

THE *MOSTRA D'OLTREMARE* AND COLONIAL HERITAGE IN NAPLES: BETWEEN ARTISTIC PRACTICES AND MEMORY ACTIVISM

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the historical transformations of the *Mostra d'Oltremare di Napoli* (The Overseas Exhibition in Naples), the exhibition complex built during the fascist era to familiarise Italian people with the colonies, as a site of contemporary memory activism. Drawing on urban mapping of colonial heritage, historiographical reconstruction, and semi-structured interviews conducted within the *CONCILIARE Project*, the study investigates how colonial traces persist in the urban landscape and are contextualised and endowed with new meanings through artistic interventions. The article situates the Italian case within the broader European debate on colonial heritage while highlighting its specific trajectory. Although Italy has experienced only a limited number of highly visible protests against colonial symbols, public reflection on colonialism has also developed through less spectacular, more diffuse practices rooted in local activist networks, migrant communities, artistic production and urban cultural spaces. The case of the *Mostra d'Oltremare* reveals how colonial heritage sites can simultaneously remain hyper-visible and socially invisible. Although the site continues to function as one of the city's main cultural and entertainment hubs, many of its colonial references remain largely uncontextualised and publicly unacknowledged. Through the analysis of artistic projects, exhibitions and activist practices, the article explores how different actors seek to reactivate critical engagement with colonial memory in contemporary Naples. The study argues that the Neapolitan case reflects a specific form of memory activism in which artistic and performative practices are central in mediating public awareness of colonial legacies.

KEYWORDS

colonial heritage, memory activism, public space, Naples, difficult heritage

A *MOSTRA D'OLTREMARE* E O PATRIMÓNIO COLONIAL EM NÁPOLES: ENTRE PRÁTICAS ARTÍSTICAS E ATIVISMO DA MEMÓRIA

RESUMO

Este artigo examina as transformações históricas da *Mostra d'Oltremare di Napoli* (Exposição do Ultramar de Nápoles), o complexo expositivo construído durante o período fascista

para familiarizar a população italiana com as colónias, enquanto lugar contemporâneo de ativismo da memória. Com base no mapeamento urbano do património colonial, na reconstrução historiográfica e em entrevistas semiestruturadas realizadas no âmbito do *Projeto CONCILIARE*, o estudo investiga de que forma os vestígios coloniais persistem na paisagem urbana e como são contextualizados e dotados de novos significados através de intervenções artísticas. O artigo situa o caso italiano no contexto do debate europeu mais amplo sobre o património colonial, salientando simultaneamente a sua trajetória específica. Embora a Itália tenha registado um número limitado de protestos de grande visibilidade contra símbolos coloniais, a reflexão pública sobre o colonialismo também se tem desenvolvido através de práticas menos espetaculares e mais disseminadas, enraizadas em redes locais de ativismo, comunidades migrantes, produção artística e espaços culturais urbanos. O caso da *Mostra d'Oltremare* revela como os locais de património colonial podem ser, ao mesmo tempo, altamente visíveis no espaço urbano e praticamente invisíveis no plano social. Embora o complexo continue a funcionar como um dos principais polos culturais e de entretenimento da cidade, muitas das suas referências coloniais permanecem em grande medida descontextualizadas e sem reconhecimento público. Através da análise de projetos artísticos, exposições e práticas ativistas, o artigo explora de que forma diferentes atores procuram reativar um envolvimento crítico com a memória colonial na Nápoles contemporânea. O estudo sustenta que o caso napolitano reflete uma forma específica de ativismo da memória, na qual as práticas artísticas e performativas desempenham um papel central na mediação da consciencialização pública sobre os legados coloniais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

património colonial, ativismo da memória, espaço público, Nápoles, património difícil

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite Italy's later and comparatively shorter colonial experience than that of other European powers with a longer colonial tradition, the Italian case has witnessed a few highly visible episodes of contestation, such as the defacement of the bust of Antonio Baldissera, commander of the Italian troops and governor of Eritrea, in Rome in 2020, carried out by the activist group Rete Restiamo Umani, and the repeated protests against the statue of Indro Montanelli, an Italian journalist who took part in the occupation of Ethiopia, in Milan between 2012 and 2024, organised by various local activist groups. However, as Labanca (2002) argues, the “atypical” history of Italian colonialism, as it has sometimes been described in comparison with that of other European colonial powers (Dubois, 1993), should not lead scholars to emphasise only its exceptional features, thus risking placing Italian colonialism outside history and making it incomparable (Labanca, 2002). At the same time, the process through which awareness of the Italian colonial past and related forms of activism developed should not be understood solely as a response to major international movements such as Rhodes Must Fall and Black Lives Matter. Rather, it should also be traced back to earlier, less visible and less spectacular processes, often involving forms of quiet activism within urban spaces, capable of mediating public debate, fostering engagement, and raising awareness.

Starting in the 1990s, in fact, “Italians were realising that ‘over there’ was, dismayingly, now over here” (Ben-Ghiat, 2006, p. 390), alongside the increase in migration flows from Africa to Italy, which contributed to a gradual reconsideration of the national colonial past. In parallel with the growing public awareness of Italian colonialism, the following decades witnessed the emergence of multiple bottom-up initiatives, ranging from Italian postcolonial literature (for an overview, see Romeo, 2017) to heterogeneous social movements committed to constructing counter-narratives that drew attention to a legacy simultaneously erased from public memory and still highly visible in contemporary public space (Gamba, 2025).

In this context, the case of the *Mostra d'Oltremare di Napoli* (The Overseas Exhibition in Naples) clearly shows how the visible can become invisible: the fairgrounds are still used and crossed daily, while the spaces originally conceived to celebrate the splendour of the Fascist colonial empire and its conquests remain largely unchanged and are often ignored in both their origins and historical meaning.

