Looking for a Space to Breathe Decolonising Italian Cities

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ABSTRACT

This contribution explores two projects that have addressed urban toponymy by building counter-narratives that challenge dominant historical narratives. It does so through audio-visual materials and draws on biographies as well as intimate gazes. The first section explores the Rome-based Tezeta collective's Harnet Streets project, where memories and family histories of subjects belonging to the Eritrean diasporas¹ become the centre of a new counter-storytelling that starts from the toponymy of the African neighbourhood. The second section focuses on the city of Padova, looking at how some colonial streets have been re-appropriated by the bodies, voices and gazes of six Italian Afro-descendants who took part in a participatory video, re-signifying urban traces of colonialism in a creative way. The teaching and research experience of the Visual Research Methods Lab (University of Padova, Fall 2020) allowed us to question world-views and social hierarchies that made it possible to celebrate/forget the racist and sexist violence of colonialism.

KEYWORDS

Colonial streets, urban decolonisation, visual research, Italy, Tezeta

Federazione delle Resistenze's 'Urban Guerrilla' and the Harnet Street's Memorial Archive with the Roman Eritrean Diasporas

Those who still infest the legends around the jail of Dekhamere are white devils. They are Italian devils (Riccardo, co-founder of Tezeta, sharing narration by a young refugee recalling a jail in Eritrea).²

Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo (2012) have commented on an 'uneven decolonization' in Italy, as a result of systematic amnesic policies enacted throughout the decades that followed the Second World War (WWII). This prevented Italy from developing a collective public debate about its colonial past, which survived in fact within nostalgic reminiscences; historians (Del Boca 2005; Labanca 2007)

report that at the end of WWII Italy was in favour of maintaining control over the colonies and almost 20 per cent of Italians believed that losing the colonies would have been a most painful ‘mutilation’.

Attempts to unroot this ‘faltering postcolonial consciousness’ (Lombardi-Diop 2012) grew parallel in the last decade, bursting out during 2020’s Black Lives Matter (BLM) global wave, and targeting colonial urban traces as a starting point for a critical debate questioning Italian colonial history and its removal. February 2021 saw the birth of the Federation of Resistances, where many collectives and associations throughout Italy converged in collective urban guerrilla actions (in the cities of Palermo, Milano, Roma, Bologna, Padova, Reggio Emilia and Carpi). Since its start, the federation aimed at setting common guidelines, planning plaques and boards to be placed as road signboards during events such as Yekatit 12, calling off the names of colonial battles and conquerors inscribed in the toponymies of the cities. These interventions constitute multiple answers towards the direction of ‘deprovincialising Italy’ drawing on Mellino’s suggestion (2013), (who reverses Chakrabarty’s enunciation of ‘provincialising Europe’), by creating affiliations with other global and postcolonial contexts, but mostly placing Italy at the crossroads of transnational transatlantic and Mediterranean migrations, battles, and resistances. Among these, in this section, I am going to explore the experience of Harnet Street, which addresses colonial toponymy by working with oral histories and intimate memories from the Roman Eritrean diasporas.

Harnet Street’s first experimentation occurred in summer 2018 within CivicoZero Onlus, a Day Centre supporting unaccompanied minors where Riccardo Preda and Elena Maraviglia, founders of Tezeta Collective, worked as educators. Riccardo asked a group of Eritrean minor refugees to guide him through the toponymy of the neighbourhood, recalling memories and thoughts by looking at the road names (which cover all the regions of Eritrea). In the following months Yodit Estifanos Afewerki, an Italian-born, Eritrean cultural-linguistic mediator, and Giulia Zitelli Conti, a history graduate specialising in oral history, joined Tezeta and in June 2020 the collective was born: Harnet Street Project was presented as ‘Trekkling AfroUrbano’ (Afro-urban trekking) encompassing some of the roads of the neighbourhood and involving Eritrean migrants, refugees and people with an Eritrean background.

Rome has a central space in the history of Eritrean diasporas: in the 1960s, many Eritrean women followed the Italian families returning

to Italy to continue their employment in domestic service,³ and in the 1970s it was estimated that the largest immigrant group in Italy was Eritrean, as a great influx of refugees fled the country during the liberation war with Ethiopia (Andall, in Lombardi-Diop 2012). The Eritrean population increased in the subsequent diaspora flows, following the 1998–2000 war with Ethiopia and during the 2000s, when many refugees escaping the authoritarian dictatorship's martial laws reached Italian shores. *Harnet Street* deals with this multiplicity of diasporas, inviting us to see the effects of colonial geopolitical legacies and how they seriously affected the Horn of Africa. As the migratory dimension represents an essential component of the postcolonial condition in Italy, migrants from former Italian colonies and other formerly colonised territories are the ones articulating today the shifts of meaning in the processes of signification that subtend postcoloniality (Lombardi-Diop 2012). In this sense, the narrations produced not only bridge a gap between Italy and Eritrea but also critically return the complexity of Eritrean diasporas.

