creation of his Poetic Tours. And, just like professional walking tour guides, he also straddles the line between scholarship and popular culture in his attempt to popularize and disseminate poetry and semiotics by inscribing them into Genoa's cityscape. Despite his desire to ennoble walking tours with an infusion of literary insights, however, Alberto received sharp criticism from fellow intellectuals who did not appreciate the close association between literary culture and tourism. Alberto dismissed this feedback with a shrug of shoulders: "after all, this is what Umberto Eco does by writing fiction... If an intellectual of his caliber can write for broader audiences, why shouldn't I?" he said. Alberto's status as a part timer, however, still distinguishes him from professional walking tour guides. He would not consider quitting a job that he dislikes in order to design and lead walking tours on a full time basis. "I would do this only if I knew it could make me a living," he told me. Unfortunately, earnings from walking tours can barely support an individual, let alone a family, and Alberto considers himself fortunate to have stable employment.

In the Italy of precarious labor (Molé 2011) where flexibility in pursuing often underpaid short-term contract work has become the lay of the land, stable employment is still regarded as desirable. This is especially the case for men, who, even in the face of considerable changes in gender dynamics, are still under pressure to fulfill their traditional role as providers. Genoa's professional walking tour guides, the majority of whom are women, are aware of the gendering of their profession: "this is not the kind of job on which you could raise a family" Giovanna, who has two children, told me. Luckily for her, she concluded, she is married and her husband has stable employment. "Ever wonder why most walking tour guides in cities like Rome and Florence are men, while here in Genoa we are all women?" Antonietta, a woman in her early 40s, quipped during the brief pause she had

between tours. “It’s because in this city there is little money to be made in this profession.” Not all guides have a gainfully employed spouse or partner, though. Hence, several of them alternate tours with gigs, for example as substitute teachers or as contractors in clerical positions. Those who are single, in particular, have to intensify their efforts and creativity to generate a steady income. Among them is Michela, who, aside from designing and leading city and museum tours for her Genoese publics, accompanies foreign tourists through the city and the Riviera, takes groups of Italians to Scandinavian countries, serves as an interpreter, and temps as a study-abroad program administrator at the local university; Marisa, instead, writes books, produces artsy lamp shades to be sold in local stores, and paints trompe l’oeil murals. Indeed, Genoa’s walking tour guides are cultural bricoleurs and bricoleuses (Martin 1998) who creatively combine their formal training with personal talents to establish and hone their competence (see also Freeman 2014). Yet, they do so as freelancers who constantly have to negotiate their legitimacy betwixt and between a variety of fields, and as members of a gendered niche with considerable limitations. In an economy of labor where women even more than men are steered towards flexible forms of work (Guano 2006; Molé 2011), walking tour guides’ professional trajectories differ considerably from those of Richard Florida’s (2012) upwardly mobile yuppies: their efforts are not bound to create prosperity, but rather only a modest livelihood at best. Hence, Genoa’s walking tour guides have to utilize all of their creativity and their cultural capital to generate a steady output of original stories and tours.

The city as a creative canvas

Aesthetically inflected labor dwells in an ambiguous space between high culture and commerce: one where creative inspiration goes hand in hand with the necessity to make ends

meet (Win 2014: 6). Since he earns a living elsewhere, Alberto can afford to have only a few select Poetic Tours in his repertoire and offer them mostly for free. For Genoa's professional walking tour guides, however, the need to have a range of original offerings takes on a more urgent quality. Due to the large numbers of tourists visiting their cities, guides working in well-established tourist destinations like Rome, Florence, or Venice may not experience the same pressure; their Genoese colleagues, however, have to work harder to stimulate and sustain tourist interest. As locals comprise a large share of their publics, the guides face the challenge of presenting Genoa's cityscape in ever-changing ways.

If visibility is key to tourism (Copeland 2010; Poria 2010; Urry 2002; Watson 2010; Watson and Waterton 2010), a shortage of visual cues can still be compensated by narratives spun around markers (MacCannell 1976: 113). In this case, a plaque, a frieze, or a pillar may be sufficient to anchor the guide's stories. In Genoa's centro storico, guides employ various strategies for spinning tales based on elements hidden in a built environment that is hardly legible. One approach is to present the same place from a variety of perspectives. For example, a guide may choose to showcase a centro storico alley for its Roman vestiges, its medieval layout, its 17th century architectural splendor, the devastations of 19th and 20th century wars, or the lives and works of the poets, philosophers and writers who resided there. This is how Viviana explained her strategy:

If you walk through via Canneto, you can walk through it 10 times and still see different things: for example the Roman walls, or the medieval things, or niches, portals, decorations and nymphaeums. There is a Roman settlement and then there are strata all the way through to the 20th century. The cleverness of the guide consists in not saying "here you can see a medieval thing, and over there there is a renaissance or baroque thing," but rather in covering one style and century at a time. This way, visitors come back to listen to other descriptions.

In such cases, the visitor's experience is predominantly shaped by narratives (Malpas 1999; Somers 1994) that, while compensating for the limited legibility of the cityscape, become all the more persuasive due to the diffuse aura of antiquity (Lowenthal 1985: 244) permeating

Genoa's centro storico (see Figure 4). The streets and buildings of the historic center thus become canvasses where the guides' scholarship, expertise, and creativity inscribe different perspectives, evoking a temporal depth that suspends familiarity to allow for the eruption of the unexpected.

