

## Chapter 5

# WHAT WE SEE (AND WHAT WE DON'T): RESIGNIFYING URBAN TRACES OF COLONIALISM

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### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this chapter is twofold: in the first part, we will provide comprehensive, state-of-the-art urban and visual studies across the domains of visibility, urban aesthetics and the legitimate use of the urban. We will show that what we see is foremost what is accessible and legitimate as a vision, while the urban provides multiple realms of invisibility that are often neglected or rendered invisible. Art, architecture, urbanism and place-making will be used as examples of these dynamics.*

*In the second part of the chapter, we will present a research study on the decolonial practices of re-signification of colonial urban traces. Despite the dominant representation of Italians as 'good people' (a local version of 'white innocence'), in recent years, Italy has witnessed a new interest stemming from bottom-up local movements dealing with colonial legacy in the urban space. We will show a research example ('Decolonising the City. Visual Dialogues in Padova') based on participatory video, arts-based methods and walking methods.*

**Keywords:** (In)visibility regime; urbanism; participatory visual research; decolonial sociology; urban regeneration; multiculturalism

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The urban realm has always struck the imagination of the newcomer, the traveller, the foreigner, by reason of what it reveals, the ability to stimulate the imagination, to amaze a trained gaze to other visions and stimuli. We might even

consider that one of the reasons for global urbanisation is precisely related to a visual pull factor, an attractive capacity that cities have elevated to a political project.

Over the centuries, and especially in the twentieth century, the arts have contributed particularly to the cultural industry and cinema with their ability to depict and translate, represent and circulate representations. Cinematic cities are born precisely for that: places such as New York and Paris become visually known without people even having experienced them.

Both what we recognise as a visual trace and what is shown to us as desirable, pleasant and beautiful make up the visible, a kingdom constantly equipped to produce regimes of visibility (Brighenti, 2007; De Backer, 2019; Gilman, 1995), that is, social legitimations to recognise traces with respect to others, signs over other signs, forms of knowledge over other forms of knowledge.

The public space redeveloped by signature architecture, urban design and greening interventions is visible, such as the New York High Line (Loughran, 2016; Semi & Bolzoni, 2020), and a commercial streetscape is visible, with coloured signs and cosmopolitan references (Zukin, 2012).

However, not everything that exists is visible, that is, socially legitimised for visual recognition. From what is considered ugly and hidden, to what is not visited and therefore left out of the tourist circuits (and disappears from visual social networks, such as Instagram or Facebook), to what must not be seen because it is disorienting or destabilising, such as an informal urban settlement or a place of detention, there is a whole world that lives within a regime of invisibility (Topak, 2019).

Following the recent literature on what Böhme calls ‘aesthetic capitalism’ (2017), taking up Sloterdijk’s insights into immunisations and bubbles (2011) and integrating Edensor’s reading on light and dark (2017), we intend to offer here a theoretical frame on the urban as a machine for legitimising visibility and invisibility.

## 2. VISIBILITY REGIMES THROUGH TIME

Following Therborn (2017), we can see cities as those contexts where the concentration of wealth and power is maximum, while the urban is a widespread, global network that connects cities in a material and immaterial network of infrastructures, flows and mobilities (Brenner & Schmid, 2015). Historically, the making of urban centres, of cities, happened through the capacity to concentrate wealth and power under the affirmation of each specific economic system. With regards to our era, capitalism and its continuous mutations and variegations define urban form. We can, somewhat hastily, distinguish at least three different periods of urban development over the last 150 years that are characterised by equally different visibility regimes: Fordist urbanism, post-Fordist urbanism and platform urbanism.

By Fordist urbanism, we mean the specific urbanisation based upon industrial manufacturing development. The factory spread everywhere on a global level as the

main cornerstone of this urbanism, together with the rigid functional separation between residential neighbourhoods and workplaces. If the affirmation of this model follows the temporalities of each national capitalism and adapts to pre-existing urban forms (where they existed), for example by creating industrial cities along the lines of the Renaissance or medieval cities in Europe, or brand new settlements becoming rapidly industrial cities in North America or parts of Asia, however, this model began to collapse when global competition and energy crises drew new maps of power after World War II. It is no coincidence that so-called 'shrinking cities' spread earlier and with particular violence in the Western part of the Global North as early as the late 1950s. This Fordist urbanism has its own regime of visibility and legitimacy, inherent in the modern metropolis, as Simmel keenly noted when looking at fin-de-siècle Berlin (1902). It is linked to the domination of the eye as a 'social' sense, of its preponderance with respect to the 'ear'. The metropolis can be seen. This characteristic of understanding the world we inhabit has a material, structural and even industrial dimension. The factory shows itself, in its majesty, to have its own representations. As in the murals of Diego Rivera, it becomes a recognisable element in its materiality and in the serial reproduction of its architecture, with the chimney, the red brick and the majestic occupation of land.

