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(Counter-)Narratives of Violence

Colonial Legacies and Activism in Italy's Public Spaces

Abstract: Even though the Italian colonial empire was relatively small and short-lived (compared to others, such as the British or French), it left numerous material traces in the public spaces of Italian cities. For decades, no one was interested in the monuments and street names that celebrated long-gone expeditions and military ventures. Since 2015, however, this has changed. This article examines how dominant discourses of colonial violence manifested in public spaces during the liberal and fascist eras and how collectives have challenged these narratives through the use of various strategies in recent years.

Keywords: colonialism, public space, memory, violence, activism, Italy

Pincio Hill is not just any site in the city of Rome. Anyone walking through the park above the city will inevitably pass the dozens of busts scattered throughout the park. The venue is closely linked to the history of Italian unification in the nineteenth century: the busts were commissioned by the political leadership during the short-lived Roman Republic in 1849[1] and after 1870 by the city administration, when Rome finally became Italy's capital. By the 1960s, there were a total of 229 busts, depicting mainly male historical Italian figures from antiquity to the protagonists of Italian unification and expansion thereafter. The busts were meant to create a homogeneous image of a society, a national identity that was not yet established and fixed. Through the selection of the subjects and the construction of the busts, political elites of the

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1 The Roman Republic of 1849 was a democratic republic which came into being after the revolutionary uprisings in 1848. After France's and Spain's military intervention, the republic was crushed, and the Church's political rule was restored.

new nation state defined what or who was (not) to be considered part of the Italian "imagined community"[2] for decades.[3]

As the hill offers a magnificent view over the *Piazza del Popolo* towards the west, today it is popular with tourists and for spontaneous parties.[4] It attracts hundreds of visitors a day, especially towards the evening as the sun sets behind the world-famous St Peter's Basilica. However, since the busts are placed in the publicly accessible garden, they are also regularly damaged by unknown persons. Conservative observers usually frame these as acts of vandalism, mindless destruction. In a newspaper article from 2010, Alessandra Rizzo, a member of the Associated Press Agency, for instance, complained that even though police presence in the park has increased in recent years, busts are "routinely vandalised, their noses broken, their faces smeared with offensive writing". Rizzo holds that "students or young people under the fumes of alcohol"[5] are responsible for the damage.

On the morning of 19 June 2020, local authorities found another damaged bust on Pincio Hill. During the night someone had poured red paint over the bust of Antonio Baldissera (1838–1917), a military general who had been governor of Eritrea in the 1890s. The Roman mayor, Virgina Raggi, of the populist Five Star Movement, immediately tried to frame this intervention as part of the already well-known "vandalism" in the park. On Twitter she labelled those responsible as "uncivilized", condemned their act as "shameful", and demanded that "Rome must be respected".[6]

Raggi's rhetoric makes the attack on this bust seem arbitrary and, additionally, denies any political agenda to those behind it, as if they were merely drunken teens. "Rome", meanwhile, functions as a symbol that refers not to Rome as a physical site but to the values and historical imaginaries presented in the Pincio park, which Raggi believed should be respected. Rome's self-image, for instance, is driven by the idea of being a hub of civilization. The damaged statue, which was installed in 1932, is linked to this imperial imagination: as governor it was Antonio Baldissera's aim to bring the 'benefits' of Italy's 'civilization' to the people of Eritrea, which was an Italian colony between 1882 and 1941.[7]

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2 Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, Frankfurt am Main/New York 1983.

3 Alessandro Cremona/Sabina Gnisci/Alessandra Ponente, Il giardino della memoria. I Busti dei Grandi italiani al Pincio, Rome 1999; http://roma.andreapollett.com/S1/romac23i.htm (25 April 2022).

4 https://www.walksinsiderome.com/tour-attractions/pincio-terrace/ (25 April 2022).

5 Alessandra Rizzo, Eternal City grapples with endless vandalism, in: NBC News Digital, 29 Juli 2010, https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna38471910 (25 April 2023); all translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

6 https://twitter.com/virginiaraggi/status/1335595486770835460 (15 February 2022).

7 Piero Pieri, BALDISSERA, Antonio, in: Dizionario biografico degli italiani, vol. 5, Rome 1963, https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/antonio-baldissera_(Dizionario-Biografico) (25 April 2022).

However, this time things were different on Pincio Hill. The intervention against Baldissera's bust was linked to the Black Lives Matter movement and its political agenda. The covering of a representation of colonialism with red paint as a symbol of violence was not only inspired by similar actions of the movement around the globe but also by a BLM demonstration that had taken place in Rome the day before. The same day that Raggi tweeted, activists from the network *Restiamo umani*[8] (Let's Remain Human) came forward on Facebook and claimed responsibility for this action as well as for another intervention that had taken place the same night: the activists had changed the street name of Via Amba Aradam to Via George Floyd, the African-American US citizen whose murder by a policeman in May 2020 unleashed the global BLM movement. The official name, Amba Aradam, given to the street in 1936, recalls a battle in the 1935–1941 Italo-Ethiopian War, in which Italians deployed gas warfare.[9] Making use of the media attention, *Restiamo umani* stated that "there is a clear need to bring back a historically true narrative of Italian colonialism. Some of our streets recall shameful slaughters carried out by Italian soldiers in Ethiopia […] and some monuments give eternal glory to men who are guilty of the worst atrocities against the human race."[10]

Today activists denounce how Italy's colonial legacy lives on unchallenged, and, therefore, they demand change in colonialism's continuing commemoration in public spaces, but this perception is quite new in the Italian context. After all, during the decades following the end of colonialism in 1943, its material traces have caused little offence.[11] Few would have considered street names or monuments referring to the violent colonial past as "dark heritage"[12] in recent decades.[13] In 2004, Krystyna von Henneberg argued that in her reading, "the Italian silence about street names and monuments reflected the more general official post war reticence about empire".[14] Before the 2010s, public debates about Italy's colonial past were indeed rare.[15] One

8 https://www.facebook.com/ReteRestiamoUmani/ (25 April 2022).

9 Aram Mattioli, Entgrenzte Kriegsgewalt. Der italienische Giftgaseinsatz in Abessinien 1935–1936, Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte 51/3 (2003), 311–338, 325–333.

10 Arianna di Cori, Roma, imbrattato busto di Baldissera al Pincio, via Amba Aradam diventa via George Floyd, in: La Repubblica, 19 June 2020.

11 On the memory of colonialism in Italy after 1945 see Jacqueline Andall/Derek Duncan (eds.), Italian Colonialism. Legacy and Memory, Oxford 2005; Nicola Labanca, Una guerra per l'impero. Memorie della campagna d'Etiopia 1935–36, Bologna 2005; Valeria Deplano/Alessandro Pes (eds.), Quel che resta dell'Impero. La cultura coloniale degli italiani, Milan/Udine 2014.

12 For the term, see Suzie Thomas et al., Dark Heritage, in: Claire Smith (ed.), Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology, Berlin 2019, doi: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-51726-1_3197-1.

13 Krystyna von Henneberg, Monuments, Public Space, and the Memory of Empire in Modern Italy, in: History and Memory 16/1 (2004), 37–85, 44.

