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The Mirror of the Dead: Thanatopic Storytelling in an Italian Cemetery

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Summary

As the contemplation of death, thanatopsis is the attempt to come to terms with mortality; in the contemporary world, dark heritage and tourism have become main conduits for this practice. This paper draws on ethnographic research conducted in Genoa's Staglieno monumental cemetery between 2016 and 2019 to examine the events--poetic readings, guided walking tours, and outdoor theater performances--that have become popular against the backdrop of the local tourist industry and its economy of cultural experiences; its goal is to explore the strategies through which the evocative power of storytelling promotes the contemplation of mortality. Drawing on Heidegger (1962), I argue that the narrations shared during these events grant the dead a temporary Dasein: a "being there" that interrupts the silence of death, even though only for a moment. I conclude that the poets, the volunteers, and the theater troupes active in Staglieno use their storytelling practices as a narrative mirror through which they merge the spaces of life with those of death, thus providing their

audiences with the opportunity to reflect upon their common humanity and their shared mortality.

Thanatopsis; Dark Heritage & Tourism; Narrative; Cemeteries; Italy

Emanuela Guano

The Mirror of the Dead: Thanatopic Storytelling in an Italian Cemetery

“I wed Count Navigato, native of Genoa./We went to Rome. He poisoned me, I think./
Now in the Campo Santo overlooking/The sea where young Columbus dreamed new
worlds,/See what they chiseled: “*Contessa Navigato/Implora eterna quiete* [implores eternal rest].”
Standing in the center of Genoa’s Staglieno monumental cemetery, an actress is impersonating
Dora Williams, a character from Edgar Lee Master’s *Spoon River Anthology* (2007[1915]).¹ She is
performing as part of an event that, entitled *Stories and Poems at Sunset*, is offered free of charge
to Genoa’s publics. While tourism to Staglieno is still quite limited, since the early 2000s events
such as this have become increasingly frequent; addressing local audiences, they are staged by
individuals and small groups who tell stories about the dead against the backdrop of this
cemetery’s sumptuous statuary and its family chapels.² Be they wealthy or poor, since the mid-
1800s the majority of Genoa’s residents have been buried in Staglieno, and a stroll through its
alleys is tantamount to a walk through this city’s past. This is why Staglieno is locally known
as the “mirror of Genoa’s history.”³

The idea of this cemetery as Genoa’s looking glass dates back to Staglieno’s very
inception. In the 19th century, it was customary for Europe’s large graveyards to engage in a
“binary correspondence” with the cities they served (Malone 2017, 82). If Staglieno’s silhouette

resembles the shape of the Genoa of the 1800s,⁴ it is because its architects Carlo Barabino and Giovanni Battista Resasco planned it as the city of the dead—or, as Foucault (1986, 6) put it, the “other city, where each family possesses its dark resting place.” In those years, the competition between the local aristocracy and this city’s rising bourgeoisie comprised of professionals, entrepreneurs, and administrators led to a proliferation of monumental tombs and marble statuary that, abiding by the tenets of bourgeois realism, engaged in the secularized celebration of the values and the virtues of the deceased (Malone 2017; Sborgi 1996). [Fig. 1] This monumentalization process turned the cemetery into a Grand Tour destination and a site where the local oligarchy would practice seeing and being seen against the backdrop of their sumptuous family graves (Sborgi 1996; Malone 2017).⁵

Contemporary Genoese do not go to Staglieno to see and be seen; instead, their purpose in visiting this cemetery is usually to pay respect at the graves of their loved ones. In the 1990s, however, Genoa began establishing its reputation as a city of culture to be enjoyed not only by visitors from other parts of Italy and the world, but also and just as importantly by residents (Guano 2017). This process entailed, among others, the creation of local heritage by assembling materialities and stories into “a mirror to the present” (Harrison 2013, 4). It is to behold this mirror that nowadays groups of residents occasionally walk through Staglieno’s alleys, listening to stories about their fellow Genoese of the past: the artists, the aristocrats, the patriots, the entrepreneurs, and the ordinary folks who once lived in Genoa and now rest in its “other city.”⁶ At times, the events commemorating Staglieno’s dead are staged by poets who

move from grave to grave, reading out loud excerpts from poems and novels that celebrate this cemetery. A different kind of tours is led by volunteers who rescue tombs from the weeds and life stories from oblivion to share them with their audiences. Theater troupes, instead, give the dead a semblance and a voice through which they can address the living. Offered free of charge, events such as these usually intensify in late spring, when the weather is pleasant.⁷ Advertised in Genoa's newspaper and in local social media circles, they are attended by those Genoese who are willing to trade their wariness of death for the promise of a culturally enriching afternoon.

