

Routes and Places of Counter-Memory of Colonialism in Italy

Porta Venezia: A Case of Reappropriation of Space and Memory by the Habesha Community

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ABSTRACT

In the aftermath of the racist murder of George Floyd, racialised people in several Western European cities protested against the presence of monuments and statues celebrating colonialism in the public space. In the wake of the demonstrations, contestations and bottom-up “city decolonisation” initiatives multiplied in Italy. These latter consist of counter-memory pathways and actions of re-signification of the so called “colonial traces” such as statues, monuments and toponymy celebrating colonialism. The aim is to contrast the “Italian colonial removal” and bring out invisibilized¹ histories and subjectivities. In this way, these initiatives are giving rise to material and immaterial places of bottom-up counter memory. At the same time, another interesting aspect is that these contestations are a means of political negotiation of the public space, functional to claim the recognition of the invisibilized part of the population and their rights. In this regard, the objections to the Milan municipality decision to dedicate the public gardens of Porta Venezia and a statue to Indro Montanelli is an emblematic example. In fact, problematising the decision to dedicate this space to Montanelli serves to reclaiming the recognition of the Habesha community and, more broadly, the right of racialised people in Italy to have a voice on colonial memory and on what is designated to represent the history, the identity and values of the population they are part of. Consequently, the actions are also a way to challenge the essentialised conception of Italian identity and reaffirm their presence and belonging to the space on the basis of which they claim the right to Italian citizenship. Thus, these initiatives are a struggle to redefine public space in a way that reflects the many bodies and histories that make it up.

Keywords: Colonialism, Statues, Heritage, Memory, Public spaces, Decolonisation.

1. INTRODUCTION²

During the anti-racist protests that took place in several Euro-western cities following the murder of George Floyd, demonstrators contested the presence of statues and monuments dedicated to slavers and colonisers in public spaces. The protest actions took various forms, from the more artistic to the more disruptive that led to the demolition of some statues. For example, among the images that went viral during this period were those in which the faces of George Floyd, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du

¹ I use the word ‘invisibilize’ to highlight how subjectivities and histories undergo active processes of marginalisation and erasure by dominant subjectivities.

² This paper is part of the author’s ongoing PhD research and is indebted to dialogues held with Selam Tesfai, Angelica Pesarini, Rahel Sereke, Mor Talla Sek and Serena Fiorletta.

Bois, John Lewis, Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King and others were projected onto the statue of Robert E. Lee, the slaveholder who fought in the American War of Secession for the Confederate States. In Bristol, the statue of the slave trader Edward Colston, which had already been the subject of several protests and petitions for its removal, was pulled down and thrown into the river by the crowd. As a result of these events, demonstration actions also took place in Italy, and bottom-up city decolonisation initiatives multiplied. These latter consist in the contestation of the so-called “colonial traces” through paths of counter memory and counter narrative as well as actions of re-signification from below of the monuments celebrating colonialism and of the streets bearing name of colonial origin. In this way, in Italy, anti-fascist, anti-racist and transfeminist collectives, whose protagonists are increasingly the new generations of racialised people, have adopted these forms of contestation. This gave rise to new projects such as: *Decolonize the city* within social centre *Cantiere Milano*; *Decolonize your eyes* collective in Padua; *UrbaAfricani* Treks organised by *Tezetà* Collective in Rome; *Arbegnoc Urbani* collective born within the mutualism space *Casa Bettola* in Reggio Emilia and many others. Many of these have been inspired by the *Resistenze in Cirenaica* collective which, since 2015 in Bologna, has been carrying out “guerrilla odonomastica”³ actions and urban treks on the traces of Italian colonialism and fascism.

