

Italy's Colonial Futures: Colonial Inertia and Postcolonial Capital in Asmara

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Asmara is no longer a secret.
--Naigzy Gebremedhin (2007, 25)

The *mal d'Africa* of the nineteenth century has been supplanted by the *mal d'Europa* of the twentieth century.
--Ruth Iyob (2005b, 271)

Italy hardly appears likely to acquire colonial territories in the future, though it participates in some of the West's wars and peacekeeping efforts (the Iraq coalition and NATO's assault on Qadhafi's regime; Eritrea and Lebanon) – all of them, from one point of view, legacies of the colonial era. Instead, this article takes into consideration a different sort of colonial future: one inherent in an unconcluded colonial past. Italy certainly has a colonial past, albeit one that is often described as *rimosso* (“repressed” or “displaced”), suggesting it is less than accessible, and perhaps hard to locate. Although it is true that most Italians are poorly informed about their country's past deeds and misdeeds in Eritrea, Somalia, Libya, the Dodecanese Islands, Ethiopia, and Albania, I claim here that rather than invisible, the traces of Italy's colonial ventures are ubiquitous. This is true of Italy itself, if one knows where to look, but in this essay I am interested in the former colonies above all.

In Asmara, the capital city of the ex-colony of Eritrea, I describe Italy's colonial inertia, or how Italy's once-vigorously implanted colonial signature has sustained momentum and shows every promise of continuing to do so. When Italian colonizers left in the post-World War Two era, their refashioning of built, cultural, and social environments to their own specifications did not vanish with them.¹ On the contrary, Italians' architectural and urban interventions, along with social, economic, and linguistic reminders of their occupation of Asmara, have been preserved quite faithfully. This is not a sign, as some might claim, that the Italian colonial period is remembered especially fondly – although this happens occasionally – but an indication that these remains have value today. In this atypical but instructive postcolonial site, past colonial traces are being converted into currently useful forms of political, cultural, social, and financial capital.

¹ I refer here to blatant traces of the colonial period, but for some of the less obvious ones, see González-Ruibal (2010).

Modern Italy's Colonial Origins

The historiography of modern Italy typically omits the fact that colonialism was a constitutive ingredient of the vision of a unified Italy from its very beginning. In the mid- and late-nineteenth century, it was unimaginable that a modern European nation could rank with other ones unless it held colonial domains; real nationhood required an empire, no matter how modest or flimsy. Even prior to Italy's Unification, Giuseppe Mazzini saw no contradiction between the drive to decolonize Italy, on the one hand, and the seeming entitlement to colonize someone else's territory, on the other.² Independence at home required becoming the oppressor elsewhere, and taking on colonial power would definitively confirm Italy's newfound autonomy from its recent, subjugated past.

Thus it was not as quixotic as it may seem that the year before the new Italian state had even liberated Rome from papal control in 1870, an enterprising individual representing a shipping company in the Red Sea bought what would become Italy's first sliver of overseas territory, at Aseb. The state agreed to take it over in 1879, but did not send forces to occupy the small port town until 1882 – after France had occupied Tunisia, shutting Italy out of the Mediterranean for the time being. Having extended its military presence into the highlands, in 1890 the Italian government declared Eritrea – an area with borders, as well as a name, of its invention – its *colonia primogenita* (“first-born colony”).³

If any aspect of Italy's colonial past is generally known, however, it usually concerns its ventures under fascism (1922-1943) rather than those of the preceding decades. Until not so long ago, access to precious archival evidence was exceedingly difficult. The first real revelation to the Italian public came in 1969 when Angelo Del Boca published original telegrams proving beyond any doubt that Italy had used chemical weapons in Ethiopia starting in 1935, and that Mussolini had authorized his generals to do so (1996).⁴ Meanwhile, recurring Libyan demands for reparations ensuing from the Italian-perpetrated genocide in the 1920s and early 1930s helped keep Italy's North African past in the public eye to some degree, until the two countries reached accords in 2008.⁵

² As he wrote in 1845, “Europe has been providentially called to conquer the rest of the world to progressive civilization” (Recchia and Urbinati 2009, 29). In 1871, he advocated the Italian pursuit of North African territories on the basis that they had once been part of the Roman Empire (238-9), an argument that was to be rehearsed for decades.