Yet this paper does not focus on the visitors, but rather on the individuals who organize and facilitate these events. In my previous work, I showed how, since the 1990s, educated members of Genoa's middle classes have created niches of self-employment in this city's rising cultural tourist industry. As habitual consumers of urban heritage, walking tour guides, event organizers, artisans, and antique sellers rely on their cultural capital, interests, and talents to help turn Genoa into an object of aesthetic consumption for residents and tourists alike (Guano 2017). This paper explores how, at times, the individuals whose practices contribute to shaping cultural tourism are not motivated by the need to earn a living but rather by personal interests such as their love for art and the thrill of discovery. Drawing on 12 months of ethnographic research conducted between 2016 and 2019,⁸ in what follows I explore how the poets, theater troupes, and volunteers active in Staglieno seek to facilitate the contemplation of mortality through the evocative power of storytelling. The tales they share, I suggest, strive to grant the

dead a temporary Dasein: a “being there” (Heidegger 1962) that interrupts their silence, even though only for a moment. I conclude that Staglieno’s event organizers use their storytelling practices to reinscribe this cemetery’s role as a mirror not just to the city, but also to audiences willing to engage the mystery of death.

Sharing Stories on the Threshold of Death

Known as thanatopsis, in Europe the contemplation of mortality through the death of others goes back at least to the Middle Ages. In the face of the rising medicalization of the dying process, in the 1800s Romantic travelers drew on art and literature to intensify their thanatoptic experiences (Seaton 1996, 236; Stone 2011, 23). A century later, however, death became hidden from public sight (Ariès 1991; Ruin 2019; Stone 2012). This is when, known as dark tourism or thanatourism, travel to burial and disaster sites turned into a main venue of thanatopsis, thus allowing people to continue to entertain the notion of death in the face of its sequestration (Mellor and Shilling 1993; Seaton and Lennon 2012; Sharpley and Stone 2009; Stone 2011; 2012; Walter 2009; Winter 2012). Staglieno underwent a similar trajectory: after becoming an object of proactive avoidance at the hands of death-wary 20th century publics, in the early 2000s it began to resume its role as a thanatoptic destination.⁹

Conjuring impressions of lives that are no more and memories that have given way to historical reconstructions, since the onset of modernity cemeteries have often become *lieux de mémoire* from where to imagine the past (Nora 1989). As phantom spaces potentially hosting

a fluid transmission of affect (Navaro-Yashin 2012), graveyards are also heterotopias where to experience the end of time (Foucault 1986). Furthermore, as locations of the ultimate rite of passage (Van Gennep 1960) and the physical and symbolic threshold between the world of the living and that of the dead, cemeteries are quintessential *limen* spaces separating experiential realms (Spiegel 2011, 17). For tourists who are leaving their everyday in the pursuit of that sacred state where “marvelous things” happen (Graburn 1989, 20), a visit to a cemetery can potentially induce a liminoid experience as an interstitial state that interrupts normalcy while establishing a sense of intimacy and bonding (Bowman and Pezzullo 2010, 194).¹⁰ In contemporary Staglieno, I suggest, this process is promoted through the “ephemeral” but also “most direct and forceful” power of the spoken word (Richardson 2001, 266): a power that uses narrations to establish a temporary communication channel between the living and the dead, giving the latter one more chance to be heard and remembered.¹¹

Narrations are the ultimate tool for the description of lived time (Bruner 2004): as they structure one’s experience of oneself and others (Schank and Abelson 1995), they organize and conceptualize life as a whole (Jackson 2007; Somers 1994). The power of narration is such that, as we tell our stories, we *become* them (Bruner 1986, 694). “We dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative,” wrote Barbara Hardy (1968, 5), concluding that “in order really to live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future” (*ibid.*). The creation of the “complex mental

edifice” one calls a “self” requires an act of remembering (Bruner 1994, 41); yet memory, too, emerges through narration (Ricoeur 2016; 1984). Ultimately, situating oneself in the present means weaving together in narrative form feelings and emotions attributed to the past (Maschio 1995, 102). If this process is foundational to imagining one’s life, it is just as essential to the conceptualization and the experience of others. This is all the more true when these others are, in fact, dead, and their Dasein can only be temporarily revived through the tales the living share about them, thus granting them a “thereness” that briefly transcends time (Verdery 1999, 28). In what follows, I approach Staglieno’s narrative mirror as a web of stories spun by those who are looking to examine their shared humanity and their mortality: poets, in the first place.

The Poet’s Mirror

Starting in the early 1990s, Genoa underwent a revitalization process that contributed to transforming it into a destination of cultural tourism. As street performances, festivals, and walking tours became common occurrences, the city’s own residents began to develop a new disposition towards the cultural consumption of familiar urban sites (Guano 2017); just as importantly, some of them became purveyors of cultural services that contributed to reinforcing Genoa’s halo as a city of culture. It is against this backdrop that, in 1995, Genoese poet Alberto Nocerino decided to help infuse new life into his city’s sluggish literary scene. Since then, Alberto has been designing, leading, and occasionally publishing his *Poetic Tours*:

