

THE RETURN OF COLONIAL MEMORIES IN POSTCOLONIAL ITALY

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Rather than accepting the idea that these memories were repressed, what emerges is the sense that they are displaced.

Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan, *Italian Colonialism*

Certain absences are so stressed they arrest us with their intentionality and purpose, like neighbourhoods that are defined by the population held away from them. Where (...) is the shadow of the presence from which the text has fled? Where does it heighten, where does it dislocate?

Tony Morrison, *Unspeakable Things Unspoken*

It would appear from the fast-growing literature on Italian colonialism, mostly fuelled by postmodern and postcolonial-inspired Italian studies in the anglophone world (Allen and Russo 1997, Palumbo 2003, Ben Ghiat and Fuller 2005, Andall and Duncan 2005) and by a parallel movement in literary studies in Italy (Očkayová 2002; Gnisci 2003, Morosetti 2004), that the long-standing failure of Italian public memory to come to grips with its colonial past may soon be over. The visible sign of this turning point is the alleged advent of an Italian postcoloniality where the joint impact of a more critical historiography and of a new-born Italophone postcolonial literature is moulding 'the multiethnic laboratory Italy' which, like the rest of Europe, is 'creolizing' the country's culture and exposing its colonial past (Ahad and Gerrand 2004:19). With the landing of new African migrants on the peninsula, the mixture of 'mystery, exoticism and shame' which constituted the 'postcolonial sub-conscious' in Italy for more than half a century (Ponzanesi 2004: 26-29) appears to have come to an end, eroding the long season of amnesia which has kept haunting the country's short-lived colonial empire.

Historians and africanists - let alone Africans - living in Italy are rather more pessimistic. Although a more critical historiography has surfaced in recent years (Labanca 2000, 2002, Taddia 2002, Triulzi 2002, 2004), it would be a mistake to consider it to be part of a new 'canon' promoting historical revisionism. In spite of the recent 'proliferation' and re-emergence of Italian colonialism 'as a topic of heated debate' (Palumbo 2003:1), the 'legend of Italian colonialism as different, more tolerant, and more humane than other colonialisms' remains obstinately at large (Del Boca 2003: 20). Today's Italy is far from being 'a postcolonial country that has reckoned with its past': its colonial memory is described as being 'scattered and weak', paradoxically 'distant' and yet 'more troubled today' than in the past by new forms of 'confusion, regeneration, [and] self-

absolution' (Labanca 2005:29-40). The 'repressed years' are not yet over: Italy's colonial past appears to be rather 'frozen' than forgotten (Ellena 2001:42); no longer silenced, its memory is now openly exhibited in hybrid displacements and dislocations which continue to have a deep 'impact in both Italy and "Italian Africa"' (Andall and Duncan 2005:10).

It seems important therefore to accompany the present 'reexamination of Italian colonial history' (Palumbo 2003:3) with a parallel assessment of how colonial memory is managed and reconfigured in 'Italian Africa'. I will discuss here a few examples of the ambiguous distancing and closing-up of Italian society vis-à-vis its colonial past in recent years. I will also suggest that the present reconfiguring of colonial memory in Italy, endorsing a sanitised 'shared memory' of the past, is confronted by a parallel displacement of memories in ex-Italian Africa, particularly Eritrea, which is calling for new prospects of partnership and joint agency with the ex-metropolis. Displacing the colonial event is in many ways part of the same 'postcolonial politics of disappearance' designed 'to erase memories of injustice and aggression' from a troubled past (Pickering-Iazzi 2003:198). The transformation of this 'empty space' into a nostalgic whitewashing of the colonial past in the ex-metropolis invites dreams of frail co-existence and pacification between the ex-colonial masters and 'the disenchanting and disenfranchised post-colonial citizens' (Iyob 2005:271).