Illegitimate and therefore often invisible to the eye was everything that escaped the rigid temporality and spatiality of Fordist urbanism: from the refusal of work to the different segregations that also characterised this urbanism, such as gender segregation within the nuclear and patriarchal family or the racial one. When applying the lens of intersectionality, invisibility regimes become even more compelling, as in the case of the white industrial worker as opposed to Black female workers (Jordan-Zachery, 2013).

When de-industrialisation took over, the uneven dissolution of Fordist urbanism left cities filled with 'urban voids', sometimes similar to craters, in other cases hidden by the facades of the previous city and some small improvements. The urban landscape was deprived of its previous function, use and legitimate imagery. Factories emptied, dismantled and reassembled in other areas of the world, workers' neighbourhoods devoid of life and devastated by the spread of mass unemployment and heroin, urban rhythms shaken by the 'conquest of the night' (Melbin, 1978), subcultures rapidly becoming youth cultures, made the industrial city almost unrecognisable.

Post-Fordist urbanism slowly and progressively filled those gaps with new functions, from the tertiary city to the myriad variegated gentrifications (Smith, 2005), passing through the plastic capacity of capitalism to take possession of ruins and their aesthetics as well, as the literature on ruin porn has masterfully shown (Edensor, 2005; Lyons, 2018).<sup>1</sup> Cities went from managerial to entrepreneurial status, as David Harvey (1989) shows, and started strategies of reciprocal competition through cultural, sport and commercial events (Smith, 2012). The visibility regime of the post-Fordist city plays on the double register of the

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<sup>1</sup>The concept of 'ruin porn' applies to the ambiguous relationship with the visual appropriation of ruins, both made of pleasure and guilt.

aestheticization of the industrial past and on the production of festive and pyrotechnic imaginaries, with an emphasis on the production of cosmopolitan and sanitised public spaces, safe and purified from any form of conflict that can even remember the industrial city and its infinite contradictions (Mitchell, 2003). As Terry Clark points out, this was the making of a 'city as entertainment machine' (2003), an urban environment that economically and symbolically enhances various amenities, whether environmental, such as waterfronts, or cultural, such as museums and cafes. What cannot and must not be seen is therefore the past, whether it is colonial or industrial, unless it passes through its own process of aestheticization, and also everything that does not seem to contribute to the consumption of this entertainment machine. For example, numerous forms of neoliberal governmental strategies also spread, such as the business improvement districts, where the state renounces its function of managing and controlling the public space by delegating it to a coalition of private actors (Peyroux, Pütz, & Glasze, 2012). Privatisation is a salient feature of this urbanism, almost as much as the public nature of the Fordist urban was omnipresent (Peck, 2010). It follows that those who do not have the economic means or the social legitimacy to participate in post-Fordist urbanism fill the ranks of the undesirable or dangerous.

At the turn of the new millennium, however, the post-Fordist city also began a phase of further mutation, the result of two intertwined sets of phenomena: on one hand, the repeated economic and financial crises inaugurated by the bursting of the dot-com bubble in the mid-1990s, passing through the sub-prime mortgage crisis of the early 2000s and up to the pandemic crisis that began in 2020, and on the other hand, the technological accelerations that happened in the same period to enhance the affirmation of digital companies and multiple platforms. In the new millennium began what seems to be an urbanisation of platforms, where the geography of servers, global logistics of goods and services and the interpenetration between devices and the experience of the world becomes more and more intense and digitalised (Hodson, Kasmire, McMeekin, Stehlin, & Ward, 2020).

