

The logo for the Anthropology Book Forum, featuring a stylized blue spiral graphic on the left side of a dark blue header bar.

Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Hidden Genoa

Review by Rachel Heiman

Creative Urbanity: An Italian Middle Class in the Shade of Revitalization

by Emanuela Guano

University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016

There has been an extraordinary amount of public interest and scholarly writing on the dramatic transformation of cities around the world through the powerful forces of global capital and state intervention. Anthropologists have long appreciated that citymaking cannot be fully understood without equal attention to the quotidian practices of city dwellers and the residual historical conditions that continue to matter and shape their cities. Emanuela Guano's new book, *Creative Urbanity: An Italian Middle Class in the Shade of Revitalization*, offers an exemplary contribution to this literature through providing a theoretically-rich, ethnographic portrait of struggling middle class residents in the economically precarious, post-industrial port city of Genoa, in northern Italy. These walking-tour guides, street antique dealers, festival organizers, and small-business owners are trying to make do through creative outlets that draw on their underutilized academic training and that align with affective commitments to their much-maligned city. In the process, they are incrementally recasting the image of their hometown—no easy task given Genoa's legacy of political, state, drug, and gender-based violence and its post-1970s population-decline moniker as a "ghost city." Yet contrary to the familiar story of creative production in the shade of corporate and state projects, which assumes standard teleologies of gentrification, Guano's book throws into relief an account of urban transformation that involves equal parts sedimented materialities, stalled revitalization, and creative resilience.

Guano is a native Genoese who left in the early 1990s to pursue an academic life that would have been foreclosed had she remained. *Creative Urbanity* is not an autoethnography per se, yet it is written with

a diasporic sensibility that infuses intimacy into the ethnographic stories of those who stayed and have faced chronic under-employment. As Guano beautifully explains in her introduction, when describing how she came to write a book on Genoa after years of ethnographic work in Buenos Aires, “Genoa always loomed large as the city that never ceased to intrigue, charm, and disappoint me. It tantalized me with memories of my youth and with changes it superimposed on them; it also tormented me with its imperviousness, and, most importantly, it marked my personal life through its refusal to host my future and its simultaneous unwillingness to let fully go of me” (p. 19). This affective richness is most vivid in the book’s historical first chapter, which charts the conditions and spaces of hope and hopelessness for Guano’s generation of first-time college graduates. Much of Italy faced uncertainty as the economic and political optimism of the late 1960s gave way to radical hopelessness in the early 1970s, yet Genoa was hit particularly hard. Guano’s childhood memories are infused with the normalized violence of those times: of the left battling the right in the streets; of terrorist attacks during beach days with friends; of fascist police storming homes; of used heroine syringes littering the playground; of public harassment of women and girls by men of all ages. When neoliberal logics emerged in the 1980s, Genoa’s enduring left kept at bay corporate development interests, though the younger generation found inspiration in the rhetoric of entrepreneurial self-reliance: perhaps meritocracy might finally replace Italy’s ensconced gendered system of patronage and nepotism. But to no avail. In the 1990s, new immigrants and unemployed college-graduates began to revitalize empty city spaces, and along with a marina port redevelopment, Porto Antico, people started to emerge in once-feared public spaces. Yet this moment of hope also was short lived. The 2001 G8 Summit’s brutal state violence (the focus of chapter two) undermined Genoa’s attempt to enter the global stage as a city of promise, and the 2002 introduction of the Euro and related EU policies undercut Genoa’s bedrock of small businesses. The 2008 economic crisis was the final nail in the coffin: all remaining hope had turned into dystopian resignation.

It is in this context that Guano analytically re-considers the notion of a “creative class,” reclaiming it from its much-derided association with Richard Florida’s writings and planning-consultancy empire. City planners in Genoa, like so many around the world, use Florida’s measures to determine the “creative index” of their city. Yet as Guano’s book reveals, Genoa’s high creative index does not come from the entrepreneurial elite hailed in Florida’s story, who are nurtured, encouraged, promoted, and invested in by state and corporate interests as a part of neoliberal developmentalism. The people we meet in *Creative Urbanity* are on the economic fringe and have no prospects of mobility or even

expectations of economic security. They became entrepreneurs as a last resort and typically hold several jobs, yet their modes of entrepreneurial cultural production and their daily movements in space are shaping Genoa in ways hailed by city boosters. Guano's analysis in the ethnographic chapters of the book (chapters three to six) thus approaches the city, as she explains, "through the exploration of some of the subjectivities, practices, expectations, things, logics, and the built environment that contribute to its emergent formation: a process whereby neoliberalism is...only one of the forces at work." (p. 23).

Genoa's built environment is the focus of chapter three, which sheds light on "sedimented spatialities and deeply ingrained lifeways [that] cannot be just as easily overwritten by comparatively recent—and spuriously homogenous—global dynamics" (p. 88). Most vivid is Guano's discussion of the homes and neighborhood built by the aristocracy in the sixteenth century in what is now the gentrifying *centro storico*, a densely woven maze of four-story homes on narrow alleys built to emulate the design of Genoa's Maghreb trading cities. The first floors of these homes, which have grand ceilings and internal courtyards, receive no sunlight, nor do the small second floors that once housed servants' quarters and were built with low ceilings and small windows that measure only a few inches square. The third floors, where the aristocratic families lived, receive bright sunshine that streams in through large windows onto grand rooms with high ornamental ceilings. Directly above the "noble floor" is a small, buffer floor under the roof with low ceilings but brilliant light. As the neighborhood gentrified in the late 1990s and early 2000s, these homes took on contemporary class heterogeneity: middle-classes living on the sunny top two floors (e.g. artists and lawyers), with elderly and low-income immigrant families living on the more affordable first two floors. Unlike the common teleological story of gentrification, where middle classes displace the majority of long-standing working class and poor residents, leading to rejiggered segregated neighborhoods, here we see "vertical stratification" (p. 91)—a spatialization of class inequality guided by the venerable built environment of centuries before.