³ For Italy's beginnings in East Africa, the standard works remain Battaglia (1958), Del Boca (1976), and Labanca (1993). The only up-to-date work covering the history of Italian colonialism comprehensively is Labanca (2002). For a short overview, see Fuller (2007, 23-38).

⁴ Del Boca has been the most assiduous force in uncovering fascist and colonial abuses, as well as Italian indolence with respect to them – as just one example, see (2005). Military historian Giorgio Rochat has crucially documented the Italian colonial war machine (e.g., 1973, 1991).

⁵ See Salerno (2005); and on the concentration and deportation of Libyan Jews, Salerno (2008). The labor of basic fact-finding is still under way, as new materials continue to surface. One historian has recently uncovered documents showing targeted Italian attacks on Arab and Jewish civilians in Libya during World War Two: Bernhard (2010). Another combined intricate archival research with a field trip to locate bodily remains in a cave at Zeret (Ethiopia), proving conclusively that a previously unconfirmed massacre had actually occurred (Dominioni 2006). A team of archaeologists then studied the site (González-Ruibal, Sahle, and Vila 2011).

The fact that fascist acts of inhumanity in the colonies are more often mentioned does not mean that Liberal Italy was entirely benign by comparison. As just one example, its acts of colonial aggression include the world's first aerial bombardment, delivered in November 1911 on the outskirts of Tripoli. With respect to colonial violence, the shift to fascism should therefore be understood as one of degree, and not of fundamental attitude.⁶ Some have argued, though, that at an ideological level the rise of fascism brought a significant rupture characterized by future-orientation and utopianism, which were specifically shaped by a Messianic, or eschatological, understanding of time. Liberal-era Italian expansionists undoubtedly thought of the colonies as a necessary part of creating a more powerful, stable future for the nation-state; but according to this interpretation, their fascist-era followers saw fascism as the revolution that marked a *new* time, and the colonial setting lent itself particularly well to a belief in radical, rapid reform, no matter how destructive.⁷

Regardless of how dramatic that ideological shift may have been, the most drastic change in Italian attitudes toward colonialism did not take place in the transition from the Liberal era to fascist rule, but in the one to the post-World War II period. When Italy changed sides in the war, paving the way for its future as a dependent ally of the United States, it became virtually constitutive of the Italian nation *never to have had* colonies – in a complete break with views of the nation up to that point. On a day-to-day basis, it has often been observed that countless Italians suddenly, improbably, claimed they had always opposed fascism. At the state level, correspondingly, the assumption in 1943 of a non-belligerent position meant that Italy took on the guise of a less-than-martial state, in spite of the fact that wars, internal and external, had been at the heart of the Italian enterprise throughout much of its history. And it would be a contradiction in terms, or at least in political images, for a less-than-martial state to have perpetrated colonial and other war crimes. As it ensured its future in a post-Axis world, the Italian government set about omitting consistently to mention the colonial past, suppressing information, and rewriting what had until just recently been boasts of brutality into placid tales of agricultural and educational civilizing missions.⁸

What is so often referred to as a pervasive Italian “amnesia” concerning the colonial past, therefore, is at least in part the result of active disinformation: successive generations of Italians have been persuaded or reassured by their leaders’ silences that Italians were *brava gente* (“good, decent people”) in their colonies, unlike the citizens of all other colonial powers.⁹ How could it be otherwise, it was implied, when Italians are

⁶ For an excellent study of how ostensibly different policies in the two periods stemmed from the same ultimate goals, see Barrera (2002).

⁷ See especially Burdett (2010), and more broadly, Griffin (2007), Roberts (2007), and Fogu (2003).