guided walks through different locations of the city during which he recites poems (Guano 2017, 148). One of his favorite tours takes place in the Staglieno cemetery and is entitled *Genius Loci*: the presiding spirit of the place. During this tour, Alberto reads descriptions of Staglieno he found in 19th and 20th century poems and novels. Some of these works are by Genoese authors who are buried in this cemetery; others, instead, are by writers who visited it during their lifetime. A librarian by trade, Alberto can afford to offer his poetic tours free of charge, thus contributing to the dissemination of poetry as well as the experience of Staglieno itself, whose beauty he regards as a source of inspiration. While most Genoese prefer to avoid visits to Staglieno that are not strictly necessary, Alberto began roaming its alleys early in life: “my grandfather died when my mother was still pregnant and I began visiting Staglieno before I was even born... Thanks to this early initiation, this cemetery would always make an impression on me; however, it never frightened me the way it scares others,” he told me. Alberto’s connection to the cemetery is deeply personal—“this is where much of my family is buried and this is where I’ll end up, too,” he added. Yet during his tours of Staglieno he prefers to transcend the personal; instead of talking about his deceased loved ones, he uses the power of literature to evoke the intimate and yet shareable quality of the experiences that this cemetery inspires.

On a late spring morning, Alberto had his visitors gather by Staglieno’s main entrance, a place yielding an impressive view of this necropolis. “This is the city of the dead,” he told us with a broad gesture as he invited us to take in the sight. He then read an excerpt from Ugo

Foscolo's *Sepulchers*: "To great deeds/do the urns of the strong inspire one's soul" (1994[1807], 26). Memorized by rote by students all over Italy, these verses were meant to jog our memory; they also set the tone for the rest of the tour and established shared ground for the process of allowing the dead to inspire the living. What followed was a pilgrimage through various locations of the cemetery. Some of them had been chosen because of the illustrious burials they host; others, instead, provided an appealing background for Alberto's poetic readings.

While walking through a vaulted alley punctuated with marble statues, Alberto informed us that, "in the 19th century, Genoa was marginally touched by the Grand Tour; Staglieno was already a place travelers would visit. It was inaugurated in 1851, and people regarded it as an outdoor museum." He then proceeded to tell us about Mark Twain: "During his trip to Europe, Twain visited Staglieno and was impressed by it; while writing his *Innocents Abroad*, he described this cemetery's statuary as 'more lovely than the damaged and dingy statuary... in the galleries of Paris'" (Twain, 2010[1869], 117). While stoking our pride as residents of a city whose heritage had only been recently recognized by international tourism, Alberto encouraged us to imagine how Twain and other writers would wander through Staglieno's alleys; he hinted at a tourist gaze that was similar to our own in its quest for meaningful aesthetic experiences. Soon thereafter we walked to the grave of 19th century poet Giovan Battista Vigo, whose tribute to Staglieno Alberto read out loud: "And Genoa from your funereal cloister/To thy descendants shall show as a fulgent example/The glory and splendor of our century" (Vigo 1882, 202).

Fully aligned with the 19th century celebration of funerary monuments with which Alberto had started this tour, these words, too, echoed our sentiments as contemporary visitors approaching this cemetery, in Alberto's words, as an "outdoor museum."

Throughout this tour, Alberto's audience was both quiet and pensive; at times some of us would nod in appreciation of an unfamiliar sight or a poetic association. A few among us were poets and writers; of those who were not, several were literary connoisseurs who had already attended other poetic tours led by him. Alberto knew what his audience expected, and had more in store for us. Standing in a green area dotted with exquisite family chapels, he went on to recite a poem by Camillo Sbarbaro: "Sometimes at night even Staglieno's funereal constellation becomes lit/It is a sky mirrored in a tub, an upside-down armament" (Sbarbaro 1990[1920], 331). He then explained that, "while still alive, Sbarbaro could see the Staglieno cemetery from the windows of his home, and the view of this 'funereal constellation' was a daily reminder of mortality." To an all-Genoese audience, Sbarbaro's verses evoked the familiar image of the small lights floating against the dark background of the cemetery after dusk. As a reflection of our own gaze on Staglieno, Alberto used Sbarbaro's words to elicit impressions about eternity, implicitly suggesting that our time, too, would eventually come to an end. Poem after poem, story after story, his journey through the "other city" provided Alberto's audience with glimpses into how the literati of the past had perceived and described the cemetery, sensing its materialities and making sense of them.¹² It also reminded us that, just like writers of the past, we roamed the cemetery mulling over our shared mortality. Held

between the dead and the living—between the writers of the past and Alberto’s contemporary audience—this poetic mirror was a memento not just of literature’s timeless role in inspiring deeper musings, but also of Staglieno as the site where time comes to an end.