During the two-hour *Trekking AfroUrbano*, recorded voices of participants guide groups of people into memories from their lives and their family's lives in Eritrea, which are evoked by the names of the roads in the African neighbourhood, counting almost sixty colonial names dating back to the 1920s. Portelli (1997) invites us to consider these oral histories as forms of political intervention, as they encourage an effort at growth, self-awareness, and transformation for all those involved. Storytelling and oral history, largely used in anthropology as forms of collecting local knowledge, represent a new challenging tool in the postcolonial world, which questions the coloniality of power. Collecting oral sources means challenging a top-down written history that is elitist in its structure and in the way it is transmitted, thus allowing marginalised subjects to actively reappropriate a narration from which they were traditionally excluded (Bernardi et al. 1978).

The narrations become the starting point for recalling personal memories that unmask the colonial period and its legacies: for example, racial segregation in Asmara can be recounted by one of the participants, a woman from Asmara who shares a family memory recalling a certain Signor Zanchi, whose footprint was impressed in a stone where her family lived, where many places were forbidden to Eritreans. The schooling system and education in the colonies represented a tool through which colonial power was maintained and reproduced. A school in Asmara Road evokes memories of Italian schools

where Eritreans were taught the four seasons, Garibaldi's vicissitudes, and Verdi's musical compositions, while seeing erased the production of local knowledge and local history, sciences and languages (fascist colonialism even forbade Eritrean people to continue second higher education to segregate [keep a 'divide and rule' between] the colonisers from the colonised).

This 'colonization of the mind' (La Grange 2016), which followed the conquering of physical spaces, lasted for decades after the end of colonialism, while paradoxically in Italy schools' curricula rarely mentioned colonial history, thus reproducing in school textbooks propaganda that saw Italians as good people and even good colonisers (Gabrielli 2015). In Senafe Road, Italy's Southern Question (Schneider 1998) is linked to the colonial expansion into the Horn of Africa: with the country's unification (1961), Italy's re-territorialisation within its national borders was followed by colonial expansion and the expropriation of Eritrean agricultural lands. Senafe Road then recalls the Conquest of Eritrea, and the resistance of Eritrean troops guided by the rebel Batha Agos, celebrated locally as a hero who was eventually killed by the Italians. As Senafe Road merges into Makallè Road the tour ends, lingering on today's borders, which are one of the most contested legacies of colonialism. In today's geopolitical scenarios, this represents one of the conflicts between Eritrea and neighbouring Ethiopia, as the final recordings of Eritrean refugees show, as they did to Riccardo and Elena at the beginning of the journey. According to Elena, the creation of an archive collecting these stories is going to establish an important link with future generations of children of the Eritrean diaspora: 'Eritrean parents are reassured that there is a material that their children will be able to look at once they grow'. Maybe, in this way, a new link can be established to trace continuity not only between a forgotten past and contested present, but also towards a decolonised future.

Decolonise the City: A Participatory Video to Build Collective Visual Counter-Narratives in Padova

Padova, a city in the north-east of Italy, along with many other cities,⁴ hosts several roads carrying colonial names, which have been overlooked and ignored for decades. In fact, after celebrating the racial superiority of white colonisers, these places were forgotten and their meanings were left unquestioned, with the result that Italy still today

hardly acknowledges its urban ‘colonial archive’, despite the racial violence that has grown in the last years (Ghebremariam Tesfau’ and Picker 2020).

Inspired by the work of Igiaba Scego (and R. Bianchi, 2014), an Italo-Somali writer who paved the way to a more public engagement with colonial traces outside of academia,⁵ in fall 2020 a two-month laboratory ‘Visual Research Methods’ was organised by Professor Annalisa Frisina at the University of Padova’s School of Sociology. I assisted in the making of the course and the video produced within it. The laboratory included master’s degree students and six Italian Afro-descendants, mostly from ex-colonies, who walked the roads that are located mostly in Rione Palestro. The Rione is a historical left-wing antifascist neighbourhood where lots of migrants and working-class people live, and at the same time associations and collectives are working with local people (especially children) in antiracist practices through sport and community work. In the neighbourhood, parallel to the making of the video, two important manifestations occurred in June and October 2020, reclaiming a public debate over colonial history, from which the collective Decolonize Your Eyes was born.

Decolonize the City (Anon 2020), the video born out of the laboratory,⁶ draws on a mixed methodology of participatory video and visual tours, visual participatory methods fostering a horizontal and collaborative work between the student-researchers and the research participants, inspiring reciprocal contaminations, reducing the asymmetric relationship that continues to exist in every observational relationship (Frisina 2013), and enacting an emancipatory form of research that challenges different forms of oppression (Massari and Pellegrino 2020).