⁸ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs assigned a committee to craft volumes lauding Italian agricultural and economic contributions to the colonial territories, as well as military and political activities there, titled *L'Italia in Africa*; the last one appeared in 1972 (Giglio and Comitato per la documentazione dell'opera dell'Italia in Africa 1958-1972). Even Rodolfo Graziani, the military commander most notoriously tied to Italy's systematic abuses in Libya and Ethiopia, reframed his actions in his *Ho difeso la patria* [I defended the Fatherland] (Graziani 1947). In the 1980s, the Ministry of the Interior blocked Italian distribution of a scrupulously realistic film re-creating Italy's war on eastern Libya (Akkad 1981).

⁹ A complex assortment of factors made this feasible, among them the lack of decolonization in the former colonies, and of trials of fascist leaders. On the first, see Calchi Novati (2008a) (in English: Calchi Novati 2008b); and Morone (2011). On the second, see Battini (2003), and Focardi and Klinkhammer (2004). Finally, on historiographic revisionism and Italian colonialism, see Labanca (2009).

such military failures by nature? Even the far right has jettisoned the colonial past, and the most nationalistic defenders of Mussolini or his Salò regime (the *Repubblica Sociale Italiana*, 1943-1945) avoid upholding it publicly.¹⁰

Much Ado About Repression: From Whose Point of View?

As noted earlier, Italian colonialism is habitually mentioned hand-in-hand with *rimozione*, a term that inevitably evokes its counterpart, *memoria*.¹¹ Other contentious subjects that have not been dealt with adequately in the national arena, such as the civil war between fascists and anti-fascists in 1943-1945, have long been cast as objects of postwar Italy's "divided memory" (Contini 1997, Focardi 2005, Foot 2009); it is therefore not surprising that Italian colonialism would be discussed in the same terms. Still, it should be underscored that this much-invoked tension between repression and memory pertains to the public sphere, and not necessarily the private one: the state's disavowal does not extend fully to Italians themselves, or to all aspects of their collective memory of colonialism.

It is, in fact, rare to meet an Italian family today that will not readily acknowledge some past connection to the colonies, typically because one or more members went *giù* ("down," i.e., "to Africa" or "over there") at the time, as soldiers, entrepreneurs, unskilled laborers, engineers, masons, clerical workers, mechanics, company employees, civil servants, grocers, farmers, hairdressers, tailors, and so on. Moreover, today's descendants often relay the fond memories – the *mal d'Africa*, or longing for Africa – they once heard their elders express. Discursive patterns concerning Italians and "Africans" in the colonial era also continued unmodified into the postwar years, in the press and in textbooks; while visible monuments linked to colonial battles still inhabit Italy's public spaces, intact (Baratieri 2010, De Michele 2011, von Henneberg 2004). Beyond the perpetuation of colonial-era representations, the ever-increasing market in personal memoirs of colonial life further belies the notion that the colonial past has been "repressed," in any sense but rhetorically.¹²

In any case, discussions about Italian colonialism and memory are problematic in another respect: they focus nearly exclusively on the memories of *Italians* – perpetuating the very self-centeredness that shaped and limited the colonial view. To be sure, Italians' own aspersions concerning the "repression" of Italian colonial memory are often well-meaning and self-accusatory, as when they are marshaled to explain negative reactions to the arrival of immigrants – racism today being seen as proof of the unacknowledged colonial past, and an inevitable return of repressed violence. Nonetheless, this recurrent emphasis gets in the way of curiosity about the experiences of non-Italians, and the inverse question has barely been posed: is the Italian period *rimosso* in the former

¹⁰ Although out of public earshot, I have heard one far-right politician acknowledge the colonial past, only to deny vehemently the veracity of claims concerning crimes or massacres, calling them "inventions" of Del Boca and the Left.

¹¹ Recent examples include Triulzi (2008); Contini, Focardi, and Petricioli (2010), which includes a chapter on Italian colonialism; and *Storie in movimento* (2010).