The Relatable Dead

If cemeteries enshrine the notion of the end of time (Foucault 1986, 6), they are also expected to consign the deceased to eternity (Verdery 1999, 5). It is with the No-longer-Dasein of the dead (Heidegger 1962, 238) that monumental cemeteries like Staglieno compete, challenging it with the sensory impact of their statuary and architecture. The attempt to establish remembrance in the face of oblivion is also one of the goals of the Teatro dell’Ortica (Nettle’s Theater):¹³ a “social theater” troupe whose self-declared purpose is to turn its “civil commitment” into shows to be performed in unusual venues such as Genoa’s prison or its medieval aqueduct.¹⁴ The Nettle’s director is Mauro Pirovano: a soft-spoken man in his 60s who is both a professional actor of national renown and a longtime Staglieno neighborhood resident. Mauro makes no mystery of his personal attachment to this postindustrial outskirts, a low-income neighborhood which he often uses as a stage for his plays;¹⁵ his goal is to prove that it is possible, in his own words, to “practice high culture [*fare cultura*] in a working-class neighborhood rather than just in Genoa’s [bourgeois] downtown.”¹⁶ The cemetery, in particular, keeps him enthralled with its evocative aura: “Staglieno is where you realize that all you are is really earth to earth, ashes to ashes, and dust to dust,” he told me. This is why this

site is a favorite setting for some of his plays, which, consistent with his theater's progressive agenda, he offers free of charge. Year after year, under Mauro's direction, the members of his troupe lend their semblances and their voices to Staglieno's dead. In June 2018, Mauro chose the cemetery as the setting for a play entitled *The Last City (L'ultima città)*;¹⁷ attended by an audience of about 90 people, this event featured monologues by actresses and actors impersonating some of the well-known individuals buried in this cemetery. Dressed in white, they stood by their tombstones, thus implicitly reminding their audiences of the role of funerary statues in consigning the dead to eternity (Verdery 1999, 5). Mauro, instead, wore a black tailcoat as he led his audience from grave to grave; in his capacity as the narrator, he spoke to us from that timeless space that spans both death and life.

One of their characters was Oscar Wilde's wife Constance Mary Lloyd. Tired of her husband's dalliances with young men, Constance ended up leaving him; she died in Genoa in 1898. In order to better convey Constance's inner turmoil, Mauro had two actresses perform her; wearing white, one would reminisce about the romantic and artistic underpinnings of her relationship with Oscar Wilde. "Ours was a poetic marriage, in all senses of the word... we were... in love with the poetry one would see in the heart of the other... Who else could have been my partner?" she said, still enthralled by her beloved. Dressed in black, the other Constance grieved the betrayals she suffered at her husband's hands; she also bemoaned how he had humiliated and overshadowed her throughout their marriage:

No matter how much I wrote and did in my life, I was always again only a background to his life... At the end of our honeymoon he already had some doubts and thought that, by getting married, he had made a mistake. During my first pregnancy, when I knew I wasn't that attractive anymore, he told me that the thought of kissing a woman with morning sickness made him shiver.

Taking turns in reminiscing, the two Constances gave their audiences the opportunity to witness the contradictions intrinsic not just to an individual's emotional life but also to the process of assembling a life story. By challenging the succinct coherence that is usually expected of epitaphs, the Nettle's Constances' feelings were as complex as those of ordinary persons (Rorty 1976, 305)—or anyone in their audience, for that sake. In baring their souls, the two Constances openly contradicted each other. In this way, they contributed to shedding a relatable light on the often-irreconcilable complexities of one's life: a life that, in the modern world, can only be narrated as an epistemological exploration fraught with nuances (Bruner 2004, 671).

Yet Mauro's favorite Staglieno dead—one he has his troupe perform event after event—is Caterina Campodonico. A 19th century plebeian woman who made a living by peddling *canestrelli* breads and hazelnuts in Genoa's streets, Caterina is possibly the most popular individual buried in this cemetery, and a century and a half after her death visitors still leave flowers and candles on her tomb. An independent woman impersonated by an actress with large green eyes and a white shawl, in Mauro's play Caterina described her own life as a "a

journey” in which, by selling enough of her hazelnuts, she was finally able to leave her husband. “Caterina bought off her freedom from an abusive husband; the alcohol he purchased with that money led to his early demise. Money well spent!” Mauro commented, triggering laughter and a round of applause from his audience. “Rest assured,” the actress impersonating Caterina interjected, “that back then, back in the 1800s, it was not a good idea for a woman to travel alone, because a woman traveling by herself would not be regarded as independent but rather as a tramp. Even my own relatives had some doubts about me.” [Fig. 2] In a 21st century Italy where the awareness about violence against women and *femminicidio* had become pressing, these comments came across as surprisingly timely, thus making Caterina all the more relatable in the eyes of her audience.¹⁸

Caterina became famous by commissioning a funerary statue that was installed in one of Staglieno’s vaulted alleys. The reason behind Caterina’s decision was profoundly human, if not downright amusing: as Mauro is fond of telling his audiences, “after hearing her heirs quarrel over their inheritance at what they thought was her death bed, Caterina decided to spend all of her savings on a statue by renowned sculptor Lorenzo Orengo.” Crafted in 19th century bourgeois realist style, Caterina’s monument portrays an elderly woman who, donning an embroidered apron and a fringed shawl, clutches a bundle of strung hazelnuts and donuts. These were the tools of her trade, which her monument displays with the same pride as all the merchants and captains buried around her tomb show off theirs. Caterina broke new ground in different ways: not only did she challenge class norms that would have had her

buried under a plain marble slab, but she also became the only 19th century woman in Staglieno to be identified through her own profession rather than her familial piety and class standing--a feat that made her all the more relevant to her contemporary publics.