The latency of colonial memory

It seems to me that the insistence on 'the mantra of forgetting' (Labanyi and Vakil 2001) as a collective Italian unconscious is only part of the picture. The present reconfiguring of colonial memory extends its reach beyond the imperial metropolis and affects both post-colonial élite and grassroots showing overlapping and shifting memories of colonial encounters and imprints which are as pervasive as they are disquieting. Like the Janus-figure evoked by Ruth Iyob for post-independence African elites (Iyob 2005:257), colonial memory in Italy is 'the closest approximation of the post-colonial condition that simultaneously rejects/retains the colonial past' and which oscillates between an all-out revengeful memory and the nostalgic recollection of a past which leaves 'too many unasked/unanswered questions' (2005: 268).

Given its bifurcating nature, the renewed positioning of colonial memory is like a backup file which can be brought to surface according to convenience or factuality, or during moments of crisis due to war or to perceived threats to national identity. The recent influx of African migrants trying to break into the fortified European citadel, although widely recognised as having favoured the present revision of the colonial past (Palumbo 2003, Ellena 2001, Andall, Burdett and Duncan 2003) has equally brought about an idealised and assertive colonial memory, not devoid of racist

overtone, which is growing or, rather, is being nurtured among the Italian public as well as among the ex-colonial subjects. Feelings of cultural and racial superiority are thus re-emerging within Italian society confronting both metropolitan and post-colonial societies with new forms of mal d’Africa:

The mal d’Africa of the nineteenth century has been supplanted by the mal d’Europa of the twentieth century. The trekkers are no longer colonists seeking new lands but former subjects in search of an escape from the former colonia and heading to the metropoli in order to avoid the post colony’s ‘distinctive regime of violence’ (Mbembe 2000:102). (Ruth Iyob 2005:271).

In many ways, the ‘striking back’ of the old Empire is no less controversial for Italian society than it is for Italy’s ex-colonies. Nor is it less painful. In post-colonial Italy, the African ‘alterity’ is dealt with, culturally and socially, with ambiguous returns of colonial clichés together with representations of modernity and citizenship which, while including sanitised forms of the country’s colonial past, exclude African migrants from full participation in cultural, social or political life. At the same time, as the European citadel is increasingly protected from foreign inroads, and defended from its own past, in the ex-colonies the grassroots memory of the colonial event is increasingly vested in forgetful forms of ‘whitewashing the brutality of colonial rule and selectively nurturing a nostalgic version of nineteenth century Euro-African encounters.’ Inevitably, a ‘populist re-assessment of the colonial past’ takes place: in the eyes of post-colonial citizens, the colonial period becomes in retrospect ‘a time of a more hopeful past where subjects could glimpse a “better” co-existence with the alien rulers’ (Iyob 2005:256-8).

To question the colonial past in Italy raises a further question of the current representations of national identity and the forceful need, constantly reiterated by the highest authorities of the Italian state, to forge a shared memory in order to appease the united country’s troubled past.¹ As the debate on Italy’s ex-colonies is mainly confined to the scholarly world, the spectre of antagonistic versions of the country’s past is perceived today as an unhealthy sign of cultural relativism and racial métissage which threatens the country’s destiny and endangers the very heart of Italianness (Luzzatto 2004). It is within this hostile context that the revisioning of Italy’s imperial past must be appraised together with the enduring difficulties of ‘decolonizing’ its troubled memory (Labanca 2002:438).

Several authors have insisted on the pervasive ‘latency’ of colonial memory and its long-standing imagery, the hidden remembrances still floating in Italian houses and consciences which are often lodged in private correspondence, in dusty picture albums and diaries and concealed at times from the very household members themselves (Chelati Dirar 1996:9-37) - that ‘sticking point’ which remains glued in the individual and collective lives of the roughly one million Italians

who lived and fought in Africa (Labanca 2005:31-2). In fact, the arrival of new African and Albanian migrants in the last twenty years has not only confronted the colonial and imperial memory of the nation, but unleashed new representations of national pride, glory or simply self-advancement which sustained the colonial 'dream' of pre-war Italian citizens (Isnenghi 1991). These long-standing racial clichés and prejudices from the past have been bequeathed to the present generation. This is how the 'racist system of perception' has grown in Italy in recent times and has developed into 'a daily routine, [which] is all-invading, moves quickly almost everywhere, in one form or another, whether in jokes, stories or exchanges of opinion, in daily conversations and in the media. It moves among adults and, constantly, among children.' (Tabet 1997:V).