The visibility regime that begins to emerge, although we are only at the beginning of this transformation, passes through a new domination by the eye, albeit digitally. The renderings, the growing multiplication of visual social networks such as Instagram or TikTok, increasingly mediate our experience of reality and the urban by superimposing visual layers on top of other visual layers, accelerating the present on other temporal dimensions. If the analogic urban form remains the one in which the corporeal dimension of human experience finds its place, digital acceleration pushes many of these bodies to equally accelerated uses of space. We can see two phenomena, antithetical to each other, as representative of this urbanism: global tourism and home working.

Certainly, global tourism has strongly expanded, democratised and universalised during post-Fordist urbanism, both for geopolitical reasons, such as the expansion of globalisation to tourist markets previously excluded to mass audiences, and for reasons of diffusion of well-being and styles of consumerist life that were previously closed to the vast majority of the world (Urry & Larsen, 2011). If, in the Fordist era, only the rich and highly skilled workers also travelled

for tourism (think of the birth, in those times, of global congresses and fairs), starting in the 1970s and 1980s, we saw a first global expansion of tourism, as evidenced also by the geography of air hubs and the incredible acceleration of intercontinental flights. As the works of Arjun Appadurai (1996) and John Urry (2012) have shown so powerfully, tourism globalisation was also a globalisation of visual imaginaries and mutual gazes. However, with the birth of logistics and rental platforms, such as Airbnb or Booking.com, global tourism will mark a decisive break with the past, redefining the old tourism industry (hotels) and making the urban a potential value extraction site (Cocola-Gant, Gago, & Jover, 2020; Semi & Tonetta, 2021). The standardisation of the visual imaginaries of global tourism has been a formidable vector for the expansion of the sector, like IKEA's interior furnishings and a few other global designers and manufacturers. This use of space, however, is characterised by being short term, accelerated and temporary, Fordist in rhythms and post-Fordist in uses.

The same platforms that allow us, or allowed us before the pandemic, to move so quickly on a global level, are also those, by taking advantage of the pandemic, that have helped us segregate ourselves inside our homes, making the dialectic between inside and outside, so peculiar for the urban rhythms, extreme and in favour of the interior. Infinite forms of housing segregation, imposed by states and companies but also chosen by many workers who have thus stopped living as commuters, are redesigning the urban form in unexpected and unpredictable ways (Zukin, 2020). Think of the office workspace, the subject of powerful visual representations, from cinema to TV series (a compendium of the cultural history of the office is masterfully obtained from the TV series *Mad Men* and *The Office*): what real and visual future does this space have given the discovery that home working increases productivity and decreases costs?

In terms of visibility and invisibility, legitimacy and illegitimacy, the urbanisation of platforms is still to be discovered, but several traces are already emerging. Social and urban inequalities are grafted onto digital acceleration, as shown by the social types of riders and freight logistics drivers, subject to forms of urban exploitation more similar to those of the late nineteenth century than of the late twentieth century. The dynamics of home working also lead to new and unexpected regimes of invisibility, where domestic violence and radical housing inequalities flourish both in terms of housing affordability and in terms of psychological well-being.

### 3. THE DIALECTICS BETWEEN VISIBILITY AND INVISIBILITY

This brief historical-sociological excursus between urban form, regimes of economic accumulation and consequent visibility and invisibility now leads us to think in more abstract terms on what we have up to now defined as regimes of visibility (Brighenti, 2007).

As Sharon Zukin wrote, 'culture is what cities do best' (1996), referring to the development of one of the engines of contemporary capitalism, which she called

the symbolic economy. In her words, this economy is based on two parallel production systems: 'the production of space, with its synergy of capital investment and cultural meanings, and the production of symbols, which constructs both a currency of commercial exchange and a language of social identity' (Zukin, 1996, p. 24). Cities are those sites where the symbolic economy is created and spread and become all the more important when what Böhme calls 'aesthetic capitalism' is grafted, where space takes on value as a staging of reality (2017). To take up reflections of an aesthetic nature, as in the case of Ranci re's (2021) emancipated spectator, the spectacularising of the representative dimension of reality across the centuries becomes more and more public, widespread and even subject to collective criticism. However, it also enters the commercial circuit, generating new and continuous value just by being exchanged. The urban becomes part of this spectacle and further exchange.