14 Ibid., 49.

15 Although there is significant scholarship on colonial legacies in the urban spaces of Italy and the former colonies: Mia Fuller, Moderns Abroad. Architecture, Cities and Italian Imperialism, London

popular example is the discussion about the Axum Stela, which fascists looted from Ethiopia in 1937 and installed in Rome as a sign of triumph. Even though Italy had already agreed to return it in 1947, it was not until 2005 that it did so and only in response to repeated demands by the Ethiopian government.[16] Such disputes addressing the transmission of historical knowledge in urban space are closely related to museum debates with similar questions, content, and structure. Therefore, a critical reflection on public space is beneficial in the context of a special issue addressing museological reflections on the display of violence.[17]

As cultural objects in public space, colonial monuments and street names have a social-political referential function. As media of cultural memory, they are indicators of the public struggle for power over the 'national' narrative.[18] Therefore, by drawing on colonial heritage in Italy's urban spaces, this article aims to investigate both how colonial violence is displayed and how anti-racist and decolonial activists have been dealing with these articulations in recent years. In my reading of this struggle over meaning, I am mostly drawing on the theoretical framework provided by Oliver Marchart's political theory of collective memory. By using a transdisciplinary approach relying on cultural and memory theory, political discourse analysis (especially in its hegemony-theoretical variant), and political philosophy, Marchart describes collective memory as "a layered field of sedimentations whose contingent origins have been forgotten in the contestation of competing definitions of the past after a particular version of the past has prevailed and become hegemonic".[19] In this article I read a city's monuments and street names as material representations of a dominant interpretation of the colonial past. The resources expended, the sponsoring groups (public bodies or particular groups), and the spatial placement in the urban centre or periphery determine the relevance and binding nature of the narratives.[20] A moment of crisis or conflict can launch a process of politicization through

2006; Mia Fuller, Italy's Colonial Futures: Colonial Inertia and Postcolonial Capital in Asmara, in: California Italian Studies 2/1 (2011), doi: https://doi.org/10.5070/C321009014; Sebastian De Pretto/Markus Wurzer (eds.), Colonial Heritage in Italy (forthcoming special issue in Interventions. International Journal of Postcolonial Studies).

16 Rino Bianchi/Igiaba Scego, Roma negata. Percorsi postcoloniali nella città, Rome 2014, 70–98.

17 How colonial heritage can be dealt with from a postcolonial perspective is shown, for example, by the project called *Postcolonial Italy*: http://postcolonialitaly.com/ (25 April 2022); see also Daphné Budasz's contribution in this special issue.

18 Heidemarie Uhl, Aus dem Lot. Denkmäler und reflexive Erinnerungskultur, in: Arbeitskreis zur Umgestaltung des Lueger-Denkmals in ein Mahnmal gegen Antisemitismus und Rassismus (ed.), Open Call: Handbuch zur Umgestaltung des Lueger-Denkmals, Vienna 2011, 38–45, 41.

19 Oliver Marchart, Das historisch-politische Gedächtnis. Für eine politische Theorie kollektiver Erinnerung, in: Ljiljana Radonić/Heidemarie Uhl (eds.), Gedächtnis im 21. Jahrhundert. Zur Neuverhandlung eines kulturwissenschaftlichen Leitbegriffs, Bielefeld 2016, 43–77, 48–49; Paul Connerton had already coined the term "sedimentation" in his 1989 book entitled How Societies Remember.

20 Uhl, Lot, (2016), 41.

which the (forgotten) political character of collective memory, its constructed and contingent nature, can again become evident.[21] Therefore, in regard to colonial heritage the anti-colonial protests of activists challenge normative narratives by proposing counter-positions about the colonial past that imagine a different, truly decolonial future.[22]

This article is structured into three sections. In the first, I outline the historical-political framework by discussing the connection between public space, collective memory, and identity-building in Italy. Next, by drawing on the monument for Pietro Toselli in the small town of Peveragno in Piedmont, I analyse – following Marchart's terminology – the historical process of "sedimentation",[23] namely how hegemonic discourses of colonial violence manifested in public spaces in the liberal and fascist eras.[24] This case study stands out in Italy's landscape of colonial monuments because it is one of the few depicting an '*Ascaro*'. This colonial term refers to men from the colony of Eritrea recruited by the colonial regime, whose attempts at occupying East Africa relied upon these colonial troops.[25] They are almost invisible in the vast majority of memorials, however. In addition, the Peveragno monument is the only one – as far as I know – visualizing the body of an indigenous opponent.[26] According to Henneberg, most colonial monuments in Italy do not depict violence. Since the most popular example of this kind of almost visually neutral monument, the Dogali Obelisk in Rome, has already been studied in detail,[27] the monument in Peveragno allows me to focus on the opposite – a memorial explicitly displaying actions of violence. My analysis of it is based on a critical reading of the monument itself and the narrative it provides as well as on contemporary newspaper articles addressing the memorial. In order to contextualize my analysis, I primarily rely on Henneberg's work from 2004, in which – among other things – she addressed colonial monuments' aesthetic forms and materialities in Italy.[28]

21 Marchart, Gedächtnis, (2016), 48–49.

22 Britta Timm Knudsen/John Oldfield/Elizabeth Buettner/Elvan Zabunyan, Introduction, in: Britta Timm Knudsen/John Oldfield/Elizabeth Buettner/Elvan Zabunyan (eds.), Decolonizing Colonial Heritage. New Agendas, Actors and Practices in and beyond Europe, New York 2022, 1–22, 13; Christoffer Kølvraa/Britta Timm Knudsen, Decolonizing European Colonial Heritage in Urban Space – An Introduction to the Special Issue, Heritage & Society 13/1–2 (2020), 1–9, 4.

23 Marchart, Gedächtnis, (2016), 47.

24 The history of united Italy is commonly divided into two eras, the liberal one from 1861 to 1921 and the fascist one from 1922 to 1943/45.

25 For more details see Alessandro Volterra, Sudditi Coloniali. Ascari Eritrei 1935–1941, Milan 2005; Massimo Zaccaria, Colonial Troops and Italian Colonialism, in: Contemporanea. Rivista di storia dell'800 e del '900 21/1 (2018), 107–111.

26 As far as I know, there is only one other monument in Italy showing a Black body: 'The Monument to Workers and Soldiers Fallen in Africa' in Syracuse, see Henneberg, Monuments, (2004), 66–69.

27 Bianchi/Scego, Roma, 2014, 49–69.

28 Henneberg, Monuments, (2004).

In the third section, I examine in detail the process of "re-politicizing" collective memory[29] and address activists' responses to these historical but still hegemonic articulations of colonial violence. I do this by looking mostly at the activities and agenda of the Bolognese collective *Resistenze in Cirenaica* (RIC, Resistances in Cyrenaica). Founded in 2015, it is one of the key players in the ongoing decolonial and anti-racist debate on how to deal with colonial legacies in public space. This section of the article draws on my critical reading of websites as well as of activists' articulations on social media because these are the 'sites' where the discussion on contested representations of colonialism is taking place. In the framing of the activists' heritage practices I rely on the methodological considerations made by the ECHOES project.[30]

Public sphere, monuments, and identity-building in Italy

Any forms of symbolic commemoration in urban space can be read as attempts by socio-political actors "to govern, control, and encourage collective affects".[31] So, even though public space is considered – at least in theoretical terms – "a product of socio-spatial relations", "a sphere of multiplicity and plurality" for open exchange and interactions that belongs to the people as a whole,[32] the political elites of nation states of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries not only built and shaped it but also maintained and controlled its accessibility through surveillance practices. For them, public space was of particular importance, and they appropriated it as a central power resource. Through a strategy of constituting hegemony that included naming streets and constructing monuments, elites displaced different discourses and routinized their view of the past as the dominant one in public space – from which they derived their legitimacy.[33] This is also true of the Kingdom of Italy, which proclaimed unification in 1861 after two wars of independence. The Savoy dynasty occupied public space by means of commemorative signs, and invented rituals as well as anniversaries through which it tried to shape the "affective attunement"[34] of its audiences towards the idea of national unification.