It was among primary school children of the early nineties that Paola Tabet found surprising levels of racial prejudice, an open racism they derived from their parents together with their unrestrained consumer enthusiasm and expectations for 'modernity'. Asked what he would do if his parents were black, a primary school child from Montecchio Maggiore claimed:

If my parents were black, I would think they came from Africa. Or I would put them in the dishwasher together with Dash, Dash Ultra, Omio Bianco, Atlas, Ace, Ava, Dixan 2000, Coccolino, Ajax detergents, so I would be sure they would get back to normal. (Tabet 1997:113)

To be normal is to be white, abnormality is its contrary. So Ambra, another school child from Arezzo, answered the same question wanting to paint his black parents pink 'so at least they would become of Italian skin (sic!)' (Id.). It is in these children's representations of daily 'normality', which resonate with convictions obviously widespread in the adult world, that Italian memory of the colonial world is to be found today, present yet latent. Like a well-functioning engine which has been put into neutral, the racist system of perception can be started at any time and, once geared in, can be pushed to any speed. Public events such as battle memorials or the sending of Italian troops for humanitarian aid can be the occasions for such 'gearing in', as in all these events the old representations of national glory and prestige help sustain the national sense of belonging and make Italians feel they are part of a nation endowed with a civilised and progressive 'imperial' past. It is these feelings of national belonging which are being resumed and appropriated today to induce media and public consensus in favour of the new cultural, political, and military expressions of 'Italianness'.

Thus colonial memory breaks out occasionally in Italy following the paths of belonging or exclusion, or of mere political convenience, which are opened up by new events. In the Summer of 1993, an Italian expeditionary corps was sent to Somalia under the aegis of the United Nations to distribute food aid and help restore peace in the country. This was in spite of initial US and Somali hostility on account of Italy's colonial past in the region. The event prompted the Italian Foreign

Ministry Under Secretary of State, Laura Fincato, to call for an ‘international protectorate’ over the old colony in the process receiving open support from Italy’s leading foreign affairs editorialist, Sergio Romano, in *La Stampa* (16.07.1993, Tripodi 2000: 11). Three years later, Prime Minister Lamberto Dini refused to send a state delegation to Ethiopia to take part in the centenary commemoration of the Battle of Adwa where Italy had suffered major military defeat and a setback to its expansion in the region. The reason for his decision was that he feared attacks by the right on the eve of national elections. The matter was uneasily patched up by allowing the President of the Senate’s Foreign Affairs Committee, Giangiuseppe Migone, to lay a wreath on the battlefield together with his Ethiopian counterpart (Triulzi 2005b). In Italy, the defeat of Adwa was highlighted by poor newspaper attention and by renewed polemics on the country’s colonial past, while the international conference called by Angelo Del Boca in Piacenza to commemorate the event failed to obtain official state support (Del Boca 1997; Labanca 1997).

Historians have remarked that the first challenge to post-colonial Italy came with post-war requests for reparation from the ex-colonies (Labanca 2005:35; Del Boca 2003: 21-30). But it was with the outbreak in May 1998 of a bloody conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea over the old colonial (i.e., Italian) border separating the two countries, that Italy’s colonial memory was suddenly and unexpectedly called back, and the ‘return of the colony’ within Italian society and its ex-colonial possessions became rampant giving a new turn to the oscillating memory of the common past. I want to discuss now how this sudden resurgence of colonial memory both in Italy and in its ex-colonies is having a sweeping impact on both Italian and African society, displaying a multiplicity of reactions, recollections and displacements aimed at countering, soothing, extolling or re-enacting the hybrid encounters/clashes of colonial times.