If we take the example of global tourism, the passage from the eighteenth-century or nineteenth-century Grand Tour by the European  lite to the temporary use of accommodations rented on Airbnb in recent years, this tells of a double transformation: the democratisation of the exploitation of space by many inhabitants of the world, but also a growing reliance on images and representations of reality increasingly consumed and disconnected from the mechanisms of production. You buy your own experience on a website well before you visit the actual site.

What, then, are visibility regimes? We consider them as frames. They work as Goffman (1974) showed: they tell you what to see and how to see it, and above all they hide what is outside the frame. Returning to Tim Edensor's studies of cultural geography, we can also think of visibility regimes as 'ways of seeing and interpreting landscapes [that depend] on its material qualities, their interaction with light and our sensory experience, as well as being informed by intersubjective cultural understandings and values' (2017, p. 22).

Seeing and not seeing therefore imply a constant swing between a subjective and intersubjective dimension, between individual agency and the materiality of the social structure.

Culturally, we are used to associating what is seen with light and illumination, relegating the invisible to dimensions devoid of or deprived of light, where darkness takes on a double meaning both as a territory where things that cannot or must not be seen happen but also as a realm that protects precisely those people and things that cannot or must not be seen.

The struggle for visibility is therefore a struggle to get out of the state of invisibility and illegitimacy that also involves a redesign and resignification of what light and darkness should be. It is therefore no coincidence that we have chosen post-colonial practices of struggle as a terrain to show this constant dialectic between the visible and the invisible.

#### **4. WHY RESIGNIFY URBAN TRACES OF COLONIALISM?**

Decolonising cities in Europe has become a way to come to terms with a denied history of imperialism, colonialism, racism and enduring structural violence.

As Valeria Deplano (2020) has argued, in most cases it is institutions, particularly state institutions, that choose who or what is worthy of being remembered. In Europe, colonial events, scattered like traces in cities, have helped celebrate national histories steeped in colonialist values. What falters today are not only the statues and street names but also the worldviews and social hierarchies that erected those statues and named those streets. It is white innocence (Wekker, 2016) with its privileges that is being challenged in a post-colonial and post-migratory Europe in which its citizens have been of the most diverse origins for generations and in which the activism of Afro-descendants becomes increasingly relevant.

According to Schilling (2020), the idea of decolonising the cities of Europe has spread and grown in recent years. For example, in Germany, since 2007, Berlin Postkolonial has been working to bring traces of Germany's colonial past out of oblivion in its institutions, monuments and street names. Through its digital activism, urban walks and cultural events, Berlin Postkolonial succeeded in renaming a street that previously honoured the slave trader Otto Friedrich von der Gröben. The street now celebrates and acquaints a wider audience with May Ayim, a German Afro-descendant, scholar-activist, poet and pioneer in the valorisation of the history of Afro-Germans.

In The Netherlands, it is thanks to Afro-descendant activists (primarily Simone Zeefuik, Hodan Warsame and Tirza Balk) that a major decolonisation process was initiated at the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam (van Huis, 2019). This led not only to a critical revision of how colonialism was (not) being told in the museum, but in 2019 gave rise to a new exhibition entitled 'Afterlives of Slavery', within which, for example, video interviews with scholars such as Gloria Wekker were projected on large screens to make people rethink the close relations between the colonial past, contemporary social inequalities and anti-racist struggles in Dutch and European society.

Anti-racist movements thus seem increasingly engaged in practices of cultural re-signification at the urban level. The statues, monuments, museums and streets steeped in colonial history often remain but are flanked by plaques or cultural and political interventions that bring them out of invisibility. This prevents them from being seen in an innocent, uncritical way. Sometimes, compensatory interventions also take place, erecting new statues and monuments, creating innovative exhibitions and changing street names to celebrate figures of anti-colonial and anti-racist resistance.

The accusation of wanting to 'erase history' seems specious because it is instead a call to know it better in a critical key and to decolonise the gaze on contemporary European society.