The article first analyses the diverse landscape of Neapolitan activism and how it intersects with broader forms of “memory activism” (Katriel, 2016) on colonial legacy. This is followed by a historiographical analysis of the *Mostra d'Oltremare* and its historical development, with an in-depth examination of the forms of contestation of the site. Finally, the article draws on interviews with three activists who helped bring the exhibition complex's colonial origins back into public discussion.

The aim is to examine how Naples has engaged with and contested its colonial legacy, with particular attention to the *Mostra d'Oltremare*. It asks whether the continued visibility of this former colonial exhibition complex within the urban landscape, and its ongoing use as a major venue for public events and cultural activities, has fostered critical reflection on its colonial origins and meanings. The article also investigates the composition and origins of the Neapolitan movements that have addressed this colonial heritage, analysing their practices, forms of activism, and public interventions. Finally, the article explores the institutional management and contemporary reuse of the *Mostra d'Oltremare*, showing how its historical significance as a colonial site remains largely overlooked. By examining both grassroots initiatives and institutional practices, the paper sheds light on the tensions between remembrance, public use, and the persistent marginalisation of the site's colonial history.

2. ITALIAN COLONIAL MEMORY AND URBAN LEGACIES

This analysis is situated within the field of studies on colonial heritage in urban contexts, particularly those that combine the historiographical analysis of colonial urban traces with the study of their contestation. This body of scholarship forms part of the broader literature on the public memory of Italian colonialism, as urban colonial traces constitute one of the main sites through which colonial memory is materialised, negotiated, and challenged in public space. Before turning to this more specific strand,

it is therefore useful to briefly outline the wider debate on Italian colonial memory in the public sphere. This historiographical debate can be traced back to the pioneering works of Angelo Del Boca in the 1960s and to the emergence of the paradigm of repressed memory, which considers public memory of the colonial past substantially removed from Italian memory and culture as a result of the failure to convict those responsible for colonial crimes (Del Boca, 1991) and the willingness of part of the Italian post-war political class to suppress an uncomfortable past, in the hope of preserving a role in the former colonies during the negotiations surrounding the 1947 peace treaties. Within this framework, the myth of “*Italiani brava gente*” (Italians good fellows) became consolidated (Del Boca, 2005). In fact, the representation of Italians as hardworking and fundamentally harmless served to relegate responsibility for colonial violence and aggressive imperialism exclusively to Fascism, thereby preserving a virtuous image of Italians abroad (Ertola, 2022). Consequently, political discourses played a significant role in shaping collective memory during those years, deliberately selecting which aspects of Italian colonialism to preserve while celebrating its supposed civilising mission (Pes, 2014).

Labanca (2002) points out that speaking of a single national memory of Italy’s colonial past is problematic given the highly diversified nature of the colonial experience. Rather, it would be more appropriate to distinguish between the memories of those who, in the postwar period, had direct experience of the colonies and those for whom the colonial experience quickly disappeared from memory (Labanca, 2002).

Subsequently, the idea of a complete removal of the colonial past from national collective memory and public debate was challenged by studies which, especially from the 2000s onward, began to demonstrate that colonialism had not been entirely removed from Postwar Italy while at the same time showing how the legacy of colonialism continues to shape contemporary Italy up to the present day. In particular, the contributions collected in the 2005 volume *Italian Colonialism: Legacy and Memory* argue that, rather than speaking of a total removal, it is more appropriate to refer to “displaced memories” (Andall & Duncan, 2005). This concept of a “displaced colonial memory” was later taken up by Triulzi (2006), who argued that rather than erasing this past, Italy transformed it into a nostalgic, ambiguous memory that continues to live on in the present. Baratieri (2010) likewise challenges the notion of complete amnesia surrounding Italy’s colonial past in the public sphere. Drawing on a variety of media sources, including the press, newsreels, and film, she argues instead for a selective memory and demonstrates how the silences surrounding the colonial question reveal much about what was chosen for remembrance and what was left to fall into oblivion.

During these same years, the study of Italian colonial memory also began to benefit from the postcolonial turn. Although it is not possible to provide a comprehensive overview here, it can be said that the postcolonial perspective highlights the temporal and spatial continuities linking Italy’s colonial past, present-day society, and historical patterns of migration (Romeo, 2017) and gradually expanded the focus from

the memory of colonialism to its enduring cultural and social legacies. Works such as *Italian Colonialism* (Ben-Ghiat & Fuller, 2005) and *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity* (Lombardi-Diop & Romeo, 2012) explored the lasting effects of colonialism on processes of national identification, racial formations within Italian society, and representations of alterity.

Within this broader historiographical debate on Italian colonial memory, a more specific strand of research has focused on colonial heritage in urban contexts. Initially concerned with reconstructing the historical origins and persistence of colonial urban traces, this literature has more recently expanded to examine their contestation and the forms of activism that have developed around them.

These latter studies developed especially in the wake of the Black Lives Matter mobilisations following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, which also reignited attention to colonial issues in Italy and gave rise to several highly visible protests (Pesarini & Panico, 2021). These events prompted scholars to investigate the relationship between Italy's colonial past and the contemporary present, while also historically contextualising the urban traces that remain and analysing their origins and development (Deplano, 2024).

On the one hand, the study of these traces as devices of public memory has increasingly focused on their historiographical reconstruction: their origins, the administrative decisions that established them, their permanence or their removal after the end of the Italian colonial period (Belmonte, 2021; Deplano, 2024; Ertola, 2025). In this regard, Ertola (2025) highlights how colonial traces in Italy, unlike those strictly associated with Fascism, survived the transition to the Republic because they were considered, to some extent, reusable, thereby revealing “the inability or unwillingness of the republican ruling classes (...) to consider such street names, like statues and stone inscriptions, as instruments of public pedagogy” (p. 46).

