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MY GIANTS

by
Teodora Altomare

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts, Integrated Media Arts, Hunter College of the City University of New York.

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ABSTRACT

My Giants is a thirty minute documentary about two journeys to my homeland. During the first, in 2015, I documented the story of Xylella *fastidiosa*, a deadly bacteria responsible for the loss of many thousand-year-old olive trees in the Italian region of Puglia. During the second visit, in 2016, I witnessed the illness of my father.

By weaving together the two stories—the epidemic killing the olive trees and the cancer that invaded my father—I create a snapshot of a transitional moment in my life, a moment when illness became an opportunity to reconnect with my roots.

BACKGROUND AND SUBJECT

Puglia, a Southern Italian region of the Mediterranean basin, has more than 60 million olive trees. These plants are smaller than a sequoia, a baobab, or an oak, but the Apulian inhabitants proudly call them "walking giants" because their peculiar shape makes them look like an army of marching trees. In fact, it is the centuries of care that people have put into these olives trees, regularly digging and removing the dying core of the trunk, that has given them their "walking" shape and allowed them to survive for hundreds, sometimes even thousands, of years.

In 2013 in Salento, the southernmost area of the region, olive trees began to get sick, dry out, and die. Trees that had survived for centuries, and stared down many natural adversaries, were now succumbing to a mysterious disease. Nothing similar had happened in human memory.

Almost two years later, local scientists finally identified the main culprit of the disease: Xylella *fastidiosa*, a non-indigenous bacteria that had never been detected

in Europe and had never attacked olive trees before. The lack of knowledge, and the fear that contagion could eventually affect all of Italy, ignited a political and media firestorm.

Puglia's government passed an emergency plan that divided the affected area into four zones, based on their degree of infection. An "infection zone," where it was no longer possible to contain the infection, was established in the southernmost area of the region. An "eradication zone," where Xylella *fastidiosa* was already present but where eradication of the bacterium was considered possible, was created. Then there was a "buffer zone," where the bacterium had not yet arrived, and finally a "security zone" where there was no risk of contagion.

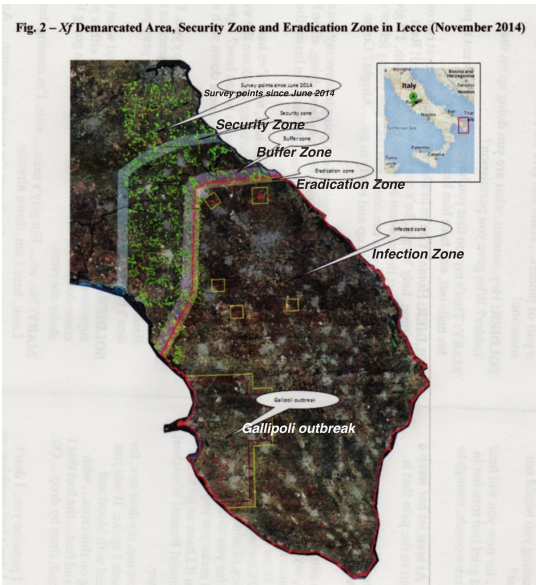

Fig 1: "Final Report of an Audit Carried Out in Italy from 18 to 25 November 2014 In Order to Evaluate the Situation and Official Controls for Xylella Fastidiosa." Source: European Commission DG (SANCO) 2014-7327 MR FINAL.

The emergency plan dictated that the most radical measures would be taken in the buffer zone. Here, infected—and potentially infected—plants were culled,

pruned materials were burned, there was a ban on the movement of infected materials, and pesticides were used heavily to suppress the insects' disease vectors.

Olive trees represent more than a cultural heritage for the people of Puglia. The region produces about 40% of Italy's olive oil. According to the European Commission, employment in agriculture is above the national average (6.8% versus 2.3% as of 2013) and the rate of employment in food manufacturing is higher than in the rest of the country (2.4% versus 2.0%). However, according to Eurispes, an institute for political, social and economic studies, since the arrival of Xylella *fastidiosa*, the value of olive orchards in the infected areas of Salento has declined by 70%[1].