In Italy, material traces of colonialism are in almost every city, as can be seen from the (interactive) map ‘Viva Zerai!’<sup>2</sup> or the website of the project ‘Post-colonial Italy – Mapping Colonial Heritage’.<sup>3</sup> These traces in the past have helped to celebrate a national history steeped in colonialist values of racial superiority and inferiority, only to fall into invisibility and remain long forgotten. Starting with the global mobilisations linked to the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020 (following the murder of George Floyd in the United States), initiatives have multiplied in Italy to bring out of indifference the names of historical figures and places linked to the violent history of Italian colonialism.<sup>4</sup> Streets, squares and monuments provide the chance to start a public debate on a silenced colonial history. As Igiaba Scego, an Italian writer of Somali origins, clearly states, there is indeed a deep lack of knowledge on colonial history:

No one tells Italian girls and boys about the squad massacres in Addis Ababa, the concentration camps in Somalia, the gases used by Mussolini against defenceless populations. There is no mention of Italian apartheid (...), segregation was applied in the cities under Italian control. In Asmara the inhabitants of the village of Beit Mekae, who occupied the highest hill of the city, were chased away to create the fenced field, or the first nucleus of the colonial city, an area off-limits to Eritreans. An area only for whites. How many know about Italian apartheid? (Scego, 2014, p. 105)

This lack of knowledge has political roots. Paolo Favero (2010), moving among historical material and contemporary debates on xenophobia and war, explores the self-representation ‘Italiani Brava Gente’, an image claiming the intrinsic goodness of the Italian people. This representation has its origins in the first Italian colonial enterprises, and it has also been used for overcoming the horrors of fascism. In contemporary Italy, it is evoked for justifying violent events, functioning as an ‘ideological laundry’ for reformulating and then setting aside events of national shame. Briefly, ‘Italiani Brava Gente’ is central to the construction of a modern Italy, a nation-state formed in 1871, whose colonial history played a crucial role in building national memory (Deplano & Pes, 2014; Giuliani, 2019).

Ignorance on colonialism can be considered a ‘substantive epistemic practice that differentiates the dominant group’ (Alcoff, 2007, p. 47). The concept of ‘white ignorance’ (Mills, 2007) helps us to interpret the selective exclusion of certain historical facts from collective memory as the result of centuries of white

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<sup>2</sup>[https://umap.openstreetmap.fr/fr/map/viva-zerai\\_519378#6/41.921/16.390](https://umap.openstreetmap.fr/fr/map/viva-zerai_519378#6/41.921/16.390).

<sup>3</sup><https://postcolonialitaly.com/>.

<sup>4</sup>The most dramatised controversy in the Italian media concerns the statue of journalist Indro Montanelli in Milan (14 June 2020). The statue was covered in red paint with the words ‘racist’ and ‘rapist’ written on its base. Montanelli, considered one of the most influential Italian journalists, took part in the fascist invasion of Ethiopia as a voluntary conscript. During his stay, Montanelli took as his ‘wife’ – under colonial concubinage (the so-called madamato) – 12-year-old Eritrean child named Destà, whom he had bought from her father and who the journalist himself described as a ‘little docile animal’. On several occasions, Montanelli justified his act claiming it was an ‘African custom’. For a discussion on this controversy, see Pesarini and Panico (2021).



oppression and racial domination. In fact, memory is deeply embedded in power dynamics. Only certain forms of knowledge and ways of remembering have been deemed valid. In opposition to the epistemic practices of the dominant groups, Mills advances the idea of 'counter-memories' produced by minoritised social groups to challenge hegemonic forms of collective memory.

In her book *Roma Negata. Percorsi Postcoloniali Nella Città* (2014), Igiaba Scego works to visually represent the historical connections between Europe and Africa in creative ways; she worked with photographer Rino Bianchi to portray Afro-descendants in places marked by fascism, such as Cinema Impero, Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana and Dogali's stele in Rome. This work represents a significant starting of a dialogue between visual narrations and stories coming from the margins, questioning the Italian colonial past and giving life to forms of counter-memories. *Roma Negata* was a source of inspiration for the realisation of visual research in Padova.

## 5. DECOLONISING THE CITY. VISUAL DIALOGUES IN PADOVA

Despite its claims to the contrary, whiteness is not a monolithic form. It is fissured, fractured and fragmented, always trying to form a statue. Let's try to work in these "cracks" of whiteness. (Mirzoeff, 2021)

According to [Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancioğlu \(2018\)](#), decolonising means first and foremost a recognition of coloniality as a key to understanding contemporary society. Moreover, it implies a will to build knowledge in alternative ways and a commitment to open new spaces for dialogues with anti-colonial and antiracist movements. Inspired by Walter Mignolo's call for epistemic disobedience and MacDougall's work on transcultural cinema, [Albrecht and Walter \(2019\)](#) argue that it is possible to challenge coloniality with collaborative and self-reflexive filmmaking, which becomes a key method to trigger transcultural processes of understandings.