29 Marchart, Gedächtnis, (2016), 47.

30 Knudsen/Oldfield/Buettner/Zabunyan, Introduction, (2022), 11–12; see https://projectechoes.eu/ (25 April 2022).

31 Kølvraa/Knudsen, Heritage, (2020), 3.

32 Tali Hatuka, Public Space, in: Kathrin Fahlenbrach/Martin Klimke/Joachim Scharloth (eds.), Protest Cultures. A Companion (Protest, Culture and Society 17), New York/Oxford 2016, 284–293, 284–285.

33 Marchart, Gedächtnis, (2016).

34 Kølvraa/Knudsen, Heritage, (2020), 3.

In the century and a half that followed unification, public spaces remained sites of collective memorialization for Italian society. *Andare in piazza* (going to the square) was considered an important part of someone's life, since the *piazza* represented the location where social life happened. But it was also the site of both political struggle and power representation: after the violence that shook public space following the First World War, the fascist regime charged it as a specifically national space with mass events.[35]

In the 1940s, Italy saw a whole series of political caesuras. In 1943, Benito Mussolini's fascist regime collapsed after 21 years of rule.[36] The same year also saw the end of the colonial empire that had existed since 1882.[37] The end of the Second World War not only brought the defeat of fascism but also a change in Italy's form of government: in a referendum, the population voted against the constitutional monarchy and in favour of a republic. The Savoy dynasty, discredited by the role it had played during fascism, went into exile in Portugal.

After the fall of the fascist regime, public space became a stage for settling scores with fascism. This began with the public presentation of Mussolini's corpse in the *Piazzale Loreto* in Milan in 1945 and continued with the – albeit only haphazard – removal of fascism's symbols of power. This process was far from thorough and its remnants were sometimes dealt with in very different ways. Overwhelmed by its omnipresence in the public space, many were overlooked or left as they were. Republicans seem to have been content – as far as street names were concerned – to replace only the most compromising ones with the names of persons anti-fascists had lifted to the status of a hero of the resistance or of the young democracy. According to Henneberg, these activities represented a "low-cost practice of erasing and reinventing urban traditions to inaugurate a new political era". The new names "were intended to forge a new republican and democratic consciousness, didactically informing citizens whom to admire, what to remember and forget, and which dates and battles to consider part of Italy's new national history".[38]

So, while in an attempt to develop a new, republican identity the most prominent parts of fascist heritage were politicized in the aftermath of the war, other

35 Nick Dines, The Politics of the Piazza. The History and Meaning of the Italian Square, by Eamonn Canniffe, in: Modern Italy 15/1 (2010), 115–118, 115; see also Mario Isnenghi, L'Italia in piazza. I luoghi della vita pubblica dal 1848 ai giorni nostri, Bologna 2004.

36 After the fall of the fascist regime in 1943, Mussolini succeeded in establishing another in northern Italy, the Italian Social Republic (Repubblica Sociale Italiana), which was to exist until 1945.

37 In 1882, Italy's government took control of the Bay of Assab, which had been bought by an Italian company in 1869. See Theodore M. Vestal, Reflections on the Battle of Adwa and Its Significance for Today, in: Paulos Milkias (ed.), The Battle of Adwa: Reflections on Ethiopia's Historic Victory Against European Colonialism, New York 2005, 21–36, 22.

38 Henneberg, Monuments, (2004), 42.

dominant discourses of the past remained untouched. What the republicans did not want to get rid of was the memory of the royal regime. After more than 80 years of reign, the royal family was so bound up in national history that the republican elites did not overthrow its memorials and street names. This is because its removal would not only have called into question the monarchy but also the project of nation-building, which remained an important point of reference for the new, republican self-image.

Likewise, most representations of colonialism survived the political caesuras of the 1940s largely unscathed in the public sphere. In some places, republicans renamed or dismantled monuments where the link to the fascist regime was too strong. For the most part, however, colonial monuments and street names of both the liberal and fascist eras remained intact.[39] This is because the political parties of the republic did not break with the legacy of the colonial regimes. On the contrary, after the end of the Second World War, there was a strong consensus among politicians across party lines, from the conservatives to the communists, that Italy had to make efforts at the negotiating table with the Allies to regain the colonies lost during the war. For them, this political position did not contradict the anti-fascist consensus. Just because the fascist regime was also colonial did not mean that colonialism, like fascism, should be condemned per se; after all, other democracies, such as Britain and France, still had colonial empires at that time. Nevertheless, in the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty, the Allied powers rejected Italy's demands for the restoration of its empire.[40]

In the decades that followed, the memory sites of colonialism lost their former identity-forming function. In the liberal and fascist eras, political leaders considered colonial expansion a central part of the nation-building project. *What* and *who* was Italian were negotiated above all in confrontation with the perceived 'otherness' on African soil. After the Second World War, these experiences lost social relevance. The sites of colonial memory faded and became almost invisible in public space – even though they remained physically present.[41] Exceptions to this general trend of marginalization can be found within the republican army or veteran associations. These groups created strong continuities with the Royal Army, which was involved in colonial enterprises during liberal and fascist times. Republican military branches institutionalized the maintenance of colonial memory through the continuation of rituals. In the city of Messina on Sicily, for instance, both the 24th Artillery Regiment and local veterans' associations regularly commemorate the 1896 Battle of

39 Ibid., 42.

40 Italian presence in Africa, however, did not end until 1960: In 1949, the United Nations made Somaliland a UN Trust Territory under Italy's administration.

41 Henneberg, Monuments, (2004), 44, 49.

Adwa. Again in 2022, they laid a wreath at the monument (erected in 1897) dedicated to a Sicilian detachment that took part in the battle.[42]

In the 1960s and 1970s, unlike other European countries which still claimed a status as empires, Italy had no colonies and thus did not go through a process of political and cultural decolonization. Therefore, it did not have to deal with indigenous movements demanding political independence.[43] On the contrary, veterans of colonial wars as well as a still strong colonial lobby were successful in perpetuating the myth of the *brava gente* (good people). Behind this term – which had already been coined in fascism – is the idea that Italian colonizers were particularly good and humane, and that indigenous societies benefited from Italy's 'civilizing' missions.[44] Under Silvio Berlusconi's governments (1994–2011 incl. some interruptions), which pursued a historical revisionist course, this imagination of the past became dominant again.[45]

According to Heidemarie Uhl, marginalized monuments become socially visible again when "they are obviously no longer in line with the memory needs of a new generation".[46] This can happen, as Marchart argues, because collective memory is a political area of conflict determined by a diverse distribution of power resources, which makes its total hegemonization by a single actor impossible. Consequently, after a discourse has become established as hegemonic and other, competing discourses are silenced, the renewed politicization of collective memory becomes only a matter of time. In moments of crisis or political conflict new actors can appear in the field demanding a change in the dominant narratives by protesting its articulations.[47]

Around the turn of the millennium, Italy's unchallenged colonial legacies made it back into public debate. The interest in the colonial past and its representations, however, was to a great extent imposed from "outside" as a result of three different kinds of events. First, the legal efforts by former colonial subjects to reclaim their

42 https://www.tempostretto.it/news/messina-ricordato-il-126-anniversario-della-battaglia-di-adua%EF%BF%BC.html (7 March 2022).

43 Karen Pinkus, Empty Spaces. Decolonization in Italy, in: Patrizia Palumbo (ed.), A Place in the Sun. Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-unification to the Present, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 2003, 299–320, 300.