Environmental activists and local farmers rejected the government's drastic measures, pointing out the lack of scientific proof that they were necessary. Protests and occupations of private orchards slowed down the deployment of the emergency plan and scientific research on the disease, which continued to kill trees.

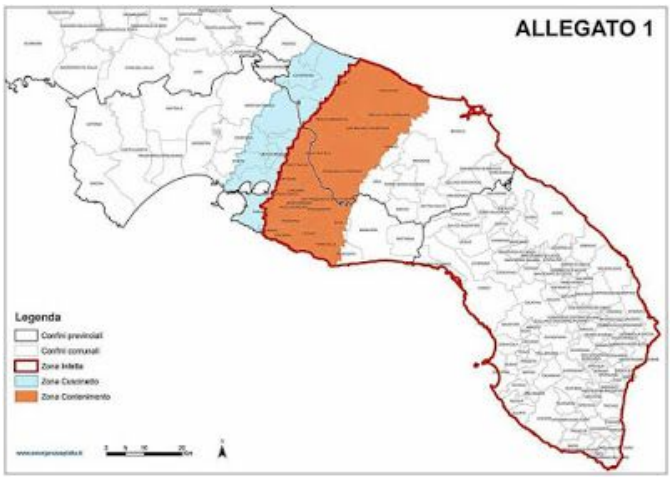

Fig 2: Map of Xylella infection that reflects the northward advance of the bacteria.

[1] Simpson, Thomas. "Land Values Collapse 70% in Xylella-Infected Zones of the Salento." *Xylella codiro*, www.xylellacodiro.blogspot.com/2016/01/land-values-collapse-70-in-xylella.html. Accessed 14 April 2016.

As the Italian government scrambled to contain both the protestors and the disease, the European Union intervened and mandated the immediate culling of all trees in the infected areas. Italian rangers invaded private orchards and culled any tree that the scientists had diagnosed as infected. In 2015, activists, farmers, and oil producers organized a major protest that prompted coverage in the New York Times, and that is how the news of the epidemic reached me in New York, where I was studying media at Hunter College.

When I returned home to spend the summer holidays with my family in the summer of 2015, Xylella *fastidiosa* was on everyone's lips. In Puglia, almost all families own a small plot of olive orchards. My family has never owned one, and I could not directly relate to the economic and emotional damage that the disease was inflicting on many families. However, the loss of the ancient giant trees that were so emblematic of life in the Mediterranean basin, and that I had played around and been told stories about my whole life, was unavoidably tragic. I began to film the olive trees of the area surrounding our house to document the trees that, if scientists were right, would soon be gone.

As I listened to activists and farmers upset with the government response, I asked myself, "Is Xylella *fastidiosa* the real and main cause of the problem, as scientists and politicians claim?" "Is culling the only way to contain the disease?" "Is it true that, once a tree is infected, there is no way for it to heal?"

With these questions in mind, I drove across the 500 miles of my homeland, tracing the path of the disease, in an attempt to understand the shifting and contradictory story of the olive tree disease and its cultural and economic consequences for the inhabitants of Puglia.

In 2016, while I was in New York editing my documentary about Xylella *fastidiosa*, the news of another illness reached me. My father had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. With the footage of the olive trees and a suitcase full of fear and love, I returned home.

The news of my father's cancer caught me completely unprepared, but I eventually found in the story of trees' disease an opportunity to learn something about my dad's illness and to come to terms with my fear of losing him. While watching and editing the film, it became clear how the story of Xylella *fastidiosa* and of my father's cancer were intertwined. The parallels between the two stories were clear on many levels and, surprisingly, I found there were lessons to be learned from each story about the other. *My Giants* became a personal essay film that investigates my questions about belonging, time and roots.

INTELLECTUAL AND AESTHETIC APPROACH

The use of voice over in the form of a personal recollection of memories was a pivotal choice in my filmmaking journey. I always intended the film to have a first-person narration, but the tone and perspective of the voice changed dramatically as the story of the olive trees overlapped with the story of my father.