At the end of the play, the performers gathered at the top of Staglieno's central staircase. "We all have to die," blared a boombox. As the audience watched them from the bottom, they walked down deliberately, one step at a time, pausing to stare back at the viewers. Feigning surprise, they pointed at the onlookers. "We can see you," they said. After reaching the bottom of the staircase, they took one last look at their audience and concluded: "we are you and you are us," thus bridging, at least for a moment, the distance between the dead and the living. Extraordinary though they were, the stories they shared were also quite relevant to their audiences. In fact, they clearly illustrated the kind of "trouble" that not only "drives the drama" (Bruner 1986, 670) but is also required of a persuasive life narration (Bruner 2004, 697). The power of the stories Mauro chose to tell is their potential for highlighting the "deep structure" intrinsic to "life" (Bruner 2004, 699): one that is likely to resonate with his publics' own experiences. As modern individuals with complicated lives that are at times rewarding and at times punishing, his protagonists encountered challenges: occasionally they overcame them; just as often, however, they were overwhelmed. Through their performances, the players impersonating Constance Lloyd's two souls, Caterina Orenco as well as other individuals buried in Staglieno produced a dramatic re-enchantment of the cemetery. The Nettle troupe allowed the dead to communicate with the living, performing

them as simultaneously present and absent--absent from their publics' lives, yet, at least for a time, still capable of addressing them directly.¹⁹ Just as importantly, their narrations held a mirror to the living, showing them the "other side" of themselves (Richardson 2001, 263): relatable for the complexity of their lives and identical in their destiny.

The Thrill of Discovery

In spite of their role in consigning the dead to eternity, even the materialities of which cemeteries are comprised are hardly immune from the toll of time: the tombstones, the statues, and the chapels that are meant to represent immutability undergo a process of decay, too. In fact, Staglieno's statuary and its architectural structures are increasingly yielding to the onslaught of the elements and the overall neglect that ensues from demographic changes and shifting priorities.²⁰ The contrast between the cemetery's heterotopic function as a purveyor of eternity and its own state of decline can be jarring. Yet ruins are also known to accommodate creative place-making processes (Edensor 2005); at a time when the protection of heritage has become hegemonic (Harrison 2013) and active citizens may feel the moral urge to alleviate governmental shortcomings (Muehlebach 2012), Staglieno provides opportunities for meaningful volunteer work—the kind of labor that, in a neoliberal economy, is compensated with immaterial, and often affective rewards (Muehlebach 2012).

In the late 1990s, Staglieno neighborhood resident Eugenio Bolleri was serving as an arrondissement councilor. In this capacity, he took an interest in the monumental cemetery's challenges: the institutional neglect; the thefts, and the abuses at the hands of unskilled stonemasons who frequently damage the artwork. Known for his habit of butting heads with administrators, Eugenio was never afraid of denouncing the disarray forced upon the cemetery. The turning point that irrevocably devoted him to the cause of protecting Staglieno's heritage came in 2000, when the Cremation Society purchased a 17th century villa inside the cemetery's perimeter. As the society prepared to move to the new location, Eugenio requested permission to inspect the villa. Little did he know that, after cutting the locks in the company of a custodian, he would be in for a surprise. "*Risorgimento*²¹ memorabilia such as documents, flags, and books were scattered all over exquisite 19th century furnishings," he told me with obvious excitement. On the second floor, Eugenio found thousands of funerary monument blueprints signed by famous 19th century sculptors: a "patrimony worth two billion lire!", he exclaimed. Yet things were to get even more interesting:

The custodian told me "it's all trash, why bother." However, I called the *soprintendente* [state heritage manager] to tell her what I had found, and she told me "it's not possible... If you make me go there for nothing I promise I'll make you pay." She arrives at 11:15am, we ask the custodian to open the door to the villa and he gets angry and replies "what do you want, who is this woman anyway?" She replies: "I am the

state, if you don't do as I say I will call the *carabinieri* [army police]" [Eugenio giggles].

When she saw what was inside the villa, she was shocked.

Thanks to Eugenio's intervention, Staglieno's 19th century treasure was finally recovered and displayed in the local Risorgimento museum for the citizenry to admire.