44 For instance, see Filippo Focardi/Lutz Klinkhammer, The Question of Fascist Italy's War Crimes: The Construction of a Self-acquitting Myth (1943–1948), in: Journal of Modern Italian Studies 9/3 (2004), 330–348; Elena Petricola/Andrea Tappi (eds.), Brava gente. Memoria e rappresentazioni del colonialismo, in: Zapruder. Storie in movimento 23/1 (2010), 1–176; Angelo Del Boca, Italiani, brava gente? Un mito duro a morire, Milan 2014.

45 Nicola Labanca, Perché ritorna la "brava gente". Revisioni recenti sulla storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana, in: Angelo Del Boca (ed.), La storia negata. Il revisionismo e il suo uso politico, Vicenza 2009, 69–106.

46 Uhl, Lot, (2011), 38.

47 Marchart, Gedächtnis, (2016), 53–54.

cultural heritage looted by Italy during colonialism finally paid off. The aforementioned restitution of the Axum Stela to Ethiopia and of the Venus of Cyrene, a classical statue, to Libya in 2008 are two well-known examples.[48] Second, immigration from African countries brought back Italy's colonial past: Even though immigration into Italy from former European colonies started from the 1970s on, it is only since the 1990s that it has attracted attention in political and public debates. The colonial legacy appeared in these, among other things, in the framing of immigrants as "different, criminal, inferior, and dirty or ill".[49] This was the case, for example, in the aftermath of the 2013 Lampedusa shipwreck, in which at least 366 people, mostly from Italy's former colonies Eritrea and Somalia, died. The Italian state failed to integrate the migrants who managed to reach the country, leading to the social normalization of racism, which ultimately resulted in an increase in incidents of racially motivated violence.[50] It is important to note that it is researchers and writers of postcolonial literature with migrant backgrounds who are pushing both public and academic debates on colonial legacies further. Somali-Italian writer Igiaba Scego, for instance, in 2014 pointed the way ahead by examining the meanings of Roman sites associated with colonialism.[51] Third, in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd in May 2020, Italy – like many other countries – saw a significant number of BLM protests campaigning against police brutality and discrimination experienced by people racialized as Black.[52] Young Black Italians came forward, spoke up, and highlighted that racism is not only happening elsewhere but also in Italy.[53]

In Italy, as in other countries, in the wake of all these events, social movements and activists came forward to reclaim their right to the city as a co-created space,[54] which would ideally be "a significant location for cultures to negotiate, protest, modify, and present their values and traditions".[55] As a result, protests sometimes erupted at the sites of colonial monuments. Activists took the role of informal heritage actors by inventing, mobilizing, and developing "new strategies for and performances of affective attunement in the urban space".[56] As Marchart would put

48 https://plone.unige.ch/art-adr/cases-affaires/venus-of-cyrene-2013-italy-and-libya (25 April 2022).

49 https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseih/2020/08/25/in-plain-sight-black-lives-matter-and-italys-colonial-past/ (25 April 2022).

50 Abril K. Muvumbi, Black lives matter in Italy, in: European Journal of Women's Studies (2021), doi: 10.1177/1350506820978900.

51 Bianchi/Scego, Roma, 2014.

52 https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseih/2020/08/25/in-plain-sight-black-lives-matter-and-italys-colonial-past/ (24 April 2022).

53 Muvumbi, Lives, (2021).

54 For instance, see Kafui Attoh, What kind of right is the right to the city?, in: Progress in Human Geography 35/5 (2011), 669–685.

55 Hatuka, Space, (2016), 284.

56 Kølvraa/Knudsen, Heritage, (2020), 3.

it, suddenly, monuments that had previously been almost invisible regained both their political character and their social relevance[57] because they were considered to represent both the colonial past and the failure to come to terms with its legacy. The figure of journalist and newspaper founder Indro Montanelli (1909–2001), who had participated in the fascist attack on Ethiopia in the 1930s, and his statue in Milan were at the centre of the controversy sparked by the BLM movement.[58]

Since activists have no political power to change what they denounce, their actions are designed to draw attention to their concerns and to provoke a target group, usually political leaders, that does have the power to effect change. In this regard the choice of spatial location is crucial because it affects both the attention their actions receive and their meaning. By appropriating or possessing space, activity challenges the narrative presented at this particular site.[59] In my reading, given Pincio Hill's significance as a reference point for Italy's cultural identity, *Restiamo umani*'s action denounced the fact that the city of Rome still celebrates a colonialist as a national hero. The protest in Milan, on the other hand, addressed everyday racism and its colonial origins by drawing on Montanelli's racist thinking.

Colonialism, violence, and its hegemonic narratives in public space

From the beginning of Italian expansion in the 1880s, colonial ventures involved massive violence. Packaging this in memorials and thus communicating it to audiences at home posed an immense challenge to political leaders, especially because early campaigns were not only violent but, in addition, were marked by major setbacks that swallowed up vast sums of money – the enormous defeat at Adwa in 1896, for instance, claimed more Italian lives than all previous wars of unification.[60] Unlike these conflicts, the wars fought in East Africa were difficult for political leaders to explain to society. In fact, the wars were controversial, and the public met them with scepticism and was even openly exasperated with them after the traumatic defeats at Dogali and Adwa.[61] Owing to these initial failures, "official efforts to represent and justify empire were marked by an especially draining effort to reconcile imperial ambition with national self-doubt, and populist

57 Marchart, Gedächtnis, (2016), 47.

58 Angelica Pesarini/Carla Panico, From Colston to Montanelli: Public Memory and Counter-monuments in the Era of Black Lives Matter, in: From the European South 9/2 (2021), 99–113.

59 Hatuka, Space, (286), 290.

60 Angelo Del Boca, Gli Italiani in Africa orientale: Dall'unità alla marcia su Roma, Milan 1992, 701.

61 Henneberg, Monuments, (2004), 55.

zeal with public disaffection".[62] This continued in the fascist era of colonialism: even then, after the occupation of Ethiopia in 1936, officials showed a defensive reluctance to celebrate colonial victories in the public sphere, which led to the construction of less lavish monuments.[63]

Of course, this does not mean that liberal and fascist officials did not try to secure the hegemony of their interpretation of colonial violence in the public sphere. Hundreds of street names and countless commemorative plaques and monuments bear witness to this desire. The colonial monuments, however, regardless of whether they were donated before or after the fascists took power in 1922, are characterized by an "unusual visual and iconographic sobriety",[64] especially in comparison to liberal monuments referring to the unification or fascist monuments referring to the First World War – which can be thoroughly martial in their figurative representations. In regard to the artistic configuration of colonial monuments, Henneberg argues that there is hardly any difference between those referring to losses in the nineteenth century and those recalling fascist victories: static-looking, formally conservative, they carry ideas "the more noble and abstract, the better", but show no depictions of struggle or violence – not even as figurative metaphors.[65]

According to Henneberg, when it came to the question of how to represent colonial warfare and violence, this "visual neutrality" of colonial monuments emerged because of political leaders' "continuing anxiety about empire" and the "insurmountable iconographic challenges that officials and the artists who served them struggled to solve".[66] Henneberg identifies three major challenges concerning the representation of loss, imperial space, and bodies of perpetrators and victims as racialized subjects. Clearly, making space in the metropolis for a monument depicting faraway traumatic defeats by an enemy considered racially inferior through figurative elements and details of battle was hardly an option, since it threatened the legitimacy of both empire and nationhood, which political leaders were so desperately trying to build. The political opposition could easily have used them in order to accuse the government for its failed colonial policy.[67] Therefore, political leaders tried to conceal military defeat by a supposedly inferior 'other' from the public, not only through media censorship[68] but also in the construction of monuments. So, instead of making artists represent violence through explicit depictions – as memo-