I began writing in 2015 with the aim of exploring doubts and concerns I shared with farmers and environmental activists. I wanted to understand the real causes behind the trees' disease, the political and economic interests at play, and their consequences on a social scale. Initially, the decision to use a first-person voice over narration seemed the most obvious response to an overwhelming amount of news on the case of Xylella *fastidiosa.* Media interest was fueled by morbose

stories of alleged agricultural crimes that trivialized an economic crisis through folklore and exoticism.

The first version of the film's script was based on my notes from conversations with farmers, oil producers, environmental activists, and scientists. I met with historians and folklorists who provided me with a fascinating series of popular stories on the culture of olive oil in the rural areas of southern Italy. Some of these were incorporated into the script in the form of short local stories. Finally, I organized my writing into chronological sections that explored the value assigned to olive trees over the years. In particular, I focused on the '90s, when new competitive markets began to dictate the rules governing the trade of olive oil and ornamental plants, on the early 2000s, when the Apulian government put an end to the massive illegal trade of ancient olive trees by banning the uprooting of the oldest plants of the area, and on 2013, when the bacteria Xylella *fastidiosa* arrived and was discovered.

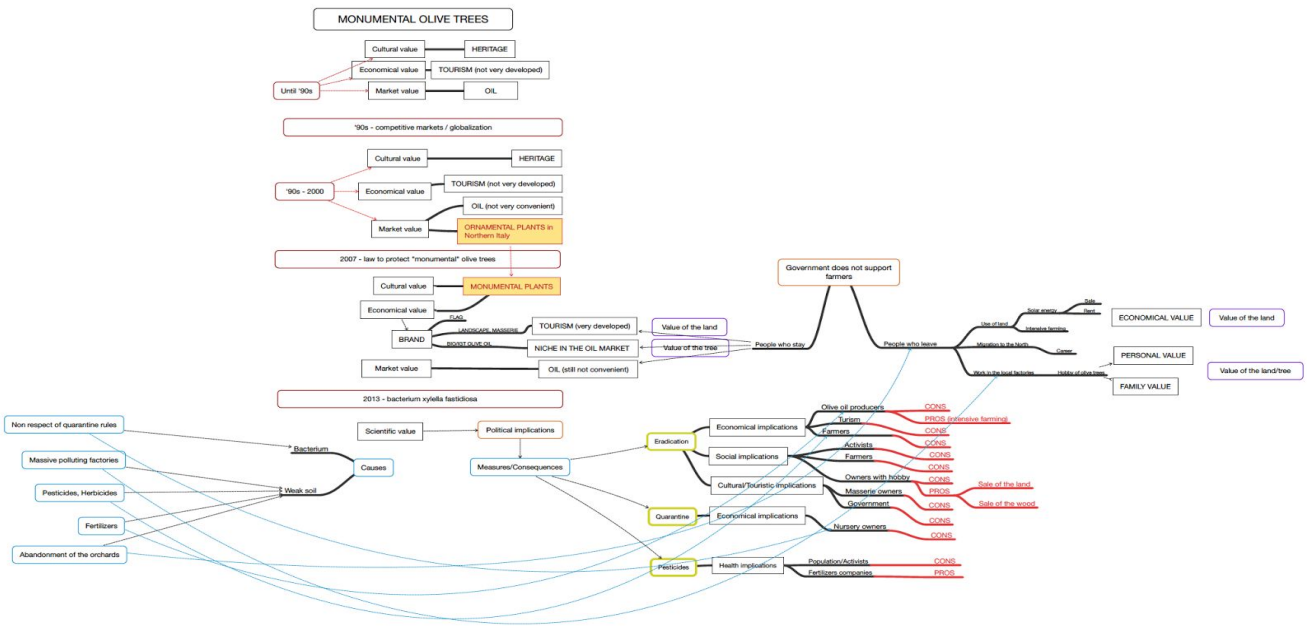

Fig 3: Preparatory study of the cultural, economic, and political history of olive trees in Puglia.