Eugenio's tale—one he enjoys sharing with the gusto of an adept storyteller—places him right at the center of a plot involving uninformed administrators; incompetent public sector employees; and heritage as a valuable public possession. Eugenio weaves each of these elements into a compelling narrative: precious historical items are lost to the general public and may end up being misplaced or even destroyed; the active citizen discovers them; the inept custodian is put in his place; reluctant administrators are forced to live up to their responsibilities; and the heirloom pieces are recovered and displayed for the edification of the citizenry.²² Eugenio's *Ur*-tale of discovery also lends itself to an ulterior reading: one where, rather than being mediated by institutions, the rapport between individuals and heritage becomes part of an economy of experiences to be drawn directly from the city and its spaces— one where engaged citizens obtain their rewards from an exciting discovery first, and from sharing a captivating narration later. Most importantly, once turned into a compelling story, Eugenio's first Staglieno experience began casting the cemetery as a repository of hidden treasures in the form of materialities to be revealed and stories to be investigated.

Twenty years later, Eugenio has become the driving force of a group of volunteers whose purpose is to experience the thrill of discovery as they salvage Staglieno's heritage from the weeds infesting the cemetery. Emanuela Mantero, a surgical room nurse in her mid-50s and the association's first member, met him in 2013. Charmed by Staglieno's beauty, she decided to help. Eugenio gave her loppers and she cleaned up a tomb she had chosen at random. "The grave turned out to belong to a 19th century painter who had been a portraitist for the Brignole Sale de Ferrari family, the very same aristocratic family that had founded the hospital where I work!", Emanuela told me. Such a serendipity intrigued her, and she kept going back for more explorations. On one of her subsequent visits, she also brought along a friend; later on one more woman joined them, and, little by little, the group grew into an association. A heterogenous crowd comprised of fast-food workers, art history teachers, retired physicians, software engineers, and clerical and social workers whose ages range from 40 to 75, the Per Staglieno volunteers are, indeed, driven by the rewards of a righteous citizenship vis-à-vis a lacking state—more specifically, a thankless bureaucracy that is unwilling to support their labor.²³ However, what keeps them going back is the gratification of making interesting discoveries. Honed by the experience economy dominating the contemporary leisure industry (Pine and Gilmore 2011; Sundbo and Darmer 2008), the curiosity that keeps the Per Staglieno volunteers returning to the cemetery month after month is the quasi-archaeological excitement of finding what had been previously hidden from public sight (Holtorf 2005). This thrill is what prompts them to scour through the vegetation

enveloping exquisite funerary artwork, thus bringing back to light not just the tombstones, but also the stories of those who are buried underneath.

The Story Hunters' Mirror

Every fourth Saturday of the month, Eugenio stands at Staglieno's side gate to coordinate the operations as association members brandish the loppers, the chainsaws, and the heavy gloves they will need to tug at the weeds infesting the cemetery. The task is daunting: in winter, gusty winds blow through its alleys; in summer, the heat is unbearable and tiger mosquitos bore through clothes. The volunteers' enthusiasm, however, keeps them going [Fig. 3]. Covered in specks of wood and leaves, at lunch time they collect their cuttings and spread a tablecloth on a tombstone. Feasting on focaccia and white wine, they share what they regard as their real bounty—that is, the stories of the dead they researched in previous weeks. After lunch, they take pictures of their work and note down whatever information they find: dates, names, epitaphs. In the following weeks, they will launch an investigation into these past lives by running Internet searches and consulting history books and old newspapers. Their go-to source is Ferdinando Resasco's *La Necropoli di Staglieno* (2011): a collection of anecdotes about Staglieno's dead originally published in 1892. All of the Per Staglieno members own a copy of this volume; to them, this is not just a useful resource, but also a template for the kind of stories about the dead they look for—narrations that are both exciting and unknown to the general public. With a modicum of luck, real gems emerge: interesting lives that the volunteers

share with their audiences during their walking tours of the cemetery, which they conduct a few times a year.

Due to her pleasant demeanor and her excellent communication skills, Emanuela also plays the role of the association walking tour guide. In June 2019, for example, Emanuela led a group of about 10 visitors on a tour of the cemetery. Consistent with the association's philosophy that what matters is not the discussion of funerary art styles but rather the sharing of long-forgotten stories, during this tour Emanuela walked us from grave to grave to explain what she and her fellow volunteers had discovered. During this two-and-a-half-hour-long hike, many of Emanuela's tales delved into the intricate connections between the city of the dead and that of the living. Among the tombs we visited was the resting place of Cesare Gamba, the engineer who, at the turn of the 20th century, planned and built the majestic bridge hovering over Genoa's main street. "To assuage public fears that this heavy structure would collapse, one day he took a chair and sat under [the bridge] smoking his cigarettes," Emanuela informed us. "People watched him and realized that the bridge was safe and the street under Gamba's bridge became a favorite shopping and strolling destination." We moved to another grave, and Emanuela told us about Gian Luigi Botto, the long-forgotten surgeon who assisted with the birth of pope Benedict XV, the only pontifex ever to hail from Genoa. "As you may have noticed, a marble plaque commemorating the birth of this pope is still visible on the façade of a building in Salita Santa Caterina," she suggested, trying to jog our memory about this downtown street. None of us remembered the plaque. "This is embarrassing--I'll have to