¹² These memoirs are too numerous to cite, but the best-known ex-colony-born Italian author is Erminia Dell'Oro. See, for instance, her novel *Asmara addio* (1988), and an autobiographical essay (1992).

colonies? What have the ruptures and continuities of history and memory been, *there*? How do the formerly colonized remember their time as colonial subjects; what do they prefer to forget; and in what ways are their memories relevant to their present and future – if they are at all? These are difficult questions for foreigners to answer knowledgeably; to make matters worse, in some instances they raise issues of extreme political delicacy for local intellectuals to tackle.¹³

Furthermore, on the basis of what materials can researchers hope to answer such questions? In the once-colonized city I discuss here, the unmodified built environment practically demands investigation. Most formerly European-colonial cities retain obvious markers of the colonial past (such as broad avenues and government buildings), but in combination with highly visible and symbolically deliberate changes to what is left of that past, including new constructions that alter the proportions of city spaces, new monuments, and new names – amounting, overall, to three-dimensional rejections of past subjugation, or to assimilations of it on new terms.¹⁴ By contrast, Asmara's colonial architecture and urban layout are so unchanged today that they remain uncannily close to the Italian image in which they were designed.¹⁵ Many visitors intuitively take this as evidence of an unproblematic colonial past; but are they correct? Is this preservation the result of active effort or benign neglect (Fuller 2001)? And how should we interpret it? On the basis of close observation of the built environment and its history, as well as interviews and a wide array of literary, monumental, journalistic, and cinematic materials, I present here some of the ways in which Asmara's physical continuities are the vehicles of complex local appropriations *and* rejections of the past, against a larger backdrop of aspirations for the future – a future that, appearances notwithstanding, is not linked to Italian colonialism.

(Post)colonial Inertia: Representations of Asmara

Such a general statement is unlikely to surprise. But Asmara *is* surprising in the illusion some visitors experience there of a parallel universe where Italian colonialism is still a going concern. This is partly due to the built environment, to which I return below, but it is also the result of local and foreign actors' elaboration of an image of the city that has turned out to be quite marketable. Over the last two decades, these actors (to whom I return below as well) have solidified Asmara's photogenic representation as an extraordinary repository of Italian architecture dating from the late nineteenth century to World War II. The city's architectural inventory is eclectic, and yet publications emphasize modernist structures that went up during the mid-1930s building boom, when

¹³ Few scholars of Italian colonialism use materials other than Italian archival documents, and even fewer have used oral history as their primary material, with the notable exceptions of Irma Taddia and Nicholas Doumanis (Taddia 1988, 1996, 2005; Doumanis 1997). For a rare critique showing how gender relations in independent postcolonial Eritrea have echoed those between Italian men and Eritrean women in the colonial period, see Iyob (2005a).

¹⁴ The range of examples is extensive, as is the scholarly literature on postcolonial cities. For a useful overview, see Yeoh (2001). In addition, see two region-specific volumes: Bishop, Phillips, and Yeo (2003), and Demissie (2007).

¹⁵ On the colonial-urban uncanny, see Chattopadhyay (2005).

Italy used Asmara to stage its 1935 invasion of Ethiopia. Most recognizable, thanks to its improbable wingspan, and emblematic of the city as a whole, is the dramatic 1938 FIAT service station, often described as “futurist.” The unmodified 1930s décors, however, such as that of the frequently photographed bar in the Cinema Odeon, are probably most instrumental in keeping foreigners’ fascination afloat.

Outsiders’ discovery from afar of these seductive façades and interiors began in the early 1990s, with publications based on archival materials held in Italy.¹⁶ The timing coincided with the conclusion of Eritreans’ long struggle for independence from Ethiopia in 1991, which made it feasible to visit the city for the first time in decades. Peacetime also brought local efforts to catalogue and preserve this architectural treasure trove, culminating in the 2003 publication of *Asmara: Africa’s Secret Modernist City*, a photograph-heavy book drawing on local archives, which, in addition to unveiling new materials, attracted international attention and packaged the city for foreign consumption – if not through actual tourism, by creating a market for depictions of the city (Denison, Ren, and Gebremedhin 2003).¹⁷