Following Igiaba [Scego \(2014\)](#), Frisina and a group of graduate students gave life to a visual research project that defied the regime that condemns to invisibility the counter-memories of Italian Afro-descendants. The goal was to explore the historical connections between Europe and Africa in intimate and creative ways, taking urban traces of Italian colonialism in Padova out of insignificance and resignifying them through a participatory video, combined with walking methods and arts-based methods. Participatory and subject-centred approaches ([Pauwels & Mannay, 2020](#), pp. 237–349) allow the treatment of interlocutors as active subjects (not as containers from which to extract useful information), reducing the asymmetric relationship that continues to exist in every observational relationship between a research subject and the researcher. As a university teacher, Frisina wondered what 'decolonizing methods' ([Frisina, 2020](#), pp. 178–186; [Smith, 2012](#); [Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021](#)) could mean in Italy, and with her students she decided to question 'white innocence' and the myth of 'Italiani Brava

Gente' by listening the counter-memories of Italian Afro-descendants and experimenting with practices of counter-visibility (Mirzoeff, 2021), communicating the research to a wider audience and collaborating with local antiracist movements.

The participatory video (Frisina, 2013, pp. 105–113) was the experiential core of the laboratory of the visual research methods course held at the University of Padova in 2020.<sup>5</sup> As Mitchell and de Lange (2020, p. 256) suggest, using participatory video gives participants the opportunity to nurture their reflexivity through a collective work:

Working with video production as a group process (from the initial concept through the storyboarding, planning shots, shooting, initial screening and post-screening discussion) offers participants access to a type of socially constructed knowledge that is particularly significant to addressing themes which have often been taboo – the unspeakable.

The realisation of the video *Decolonising the City* (Fig. 1) involved a great number of people with different backgrounds, bringing together diverse skills and expertise.<sup>6</sup> The university research laboratory was intertwined with the experience of the collective 'Decolonize your Eyes',<sup>7</sup> born in the Palestro district,<sup>8</sup> where

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<sup>5</sup>Before the shootings, a day was dedicated to becoming familiar with video cameras and audio recording equipment from the sociology visual laboratory. The shootings spanned a week-and-a-half, during which small groups of students accompanied the Afro-Italian protagonists on their urban walks. The script was partially prepared by the protagonists, and the students negotiated with them the video shootings and the content. After an initial phase of editing, there was a first screening and discussion with the other students, Frisina and people from the collective who helped in the shootings, during which feedbacks and suggestions were gathered. After the first discussion, the videos were shared with the protagonists (one of them, Cadigia, was also a student of the course) and reported feedback. This led to a final editing phase that also required the students to go back to some of the protagonists for extra recordings to be added to the initial narration. This participatory editing lasted for a week-and-a-half, after which followed a final presentation with the class, an official restitution to the protagonists and finally a public restitution in the neighbourhood of Palestro.

<sup>6</sup>Elisabetta Campagni, a master's graduate in Sociology, assisted in the organisation of the course, the shootings and the editing process with the students. Essential assistance came from Dagmawi Yimer, a filmmaker of Ethiopian origin who has been working within the Italian independent cinema industry.

<sup>7</sup><https://www.facebook.com/DecolonizeYourEyes/>; <https://resistenzeincirenaica.com/decolonize-your-eyes/>; Instagram: Decolonize\_Your\_Eyes. The symbol chosen by the collective was the Ethiopian partisan Kebedech Seyoum, who upon the death of her husband, killed by Italian colonialists, took command of the anti-colonial guerrilla. The basic aspiration is to connect the anti-fascist resistance in Italy with the anti-colonial one (in tune with the internationalist vision carried out by Resistenze in Cirenaica). <https://resistenzeincirenaica.com/tag/federazione-delle-resistenze/>.

<sup>8</sup>It is an important neighbourhood also for the memory of the anti-fascist resistance, in which many of its inhabitants participated. The ANPI (National Association of Italian Partisans) from Padua, with its president Floriana Rizzetto, joined Decolonize Your Eyes from the beginning (June 2020).