62 Ibid., 40.
63 Ibid., 39.
64 Ibid., 52.
65 Ibid., 52, 59–60.
66 Ibid., 54.
67 Ibid., 55–68.
68 David Forgacs, Messaggi di sangue. La violenza nella storia d'Italia, Bari 2021; see both chapters "Una guerra sporca (1911–12)" and "Stragi in Ethiopia (1937–39)".

rials of unification or the First World War in Italy frequently do[69] – officials relied on other artistic strategies, such as abstraction, distortion, and avoidance of any forms of realism. The monuments' task was "to commemorate war and death, stimulate national solidarity and elicit a sense of grief and awe"[70] – while referring only vaguely and abstractly to any acts of violence. The aforementioned Dogali Obelisk, constructed in 1887 to commemorate the Italian soldiers who had died in the lost Dogali battle four years prior,[71] is a well-studied example of such visually reluctant monuments. In total it is 15 metres high and consists of an Egyptian obelisk, an ancient symbol of military triumph, that was recovered in Rome in the 1880s and placed atop a massive pedestal with four aediculas which bear metal slabs listing the names of the dead. Besides eight lion heads (as a symbol of strength) – two on each side of the plinth foot – the monument abstains from any other symbols or figurative elements. This being said, it is important to point out that symbolic violence is inherent in such monuments: while the dead Italians are visible through the listing of names, the bodies of indigenous victims are completely erased.

Nevertheless, there are some monuments in Italy, from both the liberal and fascist eras, whose artists did not use the strategy of 'visual neutrality' and explicitly staged colonial violence. They did so by creating sculptures which depict no Black opponents and represent only white Italian bodies. They are presented either in fighting postures, such as in the *Alpini* monument in Milan, which features a mountaineer throwing a stone onto an invisible attacker, or in sacrificing postures, such as in the monument for the fallen of the Masotto battery in Messina, which stages an armed colonial soldier watching over two men, one dead, one wounded.[72]

Another example of a colonial monument that visualizes violence is that for Pietro Toselli (see Fig. 1) in Peveragno. Toselli was an officer and, as such, was deployed in Eritrea in the 1890s. He commanded an *Ascari* detachment at a military base near Mount Amba Alagi. On 7 December 1895, the Ethiopian army attacked this position and inflicted a devastating defeat. Almost all the men, at least 2,000 *Ascari* and 31 white officers, died, including Toselli.[73] The colonial regime made a hero of Toselli by honouring him with its highest award, the Golden Medal for Bravery; pro-

69 The monument for the dead of the Battle of Mentana (1867) in Florence erected in 1893 and that for the First World War dead in the commune of Pandino constructed in the interwar period are only two examples of many monuments with similarly martial aesthetics.

70 Henneberg, Monuments, (2004), 60.

71 Bianchi/Scego, Roma, 2014, 49–69.

72 Ibid., 56–57; Vincenzo Caruso/Domenico Interdonato, Il monumento alla Batteria Masotto e alle Batterie siciliane: Adua 1 marzo 1896, Messina 2014.

73 David Hamilton Shinn/Thomas Ofcansky, Historical Dictionary of Ethiopia, Lanham 2013, 71–72; Andrzej Bartnicki/Joanna Mantel-Niećko, Geschichte Äthiopiens – Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart, vol. 1, Berlin 1978, 334–335.

paganda exploited the event and staged him as a new Leonidas, in reference to the ancient military leader who had defied Persian superior numbers at the Thermopylae. Busts of Toselli were installed in schools, and parents named their children 'Tosello' or 'Tosella'.[74]

Moreover, the inhabitants of Toselli's birthplace, Peveragno, organized an Italy-wide appeal for donations to raise a monument to 'their' citizen. In 1899, four years after his death, a monument was finally inaugurated at its location in front of the town hall in the presence of many political and military leaders, including the Duke of Aosta, who was one of the monarchy's highest representatives. It consisted of a huge bronze sculpture and an enormous plinth, in total 6.5 metres high, designed by Ettore Ximenes (1855–1926), whom contemporaries considered "one of the best sculptors"[75] Italy had at that time.[76] The sculpture stages the last moments of the Battle of Amba Alagi. Contemporaries considered the depiction quite realistic.[77] Toselli, whose figure stands in the centre, is surrounded by a wounded officer, crouching to his right, and an *Ascaro* strangling an Ethiopian combatant to his left. Through the visualization of stereotypical clothing and bodily features (the Ethiopian, for instance, has curly hair, wears no shoes but a tunic and an ammunition belt), the artist racialized the bodies as either Black or white.[78] In my reading, the presence of the enemy in the sculpture was meant to emotionalize the audience by creating the idea of an inescapable situation.
The imposing pedestal bears an inscription formulated by the artist himself that has not been changed over the decades. It informs the audience that the monument is dedicated to "Major Pietro Toselli of Peveragno", "who with his fourth battalion of natives was attacked by a formidable Ethiopian horde" and who "died with his eyes on the enemy and his heart by Italy".[79]

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74 Giuseppe Finaldi, A History of Italian Colonialism, 1860–1907. Europe's Last Empire, New York 2017, 91–142.

75 Matita Nera, Due monumenti, in: Natura ed Arte. Periodico Qundicinale Illustrato per le Famiglie 9/16 (1898–1899), 326.

76 N.N., L'inaugurazione del Monumento a Toselli, in: Natura ed Arte. Periodico Qundicinale Illustrato per le Famiglie 9/17 (1898–1899), 426.

77 Nera, Monumenti, (1898–1899), 325–326.

78 After decades the racist codes can be misread, which, interestingly enough, does not change the monument's hegemonic reading but strengthens it: only recently, in 2020, Enrico Petrucci wrote a blog entry about the monument for the popular science magazine *Storia in Rete* in which he mistook the figure of the '*Ascaro*' for an Ethiopian and the figure of the Ethiopian for that of an Italian. Consequently, from Petrucci's point of view the strangulation depicted is "a true colonial representation of indigenous deviousness!"; see https://www.storiainrete.com/due-statue-coloniali-di-ximenes-per-rileggere-il-nostro-passato/ (25 April 2022).

79 The original text reads: "Al maggiore Pietro Toselli di Peveragno che col suo quarto battaglione indigeni sull'Amba Alagi nell' Enderta da sterminate etiopiche orde assalito lo sguardo volto al nemico il cuore all'Italia cadde VII dicembre MDCCCXCV."

Figure 1: Ettore Ximenes' model for the monument of Pietro Toselli printed in the newspaper La Tribuna Illustrata della domenica, 16 July 1899; source: Wikimedia Commons CC-BY-SA-4.0.

Besides the bronze sculpture itself (see Fig. 1) and Ximenes' inscription, a comprehensive description by Matita Nera[80], a contemporary, published in the journal *Natura ed Arte* in 1899 helps to understand how Ximenes managed to meet the aforementioned iconographic challenges of depicting violence and the meaning he assigned it. Nera wrote:

> "The figure of Toselli occupies the central space on the monument. He is standing, his eyes blazing, fearless in his pose, while his right arm stretches out to reveal his large and generous chest, waiting for the enemy bullets to hit him. In the whole figure, in the attitude, in the lines of his face, there is something majestic, something that inspires respect and admiration for the hero, who, seeing his companions in arms perish, prefers death over defeat. At his feet, on the right, his loyal attendant and interpreter, Neussiè Uolbariat, nervously clutching his rifle in one hand, with the other trying to strangle a Shewa man,[81] who is writhing in the spasms of suffocation. On the left, at the foot of the monument, there is the figure of a wounded officer who has fought a terrible hand-to-hand fight; his sabre is broken and he is holding a revolver

80 Matita Nera means "black pencil" in Italian. It can be assumed that this is a pen name.

81 Man from the central Ethiopian region of Shewa, Italian: *Scioà*.

> pointing at the enemy with a steady hand; behind the figure of Toselli one can make out the profile of a soldier."[82]

Nera's text offers a pro-colonial interpretation of the monument. On the one hand, the author considers Toselli and his officer as utterly fearless and dutiful military role models and Uolbariat as 'loyal' not only to his superiors but also to Italy's colonial course. The Ethiopian man, on the other hand, is imagined as weak and inferior – even though the army he represents was victorious.