Whatever their origin, descriptions of Asmara share a set of consistent, even predictable tropes. Dubbing the city “secret,” which the 2003 book did, suggests that it was lost and is now rediscovered, as an earlier magazine article, “The Forgotten City,” had already implied (Street 1997).¹⁸ Other portrayals, like the photography book titled *Asmara, the Frozen City*, add to this an aestheticizing intimation of frozen time (Boness and Visscher 2006). *Asmara Dream*, a book of hazy, ‘timeless’ images, further likens visiting the city to experiencing a dream-state (Barbon 2009); dreams are also key to the branding of Asmara in *City of Dreams*, a documentary film (Ofori, Scott, and Gebremedhin 2005). Altogether, such an emphasis on the romance of rediscovered treasure, combined with the elision of Asmara’s present-day urban realities and more broadly, Eritreans’ political difficulties, is reminiscent of H. Rider Haggard’s 1885 classic, *King Solomon’s Mines* – or any other colonial-era adventure fantasy promising untold wealth tucked away in a land of ‘natives’ too dull to grasp its value.

Most striking here has been the unapologetic pattern of describing Asmara almost strictly in terms of its enduring signs of the colonial era – i.e., in colonial terms. Asmara had been more or less invisible to the world for years, and it is not shocking that the language used to describe it should speak of rediscovery; but it bears noticing that these expressions imply a return to *Italy*, and an arrested *European* time, rather than to a long-isolated African city in the present. One might even infer from some publications that Eritrea remains colonial: to wit, the *New York Times* articles titled “In An African City,

¹⁶ Gresleri (1992), Gresleri and Massaretti (1993 and 2008), Lo Sardo and Boccia (1995). Also based on Italian archives, but in combination with local expertise, the Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente (IsIAO) has been making parts of its archive accessible: see its interactive on-line map of Asmara at <http://www.isiao.it/asmara/mappa>, and Barrera, Triulzi, and Tzeggai (2008). Some works have focused on preservation along with Asmara’s architectural history (Amara 2007); others have been developing new architectural- and urban-historical approaches to an increasingly rich range of accessible materials, including local archives and oral histories. See Anderson (2006a and 2006b); Locatelli (2003 and 2007); and Bader (in progress).

¹⁷ More modest local cataloguing efforts had started earlier at the Italian school (Oriolo 1998).

¹⁸ The author was the first foreign advocate promoting the preservation of Asmara, where he spent long periods in the 1990s.

All Roads Lead to Rome” and “Recalling La Dolce Vita in Eritrea” (Lacey 2003, Gettleman 2008).

(Post)colonial Inertia: The Built Environment

Photographs and figures of speech aside, the city itself nurtures Asmara’s image as a site of uninterrupted colonialism. Italians describe their first visit as a stunning, visceral experience – one that can only be described in terms of time having stood still. Even a non-Italian foreigner’s disorienting first impression is that the city’s center resembles an Italian one. On second thought, though, it resembles nothing in Italy today, because comparable environments there have been altered, and overlaid with post-World War II constructions. To outsiders, in other words, downtown Asmara first appears as a living fossil: a European urban environment that was believed no longer to exist, and yet does.

Also sustaining this experience of familiarity in an unfamiliar setting is the fact that genuinely Italian meals are readily available, and consumed by Eritreans and foreigners alike. The markets are distributed into sections dating to the colonial era, corresponding to those in Italy today: separate buildings and spaces house the meat, fish, produce, and grain markets, reflecting the prevailing views on hygiene the colonizers brought with them. Completing the illusion of a lost Italian hometown are the countless cafés – some with original names such as *Bar Crispi*, for the Prime Minister who gave Eritrea its name in 1890 – where an excellent *cappuccino* is served, along with a connoisseur’s choice of pastries to go with the chrome counters and vintage espresso machines.