look for it," a woman giggled; "yes, yes," everybody else agreed. Yet the tour had additional surprises in store for us. After walking us to Giovanni Ansaldo's grave, Emanuela explained that this man had been summoned by Italy's prime minister in 1853 to revitalize Genoa's mechanical industries; due to Ansaldo's successes, these factories were named after him. "Giovanni Ansaldo died at the age of 40, but his workers loved him so much that they carried his coffin on foot from their factory to this cemetery at the opposite end of the city," Emanuela said, sharing yet another anecdote we ignored. In the Genoa of the 21st century, what is simply known as *l'Ansaldo*, the Ansaldo, is an industrial and energy conglomerate that still employs thousands of workers, white collar employees, and scientists. However, while the history of Genoa's main industrial hub is intertwined with that of the city, the memory of the individual who played a pivotal role in its development has faded. The Per Staglieno volunteers recovered it along with myriad other stories. [Fig. 4]

As a mirror full of discoveries, in Emanuela's narrations Staglieno became not just the repository of Genoa's known histories, but also and above all the trove of all the interesting stories that this city's current residents have forgotten. What the pope's surgeon, the bridge's engineer and Giovanni Ansaldo all have in common is to have been long ignored after contributing, each in his own way, to Genoa's history. Using her narrative prowess to disseminate stories retrieved from oblivion, Emanuela highlighted the connections between the city of the dead and that of the living. Drawing on her audience's own repertoire of everyday urban experiences, she reminded us of familiar places, telling us about urban actors

of the past. If the tales of a city are the stories of the “people who between them experience and create [it]” (Finnegan 1998, 82), Emanuela’s stories were the narrative mirror that showed us those who had helped establish contemporary Genoa. By linking the remembrance of the dead to our own experience of the city, she allowed us to contextualize their lives in space, thus adding temporal depth to our perception of community;²⁴ she also promoted a sense of locality (Regis 2001, 756) that blended the spaces of death with those of life.

Conclusion

“The face of death is a mirror image of... the other side, of the self,” wrote Miles Richardson (2001, 263). As they hold their narrative mirror to their audiences, inviting them to stare through it, Alberto, Emanuela, and Mauro remind them that, if life is impermanent, so is death as the transition from the state of Dasein (“being there”) to the void of the no-longer-Dasein (Heidegger 1962, 238). Yet the practice of imagining Genoa’s cemetery as “the other city” denies the no-longer-Dasein of the dead not only by attributing them a place in the cemetery, but also by acknowledging their past “being there.” As it unfolds not in an abstract and generic space, but rather in the very same Genoa from which the visitors hail, this “other city” becomes more relatable. If, as Heidegger suggested, in everyday life “‘dying’ is levelled off to an occurrence which reaches Dasein but belongs to nobody in particular” and therefore is thought not to concern the self (1962, 297-298), the encounter with Staglieno’s dead as

mediated by poets, theater troupes, and story hunters is a narrative *memento mori*. By inviting their audiences to interrupt normalcy and engage those who are no more, Alberto, Emanuela and Mauro provide opportunities for a liminoid experience meant to disabuse their publics of their own feelings of immortality.

Staglieno's dead as presented by poets, volunteers, and theater troupes inhabited, experienced, described, and even helped build the same city where their audiences live. To the attentive eye, suggest the Per Staglieno story hunters, signs of this past presence are hidden in myriad urban sites and wait to be discovered. Not only can the voices of the dead still be heard in their poetry, argues Alberto, but their musings about the cemetery, and therefore mortality, resemble those of Genoa's contemporary residents. Their relatability extends to the lives of contemporary residents, too, surmise the Nettle Theater performers, pointing to the nuanced emotions with which Staglieno's dead display their affinity with their contemporary publics. Staglieno's mirror emerges out of a narrative web that, eschewing the grief of burying a loved one, turns this cemetery into a stage for a more distant—and yet still intimate—contemplation of the complexities of life as well as its precarious nature.

In the 19th century, Staglieno's bourgeois monuments told secular stories about hard work, charitability, and familial piety (Malone 2017; Sborgi1996); they also consigned the deceased to eternity, negating their absence even as they reiterated it.²⁵ Theirs was the kind of preverbal, artistic narrativity that strikes the senses as it builds in space (Ricoeur 2016, 31). Over a century later, Staglieno's poets, story hunters, and performers use the narrative power