Post-colonial memory and colonial hybridity

The Ethio-Eritrean conflict between May 1998 and December 2000 made some 100,000 victims and shattered the political, geographic and moral economy of the two countries. In spite of the growing literature on the conflict (Abbink 1998, Trivelli 1998, Gilkes and Plaut 1999, Iyob 2000, Negash and Tronvoll 2000, Clapham 2000, Jacquin-Berdal and Plaut 2004), few authors appear to have noticed how much the conflict was rooted in different representations of the colonial past, and how these representations have been used to shape new national identities and politics of inclusion/exclusion in the region.

In September 1998, just a few months after the hostilities between the two ‘brother countries’ had started along the old Italian colonial border, a parallel ‘war of words’ (Abbink 1998:554) was launched in each country to sustain the fighting at the front and ‘explain’ the real

nature of the conflict. The respective national communities living in the diaspora soon joined in and heightened the level and purpose of the heated dispute (Guazzini 2002; Le Houérou 2000). To raise the issue of the colonial past was possibly a way to by-pass the more cogent reasons which stood behind the conflict. Many powerful forces drove the discord: the old rivalry between the two Liberation Fronts - the Eritrean EPLF and the Tigrayan TPLF - both of whom helped to free the country from Mengistu's tyranny; economic competition over foreign trade; the Eritrean decision to use the newly-coined nakfa currency for the independent state, and the different political visions of the respective leadership cadres - one favouring a 'hegemonic' (Ethiopian) the other a 'diasporic' (Eritrean) state form (Iyob 2000). Yet, the virulence of the dispute over the respective 'colonial' past and its impact on the national question shows how much hybrid memories of the colonial encounter, after remaining in hiding for a long time, are now haunting the Horn region as well as the ex-colonial metropolis.

The heart of the challenges lay in the alleged 'colonial' mentality, and even DNA, which the Eritreans were said to have inherited from their ex-colonial masters (Walta Information Center 2000: 116-19). Throughout the conflict, Eritreans were accused in the Ethiopian media of having interiorized the expansionist and 'fascist' attitudes of the Italian colonisers, along with their 'colonial arrogance' and racism. In the face of the apparent indifference or ignorance of Italian state authorities and civil society, cartoons borrowed from the fascist occupation of Ethiopia (1936-1941) were extensively used and manipulated on internet to this effect (Guazzini 2002; Triulzi 2005a). In fact, throughout the conflict, the memory of the common colonial past was used in Ethiopia to distinguish the historical experience of the two national communities - the century-old independence of Ethiopia broken by the brutal fascist occupation, and the colonial subservience of its Eritrean neighbours who accompanied the Italian troops invading the motherland in 1896 and 1935. The colonial troops, mainly composed of Eritrean ascari, were the main target for the ideological offensive: the Eritrean government and people were all subsumed under the ascari label, a synonym of betrayal for Ethiopians, since it was Eritrean ascari who sided with the Italians at Adwa in 1896, and first marched into the occupied Ethiopian capital on 5 May 1936 (Le Houérou 2000:19).

In Eritrea a contrary anti-Ethiopian ideology, forged during the long years of the liberation war fought after Ethiopia annexed the northern province in 1962, was equally heightened during the conflict and attuned to answer Ethiopian claims. Here too, drawing on the iniquitous 'colonial' past of the Ethiopian 'occupation' (1962-1991) - which followed and superimposed itself on the Italian one (1890-1941) - the Eritrean political elite encouraged a new angle to the reading of the country's history. In the course of the conflict, the national myth of Eritrean oneness coinciding

with the founding of the Italian colony in 1890 - itself a unique case of displaced decolonization in the region (Calchi Novati 2005) - was accompanied by a further, and until then disregarded, colonial memory of the ascari as 'agents of modernity' and, indeed, 'frontier-makers' for the advancing independence. So, what to Ethiopians was 'a shameful past', was perceived by Eritreans as a 'founding' one (Le Houérou 2000:26)