From my reading of the monument-immanent narrative as well as of Nera's contemporary report, I argue that the monument represents what Oliver Marchart refers to as a discourse of acknowledgement. Other than strategies like slander and displacement, which aim at silencing unsought narratives, this kind of discourse supersedes critique of, for instance, the nation or the government, through affirmations of the colonial project, as in this case.[83] In this regard, the sculpture can be understood as an attempt to transform the ignominious military defeat into a moral victory. Both the figure of Toselli and the depiction of violence play a crucial role. Toselli's persona not only creates a link between the site of violence, the distant Amba Alagi, and Peveragno, the site of construction, as it is his birthplace. The narratives about the heroism he supposedly showed in the moment of his death, which were coined by colonial propaganda, also enabled Ximenes to reduce the lost battle to one particular episode – which in the face of defeat could be 'sold' as a triumph of values. After all, according to an unknown contemporary, in his reading the monument was supposed to "show the sons and soldiers of Italy the path of heroic duty and glory".[84]

In my reading, the violence depicted serves to elevate Toselli's assumed attitude. It is striking that in the monument's composition Toselli and his inferiors relate to violence in different ways: while the artist staged Toselli as unimpressed by the fighting, the bodies of the other two represent violence suffered (officer) and executed (*Ascaro*). While Black bodies appear to be perpetrators, the white are staged as victims of violence. Ximenes was careful, however, not to threaten the idea of white supremacy through his artwork: In his sculpture, he established a racial hierarchy at the top of which are the white – as yet undefeated – officers, above all Toselli. The wounded officer sitting next to him still fights, "with a steady hand", an enemy who remains invisible and is not part of the sculpture. So it is not the officer but another member of the colonial power, the *Ascaro*, who fights and defeats the Ethiopian. According to the racial hierarchy, he was only able to beat his opponent hand-to-hand because – as Nera suggested in his reading – his "nervous" hand is metaphorically guided by his

82 Nera, Monumenti, (1898–1899), 325.
83 Marchart, Gedächtnis, (2016), 55–57.
84 N.N., Inaugurazione, (1898–1899), 426.

superior. At the bottom of the hierarchy ranks the strangled Ethiopian. The depiction and framing text on the pedestal present the idea that the Ethiopians – who supposedly lost direct duels due to their imagined inferiority – were ultimately victorious only because of their superior numbers, with which the artist referred to a common topos of colonial rhetoric in order to explain defeat despite all individual heroism.[85]

The decolonial "guerrilla" in public spaces

Even more than through expensive monuments, political leaders tried to sell their stories about colonial enterprises – and 'neutralize' the violence that was linked to them – to society by the widespread naming of streets and squares. For instance, according to *Viva Zerai!*,[86] an online map issued by *RIC* in collaboration with *Wu Ming*[87] (a Bologna-based collective of authors founded in 2000), at least 52 streets carry the name Toselli in Italy today, while – according to the map – only one monument exists. All over Italy, hundreds of other names in many towns and villages recall events, distant places, or persons associated with colonialism.[88] For officials, these names have the advantage that they do not raise the question of how (not) to depict violence and, therefore, can conceal it; in turn, a street name's meaning cannot be completely controlled. Each represents "a political choice. But […] names alone do not specify which stories should be told or what one should think about them."[89] Their meanings, even if local authorities determine the dominant one, only arise in the individual process of reception. This means that public spaces are open to anyone for reinterpretation.[90]

Since 2015, groups of activists have rediscovered Italy's colonial heritage hidden in plain sight in its public spaces and have started to address the absent violence by reinterpreting colonial street and square names. The Bolognese collective *RIC* is one of the key players in this endeavour. Founded in 2015 in the context of a social protest against building speculation in the *Cirenaica* district[91] – whose name was inten-

85 Markus Wurzer, Viel Feind, viel Ehr?, in: Frankfurter Zeitung, 22 October 2018, 6.

86 Named after Zerai Deres (1914–1945), an Eritrean translator who died in a judicial psychiatric hospital where he was brought after he had attacked the Dogali Obelisk six years prior. See Jean-Bernard Carillet/Anthony Ham, Etiopia e Gibuti, Turin 2018, 65.

87 Wu Ming means 'nameless' in Chinese. https://m12.manifesta.org/viva-menilicchi-2018/index.html (25 April 2022).

88 https://umap.openstreetmap.fr/fr/map/viva-zerai_519378#9/44.6227/7.6190 (25 April 2022); this map gives an idea of the enormous amount of material traces left by colonialism.

89 Henneberg, Monuments, (2004), 60–61.

90 Hatuka, Space, (2016), 290.

91 Built to Last? Material Legacies of Italian Colonialism. A Roundtable with Ruth Ben-Ghiat, Hannes Obermair, Igiaba Scego, Alessandra Ferrini, Viviana Gravano, *Resistenze in Cirenaica* and *Colletivo*

ded to refer to the occupation of the eponymous stretch of land in North Africa in 1912 – the association today understands itself as a "permanent cultural workshop that wants to make the *Cirenaica* district a laboratory of historical memory in order to uncover Italy's colonial past".[92] Because of the colonial roots of the district's name, dealing with colonial street names has been a core aspect of their decolonial heritage practices from the beginning.[93] In the past five years, *RIC* activists have created, theorized, and promoted a subversive strategy called *guerriglia odonomastica* (guerrilla actions against road names).[94] They are challenging the dominant narratives on the colonial past still articulated through street and square names in public spaces. In the words of *RIC*, the onomastic guerrilla is

> "a means for awakening from amnesia, an act of resistance with a counter-informative value that contributes to dismantling false beliefs and highlighting stories that have been sidelined or ignored. It is a gesture of reappropriation of urban spaces, of the surrounding environment; an act of awareness and conscience to remember what we have been and take responsibility for what we have done. Because knowing what was in the past, in the light of what we are today, allows us to provoke debates on the ignoble figures of our history. The onomastic guerrilla is therefore political."[95]

Obviously, *RIC* is well aware that the reactualization of the collective memory's contingency means acting politically.[96] This mission statement also makes clear that *RIC* – just like other "guerrilla memorialization"[97] groups around the globe – is trying to use decolonial thinking and practice in order to work towards a future that offers more diversity and equality.[98]

In 2018, *Wu Ming* in collaboration with *Fare Ala* (a Sicilian collective of artists[99]) adapted *RIC*'s concept of onomastic guerrilla action for *Manifesta 12*, the European Nomadic Biennial[100] – which then took place in Palermo. As part of the project *Viva*

Tezeta, moderated by Luca Peretti, in: Sebastian De Pretto/Markus Wurzer (eds.), Colonial Heritage in Italy (forthcoming special issue in Interventions. International Journal of Postcolonial Studies).

92 https://resistenzeincirenaica.com/ric/ (25 April 2022).