Major mapping projects aimed at uncovering the colonial origin of place names were carried out across various Italian cities, such as the *Postcolonial Italy Project* led by researchers Markus Wurzer and Daphné Budasz (Budasz & Wurzer, 2024), and the 2021 mapping project *Viva Zerai!* promoted by the Wu Ming collective (Wu Ming 2, 2023).

On the other hand, there has been a growing number of studies examining the current life of these traces: their contestation or their transformation into focal points for initiatives aimed at reactivating public attention toward colonial history, promoted by groups of Afro-descendants, local activists and, at times, public institutions themselves. From this perspective, scholars have analysed the modes of action adopted by activists, the dynamics of so-called guerrilla warfare on street names, and the origins of these movements (Balestri, 2025; Gamba, 2025; Mancosu & Vitale, 2024; Wurzer, 2023). Particularly relevant for the present study is the literature that has adopted, as a methodological approach, interviews with those directly involved in activism on these issues, in an attempt to reconstruct what may be described as a bottom-up perspective (Giuliani, 2023; Peretti, 2024).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study draws on research conducted within the Horizon Europe project *CONCILIARE: Confidently Changing Colonial Heritage*, which investigated European colonial legacies and the ways they are being challenged and reconsidered (<https://conciliare.uc.pt/>). The research presented in this article follows a preliminary activity, also carried out within the framework of the project, which consisted of mapping and cataloguing colonial urban traces through the systematic collection of data concerning their origins, historical transformations, underlying historical references, as well as possible forms of contestation and processes of transformation up to the present day.

While most Italian cities had already been extensively mapped through the *Postcolonial Italy* and *Viva Zerai!* projects, the Italian section of the *CONCILIARE Project* produced the first systematic mapping of Naples. Until then, the city had only been partially mapped by Wu Ming's *Viva Zerai! Project* (Wu Ming 2, 2023). This mapping activity highlighted the significant traces of Italy's colonial heritage in the city's urban landscape. Naples therefore represents a less explored context, making it particularly relevant for examining how activist initiatives have contributed to reopening the debate on the colonial urban past.

Within this broader framework, the present research focuses on the case study of the *Mostra d'Oltremare di Napoli*. This site is peculiar in its nature, function and urban location, as it comprises an architectural and exhibition complex originally built during the Fascist period and later repurposed. Its contemporary reuse has inevitably reopened questions concerning its colonial origins. At the same time, the continued use of the *Mostra d'Oltremare* as a fair and cultural venue has raised broader reflections on the current meaning of a place originally conceived as a celebration of the Fascist Empire.

The case was reconstructed through documentary research based on legislative and institutional sources, complemented by secondary literature on the history of the *Mostra d'Oltremare* and Italian colonial exhibitions, integrated with secondary sources on the topic. This first phase was accompanied by a specific analysis of the contestations, activist practices, and efforts to redefine the meaning of the site in recent years, reconstructed through materials and reports circulating in the press, digital media, and social media platforms.

The research also relied on oral sources, including three semi-structured interviews with activists directly involved in these initiatives. Their qualitative analysis complemented the documentary analysis, highlighting the perspectives of the subjects involved. The interviewees were selected through purposive sampling. Selection criteria included direct involvement in artistic, cultural, or activist initiatives addressing the colonial origins of the *Mostra d'Oltremare* or, more broadly, colonial traces in Naples' urban landscape. Although operating in different contexts, the interviewees shared a common profile as artists and cultural practitioners engaged in forms of "memory activism" (Katriel, 2016), using artistic production and public engagement to foster critical reflection on colonial histories and their legacies.

Interviews were transcribed and analysed through a thematic qualitative approach. Particular attention was paid to recurring themes concerning public awareness of colonial history, perceptions of the *Mostra d'Oltremare*, relationships with institutions, strategies of public engagement, and the role of artistic practices in fostering critical engagement with colonial memory.

Interview data were not treated as self-standing evidence but were interpreted in relation to the broader research materials. The anonymisation of the interviews derives from the interdisciplinary design of the *CONCILIARE Project*, in which historical research is combined with methodological tools drawn from the social psychology. In the present contribution, however, these testimonies are used primarily as sources for analysing contemporary practices of contestation, the dynamics of public memory and the forms through which the colonial past is being reactivated within urban space.

4. MAPPING NAPLES' URBAN COLONIAL HERITAGE

The systematic mapping of traces of colonial urban heritage within the city of Naples revealed the significant presence of this legacy throughout the urban fabric, confirming what has often been underlined in the literature: namely, that Naples played a strategic role as a gateway between Italy and its colonies within the Fascist colonial project (Deplano, 2012), for its physical proximity to the colonies and for the fact that its port was used as a crossroads during the war on Ethiopia (Salvatore, 2023).

The study identified 53 colonial traces, including 34 street names, six plaques, eight buildings, one statue/bust, three sites of confinement, and one miscellaneous trace.

The selection of these traces was based on two main criteria. First, only traces that remain visible and recognisable in the public space were included; therefore, toponyms that have changed over time were excluded. Second, the selected traces had to display a clear colonial reference, including historical figures directly or indirectly involved in Italian colonialism, events associated with Italy's colonial past, and geographical locations connected to the Italian colonial experience.

The selection included streets, squares, statues, and plaques, as well as buildings that played a role in the Italian colonial project (such as the Castel Nuovo castle, which served as a depot for colonial supplies and troops, or the Royal Oriental Institute) and "places of confinement", namely locations to which colonial subjects were deported during the wars of conquest. The term "miscellaneous" refers here to the Third "Ogaden" Interregional Carabinieri Command, headquartered at the Vittoria Barracks in Naples, which was established in 1939 and takes its name from an Ethiopian locality, the site of a battle fought between Italian colonial troops and the Ethiopian resistance, which ended with an Italian victory (Labanca, 2002).