However, when the news of my father's illness reached me in New York, where I was already editing the film, I felt compelled to rewrite the whole story. The footage of the sick olive trees immediately took on new meaning, and revealed the connections between the illness of the plant and the cancer my father was fighting. But more fundamentally, I was simply no longer able to approach the film from an investigative point of view. Every single shot of the documentary became a window onto the struggle we were facing at home, and it turned out to be impossible to relate to the images the same way I had up to that point. I moved back to Italy to stay close to my family, and started to write again. The investigative tone of the film became poetic and my approach changed. Although it was still important for me to shed light on the environmental and cultural consequences of the story of Xylella *fastidiosa* for the Apulian inhabitants, I realized that as a documentary filmmaker I had another opportunity. I could look closely into a transitional moment in some people's lives—the farmers losing their trees, and me facing my dad's deadly cancer—and use the camera to unveil the pain, the confusion, and the love that come with that moment.

While the writing and structure of the piece changed drastically, other formal elements stayed the same. Footage from both 2015 and 2016 was intentionally accomplished with the use a tripod. The tripod helped me relax in natural settings, and in conversations with my father, and helped me to convey the feeling of being "stuck." If the images of the trees were mostly medium and wide shots, however, the images of my father were mainly close ups. This choice reflected my relative distance from the two types of subject matter, and the claustrophobic feeling that

grew as I moved from the orchards to my parents' house. Finally, the editing mirrors the notions of time intrinsic to the story: the use of long observational scenes helped me to convey the opposition between the slow rhythm of nature and the fast pace of disease.

Dziga Vertov's work had a strong underlying influence on *My Giants*. In his films the camera and the editing capture and weave political themes and candid moments by pushing the power of the filmmaking process to its limits. The description of Vertov's practice is clear from his definition of Kino-Eye:

> The kino eye lives and moves in time and space; it gathers and records impressions in a manner wholly different from that of the human eye. The position of our bodies while observing or our perception of a certain number of features of a visual phenomenon in a given instant are by no means obligatory limitations for the camera which, since it is perfect, perceives more and better. (Vertov 15)

Advanced technologies and experimental editing techniques were the tools that Vertov used in his battle against "the films that have arrived from America and the West" (Vertov 17). He found in these tools a new way to express his vision of life, "to introduce into a film study any given motif—political, economic, or other" (Vertov 14). His movies didn't aim to entertain people; they wanted to use film to provide answers to any kind of questions, but especially political and economic ones. The Kino-Eye was Vertov's tool to advocate for the deepest knowledge of the historical moment he was living in.

At many points *My Giants* pays tribute to Vertov's *Man With the Movie Camera*. Examples include revealing the making of the film while the film is being

made, showing the reflection of the camera and the shadow of the tripod in some shots, and including the editing timeline in the film itself. As Barnouw says about Vertov's film, "The artificiality is deliberate, an avant-garde determination to suppress illusion in favor of a heightened awareness" (Barnouw 63).

Fig 4: Still frame from the film, where the filmmaker's shadow is deliberately revealed.

Walter Ruttman's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, Joris Ivens' *Regen*, and other city symphonies produced in the 1920's were also important references for my film. I have always been fascinated by the use of patterns and rhythms in these films, where there was no plot other than the happenings in a city during one day. Filming nature for long hours allowed me to find its rhythms, and to enhance, through the magnifying lens, the often invisible patterns that rule the daily routines of its inhabitants.

Another influential maker was biologist Jean Painlevé. I watched his film *The Seahorse* in a class I took at Hunter College called "Hybrid Documentary," taught by Professor Shanti Thakur. This class challenged my preconceptions about voice over and introduced me to a broad set of approaches to the use of narration in films. Particularly relevant to my film was Painlevé's 1937 short film about the seahorse,

which revealed to me the artistic and ironic potential of the scientific movie genre. A year later, when I began shooting, I struggled over how to make *Philaenus spumarius*, the insect vector of the Xylella *fastidiosa* bacteria, a protagonist in my film. Although eventually I decided not to give the little insect much space in the film, Painlevé's *The Seahorse* was an important reference.