The next two chapters shift our attention to entrepreneurial practices, which like spaces of home are produced within local conditions of possibility. Guano brings us into the everyday lives of antique dealers (chapter four) and tour guides (chapter five) whose spatial practices are enmeshed too with the legacy of Genoa's aristocracy but also Italy's patriarchal gendered politics. Tour guides, for example, are largely women, who are leading tour groups of mostly other Genoese and are, as Guano suggests, "both empowered and restrained by Genoa's own marginality" (p. 135). Unlike that of tourist havens Venice, Florence, and Rome, Genoa's aristocracy was reluctant to flaunt its wealth publicly, so Genoa's

urbanism is muted, with few iconic landscapes and grand piazzas for promenading. The city's cultural wealth was largely hidden. Most tour descriptions use the language of "hidden Genoa," a double entendre, Guano notes, for unseen aristocratic relics and an old city obscured by enduring discourses of crime and decline. Yet as Guano demonstrates, what also is made visible through these tours are Genoa's entrepreneurial women, who have carved out a niche in what is typically a male profession in other Italian cities. They are creatively narrating Genoa's lore on streets where women have long walked in fear and are conducting preparatory historical research with notebook in hand in its nooks and crannies. "As they do so," Guano argues, "they sustain their business by proposing ever-new perspectives on sites that are often taken for granted, conjuring a range of emotions, ideas, and experiences that cast a different light on the urban everyday" (p. 153). They are altering the "urban imaginary of Genoa's publics" (p. 118)—a feat celebrated by the state—and yet run up against regressive and undercutting forces including from the state itself, as when undercover police interrupt their tours to warn of criminal activities in the area.

Guano's final ethnographic chapter (chapter six) turns to Genoa's Suq multicultural festival, which might seem at first glance a cliché of orientalist consumerism, with its location in touristy Porto Antico and its attention to the sounds, smells, tastes, colors, and textures of Genoa's diverse urbanites from Morocco to Ecuador to Genoese regions. But Guano encourages us to view the Suq as a site of "political pedagogy" (p. 187), when understood in the context of Italian festival history, Italy's nationalist fervor regarding food and the sensual, and practices within the festival itself, which includes a stage that doubles as a platform for cooking demonstrations and activist discussions of immigrant rights and ethical shopping. Guano is careful not to imply that the Suq and its booths of wares are free of orientalist logics. Rather, she suggests we view this popular festival as a site of "strategic orientalism and subversive hybridity" (p. 187). In a xenophobic moment when economic precarity is blamed more often on Ecuadorian youth than neoliberal policies, to place on equal footing Italian terroir and the culinary feats of ethnic others is a radical disruption. As such, relevant here, Guano argues, is not only the history of orientalist World's Fairs but also the Italian *sagre*, a fascist era festival of local goods, services, and affective politics retooled for the current political economy. A particularly poignant moment is Guano's discussion of "the basil man," who dresses in medieval garb and marches through the Suq with aromatic flair. He is not there to protest the festival's cultural pluralism, but rather the common enemy of all who have booths there: corporatization of local goods like basil and the growth of nearby malls that undercut small businesses. Guano convincingly articulates how we can

acknowledge the contradictions intrinsic in these spaces and view them as “a polemic alternative against the backdrop of [the] transformation of the Italian economy and its urbanscapes” (p. 185).

It was a great pleasure to read *Creative Urbanity*. With Guano’s remarkable ability to vividly describe and interrogate a vast range of academic texts and theoretical arguments, it is an excellent book for graduate and upper-level undergraduate courses in anthropology, urban studies, gender studies, and political economy. Readers may question Guano’s use of unnecessary strawman arguments for the inclusion of Mediterranean cities like Genoa in urban theorizing. She seems at times to suggest that the literature on urbanism is still dominated by discussions of North American and North Atlantic modes of gentrification and revitalization, when there has been a surge in recent years of writings on cities ranging from Mumbai to Cairo to Shenzhen. But this overplay in no way takes away from what is a remarkable book: *Creative Urbanity* renders visible people, places and practices that have until now not been given their due place in urban anthropology and the anthropology of the middle classes.

Rachel Heiman is Associate Professor of Anthropology and Chair of Urban Studies at The New School. She received her B.A. in anthropology from the University of Pennsylvania and her M.A. and Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Michigan. Her research is driven by an interest in the cultural and spatial politics of class, particularly the interplay of political-economic changes and everyday lived experiences. Her most recent book, *Driving after Class: Anxious Times in an American Suburb* (University of California Press, 2015) explores middle-class anxieties and suburban life in the United States. Her previous book, *The Global Middle Classes: Theorizing through Ethnography* (SAR Press, 2012) is a co-edited volume with Carla Freeman & Mark Liechty of ethnographic research on the middle classes from a global perspective. Her current project, for which she has received grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Wenner-Gren Foundation, explores emergent subjectivities and modes of governance amid efforts to retrofit suburbia in the United States for a more sustainable future.



© 2017 Rachel Heiman