The city's colonial heritage clearly emerged from the mapping process, which also highlighted related forms of contestation. These include, for example, the protest carried

out by the Ischia branch of the National Association of Italian Partisans against a street name dedicated to Lieutenant Alfredo De Luca, an aviator involved in the assault on Ethiopia who had been awarded a gold medal for military valour; or the request advanced by city councillor Pino De Stasio to remove the Fascist plaque located in Pianura, a peripheral district of Naples, bearing the inscription “the Italian people created the Empire with their blood”, whose installation and restoration were promoted in 2015 by Marco Nonno, then local coordinator of Fratelli d'Italia, a right-wing nationalist party.

The project's research on contestations linked to colonial urban traces showed that efforts to critically reassess this past have focused primarily on the *Mostra d'Oltremare*, the vast exhibition and fair complex located in the Fuorigrotta district.

4.1. FROM URBAN ACTIVISM TO CONTESTING COLONIAL LEGACIES IN NAPLES

To understand contemporary activism in Naples, it is first necessary to consider political and social activism as a structural element of urban history. This perspective is clearly outlined by Festa (2003), who reconstructs the continuity of political struggles and social movements that have shaped the city since the mid-1970s. These movements initially developed around demands related to housing rights and the right to work, later evolving through student collectives and self-managed social centres. Among the main actors of this phase were the Collettivo Comunista Napoletano (Neapolitan Communist Collective) and the Coordinamento dei Collettivi Studenteschi (Coordination of Student Collectives).

This trajectory culminated in 1991 with the creation of the Centro Sociale Occupato Autogestito (Occupied Self-Managed Social Centre) Officina 99, established in an abandoned factory in the Gianturco district. Unlike other experiences more strongly rooted within a single urban territory, Officina 99 rapidly assumed a city-wide dimension, becoming a space of convergence for heterogeneous social groups, including students, workers, unemployed people, individuals without stable housing and precarious workers. Through their work with migrant communities and other marginalised groups, some movements increasingly addressed questions related to colonial history, its public remembrance, and the persistence of racialised hierarchies and representations in contemporary Italian society. Similar dynamics have been observed in the broader Italian context, where anti-racist and migrant-rights movements have progressively connected contemporary forms of exclusion to colonial legacies and structures of racialisation (Giuliani, 2023).

In particular, social spaces and collectives born from practices of urban reappropriation, such as the social centre ex OPG Je so' pazzo, where the Movimento Migranti e Rifugiati Napoli (Naples' Migrant and Refugees Movement) was founded in 2016, together with the ex Caserma Occupata and the ex-Asilo Filangieri, constitute important spaces of cultural and political production where critical reflections on Italian colonial memory, social inequalities and the conditions of migrant subjectivities have found expression.

In particular, the ex-Asilo Filangieri has emerged as one of the city's main spaces for cultural and political reflection on decolonial issues, having hosted numerous initiatives

over time that have critically rethought the Italian colonial past and its persistence in the present. Among these, particularly significant was the workshop and discussion day “Uno Sguardo Decoloniale su Napoli” (A Decolonial Gaze on Naples, <https://resistenzeincirenaica.com/2021/12/14/uno-sguardo-decoloniale-su-napoli/>), organised in 2021 through the collaboration of groups such as the Neapolitan project *DeVerso – Percorso Decoloniale*, the Bologna-based collective *Resistenze in Cirenaica* (Resistences in Cirenaica) and the Padua-based project *Decolonize Your Eyes*. Structured around workshops on toponymic guerrilla practices, audiovisual screenings and public discussions, the initiative aimed to promote critical reinterpretations of urban space and symbolic reappropriation of the marginalised memories of Italian colonialism. Through reflection on street names, monuments and the material traces of coloniality, the event sought to question the persistence of colonial, imperial and Fascist imaginaries in contemporary public space.

At the same time, groups such as *Associazione Studenti e Diaspora Africana* (Association of Students and the African Diaspora, https://asda.altervista.org/category/storia_it/), founded in 2019 by Yacouba Traore, a student from the University of Naples “L'Orientale”, have developed independent projects of research and mapping dedicated to places connected to the colonial history of Naples, contributing to a growing civic awareness of these issues.

A central element emerging from Neapolitan memory activism is the strong connection established between colonial past and contemporary forms of discrimination. The initiatives promoted by these groups relate the Italian colonial past to the everyday experiences of migrant communities, focusing in particular on processes of racialisation, relations with police forces and forms of marginalisation affecting working-class neighbourhoods. This connection was recently represented by the Somali-Neapolitan director Halim Mohammed in the film *Lievete da Annanz 'o Sole* (Move Away from the Sun), which offers a glimpse into the everyday lives of people of African origin in contemporary Naples.

This perspective is also reflected in the *Project Research as Vocality: Tracing the African Presence in Naples* (<https://afrovocality.com/research-as-vocality/>), launched in 2022 and conceived by ethnomusicologist Giovanni Chiriaco together with rapper, performer and writer Napoleon Maddox. The project proposes a reinterpretation of the African presence in the history of Naples through artistic, performative and participatory research practices. Starting from the observation that memories of African communities in the city dating back to the fifteenth century have long been marginalised or erased, the project seeks to question the persistent forms of othering that continue to shape representations of Afro-descendant subjectivities within contemporary Italian society. Through vocal practices including singing, spoken word, rap, and performance, artists, researchers and activists collectively elaborate reflections on the historical relations between Naples and Africa, linking colonial memory, migration, and access to rights within contemporary urban space.

Also noteworthy is the initiative that developed around the Unity Club, a venue founded by a woman of American origin and her Senegalese partner, who has lived in Italy for more than twenty years. Over time, the Unity Club became a genuine centre of musical production, bringing together much of the Neapolitan Afro-rap scene and community. Together with them over three years, the research group reflected on what it means for Afro-descendant people to live under the gaze of “White” society and, at the same time, on how White society relates to a community that is highly active within the city yet still marginalised.