The proliferation of this kind of initiatives in various cities prompts several questions: why have these objects, which seem to have exhausted any symbolic function in the present and which often go unnoticed or are indifferent to many, become so important today? What function do these colonial traces serve? To answer these questions in the next section I will address how the traces of colonialism are generally used within the projects of anti-racist collectives. Afterwards, I will deepen the multiple claims that these kinds of initiatives can bring through the case study of the protests against the decision of the municipality of Milan to dedicate the public gardens of Porta Venezia and a statue to Indro Montanelli.

2. COLONIAL TRACES IN PUBLIC SPACES AND THEIR POSSIBLE USES AND FUNCTIONS

It can be argued that contestations and decolonisation initiatives have turned the spotlight on objects that go unnoticed because most people are unable to decipher them, since the history these objects bear is unknown. In Italy, colonialism is a page of history that has long been removed, whose sweetened, distorted and incomplete narrative has survived to this day (Deplano 2017). It is for this reason that the expression “*rimosso coloniale*” (colonial removal)⁴ is used to indicate a lack of a collective memory and consciousness about Italian colonial experience and/or a distorted and incomplete knowledge of colonial history. First of all, the actions have the merit of revealing a gap in knowledge, consciousness and collective memory regarding colonialism that prevents from reading the continuities between past and present. In this sense, the traces of colonialism can have the function of bearing witness to a past that is not present in the collective memory and that has been archived too quickly. This is one of the reasons why these traces are so important: because when the witnesses of this history are no longer there, these objects are entrusted with the task of bearing witness. At the same time, colonial traces do not belong exclusively to the past. In fact, memories of the empire can also be kept alive or reactivated through new constructions, new monuments and heritage processes (Jacobs 1996). In this sense, the city's decolonisation projects also become an instrument for denouncing new initiatives aimed at rehabilitating colonisers and, therefore, colonialism through patrimonialisation proposals and through streets names or statues dedicated to them. What the colonial traces in public spaces have in common is that they all equally celebrate colonialism. Through their representations and inscriptions, they preserve and re-propose a distorted and incomplete reading of history in which certain subjectivities and histories have been invisibilized or erased. Consequently, contestations and paths of counter memory, through actions of re-signification, are opportunities to collectively focus on distortions and bring invisible histories and subjectivities to light. This implies challenging the idea of history, culture, identity and heritage that the ononymy,

³ With “Guerriglia Odonomastica” *Resistenze in Cirenaica* refers to actions and performances that aim to re-name streets and squares of cities from below or to add information to their names in order to change the meaning of the naming. Also see: <https://www.wumingfoundation.com/giap/2018/12/guerriglia-odonomastica/>.

⁴ All translations are the author's own unless otherwise stated.

statues and monuments celebrating colonialism embody and symbolise (Gebrial 2018). Therefore, although it is true that most of the time these traces go unnoticed, when they are contested the reaction of the 'defenders' of cultural heritage, history, culture, identity and the values they embody is triggered (*Ibidem*). On one hand, this reaction shows that these elements still serve the function of providing a means of identification for a part of the population that recognises itself in this cultural heritage. On the other hand, the protests bring out how another part of the population does not recognise that heritage because they are heirs to those histories and subjectivities made invisible by that heritage. In other words, the contestations contain different claims: they express the will of the racialised people, as part of the citizenry, to claim space within the public sphere and the right to have a voice on colonial memory, on which histories and subjectivities are part of the country's identity, history and culture, and therefore on what is chosen to represent them (Schwartz 2022).

In this regard, the objections concerning the public gardens of Porta Venezia are an emblematic example. In this case, the subject of the disputes concerned the Milan municipality's decision to re-name the public gardens to the figure of Indro Montanelli in 2002 and to place a statue dedicated to him in the park in 2006. The actions not only problematise the figure of Montanelli because of his history and what he symbolises but are an instrument of political negotiation of the public space in order to make visible and claim the recognition of the Habesha community, its historical relationship with the neighbourhood and more generally of the many racialised people living in Italy. In this sense, protests are also a means for racialised people to claim the right to have a voice, as part of the citizenry, on what is chosen to represent the history, culture, identity and values of the population. What happened has to do with a battle for the re-appropriation of a public space in a literal and metaphorical sense, through which another battle is also being played out: the one for the recognition of the presence and belonging of the younger generations of racialised people born and/or raised in Italy, and thus for the redefinition of Italian citizenship and identity.