Fig. 1. Decolonising the City. Visual Dialogues in Padova Link to the Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B6CtMsORajE>.

most of the colonial traces in Padua are concentrated. In fact, there are many roads that carry colonial names, such as Via Eritrea, Via Asmara, Via Libya, Via Amba Alagi and Via Amba Aradam. They are mostly names of colonial battles and geographic places that were battlegrounds or the locations of war crimes and massacres, though some are the names of Italian war criminals (celebrated as heroes).

The use of walking methods (O'Neill & Roberts, 2020) was motivated by the will to give attention to bodies and their performances, problematising some of the roads and calling out for a different topography. The colonial streets of Padova have been reappropriated by the bodies, voices and gazes of six Italian Afro-descendants<sup>9</sup> who resignified urban traces of colonialism, rereading them through their (family) biographies. We also used arts-based methods (Leavy, 2020) to allow each protagonist of the video to leave a material trace of herself or himself in the public space, a visible sign of her or his counter-memory. The artistic interventions were gifts left in the road or square each participant visited.

Below are reported each protagonist's profile and an insight into her or his personal and political narratives tied to a particular street or square.

*Cadigia Hassan* was born to an Italian mother and Somali father who was among the first students who reached Italy in the 1960s with a scholarship from the Italian government. She shares the photos of her Italian-Somali family with a friend of hers and then goes to Via Somalia, where she meets a resident living there who has never understood the reason behind the name of that street. This unplanned moment showed how seldom colonial history is known to the larger majority of Italian people and led the students to diverge from the original script. Cadigia has returned to Via Somalia to leave traces of herself, of her family history and of historical intertwining and to make visible the important connections that exist between the two countries.

*Ilaria Zorzan* is an Italo-Eritrean art history student living in Padova, and she shares her grandparents' story using printed black and white photographs taken by her family members. Her story is narrated while walking among the bridges and canals of Padua. With her family history, Ilaria challenges the colonial propaganda of Italians as 'good people' because they built roads, factories, bridges and other signs of 'civilisation'. Her family biography stands as another side of the history, recalling also the lives of 'mixed children', so-called 'sons of two flags' that included her father. She stresses the hardships they had to go through in the colonies, where interracial marriage was prohibited during fascism. Ilaria conceals her face behind old photographs just to reveal herself in Via Asmara through a mirror.

Cadigia and Ilaria belong to different generations, but both closely deal with their family backgrounds and the history that brought them to Italy. They both work on photographic material in very distinct ways: Cadigia uses photographs belonging especially to her parents, while Ilaria uses photos from her grandparents. The theme of biographical crossroads and historical memory emerges as particularly critical in today's Italian society. Cadigia and Ilaria's contributions bring together a colonial Italian past intertwined with personal memories such as family photographs, which are part of an unknown and more intimate sphere that left scars on thousands of Italian families.

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<sup>9</sup>The protagonists were involved because they were motivated in various ways to mend stories and interrupted relations between Africa and Italy, and in doing so they placed the colonial fact at the centre in its continuity and contemporaneity.

Artist and activist *Wissal Houbabi* is Italo-Moroccan – ‘Mediterranean’, as she defines herself. She chose Issaa’s song ‘*Non respiro*’ [I can’t breathe] (2020) as the soundtrack for her walk through the streets in Padova with colonial names (such as Via Libya, Via Cirenaica), resignifying them through slam poetry.

We’re the children of immigrants who survived the Mediterranean [...]. We were looking for a glimmer, to be able to breathe, suffocated even before they shut our mouths and sanitised our hands [...]. We’re not all in the same boat, and it takes class not to rub it in your face. My social class doesn’t have the strength to be angry or bitter.

[...] The past is here, even if you forget it, even if you ignore it, even if you do everything to deny the squalor of what it was, the State that preserves the status of frontiers and *jus sanguinis* [...].

I’m the reincarnation of the forgotten past [...]. I’m Mediterranean, and, here, every story has at least two versions of the truth.

Wissal challenges with her poetry the borders set by racist laws while pasting a map of a capsized Mediterranean region, forcing us to visually subvert dominant points of view. Wissal has spoken publicly as a ‘daughter of diaspora and the sea in between’, as a ‘reincarnation of the removed past’. It is therefore not surprising that not only the direct descendants of the former Italian colonies are taking the floor on these colonial roads, but all those who want to come to terms with the violent history of European capitalist modernity (Danewid, 2021) and who know from direct and daily experience the racism in contemporary society.