A similar perspective also characterises the initiatives *Musiche Migranti* (Migrant Music) and *Black Tarantella*, founded in 2000 by Andrea Aragosa, which promote a representation of the city grounded in encounters between cultures, the valorisation of migrant subjectivities and the overcoming of homogeneous identity narratives. In this sense, music and performance become instruments through which cultural practices connected to a decolonial sensibility are articulated.

This centrality of artistic and performative practices is equally evident in the field of visual arts and museum exhibitions. Particularly emblematic is the exhibition *Il Cono d'Ombra. Narrative Decoloniali dell'Oltremare* (The Shadow Cone: Decolonial Narratives of the Overseas, <https://www.blacktarantella-art.it/il-cono-dombra/>), conceived by Andrea Aragosa for Black Tarantella and held at the Castel Nuovo in Naples in the summer of 2022, under the curatorship of Marco Scotini. Organised in collaboration with the University of Naples “L'Orientale” and sponsored by the Campania Region and Mostra d'Oltremare S.p.A., the project brought together 50 works by 12 artists from the African diaspora. Its core purpose was to resignify the castle's spaces, which back in 1934 had hosted the *Second International Exhibition of Colonial Art*. In this regard, the exhibition's reference to the colonial events held in Naples in 1934 (at the Maschio Angioino) and in 1940 (at the Triennale delle Terre d'Oltremare) is deeply significant, recalling them as pivotal moments in the construction of the Italian colonial imaginary.

NAfrica-Maschere (<https://capodimonte.cultura.gov.it/mostra/nafrica-maschere-memorie-identita-uomini-o-maschere/>) is another notable example of this: hosted in 2025 at the Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte and curated by Simon Njami, a leading figure in contemporary postcolonial curatorial discourse, the exhibition explicitly addresses the theme of the Italian colonial legacy in Africa, questioning the relationship between memory, identity and representation through the dialogue established between colonial archives and works by contemporary African, Afro-descendant and European artists. In this sense, contemporary art is employed as a tool for critically reinterpreting colonial memory and deconstructing the racial representations produced by Italian colonial culture.

Taken together, the initiatives discussed above reveal a common feature within the Neapolitan context. What emerges most clearly from these experiences is the central role played by artistic, musical, and performative practices in Neapolitan memory activism.

Nevertheless, these artistic interventions should not be regarded as an isolated phenomenon unique to Naples. Rather, they can be situated within a broader European repertoire of artistic practices that critically engage with colonial heritage in public space.

A notable example is the intervention *On Monumental Silences* (2018, <https://extracitykunsthal.be/en/exhibitions/on-monumental-silences>), developed by Ghanaian artist Ibrahim Mahama in collaboration with Antwerp's Extra City gallery and the municipal museum Middelheim. The project engaged critically with the statue of Constant de Deken, a Catholic missionary celebrated in Belgium for his activities in the Congo Free State and long commemorated as a colonial hero. Rather than altering the original monument, Mahama created life-size replicas of the sculpture, including a clay version that visitors were invited to reshape during a participatory performance. Through this intervention, the monument became the starting point for a collective reflection on the persistence of colonial narratives and their continued presence in contemporary public space.

A comparable example can be found in Portugal, where artist and design researcher Barbara Neves Alves has critically engaged with the "Monument to the Portuguese Colonial Effort" in Porto (Alves, 2021). The monument was originally erected for the *First Portuguese Colonial Exhibition* of 1934, a major propaganda event of the Estado Novo regime designed to celebrate the Portuguese Empire and its so-called civilising mission. Although conceived as a temporary structure, it was reconstructed in stone and reinstalled in Porto in 1984, ten years after the end of the dictatorship, thereby extending the public presence of colonial narratives into the democratic era. Through a project that combined historical research and artistic practice, Alves (2021) sought to foster a critical engagement with the monument and its colonial legacy. Central to the intervention was the production of silicone casts of the monument's sculptural figures, which were used to encourage reflection on the persistence of colonial memory in contemporary urban space.

4.2. LIFE AND AFTERLIFE OF THE *MOSTRA D'OLTREMARE DI NAPOLI*

Although the *Mostra d'Oltremare* has attracted considerable artistic and architectural interest and has also been extensively studied from an historical perspective (Arena, 2012; Dore, 1992; Staderini, 2011), it should not be interpreted as an isolated experience, but rather as part of a broader political and urban project aimed at transforming Naples into a "bridgehead" between Italy and the colonies (Deplano, 2012). In this sense, the exhibition complex was fully consistent with Fascist policies that assigned the city a central role in Italy's colonial projection into the Mediterranean and Africa.

The *Mostra d'Oltremare di Napoli* was officially established in May 1937 through the creation of the "ente autonomo Mostra Triennale delle Terre Italiane d'Oltremare" (Regio decreto-legge 6 maggio 1937, n. 1756, 1937).

Inaugurated in May 1940 in the presence of the King and Emperor of Ethiopia, Vittorio Emanuele III (Archivio Luce, 1940), the complex was conceived to embody the regime's ambition to make Naples the quintessential colonial city, with its impressive

1,200,000 square metres of exhibition space and 36 exhibition pavilions. Beyond constituting a monumental propaganda operation celebrating Italian colonialism and the Fascist dictatorship, the construction of the *Mostra* also provided a significant impetus to the modernisation of the city as a whole and of the Fuorigrotta district in particular. It is therefore not coincidental that a significant number of the colonial traces still present in Naples are concentrated precisely within this neighbourhood.