3. A LONG HISTORY OF CONTESTATIONS AND STRUGGLE FOR BRINGING OUT THE INVISIBILIZED PERSPECTIVES

The contestations to the figure of Indro Montanelli have a long history and depend on the fact that, besides being a well-known public figure in Italy as a journalist and writer, he was a staunch fascist and colonialist, voluntarily enlisting in the Italian army to take part in the invasion of Ethiopia (Pesarini and Panico 2021). During this period Montanelli purchased a 12-year-old Eritrean girl named Fatuma or Destà (Schwartz 2022), through the *madamato*, which is the practice used during the occupation by Italian soldiers to buy local young girls and obtain domestic and sexual services from them (Pesarini and Tintori 2020). Montanelli, even after the end of fascism and colonialism, has never disavowed his experience as a coloniser, and with regard to Fatuma, he has never admitted that it was a relationship based on colonial domination and therefore on violence. For these reasons he has been subject to contestation even in his lifetime. A well-known episode dates back to 1969 when, during a television programme, Montanelli publicly recounted that he had purchased and married a minor girl claiming that it was normal in Africa. On this occasion, Elvira Banotti, a black Italo-Eritrean feminist, asked him whether he would have considered it rape if it had happened in Europe and what differences he believed there were between an African girl and a European girl, from a biological or psychological point of view (Vdnews 2022). This episode laid the foundations for the numerous actions contesting the decision to dedicate the public gardens of Porta Venezia and a statue to Montanelli that have followed over the years by different groups (Schwartz 2022).

Indeed, in 2018, *Le Indecorose collective* attached the inscription "rapist of minor girls" to the base of the statue and re-titled the park to "Gardens for the victims of colonialism, of yesterday and today" (Le Indecorose 2018). At the same time, the collective created and exhibited in the gardens the artwork "*violentasi*", in which the face of a black girl is overlapped by the typical sign announcing the offer for sale of a good, in which the word "*vendesi*" (for sale) is replaced by the word "*violentasi*" (for rape) in reference to the practice of *madamato*. In 2019, the transfeminist collective *Non Una di Meno Milano* splashed pink paint on the statue, put up a sign saying "Montanelli colonialist, fascist and rapist" and renamed the park after Destà (Balestra 2020). In 2020, in the wake of the demonstrations following

the murder of George Floyd, actions of contestation multiplied. At this juncture, the informal movement *I Sentinelli di Milano* requested, in an appeal letter to the mayor and city council of Milan, the removal of the statue as it represents “an offense to the city and its democratic and anti-racist values” (*I Sentinelli di Milano* 2020). In addition, the appeal proposed naming the public gardens after someone “more worthy to represent the history and memory” of Milan as a Gold Medal city of the Resistance (*Ibidem*). A few days later, *La rete degli studenti medi e delle scuole superiori* and the university laboratory *LUME* splashed red paint on the statue and wrote at its base the words “racist” and “rapist” (*LUME* 2020; Pesarini and Panico 2021). During the same period, following an invitation issued by Somali-Italian writer Igiaba Scego to dedicate a statue or a drawing to Destà (Scego 2020), in via Torino in Milan the street artist Ozmo portrayed Destà on a monumental pedestal (*Ozmo Blog* 2020).