As *My Giants* became more personal, the references changed accordingly. Within the copious filmography of personal essay films, Rea Tajiri's *History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige* stood out. "When we do not have access to images to construct memories and histories, Tajiri makes it clear, we make others," says Marita Sturken (Sturken 4) about the movie, which is about the filmmaker's attempt to understand her mother's inability to remember the imprisonment of Japanese Americans in the U.S. during World War II. It's very interesting to read Tajiri's description of what moved her to make the film:

> I began searching for a history, my own history, because I had known all along that the stories I had heard were not true and parts had been left out. I remember having this feeling growing up that I was haunted by something, that I was living within a family full of ghosts. There was this place that they knew about. I had never been there, yet I had a memory for it. I could remember a time of great sadness before I was born. We had been moved, uprooted. We had lived with a lot of pain. I had no idea where these memories came from yet I knew the place. (Sturken 5)

Tajiri's response to this lack of memory is a movie that analyzes the relationship between media and history through audiovisual representation. She creates a ghostly atmosphere where the spirits of the dead can be the only

witnesses:

> There are things which have happened in the world while there were cameras watching, things we have images for. There are other things which have happened while there were no cameras watching, which we restage in front of cameras to have images of. There are things which have happened for which the only images that exist are in the minds of observers, present at the time, while there are things which have happened for which there have been no observers, except the spirits of the dead. (Sturken 4)

History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige challenged my notion of memory, of the camera as a witness of memories, and how filmmaking can be a process of re-making history, whether personal or collective. It made me wonder about the role of witnessing and of the potential of filmmaking as a tool to create a new history.

RESEARCH

The first set of research tasks involved the exploration of the historical, social, scientific and political value of olive trees in Mediterranean culture, and how these values were being impacted by globalization. My investigation started with the long-standing use of olive trees to produce commodities like fire, wood, food, and soap. It then broadened to include the trees' cultural value for the government, as a way to brand the region and promote tourism.

I also educated myself about historical literature and popular tales involving olive trees and the region. *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the*

Age of Philip II, a book by French historian Fernand Braudel, helped me understand the importance of olive trees in Mediterranean culture. While Braudel's study is focused on the concepts of technology and exchange in the Mediterranean during the second half of the sixteenth century, his reconstruction offered insights that helped me look at the challenges posed today by capitalism and globalization.

My main source for folk tales was Gianfranco Ciola, the director of a regional natural reserve that is home to the highest number of centenary olive trees in Puglia. Through his work and his passion for the territory, Gianfranco is a living collection of stories of local traditions of rural Puglia. He knows all the farmers, and the small olive oil producers of the area, and he knows all the important dates and names in the history of the Southern olive oil culture by heart.

Another source that helped me understand the culture of olive trees in Puglia was a law enacted in 2007 by the Regional government that banned the culling and sale of monumental olive trees. The lawmakers came up with "monumental," a definition based on a tree's dimensions (the only possible parameter to ascertain their age, because of the way olive trees are cultivated in this region) with the intention of ending a lucrative market based on the culling and shipping of centenary trees to distant locations outside Puglia.

Other readings constituted a more strictly scientific resource to understand the main enemies of olive trees—from bacteria and insects to pesticides and fertilizers—and possible strategies for fighting these threats without negatively affecting the plants and the ecosystem. I looked into Xylella *fastidiosa* from the perspective of studies done by the College of Natural Resources of Berkeley, one of the first scientific communities to investigate the bacterium, which was determined

to be responsible for the spread of Pierce's disease through the grapevines of California starting in 1892.

Another set of readings pertained to the connection I wanted to establish between the trees and my father. The 1973 book by Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird, *The Secret Life of Plants*, provided a useful account of plants and their relationship to human beings. Jacque Brosse's *Mythologie des arbres*, a book that investigates the mythological meanings of trees in human history, helped me understand the cultural value of trees. Finally, *The Hidden Life of Trees* by Peter Wohlleben educated me about the surprising similarities between trees' and humans' behaviors.