93 Ibid.

94 Peretti, Roundtable, (forthcoming).

95 Mariana E. Califano, Della Guerriglia Odonomastica, in: Resistenze in Cirenaica (ed.), Guerrilla Kit, unpublished manual, 2021, https://www.dropbox.com/sh/d1j1ri8thq2s0ob/AABLVjg7dMXhFK0RWnp0Zp2Xa?dl=0 (25 April 2022), 22.

96 Marchart, Gedächtnis, (2016), 48–49.

97 Alan Rice, Creating Memorials, Building Identities: The Politics of Memory in the Black Atlantic, Liverpool 2011.

98 Knudsen/Oldfield/Buettner/Zabunyan, Introduction, (2020), 9–10.

99 http://www.fareala.com/p/about-noi.html (25 April 2022).

100 For more details see https://m12.manifesta.org/agen-domino99-online-yg-mudah-menang/index.html (25 April 2022).

Menilicchi![101] the collectives performed a walk through the city, recontextualizing different material traces of colonialism, and, thus, renegotiating their meanings.[102]

Soon after this performance, other collectives and associations also called out for onomastic guerrilla actions, in clear reference to *RIC*'s model of action: for instance, in Palermo the *Rete Anticoloniale Siciliana* (Sicilian Anti-colonial Network) emerged to continue the interventions *Wu Ming* and *Fare Ala* had previously started on the island.[103] Other collectives involved are *Decolonize Your Eyes* in Padua (founded in 2020),[104] *Tezeta* (founded in 2018) in Rome,[105] and *Argebnuoc Urbani* in Reggio Emilia.[106] In 2021, on *RIC*'s initiative, all these collectives joined together to form a "federation of resistances", which aims to deal with Italian colonialism by taking action on the streets. In February 2021, on the 84th anniversary of the Addis Ababa massacre – in which Italians murdered around 19,200 city residents between 19 and 21 February 1937 in retaliation for a failed assassination attempt on Viceroy Rodolfo Graziani[107] – the federation launched coordinated interventions against colonial street names throughout Italy.[108]

To support anti-colonial actions in other cities on this occasion, even where there were no active collectives, *RIC* and *Wu Ming* not only created the aforementioned online map *Viva Zerai!* depicting colonial traces in the public sphere but also an online Guerrilla Kit. This comprises both theoretical reflections on and practical guidelines to participating in the reappropriation of public space, including knowledge on how to avoid penalties by the local authorities.[109]

While *RIC* was initially concerned with demanding the removal of street names, "resignifying and contextualizing"[110] practices are now at the forefront of their guerrilla activities, as members themselves put it in an interview. Since these actors respond with new narratives to the erasure of colonial memory, the set of actions they have developed over the years can be defined – according to the ECHOES project's

101 Menelik II. was the emperor of Ethiopia (1844–1913), who defeated the Italians at Adwa in 1896. "Viva Menilicchi" (Long Live Menelik) was a slogan used by socialists and anarchists during anti-colonial demonstrations in Palermo in the same year.

102 https://uploads.knightlab.com/storymapjs/aa758891d750e6edbfbbcee34824722a/viva-menilicchi-grac/index.html (25 April 2022); Califano, Guerriglia, (2021), 24.

103 https://resistenzeincirenaica.com/rete-anticoloniale-siciliana/ (25 April 2022).

104 https://resistenzeincirenaica.com/decolonize-your-eyes/ (25 April 2022).

105 Peretti, Roundtable, (forthcoming).

106 https://resistenzeincirenaica.com/arbegnuoc-urbani/ (25 April 2022).

107 Ian Campbell, The Addis Ababa Massacre: Italy's National Shame, London 2017.

108 https://www.wumingfoundation.com/giap/2021/02/yekatit-12-febbraio-19-le-strade-ditalia-contro-il-colonialismo/ (25 April 2022).

109 RIC, Guerrilla Kit, 2021, 1.

110 Roundtable, moderated by Peretti, (forthcoming).

typology of decolonial methodologies – as re-emergence. This is because such heritage practices

> "at least potentially, open up social space for new voices, affects and bodies forging relations or 'contact zones' […] between actors, which transcend both the antagonistic dichotomies of removal and the domesticating pressures of reframing, thereby opening up the possibility for a heritage practice that presents a lost opportunity from the past that returns to offer itself as a potential future horizon."[111]

But what does re-emergence look like on the ground? 'Guerrilla memorialization' activists most commonly challenge street names' meanings through recontextualizations, for instance by adding a definition or brief biographical information.[112] Graphically, these interventions are designed in such a way that they are easily integrated into the street signs and are intended to irritate, only in content rather than in form (because that would be punishable[113]): During *Viva Menilicchi!*, for instance, *Wu Ming* placed a sticker on the sign for the square *Due Palme* (Two Palms) in Palermo which indicated that it was named not for the two palms in the square but for the Battle at the Oasis of the Two Palms in the 1911–1912 Italo-Ottoman War.[114] In this battle, according to a contemporary account, Italian soldiers killed around 400 men and took 500 prisoners.[115]

Moreover, to challenge street names' meanings, activists put in place more extensive information. For instance, as part of their onomastic guerrilla action *Decolonize Your Eyes* attached multilingual information boards to street signs that presented counter-narratives. *Via Amba Aradam* (see Fig. 2) refers to the aforementioned battle Italians and Ethiopians had fought around the mountain of the same name in 1936. Fascist propaganda had linked the name with military victory; activists countered this imagination by adding information on the sign. The plaques explained that the victory was only won because of the use of internationally outlawed gas warfare that has claimed thousands of lives, including those of civilians.[116]

Moreover, *Decolonize Your Eyes* renamed the street as *Via Fatima* and, therefore, at least temporarily and symbolically dedicated it to a victim of colonialism.

111 Knudsen/Oldfield/Buettner/Zabunyan, Introduction, (2020), 12.

112 For an overview see *Wu Ming* 2, Prontuario delle forme di guerriglia odonomastica, in: RIC (ed.), Guerrilla Kit, 2021, 25–33.

113 RIC, Guerrilla Kit, 2021, 5–6.

114 https://www.wumingfoundation.com/giap/2018/11/prontuario-di-guerriglia-odonomastica-una-fotocronaca-di-vivamenilicchi/ (25 April 2022).

115 William Henry Beehler, The History of the Italian-Turkish War, September 29, 1911, to October 18, 1912, Annapolis 1913, 63.

116 Mattioli, Kriegsgewalt, (2003), 325–333.

Figure 2: Onomastic guerrilla action by Decolonize your Eyes in Padua on 20 June 2020, photo by Fabio D'Alessandro.

The name referred to an Ethiopian girl who the aforementioned Indro Montanelli, as a soldier during the fascist occupation, had bought at the age of twelve and renamed Destà.[117]

Even though activists usually challenge meanings through recontextualization, some do so by creatively changing both the street name and, hence, its meaning. Small additions are enough to turn the name's significance around. For example, by adding three words *Wu Ming* turned *Via Rodi* – which was meant to refer to the city of Rhodes on the Dodecanese, occupied by Italy from 1912 to 1943 – into *Via comunità ebraica di Rodi* (Jewish community of Rhodes). This community was deprived of its rights, dispossessed, and deported to Auschwitz in the summer of 1944 after Nazi Germany occupied the islands in 1943.[118]

It comes as no surprise that activists use qualities of the geographical public space to lend weight to their concerns, to draw social attention to them. Since creating a social space for new voices and disseminating counter-narratives is their core interest,[119] I argue that digital space has become no less important for anti-colonial

117 Matthias Rüb, Auch eine italienische Statue gerät ins Wanken, in: Frankfurter Zeitung, 18 June 2020, https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/rassismus-und-denkmalstreit-italienische-statue-geraet-ins-wanken-16817928.html (25 April 2022).