The Eritrean political elite countered Ethiopian allegations by insisting on the 'modernity' of the infrastructure (roads, buildings, urban services) introduced into the Red Sea province by the Italian colonisers and the social transformations induced in rural Eritrea by bringing in 'villas, bread and cars'. The Italian creation of a locally-recruited army of some 100,000 ascari, whose descendants in many cases participated in the fight for independence, was part of this induced modernity. Fabienne Le Houérou, who studied the genealogies of some 250 old fighters of the Eritrean front, states that, since some fighters were children of an ascaro father, they often claimed that 'it was their fathers who originated their feeling of belonging to the Eritrean nation. (...) By fighting alongside with the Italians, the *ascari* dug a deep identity ditch which separated them from the Ethiopians' (Le Houérou 2000:24-5).

Thus the border conflict with Ethiopia reopened the vexed Pandora box of Italian colonial impact on Eritrean society (Negash 1987, Taddia 1996, Abbay 1998). In an interview given on 14 September 1998, Eritrean President Isayas Afewerki was reported saying:

In little more than sixty years the Italian Army recruited some 100,000 to 150,000 ascari. Can you imagine the sort of transformation it entailed? People stopping their farm work within their communities to be transformed into soldiers! (...) Whether you like it or not, if you eat pasta you feel more modern than if you eat traditional injera. If you live in a tukul or a hudma, you are more traditional than if you live in a villa. The ascari have made this kind of transformation in our life-style. It is these elements which are resurfacing in the present conflict with Ethiopia (Le Houérou 2000::24)

Ethiopians were quick to provide an answer. According to the pro-Ethiopian website Dagmawi, posted on 30 September 1998, it was Italian fascist ideology that

humiliated Eritreans and relegated them to sub-human status. In the search for positive self-identity, those Eritrean elites who had adopted some superficial Italian cultural aspects began to look down upon their 'uncivilised' fellowmen. The self-hatred caused by Italian colonialism was turned around and reflected on the common people of Ethiopia and Eritrea who were still in tune with their culture. It is this attitude which has been perpetuated through the past several decades, sadly contaminating the Eritrean identity. It is this phenomenon which has created the paradox whereby the indigenous cultural heritage of Axum is disparaged and the current inhabitants of the town derided as 'Agames'. In its place the Eritreans

substitute the foreign trappings left behind by the departing Italians and cherish these relics as if they created them themselves (Walta Information Center 2000:117).

The verbal skirmish concealed wider issues which have been analysed elsewhere (Triulzi 2005a), but pointed to the cultural and social gap which Italian colonial rule had created between Tigrayan peasants who were transformed into urbanised ‘modern’ Eritreans, and their brothers across the Ethiopian border (the ‘Agames’ of the quotation) who had ‘escaped colonial rule and were thus bereft of Italian roads, cuisine and fashion’ (Iyob 2005:269). This ‘innate sense of superiority’ - which Ruth Iyob calls mal d’Italia - exhibited by the Eritreans during the colonial period and maintained vis-à-vis their Tigrayan allies of TPLF during the war of liberation, has been a continuous cause of friction between the two political élites and the basis for their enduring enmity.

While the Tigrinya-speaking rulers of the two countries were each using the border conflict for their own ends by appealing to national unity feelings geared around their respective founding myths, colonial memory was put to different uses by the two combatants: the Eritreans whitewashed and purged the memory of its brutal aspects in favour of a diffuse ‘nostalgia for the aesthetics and privileges of the colonial period’ (Iyob 2005: 264). The Ethiopians sought to use memory in the course of the war to ‘settle accounts’ with an old political rival and vindicate the new Tigrayan-inspired course of events (Triulzi 2005a). Among the latter, the tortuous return of the Aksum obelisk gradually extracted from Italian resistance and postponements (Pankhurst 1999), and only recently returned to its original homeland in Tigray, played no little part. To the ruling elite in Ethiopia, Aksum epitomises many cherished symbols. As the main religious and political sanctuary in Ethiopia, it is the traditional crowning site for renovating political legitimacy and sanctioning the ruling power; it is also the holiest *lieu-de-mémoire* of Ethiopian Christendom with its time-honoured and highly symbolic Ark of Alliance (Hirsch and Fauvelle 2001). Indeed, the Ethiopian élite could hardly understand why successive democratic Italian governments should oppose the return of a war treasure they had promised to return within eighteen months in 1947. In the event it took fifty-eight years.