All these actions are filled with symbolic and political meanings that aim to bring out what has been invisibilized, that is, the history of colonial and patriarchal violence of which Montanelli was the bearer. In this regard, the plaques, inscriptions and re-titling from below serve the function of countering the sterile narrative with which Montanelli is portrayed that celebrates him as a journalist, actively hiding and erasing colonial history (Gebrial 2018). Hence, these actions oppose the operation of normalizing and rehabilitating colonialism that the monument advocates. In fact, celebrating Montanelli as a journalist implies the reduction of what he committed to an irrelevant fact and thus his absolution as a colonialist and rapist, allowing his rehabilitation and glorification. At the same time, these actions serve to counteracting the “colonial removal”, filling the lack of knowledge about colonialism and, specifically, correcting the distorted narratives about the *madamato* that omitted that it was violence. Secondly, through these counter-narratives, it is possible to bring out the invisibilized, erased or excluded histories and subjectivities from the dominant historical narrative that have no place in a figurative and literal sense in public space and collective memory and to whom, for this reason, no commemorative monument is dedicated (Mills 2007). In this sense, Destà’s story represents the many marginalized stories that have long been relegated to the private realm of family memories, which have struggled to emerge to be recognized and become public, but which constitute a living memory in the neighbourhood. In fact, the Porta Venezia gardens border the neighbourhood bearing the same name, which for many of its inhabitants is identified as the Habesha neighbourhood of Milan because of the historical presence of the Eritrean and Ethiopian community. It is for this reason that the decision to dedicate the gardens and the statue to Montanelli, in addition to being problematic in itself, is also problematic in relation to the neighbourhood and has, thus, also produced a reaction from the people who inhabit and live the space.

4. RECLAIMING SPACE STARTING FROM THE HABESHA NEIGHBOURHOOD

“The Porta Venezia is the ‘antique’ arrival neighbourhood” (Cremaschi, Albanese and Artero 2020, 6) of Eritrean migrants since the 1970s, which formed the basis for the progressive settlement of the Habesha community. The latter transformed this area of the city into a point of reference for the community, investing in it economically and symbolically (*Ibidem*). As Anna Arnone writes, even today this is the area of Milan where the majority of Eritrean “restaurants, bars and clubs are located” and it is also a highly politicized area (Arnone 2010, 19). In addition, there are formal and informal solidarity groups in the neighbourhood ready to take action in support of migrant people. Not surprisingly, this place has played “an important role in the geography of migration” (Cremaschi, Albanese and Artero 2020, 6) in Italy. Regarding the specific history of the public gardens of Porta Venezia, between 2013 and 2016, during the so-called “refugee crisis”, many of whom came from the Horn of Africa, this space became the place where refugees spent the night. As a result, it was precisely within the public gardens that humanitarian assistance to migrants was organized and provided by the *Cambio Passo* association, composed of the younger generation of Eritrean and Ethiopian origin, which was founded in the neighbourhood specifically as a community reaction to give support to the refugee arriving without point of reference beyond the neighbourhood. Therefore, this story testifies not only the rootedness of the Habesha community in the neighbourhood, but also the extent to which the public gardens are a place where the anti-racist political struggle takes concrete form. Consequently, in 2020, in the wake