Furthermore, the choice of Naples as the privileged site for hosting the exhibition was far from accidental. As noted, among others, by Dore (1992) and Deplano (2012), there existed a broader project aimed at transforming Naples into the “queen of the Mediterranean”. First of all, this was due to its strategic geographical position between Italy and Africa, which made the city ideally positioned to play a central role in the Fascist colonial project. Secondly, Naples had become “the centre of Italian colonial culture” (Deplano, 2012, p. 86), thanks to the presence of the Società Africana d'Italia (Italian African Society, formerly the Club Africano), which emerged as one of the main promoters of the Italian colonial movement, and of the Istituto Orientale, which, under the authority of the Ministry of Colonies and supervised by its Office for Studies and Propaganda, had been entrusted with the task of shaping its students' cultural outlook toward colonial issues (Deplano, 2012).

In its original form, the *Mostra d'Oltremare* combined elements of the colonial imagination with those typical of the fascist ideology: the narrative of the colonial enterprise was closely intertwined with the mythological narrative of Fascism and the cult of the Duce. A striking example can be found in the two frescoes in the so-called Hall of the Empire inside the “Cubo d'Oro”, one of the park's main buildings. The first depicts Julius Caesar on horseback surrounded by his legionaries; the second features a triumphant Mussolini on a white horse riding through the crowd. The narrative purpose is clear: to draw a common thread from the Roman Empire to the Fascist one through the vivid glorification of these two key figures.

The fascist taste was, of course, also expressed in the architecture of the buildings, which were inspired by a “practical and rationalistic” aesthetic (Dore, 1992) and, above all, in the massive use of modern audiovisual communication media. A perfect example of this was the Tower of the National Fascist Party, from which advertising and propaganda messages were broadcast to visitors.

Furthermore, it is worth noting the regime's instrumental use of the visual arts. Within the Fascist project, architecture, urban planning, and exhibitions served to shape the Fascist *homo novus*, who was encouraged to construct its national identity and sense of Italianness through comparison with the colonial “Other” (Ferlito, 2016). This was precisely the objective of the *Triennale delle Terre d'Oltremare in Naples*. The desired effect was achieved by contrasting the idealised beauty of Roman architecture with the simpler and supposedly more primitive constructions of the so-called indigenous village. The latter was constructed through the exploitation of the labour of colonised subjects who

were brought to Naples and exhibited in what scholars have defined as “human zoos” or “living museums”. This was by no means unique to Naples, as other “human zoos” had already been trialled elsewhere. In Italy, the first example of “humanity on display” had already taken place in Turin in 1884, during the *Italian General Exhibition*, and was followed by numerous other exhibitions: in Palermo in 1892, in Milan in 1894 and 1906, in Genoa in 1892 and 1914, and again in Turin in 1898, 1902, and 1911 (Abbattista, 2013).

Other European nations had also experienced similar phenomena, with the 1931 *Paris Colonial Exposition* being among the most famous. In Portugal, for instance, during the *First Portuguese Colonial Exhibition* held in Porto in 1934, “indigenous villages” were reconstructed inside the Crystal Palace, featuring colonised people engaged in daily life. According to scholarly studies, exhibitions like this one, which attracted more than a million visitors, were fundamental in constructing a stereotyped mental image of the colonial “Other” (Alves, 2021; Matos, 2014). This is also the case of the *Exposição do Mundo Português* of 1940, which has indeed been compared to the *Esposizione Triennale delle Terre d'Oltremare* in Naples (Vargaftig, 2016).

These are, of course, just a few examples to illustrate the scope of a phenomenon that cannot even be confined to the period preceding the end of the Second World War. Significantly, Belgium hosted a human zoo in Brussels as late as 1958, on the occasion of the 200-day *Brussels World's Fair* (Universal and International Exhibition), where visitors could observe the reproduction of a Congolese village (Domenici, 2015).

Despite its grand ambitions, however, the *Mostra d'Oltremare* had a short life: it was forced to close following Italy's entry into the war and suffered heavy bombing, during which many of the objects and materials it contained were irretrievably lost.

After the Second World War, the institution changed its name to *Mostra d'Oltremare del Lavoro Italiano nel Mondo* (Exhibition of Italian Labour Overseas), with the explicit purpose of “organising documentary exhibitions in Naples concerning Italian activities and labour throughout the world and overseas products, while also pursuing aims connected to the economic and tourist development of the city of Naples” (Decreto legislativo 6 maggio 1948, n. 1314, 1948). It was then definitively transformed, in 1999, into a joint-stock company under the name *Mostra d'Oltremare S.p.A.* (Decreto legislativo 20 ottobre 1999, n. 442, 1999), which it still retains today.

Beyond its name, which still explicitly evokes the language of colonialism, what is particularly significant is that several of the structures built in 1940 to showcase the colonies to the Italian public remain standing and continue to form an integral part of the complex. Today, the site functions as a major exhibition and cultural centre. It includes a zoo, an amusement park, and a concert arena, while also hosting highly popular events such as “Napoli Comicon”, which welcomed 183,000 visitors in its 2025 edition. The interviewees involved in this study describe the sense of estrangement experienced by those aware of the history of the *Mostra d'Oltremare* when observing the installations of the new theme park “Alice Lost Inside You”, placed precisely within some of the most

problematic areas of the complex: the former “indigenous villages”, the eucalyptus grove with the Coptic church, and the palm and magnolia avenue.

Despite the redevelopment of its spaces, however, the *Mostra d'Oltremare* remains an example of architecture of exceptional interest whose colonial legacy has largely remained unchanged. Browsing the pages of its official website, it becomes evident that places of clear colonial inspiration are described in an aseptic, decontextualised manner, entirely emptied of their heavy historical significance. To an external visitor, they may therefore appear as fictional spaces marked only by an exotic aesthetic. The Libya and Albania pavilions, together with the internal road connecting them, via Cardinale Guglielmo Massaia, although closed to the public, are still present on the official map of the *Mostra*. Likewise, the so-called “Cubo d'Oro”, a square-shaped building decorated with arabesques inspired by the Stele of Axum, and the Laghetto Fasilides, a faithful reconstruction of the castle of Gondar, continue to constitute central spaces within the park.