It is a sad irony of the unfinished saga of the Aksum obelisk that it was Silvio Berlusconi’s right-wing government who eventually brought it to an end. But the irony was perhaps not unintended, as amidst the protests and polemics of Berlusconi’s allies, the Italian right has succeeded yet again in sanctioning a sanitised colonial memory by displacing its brutal side and exhibiting again the good-hearted myth of Italians as brava gente (“good people”). As noted by Jacqui Andall and Derek Duncan: ‘Now that the obelisk is no longer in view either in Italy or

Ethiopia, it is perhaps even more resonant of the unresolved nature of Italy's relation to its colonial past and the memory it cultivates' (Andall and Duncan 2005:21).

Yet, in odd ways, the return of the Aksum obelisk is benefiting both countries in the revision of their own past. In Italy, Senator Alfredo Mantica, Undersecretary to the Foreign Ministry, has gone on record for claiming that, by returning the obelisk, Italy was not restoring it to its rightful owner but merely handing it back as a 'gift to favour Ethiopian identity.' (Del Boca 2004). In Ethiopia, the Aksum operation was pursued by the Tigrayan-led government not just to redress a historical injustice but in order to revive around 'the myth of Aksum' the legitimacy of the northern (i.e., Tigrayan) hegemony over the destiny of the country, thus suggesting a renewed imagery for Ethiopian sovereignty and for its leading role in the region. Thus the sixty years' sanctuary of the Aksum stele among the treasured symbols of Roman glory and civilisation have not gone to waste, and, by transferring 'part of its imagery and myths', Rome appears to have inadvertently 'ceded' to Ethiopia new hybrid displacements of national glory and supremacy (Ficquet 2004:382).

How much this is part of a new offensive by the right-wing Italian government to forge a newly shared and benevolent memory of the nation's past is hard, and perhaps too early, to say. But the signs, and the symptoms, of a new emotional pining for Africa - though not for its ills or needs - are being spread to accompany the current revision of Italy's colonial past. A recent exhibition with the title of "The Epic of Eritrean Ascari. Eritrean Volunteers in the Italian Armed Forces, 1889-1941" was recently shown at Rome's Vittoriano monument, Italy's Memorial to the Unknown Soldier, after being shown in the capital of Eritrea, Asmara. Although kept somewhat undertone during the two months it was on show in Rome (16 September-10 October 2004), the place of the exhibition and the message it exhibited are worth stressing as the Vittoriano overlooks Piazza Venezia, an area which is 'strewn with evidence of past glory' and replete with nationalist iconography (Von Henneberg 2004: 54).² It was in this square that the fall of Addis Ababa and the creation of the Italian African Empire were solemnly announced on 9 May 1936, only three months after the official (and first) state mourning for the Battle of Adwa had been organised by the Fascist Regime, forty years after the event, to 'avenge' Adwa in newly-occupied Ethiopia.

The Ascari exhibition is a curious mixture of mal d'Africa and unrepressed nostalgia for a shared past. But it is also a formidable statement of displaced agency and (poor) historical revisionism. A joint venture between the Italian Ministry of Defense and a Roman-based Italo-Eritrean NGO,³ the exhibition was accompanied by a photographic show of traditional Eritrea pictured in stereotyped poses and conventional views (Afar warriors, Coptic priests, dancing youths, breast-feeding women, rural villages, urban scenes of Asmara, etc.). As to the aim of the