Mackda Ghebremariam Tesfau’, an Italian-Eritrean scholar and Refugee Welcome activist, reflects upon the neo-colonial international policies between countries that are deeply embedded in the economic capitalist structure of the West. After walking through the centre of Padova, she reaches the colonial map displayed in Padua’s main square that exposes the Italian ex-colonial empire. Her monologue ends by quoting Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* and by leaving his words (‘Europe is indefensible’) on a reproduction of the colonial map exposed in Piazza delle Erbe (in the historical city centre).

*Emmanuel M’bayo Mertens* (Fig. 2) is an activist of Arising Africans, an anti-racist association based in Padova. In the video we see him conducting an alternative tour in the historic centre of Padova, in Piazza Antenore, formerly Piazza 9 Maggio. Emmanuel cites the resolution by which the municipality of Padova dedicated the square to the day of the ‘proclamation of the empire’ proclaimed by Mussolini in 1936. According to Emmanuel, fascism has never completely disappeared, as the Italian citizenship law n. 91/1992 mainly based on *jus sanguinis* shows the racist idea of Italianness being transmitted ‘by blood’. Instead, Italy is built upon migration processes, as the story of Antenore, Padova’s legendary founder and a refugee, clearly shows. Mertens left a sign reading ‘Migration Square’ with the colours of the Italian flag. It was a way of re-appropriating negated citizenship, celebrating multiple belongings and performing the on-going transformation of Italianness.

*Viviana Zorzato* (Figs. 3 and 4) is a painter of Eritrean origin. Her house, full of paintings inspired by Ethiopian iconography, overlooks Via Amba Aradam. In



Fig. 2. Padova, a City Founded by a Refugee According to Emmanuel M'bayo Mertens.

everyday language, 'ambaradam' indicates a (generic) confusion. It is a popular expression in Italy, but few are aware of its origin. Amba Aradam is in fact the place where in 1936 the Italian colonialists made a massive use of chemical bombs in violation of the Geneva Convention.

In the video, Viviana tells about her Black women portrait, which she has repainted numerous times, inspired by *Portrait of a N-word Woman*, a painting she found years ago and which deeply called her to respond. Doing so meant taking care of herself, an Afro-descendant Italian woman who has faced sexism and racism. She tells us to be now at peace with her, and she symbolically opens her narration by posing one of the portraits she made under the street sign of Via Amba Aradam. Reflecting on the colonial streets she crosses daily, she argues that it is important to know the history but also to remember the beauty. Amba Aradam or Amba Alagi (another street next to her home) cannot be reduced to colonial violence: they are also names of mountains, and Viviana possesses a free gaze that sees beauty.

*Decolonising the City* constitutes a participatory work in which uniqueness is based on bringing together forms of visual activism from a plurality of actors, joining academic research and social actions. It asks Italian citizens to come to terms with the white privilege and innocence that prevents them from seeing the



*Figs. 3 and 4.* Viviana Zorzato's Gift: Her 'Black Women Portrait', via Amba Aradam.

crimes of colonialism in the urban landscape and structural racism in Italian society.

## 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter, we have tried to provide a shared perspective on what we see and what we do not see when facing the urban realm. In the first part of this chapter, we set the groundwork for the understanding of visibility regimes. In our understanding, the concept highlights the framing conditions allowing or disallowing symbols, icons, traces, signs and real experiences to be seen. We have identified several historical urbanisms, each with a distinct form of visibility. Fordist, post-Fordist and platform urbanisms have transformed the urban realm not only in terms of its fabric but also in terms of what is visible and legitimate and what is beyond that.

In order to explore sociologically what was described in the first part, we offered a grounded understanding of decolonisation as a set of practices that tackle precisely the realm of the visible and the invisible. Through a deep and ethnographic account of the making of an Italian debate on the hidden side of the official colonial history, we presented the results of an ongoing video and participatory tool on the traces of the colonial past. Counter-memories are video-recorded and related to the experiences of the participants in our visual

research methods course, combined with walking methods and arts-based methods.

Traces are thus put into scrutiny, just like memories and what can be considered the visible side of history. White privilege arises and is therefore tackled, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the city as a contested and ongoing text.

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