of the protests that took place following the murder of George Floyd, *Cantiere Milano*, a grassroots political organisation composed of racialized young people, gave rise to the project *Decolonize the City* and to a series of actions specifically within the public gardens of Porta Venezia. The project aims to decolonize the city to show “other histories, start a process of collective memory” and “re-signify the symbols” of the racist and sexist past (Cantiere Milano 2021). With these goals, together with *Cambio Passo*, *Decolonize the city* organised a series of lectures and public readings on Italian colonialism, *madamato* and anticolonial resistance. At the end of the lecture on the *madamato*, given by university professor Angelica Pesarini, a plaque was affixed inside the gardens that reads “Italian colonialism was also violence, rape, massacres and racial laws. Remembering them serves to build a better present and future: borderless, anti-racist, decolonial” (*Ibidem*). In addition, lectures and readings were also organised on the relationship between Italy and Eritrea after the end of colonialism.⁵ These were aimed at talking about the relationship between the Habesha community and the neighbourhood from a historical perspective, bringing out the motivations that drove Eritreans to migrate to Italy in the late 1970s and the Italian responsibilities in this regard. These actions aim to visibilize the continuity between past and present in the erasure of histories and subjectivities not only in the historical narrative, but also in the contemporary. In fact, the actions want to bring out how in the decision to re-name the public gardens after Montanelli the historical relationship between the Habesha community, the gardens and the neighbourhood was not taken into consideration, showing how this history is not recognized by the institutions (Frisina and Ghebremariam Tesfau 2020). The reason behind the institutions' decision to re-name the gardens after Montanelli is that he used to walk in the park since it was near the headquarters of his newspaper. Therefore, it is evident how for the institutions the history of the Habesha community is not part of the officially recognized history of the neighbourhood. For this reason, contesting the institutions' decision for racialized people is a way to reclaim space within the public sphere and to make one's voice heard on what histories and subjectivities are part of the identity of the gardens, the neighbourhood, Milan and, more generally, Italy. In fact, on the *Cantiere Milano* website, it is possible to read that *Decolonize the city* aims to: “resignify and *redefine public space*, its symbols, monuments, infrastructure...to build together a metropolis in the image and likeness of the many *bodies* and *histories* that make up the mestizo and transfeminist community that lives here”⁶ (Cantiere Milano 2021). The actions carry forward a broader battle that also has to do with recognizing this part of the population as part of citizenship including recognizing the generations of racialized people born and/or raised in Italy as sons and daughters of the diaspora. In this sense, the actions are also a way of reaffirming their presence and belonging to the space on the basis of which they claim rights: the right to Italian citizenship and to have a voice in what defines and represents the history, culture, and identity of the country to which these people belong. In other words, contestations also imply a questioning of what is defined and is part of the heritage.

5. HERITAGE CONTESTATIONS AND COUNTER-PROPOSALS: CHALLENGING ESSENTIALISED CONCEPTIONS OF IDENTITY AND BRINGING FORWARD NEW MODELS OF IDENTIFICATION

In the Western European conception of heritage, statues and monuments represent the history, culture, identity and values of a population (Maffi 2006). Therefore, the decision of the Municipality of Milan to dedicate the public gardens of Porta Venezia and a statue to Montanelli entails the decision to concretise its patrimonialisation. It deutes him as representing the country's history, identity and culture and attributing him an objective, universal and therefore incontestable value. Not surprisingly, following the protest actions, a reaction was triggered by some of the “defenders” of the history, culture and heritage that Montanelli embodies and symbolises. According to these, the contestation of Montanelli is a threat to Italian history, culture, heritage and identity per se (Gebrial 2018). However, what the contestations really call into question are the essentialised conceptions of identity and culture that exclude part of the population and the idea of history as something objective and fixed on which

⁵ The reading was based on the book *Eritrea colonia tradita* (1989) by Stefano Poscia and was organised together with Rahel Sereke, president of the Cambio Passo association.

⁶ Emphasis by the author.