exhibition, a brochure freely distributed to visitors described it as ‘an act of dutiful homage to the immense tribute of courage, loyalty and blood given by Eritreans - according to their century-old warrior traditions - to our Armed Forces during the period of Italian presence in Africa (1869-1941).’ The unabashed statement testifies to the still unresolved official memory of Italy’s colonial past: one wonders, in particular, how the looted Aksum obelisk now returned to Ethiopia as a ‘gift’ of the Italian people is indeed to ‘favour’ Ethiopia’s identity, or how the 20-odd panels in the exhibition extolling the Eritreans’ ‘warrior traditions’ can help re-establish continuity with their own past or, for that matter, peace in the region. It must be pointed out further that, throughout the exhibition, Italy’s ‘presence’ in Africa was never once associated with events like colonialism, conquest, occupation or Fascism, which were never mentioned in the desultory captions accompanying the pictures. The stressed aim of the exhibition was in fact to celebrate Italian participation in ‘the birth of modern Eritrea’ and to portray the Eritrean ‘volunteers’ as ‘predecessors of the independence movement’. Thus, a photo of 1889 troops fighting around Asmara carried the following caption: ‘Thanks to the decisive contribution of Eritrean volunteers (...) the Asmara plateau is conquered. Modern Eritrea is born’; while a 2003 picture of Eritrean veterans at Keren read: ‘It is due to some ex-ascari who volunteered to participate in the anti-Ethiopian guerrilla war [that] they became the precursors of the Eritrean independence movement.’

The Italian visitor of the ascari ‘Epic’ will have found in the Roman exhibition a reassuringly pacified memory, now ready to be shared by all, Eritreans (albeit not Ethiopians) included. Indeed, judging from the smiling faces of ‘hyphenated Eritreans’, i.e. mostly second generation Eritrean-Italians (Andall 2005:200) visiting the exhibition, it would appear that the current displacement of colonial memory in both Italy and Eritrea, minimising the brutality of Italian colonial rule in order to condemn the Ethiopian one, is not only providing ‘bewildering glimpses into the colonial past’ (Iyob 2005:264) but is grossly mystifying the current ‘boundaries of Italianness’ and citizenship by giving Eritrean migrants in Italy a sense of belonging and inclusion which is in fact denied by the present government policies. The contradictory result can be seen in the sharp increase in both the number of Eritrean migrants trying to reach the peninsula, and often failing tragically to do so⁴, and in the repressive measures the Italian government is undertaking to try to stop all illegal migration.

By displacing the colonial event and diluting it into a hybrid haze of nostalgia for the colonial period, postcolonial Italy is engaging on a dangerous path of renewed amnesia which undermines a critical view of its own past and goes well beyond its geographical borders. In this sense, Italian postcoloniality is no less anomalous than its colonial precedent as it continues to

produce, sixty years after its end, ambiguous displacements of memory in the politically volatile and unresolved public arena of both metropoli and colonia.

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¹ Italian President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi has insisted relentlessly on the need to share one national memory to stress the country's sense of belonging (Rusconi 2001). The President of the Senate, Marcello Pera, has addressed recently a political rally stating his aversion to uncontrolled migration warning against the danger of Italians 'becoming all half-caste' (*La Repubblica* 23.08.2005).

² The newly-restored Vittoriano monument has become in recent years the windowshop of Italiannes. Following the heated debates on Italian identity and the 'death of the Homeland' (Galli della Loggia 1988, 1996), the monument has been used to host frequent manifestations of 'Italianness'. In the Summer of 2005, under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and the Presidency of the Republic, the exhibition "Symbols of Belonging", first of a planned series on the Roots of the Nation (2004-2011) was held at the Vittoriano displaying documents, videos and icons of italianità which included early Italian flags, military and religious ceremonies, national exploits in civil society, arts, science and sport from Risorgimento until the present. The exhibits included several visual icons dating back to Fascism and Italy's African wars.

³ The Exhibition was prepared by the Centro Studi Difesa e Sicurezza of the Italian Army (Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito) and the Associazione Onlus Italia Eritrea.

⁴ In recent months (Spring and Summer of 2005), the number of Eritrean youths trying to reach southern Italian shores in order to avoid being drafted into the army has dramatically increased, as have the number of shipwrecks and their victims during the crossing of the Mediterranean.