

Decolonizing public space

Public space can be seen as a given, that is, in its formal accessibility to all and as a manifestation of democratic life; or it can be seen as something inherently political, that needs to be constantly reclaimed by citizens, that is, to challenge processes of commercialization, privatization and the escalation of inequalities in cities. If we adopt the latter perspective, we can include and recognize the growing relevance of struggles over memories of Afro-descendants and postcolonial citizens, who have increasingly contested the symbolic place given in public spaces to their oppressors.

As recent documentaries have shown (Hunt, 2021; Ciriaci, 2022), monuments and statues of Columbus, Confederates and Founding Fathers fall from their pedestals, because anti-racism is also a battle for memory. The symbols of the legacy of slavery and colonialism have been put into question in Europe too: that is, the statues of the slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol, and of the Belgian King Leopold II in Brussels. However, this anti-racist struggle over memories is global, and works for rethinking the past from the point of view of the ruled and the vanquished, who actually never stopped fighting for dignity and rights.

What happens in the streets is related to what happens at the level of cultural production by diasporic artists and activists. In fact, the memories of racialized people as non-white, the descendants of the enslaved and colonized, are inevitably uncomfortable for people socially categorized as white; those memories sound disharmonious and dissonant with the memories institutionalized by the European nation-states, they create confusion and conflict. This is due to white ignorance, which is a global phenomenon, because it is linked to the ideological framework created to justify Western conquest and domination. At the heart of white ignorance today is the refusal to acknowledge the legacy of the colonial past, as well as the ongoing processes of racialization which continue to disadvantage racialized people as non-white.

Ending global white ignorance seems a necessary condition for global justice demands. Europe's colonial histories are fundamental to understanding the global inequalities of our present, with the long-term goal of redressing

the injustices associated with Western capitalist modernity. Europe is the richest continent on the planet, and its wealth is an inheritance that derives from the same historical processes that have left the Global South poor. Formal decolonization has reduced but not stopped the flow of wealth from elsewhere to Europe. Forms of material reparations are still far from being not only implemented, but even imagined as possible and legitimate by the majority of European states.

Instead, what is mobilizing a growing number of activists is the demand for epistemological justice, which includes the recognition of knowledge produced by people from the Global South and the public visibility of the counter-memories of the descendants of the enslaved and colonized through the cultural interventions of diasporic artists in public spaces.

The collective effort to decolonizing public spaces of European cities 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 valorization of the history of Afro-Germans.

In Italy, material traces of colonialism are in almost every city, as can be seen from the (interactive) map *Viva Zerai!*¹ or the website of the project Postcolonial Italy – Mapping Colonial Heritage.² 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 mobilizations 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. Streets, squares and monuments provide the chance to start a public debate on a silenced colonial history.

An example of this new phase of public dialogues on Italian colonialism and its legacy

is the participatory video *Decolonizing the City* (see Figure 32) which involved a great number of people with different backgrounds, bringing together diverse skills and expertise. A university research laboratory on visual methods was intertwined with the experience of the collective Decolonize your Eyes, born in the Palestro district, where 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 colonial streets of Padova have been reappropriated by the bodies, voices and gazes of six Italian Afro-descendants who resignified urban traces of colonialism, rereading them through their (family) biographies. Each protagonist of the video left a material trace of themselves in the public space, a visible sign of their counter-memory. The artistic interventions were gifts left in the road or square that each participant visited. *Decolonising the City* brought 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 ignorance that prevents them from seeing the crimes of colonialism in the urban landscape and structural racism in Italian society.

The documentary poster portrays the six Italian Afro-descendants who have resignified the public spaces of Padova with their personal and political narratives. Cadigia Hassan was born to an Italian mother and Somali father who was among the first students who reached Italy in the 1960s. 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. Cadigia has returned to Via Somalia to leave traces of herself, of her family history and of historical intertwining.

Ilaria Zorzan is an Italo-Eritrean art history student 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, bridges and other signs of civilization. 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.

Wissal Houbabi is Italo-Moroccan; 'Mediterranean', as she defines herself. Walking through the streets in Padova with colonial names (such as Via Libya, Via Cirenaica), she resignified them through slam poetry. Wissal has spoken publicly as a 'daughter of diaspora' and as a 'reincarnation of the removed past'. She is not a descendant of the former Italian colonies, but she is involved in coming to terms with the violent history of European capitalist modernity and fighting racism in contemporary Italian society.

Mackda Ghebremariam Tesfau', an Italian-Eritrean scholar and anti-racist activist, reflects upon the neocolonial international policies between countries that are deeply embedded in the economic capitalist structure. 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 the historical city centre.

Emmanuel M'bayo Mertens is an activist of Arising Africans, an anti-racist association. Conducting an alternative tour in the historic centre of Padova, Emmanuel cites the resolution by which the municipality of Padova dedicated a square to the day of the proclamation of the empire by Mussolini (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.

Viviana Zorzato is a painter of Eritrean origin. Her house, full of paintings inspired by Ethiopian iconography, overlooks Via Amba Aradam. In 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



Note: The video is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B6CtMsORajE>.

Figure 32 *Decolonising the City: Visual Dialogues in Padova (Northeast Italy, Fall 2020)*

massive use of chemical bombs. Viviana tells about her Black women portrait, inspired by *Portrait of a N-word Woman*, a painting which called for taking care of herself. She

posed one of her portraits under the street sign of Via Amba Aradam.

Public spaces of the cities offer the opportunity to put colonial traces into scrutiny and to make visible the counter-memories

of the descendants of the enslaved and the colonized, of the racialized as non-white, who play an active role in searching for a more just society.

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Notes

1. https://umap.openstreetmap.fr/fr/map/viva-zerai_519378#6/41.921/16.390.
2. <https://postcolonialitaly.com/>.

Further reading

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