of the spoken work to reinscribe thanatopsis into its spaces. As they do so, they both participate in, and contribute to, the experience economy that is typical of the contemporary tourist industry (Pine and Gilmore 2011; Sundbo and Darmer 2008). Unlike other forms of dark tourism, however, Staglieno's contemporary thanatopsis entails neither the commodification nor the kitschification of death (see Sharpley and Stone 2009). Instead, the events that periodically animate its alleys resonate with the type of cultural tourism that has developed in Genoa over the last several decades as well as its residents' disposition towards the appreciation of this city's familiar spaces through the lenses of high culture (Guano 2017). In Staglieno, this type of tourism relies on the efforts of volunteers who not only relish trafficking in stories, but also engage literature, history and theater as they use the cemetery as an expressive canvas for their own ideas and goals.²⁶ What they produce is not material but rather symbolic and affective value as a labor of love that carries its own rewards, namely the pleasures of generating and sharing meaning through forms of cultural production that are inextricably connected to these individuals' own sensibilities, their tastes, and their relationship to the city and its spaces. As they attempt to ensconce their publics in their own cosmologies, these thanatopic storytellers contribute to reiterating Staglieno's role as a mirror: the "other city" where the dead dwell and the living tell their stories.

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Endnotes

¹ In this work, Dora Williams is a woman of humble origins and a social climber who meets her destiny after marrying Count Navigato.

² Unlike other forms of tourism, cultural tourism is frequently incorporated into one's everyday life and familiar spaces (Stylianou-Lambert 2011).

³ <http://www.staglieno.comune.genova.it/it/node/1599>, 12/23/2020

⁴ Silvia Melloni, Project Manager of the Fabbrica di Staglieno NGO, personal communication (2016).

⁵ Genoa was a marginal Grand Tour destination (Black 2003). On this city's oligarchy, see Garibbo (2000).

⁶ Drawing on Heidegger (1962, 282), I distinguish between the "dead" as those who are "no longer factually 'there'" and the "deceased" as those who are still an object of "concern" for the living. My choice of the word "dead" throughout this paper is a remark on the temporal and affective distance between the living and those who, buried in Staglieno, are commemorated through the events described in this ethnography.

⁷ Staglieno is also a location of walking tours led by professional guides. These usually focus on the cemetery's artwork; also, guides charge a fee for their services. For the role of walking tours in Genoa's cultural tourism, see Guano (2017).

⁸ Research entailed participant observation during Staglieno's storytelling events as well as 19 in-depth semi-structured interviews with the individuals organizing and staging them.

⁹ Much to the chagrin of those Genoese who work in the local tourist sector, the Staglieno cemetery is not a UNESCO heritage site.

¹⁰ For a definition of the liminoid stage, see Turner (1974).

¹¹ On this topic, see also Seaton and Lennon (2012, 1575).

¹² On nexus of sensuous and signifying processes pertaining to sensing and making sense, see Howes (2015).

¹³ Remembrance is the "commemoration and memorialization of those whose suffering and death one may not have personally witnessed" (Walter, 2009, 47).

¹⁴ <https://www.teatrortica.it/chi-siamo/>, April 22, 2020. On the nexus of aesthetic experience and political engagement in theater, see Ingram (2011).

¹⁵ For an ethnography of heritagization from below in Staglieno's postindustrial surroundings, see Guano (2020).

¹⁶ As is the case with other postindustrial peripheries of continental Europe, this neighborhood hosts those facilities and infrastructures that would be unthinkable in Genoa's bourgeois downtown. These include a sewage purification plant; a garbage incinerator; a large prison; and a cumbersome highway bridge along with a host of dismissed factories.

¹⁷ The unpublished stage script is by Giancarlo Mariottini.

¹⁸ A few yards away from Caterina's tomb, a plaque installed in 2012 commemorates the victims of femicide.

¹⁹ See also Fuss 2003; Richardson 2001; Stone 2012.

²⁰ As, in the 20th century, Staglieno became an object of proactive avoidance, the local bourgeoisie shifted its attention away from their family graves. When, due to deindustrialization, Genoa's economy began to decline, many of them moved to other cities. As a result of these transformations, much of the cemetery is now in disarray.

²¹ The term Risorgimento refers to Italy's 19th century struggle to attain unification as an independent nation.

²² One could read Eugenio's story as a moral neoliberal (Muehlebach 2012) tale of sorts: one whereby a self-reliant individual wrestles with a negligent state to recover historical artifacts that are invested with both commercial and affective—in fact, patriotic—value. However, in this story the state is not fully obliterated as one would expect of a truly neoliberal narrative; instead, it is forced to stand up to its role as a guarantor of heritage vis-a-vis local and national communities.

²³ The Per Staglieno volunteers frequently complain about an institutional negligence ranging from the failure to provide them with the necessary tools to the cemetery staff's unwillingness to pick up the trash generated by their labor.

²⁴ As Ricoeur put it, "The first step of living in a community starts with the narratives of life that we exchange." (2016, 35).

²⁵ On this topic, see Richardson (2001, 266) and Verdery (1999, 5).

²⁶ This is not to claim that these volunteers' efforts escape the ideological purchase of neoliberalism; however, I contend that they promote the aesthetic consumption of urban spaces typical of neoliberal urbanism (Cavanaugh 2009; Dicks 2004; Harvey 1991) without participating in its market economy. Their rewards, I suggest, are of a different kind.

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