Susan Sontag's book *Illness as Metaphor* was a fundamental source throughout my writing process. Her book, written in 1978 to question the language used to describe and refer to disease, provided an interesting perspective from which I could draw and understand parallels between the language used by my father's oncologist and by the scientists to describe disease. For instance:

> The controlling metaphors in descriptions of cancer are, in fact, drawn not from economics but from the language of warfare: every physician and every attentive patient is familiar with, if perhaps inured to, this military terminology. Thus, cancer cells do not simply multiply; they are "invasive." [...] The military metaphor in medicine first came into wide use in the 1880s, with the identification of bacteria as agents of disease. Bacteria were said to "invade" or "infiltrate." But talk of siege and war to describe disease now has, with cancer, a striking literalness and authority. (Sontag 63)

CHALLENGES

As the film about the olive tree disease broadened to incorporate my personal struggle to deal with my father's illness, a big challenge I faced was how to approach the story in a way that would feel comfortable for my family and, at the same time, allow me to be honest about my fears and concerns. I had never exposed myself so personally in my films, and this challenge influenced both my writing and my shooting.

Although I began filming my father without the intent of using the footage in the film, as soon as I decided to include it I talked to him about it. He liked the idea. However, I found it hard, in the writing process, not to give voice to my sadness and my fears, and I didn't want my father to witness those feelings.

In order to overcome this challenge, I opted initially to write and record the voice-over narration in English. Since no one in my family speaks English, it became my secret language, a sort of a "healing spell" that helped me to finally put my deepest feelings on paper. Since English is not my first language, writing in a language whose vocabulary was limited to me helped me get to the core of what I meant to express, using the fewest possible words. This weakness became a strength. It gave me the opportunity to get close to poetry, a literary form I had always desired to explore. Once I got to the essence of my feelings and thoughts, it became easy to switch back to Italian.

Another challenge involved the changing nature of my father's appearance. Illness has a strong visual power, and as a filmmaker I wanted to handle my ethical responsibility to my father, and to my audience, carefully. On the one hand, I

rejected representations my dad's changing body that stripped him of his dignity. On the other hand, a few essential images of my father's illness revealed to me how brilliant, ironic, and peaceful his brain still was despite of the cancer.

AUDIENCE AND EXHIBITION

Although my wish is that this film will be of interest to many people, its primary audience is the communities of people who are struggling with the fear of losing a loved one. Over the past nine months, since my father's diagnosis, I have became a member of a community of caregivers I never knew existed, and a supporter of organizations that work to help people to find cures for cancer. I realized that dealing with the illness of a loved one often brings many people, myself included, to focus exclusively on practical questions like "How can my mother gain weight during chemo?" or "What does your father take to deal with his nausea?" or "Do you know of any clinical trials in Europe?" I also realized that, because people mostly focus on the present immediate needs, there is a lack of deeper conversation. It seemed to me that there were unasked questions in these chats, questions that would challenge our notions of time, of belonging, and of loss.

For people who are "battling" pancreatic cancer in particular, I feel there is a huge need for hope. According to Pancan, a U.S. based organization with the mission of improving outcomes and doubling patient survival, pancreatic cancer is the only major cancer with a survival rate in the single digits.

Although my film does not explicitly advocate for any particular cause, my goal is to create awareness and dialogue around the disease, to support advocacy organizations in their attempts to get more fundings for research, and to encourage

hope. The fact that, against scientists' predictions, the bacteria Xylella *fastidiosa* hasn't dramatically advanced northward in the last two years, somehow creates the conditions to open the space for a hopeful dialogue.

I plan to share the film first within the communities of caregivers I am part of and to collect stories to incorporate into the film's website. Then, I plan to reach out to the organizations I am in touch with, and create a calendar of key events aimed at getting federal and private funding for cancer research, and at allowing people to talk about their personal experience.

I also plan to screen the film in places where the communities that are dealing with the bacteria can directly discuss it. I want my work to help create a space where audiences can interrogate the relationship between science, faith, and identity. In fact, of the conversations I had with my father's brother, a scientist who is investigating Xylella *fastidiosa*, the one that struck me the most was about his belief that therapies may differ from person to person, and that there is a risk in believing all the information circulating on the web about standard and alternative therapies. My father shared this skepticism. Are alternative remedies as much a business as Big Pharma? While I am still dealing my father's cancer and still looking for the cure that is right for him, I would really like to bring up this question with my audience.

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