the present has no power and from the production of which certain subjectivities have been and are excluded (*Ibidem*). Moreover, what is also called into question is the supposed objective and universal value of the heritage embodied by Montanelli. The actions, in fact, are bearers of a plurality of viewpoints, memories and identities that disprove both the universality and objectivity of heritage and essentialised conceptions of Italian identity and culture. In this sense, they claim the possibility of redefining what represents them too as part of the citizenry and, therefore, they claim the right to have a voice on what defines and represents the history, culture, and identity of the country and population they are part of. Thus, the protests bring out a split, in other words, how a part of the population does not recognise itself in the proposed heritage and the values it represents. Consequently, many actions in response to Montanelli's patrimonialisation consist of counterproposals of subjectivities representing the identities and values with which the racialised people identify. In this regard, besides the re-naming of the public gardens of Porta Venezia after Destà and in memory of the victims of Italian colonialism, there are two other actions that are particularly emblematic. In the first of these, in 2020, *Decolonize the city* placed within the public gardens a sculpture by Senegalese artist Talla Mor Sek dedicated to Thomas Sankara. During the unveiling, the sculpture was wrapped in an emergency thermal blanket, generally used for first aid to shipwrecked migrants who had just disembarked, thus referring to the relationship between colonialism, racism and immigration. In the second action, which took place the following year on the occasion of the day of liberation from Nazi-fascism, a plaque was placed in the gardens in memory of Giorgio Marincola, a black partisan, and Giuseppe Tzigari, a Roma partisan, both fighting in the resistance for the liberation from Nazi-fascism. The spread of such initiatives contribute to the construction of new material and immaterial places of counter-memory from below. For example, in recent years, the municipalities of several cities have accepted proposals from below to dedicate street names to Giorgio Marincola and, in 2023, the proposal to dedicate a day to the victims of Italian colonialism. The construction of these tangible and intangible places of counter-memory take the function of bearing witness to the history of social injustice and exploitation (Guermanni 2021), remediating the *rimosso coloniale* (colonial removal) and transmitting the values of anti-racism, anti-semitism and resistance against Nazi-fascism, colonialism and imperialism. In addition, street re-names and plaques, such as those dedicated to Giorgio Marincola and Giuseppe Tzigari, are a way of introducing histories that have been excluded into the country's landscape and heritage so that they can be recognised as part of the country's history and identity. These histories form part of the genealogy of racialised people in Italy, so recovering them and bringing them to light serves to contrast the idea that the presence of racialised people in Italy is a new phenomenon linked exclusively to recent immigration. Furthermore, it serves to counter the denial of the identity of racialised people born and/or raised in Italy (Schwartz 2022). Recovering genealogy also serve to reclaim a sense of belonging to the territory on the basis of which to demand citizenship reform. In this sense, these initiatives are "performative acts of citizenship" (Isin 2008; 2017), that is, "acts that stretch the formal and traditional concept of citizenship far beyond its legal limitations (national belonging), its political borders, and social boundaries" (Giuliani and Pereira 2023, 2). Consequently, they bring a critique to the way citizenship has been historically and socially forged. In fact, the current Italian citizenship law favours a generous application of the principle of *ius sanguinis* and adopts a restrictive version of *ius soli* (Pesarini and Tintori 2020, 95). Thus, according to this today, children of migrant parents who are born and/or grow up in Italy are "foreigners". Finally, the decision to propose naming streets after Giorgio Marincola is due to the many symbolic meanings embedded in his story. The latter during the counter-memory pathways usually is told starting from the discovery of his body since, due to his skin colour, for a long time no one was able to imagine that it could belong to an Italian of Somali descent. This story is used to bring out the problematic association between Italian-ness and whiteness that is still used today in racist narratives and according to which racialised people are not recognised as Italian. Therefore, telling these stories has the function of countering the essentialised and biologising conception of Italian-ness, proposing a redefinition of it.

6. CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper I have tried to bring out how traces of colonialism, such as monuments, statues and colonial toponymy, can be used to counter distorted, sweetened and incomplete narratives

about colonialism. At the same time, through the case study of the public gardens of Porta Venezia I tried to show how the initiatives of re-signification and contestation of the presence of these elements in public space are used by racialised people as a tool of political negotiation. In particular, the case of the public gardens reveals how questioning statues and as representative objects of heritage, history, culture and identity constitutes a way to: reclaim their right to have a voice over the memory of colonialism and what is chosen to represent history, identity and culture; redefine public space in a way that reflects and represents the multiplicity of bodies and histories that inhabit it; assert their presence and belonging to the place, challenging the essentialised conception of identity and claiming citizenship law reform. Finally, through actions of re-signification, racialised people are creating new places of counter-memory of colonialism through which to bring out the subjectivities and histories that have been excluded from the dominant narrative, identifying new models and new values with which to identify and express their subjectivity.

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