Today, a dual dynamic can be observed. The cultural events, fairs, and public initiatives hosted at the *Mostra d'Oltremare*, which continue to attract large numbers of visitors, demonstrate how spaces and buildings with explicit colonial references are routinely reused and incorporated into contemporary urban life without any substantial awareness of their colonial legacy. Recent institutional restoration projects likewise reveal little interest in addressing this “difficult heritage” (Macdonald, 2010), instead bypassing its historical significance and privileging architectural and aesthetic considerations.

A notable example is the recent history of the “Cubo d'Oro”: the building underwent restoration and was officially reopened on May 7, 2010, during the celebrations marking the seventieth anniversary of the *Mostra d'Oltremare* (La Repubblica, 2010). During the inauguration ceremony, held inside the building in front of the mural depicting Mussolini in the guise of Julius Caesar, public authorities formally reopened the restored structure without promoting any critical reflection on its historical and ideological significance. Rather than reinterpreting the site and redefining its role within contemporary society, the restoration process reinforced a tendency to valorise the architectural heritage of the *Mostra* while overlooking the colonial meanings embedded within it.

The substantial 2021 volume *La Mostra d'Oltremare nella Napoli Occidentale*, produced by scholars from the Department of Architecture at the University of Naples Federico II, reflects the institutional commitment to the redevelopment and contemporary revitalisation of the *Mostra d'Oltremare* (Aveta et al., 2021). The contributions, largely written by architectural historians, reconstruct the history of the exhibition complex and its transformation over time. However, the primary focus remains the preservation, enhancement, and architectural significance of the site, with particular attention devoted to its built heritage and its role within the urban development of western Naples.

At the same time, the *Mostra d'Oltremare* has become an important site for initiatives aimed at raising awareness of the Italian colonial past and fostering critical engagement with its material and symbolic legacies. Particularly significant in this regard

is the work of artist, researcher and activist Alessandra Cianelli, who in 2012 launched the *Project Il Paese delle Terre d'Oltremare* (The Land of Overseas Territories), developed until 2023. Originating from the discovery of letters sent by her grandfather from colonial Libya, the project intertwines family memory with a critical reflection on the Italian colonial legacy.

An initial phase of the project led to the production of the films *Ambaradam* and *Sulle Spalle/On My Back*, both centred on the difficult yet necessary process of recognising and reworking the colonial past within family memory. In 2021, Alessandra Cianelli and Alessandra Spadaro also produced the podcast *Diasporic Perspectives*. “Unlearning Imperial Histories with Libyan and Italian Artists”, dedicated to dialogue between Libyan and Italian artists on the themes of imperial memory and colonial legacies. Finally, in 2023, in collaboration with architect Filomena Carangelo, the project concluded with *Il Paese delle Terre d'Oltremare. Architettura di Cemento e Cartapesta: Restaurare l'Irrestaurabile* (The Land of the Overseas Territories. Architecture of Concrete and Papier-Mâché: Restoring the Unrestorable), culminating in a walk through the spaces of the *Mostra d'Oltremare* (Cianelli, 2023).

The *Mostra* has also been at the centre of other artistic practices that critically reinterpret its colonial and Fascist past. Particularly significant is the *Project Bellezza e Terrore: Luoghi di Colonialismo e Fascismo* (Beauty and Terror: Places of Colonialism and Fascism), promoted in 2022 by the Museo Madre and curated by Kathryn Weir (Weir, 2024). The project involved numerous artists and researchers, including Cianelli herself, as well as Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti, founders of the collective Decolonizing Architecture Art Research (<https://www.decolonizing.ps/site/napoli-2022/>), which created an installation combining seating areas with a series of guided discussions designed to encourage visitors to reflect on the park's colonial legacy within the very spaces shaped by that history. The installation invited visitors to critically confront the persistence of colonial traces and the continuities of the Fascist and imperial past embedded in the architecture of the exhibition complex itself, as well as to imagine new ways those spaces could be used (Decolonizing Architecture Art Research, n.d.).

Other artists involved in the Museo Madre's exhibition *Bellezza e Terrore: Luoghi di Fascismo e Colonialismo* (Beauty and Terror: Sites of Fascism and Colonialism) in 2022 addressed colonial violence and its marginalisation in Italian public memory more explicitly. In this context, Sarah Abdu Bushra and Dawit Seto presented the performance “ከገፅታው በስተጀርባ” (Look Here), a reflection on the violent nature of photographic images and colonial visual dispositifs (Museo Madre, n.d.). The work specifically recalls the experience of Ethiopian, Eritrean and Somali individuals deported to Naples to work on the construction of the pavilions of the *Mostra d'Oltremare* and later exhibited within the so-called “indigenous villages” of the exhibition complex.

Alongside artistic installations, the *Mostra d'Oltremare* has also hosted moments of historical research and scholarly discussion. Among these was the study day organised

in 2022 in collaboration with the Centre André-Chastel, entitled *Napoli – Balcani | 1940–2020: The Material Legacy of Fascist Colonialism at the First Triennial Exhibition of the Italian Overseas Territories*, curated by Alessandro Gallicchio. The initiative brought renewed attention to a still largely marginalised dimension of Fascist imperial policy, namely Italian colonial claims over the Balkans, the Dodecanese and Albania, which were also represented within the *Triennial Exhibition* through dedicated pavilions, such as the Albania Pavilion, still visible today on the official map of the complex (Museo Madre, 2022).

5. VOICES FROM CONTEMPORARY ACTIVISM IN NAPLES

To support the research, three semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals involved in artistic and cultural practices connected to decolonial reflection in the city of Naples, particularly in relation to the *Mostra d'Oltremare*. To preserve anonymity, the interviewees will be identified as N1, N2, and N3.