According to Mirzoeff (2011), modernity can be thought of as an ongoing contestation between visibility and counter-visibility: where power was maintained in the modern world through ‘complexes of visibility’ (techniques of classification, separation and aestheticisation), conversely counter-visibility has been used as a battlefield to assert autonomy from authority and to claim a right to look and to be seen differently. Decolonising our research methods meant learning ‘to swing and to be reflexive, becoming un/familiar’ (Frisina 2013) with a dominant history and the way it was reported in history textbooks since school: being white students/researchers meant coming to terms with ‘white innocence’ (Wekker 2016) while unlearning about colonial past. As Gilroy states (2004), the awkwardness, shame, and

perplexity we feel about colonial history are important because it is through these feelings that violence inflicted can be transformed, re-signified. To understand colonialism and colonality in Italy it is necessary to look at the present colonial legacy, dig up family archives, ponder on fascist and racist legacy within today's legislation, addressing the idea of 'Italianness' and the need for it to be decolonised.

The six narrations presented in the video and briefly reported below creatively deal with different aspects of colonialism that are relevant today and which the students investigated with the help of external colleagues, scholars, and video-makers. Among these, it is worth mentioning the ongoing confrontation with Dagmawi Yimer, an Eritrean-born filmmaker who extensively worked with migrant storytelling within the Italian independent cinema. Cadigia Hassan and Ilaria Zorzan belong to different generations, and their contributions bring together colonial Italian past intertwined with personal memories such as family photographs, which are part of an unknown and more intimate sphere that left scarves on thousands of Italian families. The theme of biographical crossroads and historical memory (and of mixed families and 'mixed children') emerges as particularly critical in today's Italian society, as they stand unacknowledged as the names of the roads of Padova. While Italo-Somali Cadigia Hassan's engagement with Somalia Road shows us the way Italy forgot its ex-colonies, Ilaria Zorzan, an Italo-Eritrean art history student, shares her grandparents' story using printed black and white photographs, re-encountering the story of a family that intertwined with the story of Eritrea.

Wissal Houbabi and Emmanuel Mbayo Mertens's contributions shed light on anti-racist forms of art and activism dealing with a present-day colonial legacy, which can be mainly seen in Italian legislation. Their performances point at the continuity between colonial citizenship 'blood' legislations and today's contested citizenship law (made in 1992), which is still based on the idea of blood kinship carrying a presumed 'Italianness'. While artist Wissal Houbabi invites us with her poetry scattered in many Mediterranean Roads to 'de-racialise Italy', Emmanuel Mertens, an activist from Arising Africans, walks down Antenor Square, which is in front of the Public Prosecutor Office, as he quotes the resolution by which the municipality of Padova formerly dedicated the square to the day of the proclamation of the empire by Mussolini (9 May 1936).

Anti-colonial and anti-racist visual research also means critically dealing with geopolitical consequences that today affect the

Mediterranean Sea and the countries around it, as well as international political agreements that today implement neocolonial forms of exploitation between countries that were colonisers and ex-colonies, such as Italy and Libya. This complex problem is brought up by Mackda Ghebremariam Tesfau', the Italian Eritrean scholar and Refugee Welcome activist while pointing at the colonial map displayed in Padova's main square that exposes the former Italian colonial empire. Finally, Viviana Zorzato, an Italian Eritrean artist, ends the video inviting us to look critically at decolonisation processes when working with street names, asking us to recognise that they are more than mere theatres of colonial battles, and still preserve their inner beauty (referring to the mountains of Eritrea and Ethiopia that now are the road names in front of her house).

Conclusion

Drawing from intimate memories and visual activism, 'Harnet Street' and 'Decolonize the City' have built new counter-narratives. These have found a positive terrain, in parallel to BLM, which has drawn global attention to colonial issues and the need to develop decolonisation practices in Italy and Europe (Anon 2020). These two examples, briefly presented in this contribution, represent significant actions that were constructed with close collaboration between white students, activists, workers, researchers and racialised subjectivities (such as migrants, refugees, and children of migrants born in Italy), engaging with urban colonial traces in similar ways, attempting to find 'new spaces to breathe'.

Such counter-narratives have shown an important critical engagement that can only be incisive if it is addressed in a participatory manner, thus making visuality a fertile terrain for collective reflexivity. Future developments consider reaching out to schools in Rome and Padova, where projects can be brought in and discussed, attempting to find new strategies to face the lack of colonial awareness and its consequences in Italian society.

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Notes

1. Here the word diaspora(s) is used to emphasise the idea of three/four different migration fluxes from Eritrea to Italy that occurred though a span of many decades and that gave birth to many different sub-communities. 'Diasporas' in a plural form also stresses the idea of differences of migration reasons, political views (pro and anti-regime) and closeness to the colonial period.
2. The interview between me, Riccardo and Elena took place on the online Meet platform on 6 April 2021.
3. See the documentary *Asmarina. Voices and images of a postcolonial heritage* (2015), 69 min. Maglio, A. and Paolos, M.
4. Two maps are available: Viva Zerail (accessed May 2021) and Postcolonial Italy (accessed May 2021).
5. Her work pointed at the incredible number of colonial traces within public spaces (in monuments, street names, etc.) and co-author Gino Bianchi's stunning visual work portrayed people whose origins are from the former Italian colonies occupying these spaces with their bodies, claiming the authority to narrate their stories. Her last novel is *La linea del colore* (Bompiani 2020).
6. The complete video is available on YouTube. See references.

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