At times, tour guides may draw on even more immaterial dimensions of experience. Giovanna, for example, is known for her thematic tours "where you don't see anything at all," as she likes to joke. Her tours hinge on her ability to spin compelling stories around places to which most Genoese pay little to no attention. For example, Giovanna has designed a romantic tour during which she takes visitors to Piazza dell'Amor Perfetto, a small medieval plaza in the centro storico. Here she tells them the story of how 16th century aristocrat Tommasina Spinola pined to death after hearing that her beloved King Louis XII of France had passed. Giovanna then surprises her audiences by revealing that the name of the plaza does not mean "perfect love," as it is usually assumed; instead, the name means "the love that is no more." While leading a different kind of tour, however, Giovanna may choose to showcase tiny Piazza dell'Amor Perfetto as evidence of how the local merchant aristocracy used to hide its wealth, thus neglecting to build the grand plazas that grace other Italian cities. Last but not least, Giovanna may also utilize Piazza dell'Amor Perfetto as part of a tour on the arts and crafts of the centro storico; in this case, she will tell the story of the immigrant who managed to dislodge local drug trafficking by opening a small, though quite popular, kebab eatery in this secluded location. By using the cityscape as a canvas for their creative storytelling practices, walking tour guides valorize different elements of Genoa's composite history and lore. As they do so, they sustain their business by proposing ever-new perspectives on sites that are often taken for granted, thus conjuring a range of emotions, experiences, and even values that cast a different light on the urban everyday.

Hiddenness, creativity, and liminality

In this paper, I have argued that, rather than being a product of corporate city branding choices (Dicks 2004; Hannigan 1998; Harvey 1988, 1989; Ritzer 2010; Zukin 1991, 1995), Genoa's reputation as a "hidden" city is created and managed at a grassroots level by self-employed walking tour guides. A cautious comparison with Florida's (2012) notion of the creative class helps illuminate how, rather than being just passive consumers of culture, Genoa's walking tour guides utilize their cultural capital and skills to transform this city's public image, worlding it (Ong 2011) from the bottom up through their creative storytelling practices. Unlike Florida's "talents," however, guides are not upwardly mobile yuppies. Rather, they are a residual group that emerges out of this city's intellectual under- and unemployed workforce (Arvati 1988). Owing their sustenance to a hiddenness that is both a limitation and a source of opportunities, Genoa's walking tour guides are mostly women who creatively draw on scholarship, popular culture, and personal talents to operate in liminal ways. As they create a professional niche in the shade of urban revitalization, the guides provide emotionally inflected labor; however, they also challenge gendered representations of urban danger; they claim a place for themselves in the traditionally masculine field of urban history, and tread the tenuous line that separates academic knowledge from cultural consumption. Drawing on their inventiveness as well as their understanding of local history and lore, walking tour guides strategically inscribe ever-new stories unto Genoa's densely layered cityscape and its "hidden" landmarks. Yet, even as it is often cast as a source of opportunities waiting to be seized, Genoa's hiddenness is also a limit to the guides' trade. If, over the last twenty years, Genoa's walking tour guides have managed to establish a cottage industry where there used to be none, this city's concealed treasures can still only support a limited volume of business. This is why Alberto never managed to leave his job as a computer technician to single-mindedly invest in his Poetic Tours, and this is why most

women tour guides supplement their income with an assortment of gigs and short-term contracts. Prodded by the need to make a living as well as by the desire to find an outlet for their talents, Genoa's walking tour guides aptly exploit this city's "hidden" potential despite the limitations they encounter.

Endnotes

¹The research for this paper began in 2002 and continued through 2014 as part of a multi-sited project on Genoa's revitalization and its creative middle classes. During that time I spent about four months a year in the field, conducting among others in-depth semi-structured interviews with guides and participating in walking tours.

²http://www.gruppocarige.it/gruppo/html/ita/arte-cultura/la-casana/2007_1/pdf/28_33.pdf, accessed September 28, 2013. For an ethnographic analysis of the dynamics underlying Italy's declining fertility rates, see Krause (2004).

³ Emerging, like other "old" middle classes, as a result of 20th century industrialization (see Heiman, Liechty and Freeman 2014), since the late 1970s Genoa's middling sectors have been dealing with unemployment rates that are consistently higher than the national average (Arvati 1988).

⁴http://www.itinerliguria.it/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=80&Itemid=90&lang=it, accessed June 2013.

⁵ In the 1980s, the prospect of developing a local tourist economy was welcomed as the rise of an "industry without chimneys"-- an industry that, unlike the factories of yore, would supposedly not take a toll on Genoa's environment and the quality of life of its citizens (see Guano n.d.).

⁶ Most of the guides' biographies follow the same pattern. Many completed college degrees in the humanities which entailed studies of local art history. They then took the tourist guide board license exam while scouting for teaching positions; were added to the roster of local licensed guides, and launched their careers when recruited by the municipality or tourist agencies. Many guides initially viewed the work as an expedient source of revenue. Eventually, however, guiding tours turned into a professional identity.

⁷ <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2008/12/30/capitale-degli-scippi-altra-faccia-della.html>, accessed on August 22, 2013.

⁸ <http://www.mentelocale.it/5268-un-1-2-negroni-2-sacchi-1-2/>, accessed on August 22, 2013.

⁹ A similar struggle over historical authority has been observed by Paula Mota Santos (2012) in her ethnography of walking tours in Porto. For another example see Tanya Richardson (2008: 167).

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