One particularly significant element emerging from the interviews concerns the centrality of artistic and musical languages within Neapolitan decolonial activism, perceived by the interviewees as privileged tools for intervening in public space and producing new forms of critical awareness.

The interviews also reveal different positions regarding the role of institutions. On the one hand, N3 describes a climate of openness and collaboration with universities and municipal institutions in the process of organising exhibitions about Italy's colonial past; on the other hand, N1 and N2 report difficulties in obtaining access to the spaces of the *Mostra d'Oltremare* to organise guided walks around the most controversial areas of the complex and artistic interventions. According to the interviewees, this reluctance appears to be accompanied by a broader tendency to neglect the most problematic areas of the complex, despite funds allocated for their maintenance.

Differences also emerge regarding the composition of the audiences involved. N3 describes a heterogeneous participation composed both of university students and visitors familiar with contemporary art, as well as occasional visitors initially unfamiliar with the themes addressed. The interviewee also highlights the strong emotional reactions generated by the installations and exhibition paths, particularly among Afro-descendant visitors. By contrast, N1 and N2 express self-critical reflection on their inability to reach a broader, more socially diverse audience, attributing this limitation mainly to funding scarcity and to the difficulty of establishing long-term relationships with the public.

All interviewees, however, agree on the persistent lack of public awareness regarding Italian colonial history and its contemporary legacies. This removal is mainly linked by them to the absence, until recent years, of structured teaching on Italian colonialism within school curricula. According to N2, this process of removal contributed to transforming colonialism into a sort of national “fairy tale”, capable of minimising or concealing its historical violence. The same interviewee also points to a widespread tendency, even within artistic circles, to regard these issues as external to one's own cultural practice.

Regarding the personal motivations that gave rise to their respective paths of research and artistic production, both N1 and N3 connect their interest in Italian colonialism to family memory. N1 describes the discovery of postcards sent by their grandfather from colonial Libya, where he would later die during World War II; N3 instead traces their interest in African art back to family stories concerning their grandfather's departure for Africa and, later, to the study of the *International Colonial Art Exhibition* held at the Maschio Angioino in 1935.

Finally, all interviewees agree on the symbolic value of practices such as the defacement of statues and other demonstrative actions directed against colonial monuments, while also considering them insufficient if not accompanied by a broader process aimed at critically questioning the colonial gaze and its persistence within contemporary public space.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The mapping of colonial traces in Naples has shown that the legacy of Italian colonialism continues to occupy a significant place within the city's urban landscape. The presence of numerous street names, buildings, plaques, and other references linked to the colonial experience confirms the role Naples was expected to play within the Fascist imperial project as a "bridgehead of the Empire".

At the same time, the persistence of these traces after 1945 confirms what Ertola (2025) has observed regarding the postcolonial legacy of Republican Italy's urban toponymy: colonial references were largely absorbed into the public space of the Republic without undergoing significant processes of critical re-evaluation or historical contextualisation.

In this context, the *Mostra d'Oltremare* constitutes a particularly significant case study. In terms of its origins, functions, and subsequent transformations, it is part of a broader European history of colonial exhibitions, sharing important similarities with other exhibition complexes created to celebrate imperial expansion and later repurposed after the end of the colonial era. Indeed, the case of the *Mostra d'Oltremare* bears significant similarities to the *First Portuguese Colonial Exhibition* held in Porto in 1934, particularly in the way colonial exhibitions were mobilised as instruments of national identity-building through the display and representation of colonial alterity (Alves, 2021; Matos, 2014; Vargaftig, 2016).

Its trajectory illustrates how the contemporary reuse of spaces originally created to celebrate colonial expansion and the fascist imperial project has not been accompanied by an equally substantial reflection on their historical significance. The continuous flow of visitors attending the cultural, exhibition, and recreational events hosted within the complex testifies to the full integration of the *Mostra* into contemporary urban life, without necessarily fostering a greater awareness of its colonial origins.

This legacy, however, has not gone entirely unnoticed. In recent years, several artists, researchers, and activists have worked to bring the colonial character of the *Mostra*

d'Oltremare and, more broadly, Naples' colonial traces, back into public discussion. These initiatives emerged within a context of activism and cultural production that was already well established in the city and should not be interpreted solely as a consequence of the international mobilisations of 2020. Rather, they are rooted in networks and movements that had long engaged with issues such as anti-racism, migration, and social inequality, within which reflections on colonialism gradually found a place.

One of the most distinctive features of the Neapolitan case is the central role assumed by artistic practices as a privileged means of intervening in public space. Exhibitions, installations, performances, podcasts, and urban walks have constituted the primary tools through which a critical reinterpretation of the colonial past has been promoted. While this emphasis on artistic intervention represents a distinctive feature of the experiences examined in Naples, it also finds parallels in other European contexts, where similar practices have been employed to engage with contested colonial legacies and difficult forms of heritage.

The interviews further reveal that activists interpret the limited historical visibility of the *Mostra d'Oltremare* as a reflection of a broader lack of knowledge about Italy's colonial past, which they attribute primarily to its marginal position within school curricula and public education. At the same time, they point to persistent difficulties in promoting processes of critical reinterpretation in collaboration with public institutions. Recent institutional initiatives have tended to prioritise the architectural restoration and enhancement of the complex, conceived as a strategic asset for the regeneration of western Naples, rather than explicitly addressing its historical and political significance.

Overall, the case of the *Mostra d'Oltremare* demonstrates that engagement with colonial heritage in Italy remains partial and incomplete. While artists, activists, and researchers have contributed to reopening public debate on these legacies, institutions continue to privilege logics of preservation and refunctionalization that are only rarely accompanied by a thorough historical contextualisation of the colonial past embedded in these spaces.

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