118 https://jewishrhodes.org/german-occupation-holocaust/ (25 April 2022).

119 Knudsen/Oldfield/Buettner/Zabunyan, Introduction, (2020), 12.

activists. In its Guerrilla Kit, for instance, *RIC* explicitly asks activists to visually document interventions on street names and provide footage in order to make them visible via the website.[120] The individual collectives also use social media,[121] which – in my understanding – is a tool not only to mediate and expand their time-limited and geographically bound protest but also to improve its social range and strengthen feelings of belonging among followers and supporters.

As has become clear, violence plays a central role for onomastic guerrillas. It is above all its absence in street names that prompted activists to finally reveal the enormous violence hidden behind the seemingly innocuous names that originated from an ostensibly shiny national history. The concept of the onomastic guerrilla, however, understood as an "act of resistance" and a "gesture of reappropriation of public space",[122] contains a certain sense of violence, too. The word itself comes from the military sphere and means "little war"; the *Corriere Della Sera* dictionary defines *guerriglia* as a "form of hostilities conducted by small formations of men [sic] and characterised by surprise assaults or ambushes".[123] In the case of the onomastic guerrillas, colonial street names are the targets of nightly assaults, carried out with ladders, tape, and scissors. Even if the activists are careful not to destroy or paste over anything (in order not to come into conflict with the law), the interventions – and this is essential – represent symbolic attacks on Italy's identity, of which both liberal and fascist colonial heritage are an integral part. The assault on street name signs is symbolic in the sense that it "simply expresses a communicative intentionality; a 'will to remember'".[124] It is not about the street signs' physical destruction, but about being heard and visibly challenging the narratives they stand for. Furthermore, an important part of the meaning of the term *guerriglia* is the idea that guerrillas always challenge superior enemies, for instance a foreign occupying force or their own government. Today the onomastic guerrilla's antagonist in the struggle over meaning is the republican state, represented by local authorities, who are responsible for the maintenance of public space, and, therefore, along with veterans' associations who feel a certain duty to advocate for the reputation of earlier generations of (colonial) soldiers,[125] defend the narratives which imagine Italians either as 'good' colonizers, victorious conquerors, or heroic victims, but never as violent perpetrators. It is the very aim of Italy's onomastic guerrillas to subvert these domi-

120 RIC, Guerrilla Kit, 2021, 5–6.

121 https://www.facebook.com/DecolonizeYourEyes/ (25 April 2022); https://www.facebook.com/Resistenze-in-Cirenaica-1638918316361318/ (25 April 2022); https://twitter.com/wu_ming_foundt?lang=de (25 April 2022).

122 RIC, Guerrilla Kit, 2021, 22.

123 https://dizionari.corriere.it/dizionario_italiano/G/guerriglia.shtml (25 April 2022).

124 Kølvraa/Knudsen, Heritage, (2020), 4.

125 Henneberg, Monuments, (2004), 68.

nant narratives in public space with their actions on street names. Since – according to Marchart's political memory theory – a symbolic attack is to be understood as a moment of reactivation, in which the contingent nature of the formerly constructed collective memory immediately becomes visible and, thus, negotiable.[126]

Conclusions

Mass violence forms a central part of Italian colonial history. From the beginning, however, political leaders have struggled to commemorate and make sense of it in the public sphere – since its failure threatened the legitimacy of colonial campaigns. While Italy's status as perpetrator was veiled or normalized, it was above all the defeats at Dogali (1887) and Adwa (1896), which society perceived as traumatic, that resulted in a visual neutrality with regard to the figurative representation of (suffered) violence. Nevertheless, there are colonial monuments that contain sculptures that show violence quite explicitly. However, they focus on individuals, like Pietro Toselli, rather than collectives or entire battles. This practice makes it possible to both turn perpetrators into victims and stories of military defeat into moral victories. In my reading, the violence depicted thus serves to support colonialists' imagination of racial superiority.

Rather than through large, figurative monuments, therefore, it was in countless street names that liberal and fascist leaders attempted to selectively make sense of mass violence by either concealing it or imagining Italians as victims of violence in the colonies and not as its originators and perpetrators. These imaginations remained largely intact in public space through the political caesuras of 1941, 1943, and 1945 and mostly unnoticed by society in the decades that followed. Only over the past 20 years, however, have things changed owing to legal claims by former colonial subjects regarding the restitution of looted objects, the debates around the protection of refugees migrating from ex-colonies since 2013, and, most recently, the Black Lives Matter movement. As a result of these events, the colonial past has received new attention – not only worldwide but also in Italy. The renegotiation of this past was unleashed in public space, now and then also on the traces of colonial projects, such as monuments and street names. The protests testified to the fact that parts of society no longer consider the way colonialism is remembered in the public sphere to be in line with the times, and they are demanding change.

The prevailing demand for change takes me back to the *Restiamo umani* protests in Rome. After the intervention against the Baldissera bust in the Pincio park and

126 Marchart, Gedächtnis, (2016), 47.

the symbolic renaming of Via George Floyd in 2020, the collective's further protest was directed against the idea of naming the new metro station close to Via Amba Aradam after this very street: Stazione Amba Aradam. Inspired by the collective's protest, which included the display of a banner reading "No station should have the name of oppression",[127] two journalists, Massimiliano Coccia and Roberto Saviano, launched a petition to the city government proposing the name of Giorgio Marincola (1923–1945), a Somalian-Italian partisan who participated in the liberation of Rome and died in action in northern Italy during the last days of the Second World War.[128] They collected thousands of signatures and, initially, were successful: In July 2020, Mayor Raggi announced that the city government would fulfil the petition's demand and name the station after Marincola.[129] More than two years later, however, Eugenio Patanè, the city's transport councillor, rowed back: In his view, a metro station could not have just any name; rather, it must be a clear reference to the city plan for orientation purposes. Therefore, when the station opens in October 2024, it will be called Porta Metronia, in reference to an ancient city gate in the nearby Aurelian Wall.[130] So, the change demanded by the activists will not become a reality. Instead, Rome will strengthen its touristic self-image as a city with a rich ancient history. Naming the station after Marincola, however, would have been courageously symbolic, indeed a true turning point in how Italy deals with its colonial past. After all, a Stazione Marincola would have been the first acknowledgement of Black Italian history in the public sphere. But as it is now, the Porta Metronia station will remain a huge missed opportunity for both Rome and Italy.

127 https://www.facebook.com/ReteRestiamoUmani/ (25 April 2022).

128 https://www.change.org/p/virginia-raggi-intitoliamo-la-stazione-della-metro-c-di-via-dell-ambaar-adam-a-giorgio-marincola?utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=custom_url&recruited_by_id=6026a2a0-85c6-0130-1ed5-38ac6f16cbb1 (25 April 2022); for more details on his role in the resistance, see Carlo Costa/Lorenzo Teodonio, Razza partigiana. Storia di Giorgio Marincola (1923–1945), Rome 2008

129 Rory Cappelli, Roma, stazione metro intitolata al partigiano Giorgio Marincola: sì dell'assemblea capitolina, in: La Repubblica, 4 August 2020.

130 Andrea Barsanti, Metro C, la stazione di Porta Metronia aprirà nel 2024. Patanè: "Sarà la più bella mai esistita", in: Roma Today, 28 September 2022, https://www.romatoday.it/politica/metro-c-stazione-porta-metronia-apertura.html (25 April 2023).