Beyond buildings and comestibles, even the shortest stroll further reinforces the foreigner’s sensation of *déjà vu*. The three-dimensional space through which one moves seems familiar: from the layout of the streets and the heights of the buildings that line them, to the width and height of the sidewalks, the design of the curb, the trees that punctuate the sidewalk, and the regular distances between these trees¹⁹ – until Asmara’s individuality becomes apparent, one cannot help seeing the Italian resemblance. On the smallest domestic scale, I heard one Italian moved by seeing the electrical wiring on a living room wall, because it was identical to the wiring she saw as a child in her grandmother’s house. Such comments meet the very definition of nostalgia: the longing to return home, and to the past. They also imply far more, since for Italian visitors who have no personal connection to Eritrea, such nostalgia is a vicarious longing for a past that does not, strictly speaking, belong to them. They experience a powerful fondness for other Italians’ past / home in the colony; and ultimately, this ability to extend nostalgia into the past colonial space of one’s compatriots also suggests nostalgia for the past colonial ‘home’ of Italy itself – i.e., nostalgia for an Italy that was a colonial power.

Meanwhile, Eritreans’ history has marched on, at great cost, since Italy lost control of its East African Empire in 1941 (Iyob 1995, Connell 1997, Redeker Hepner 2009). Governed at first by the British Military Administration, their country was then federated with the Ethiopian Empire, giving rise to a determined resistance movement – one that

¹⁹ For one example of the colonial government’s direct hand in landscaping the city, see Vittorio Cafiero’s comments in the *Relazione dell’edilizia e urbanistica di Asmara* (Archivio Centrale dello Stato, fondo Ministero dell’Africa Italiana, busta 106; cited in Bader [in progress]).

grew all the more forceful after the Marxist-Leninist Derg junta took over Ethiopia in 1974, deposing the Emperor Haile Selassie and imposing its scorched-earth policies wherever it could. Eritreans' thirty years of struggle for independence achieved success in 1991, which was consolidated with a referendum in 1993. The last twenty years have brought new grief, however, as initial exuberance over self-rule has been soured for many by the government's devolution into a cruel dictatorial regime.

In light of the sustained war between Ethiopian and Eritrean forces, the survival of Asmara's built environment can seem nothing short of miraculous – and many Eritreans describe it as such. Not only will Eritrean veterans of the struggle commonly say “Asmara is what we fought for,” but in the interviews I conducted with filmmaker Caterina Borelli for her documentary *Asmara, Eritrea, Asmarini* overwhelmingly described the city as the embodiment of Eritrea, not Italy (“Asmara is Eritrea”) (Borelli and Anonymous Productions 2008).

One of the answers, then, to the question of why such a blatantly colonial built environment does not offend today's Eritreans – and therefore, how it is preserved – is that it represents their successful national sacrifice, their *overcoming* of subjugation, rather than their past colonization. Although Italian colonialism left indelible scars, these are not necessarily at the forefront of *Asmarino* consciousness. An undoubtedly apocryphal anecdote has an elderly *Asmarino* ambling along today's *Harnet Avenue* (once *viale Mussolini*). As he reaches the level of the *Cinema Impero* (next to the *Pensione Impero* and the *Bar Impero*, and across the street from the *Farmacia Impero*), he encounters an Italian tourist, who is shocked to find Italy's colonial boasts on such blatant display, and asks – in Italian: *non Le da fastidio?* [Doesn't this bother you?]. To which the elder Eritrean exclaims dismissively: *Ma! Ne abbiamo visto ben peggio!* [Bah! We've seen much worse!].

Poking tolerant fun at the Italian's ignorance of Eritreans' unfolding history in the midst of what appears to him as frozen Italian time, this story speaks directly to how collective experiences – particularly traumatic ones, including warfare – re-inscribe spaces and cityscapes with differently-weighted memories and associations. The core of Asmara may have been built under Italian rule, but what looks Italian to an Italian here, is Eritrean today. What the anecdote does not specify is which ‘worse’ the *Asmarino* might mean; hence it can accommodate the tremendous suffering caused in the city under the Derg, as well as the fears and pressures citizens undergo today. Either reading, in any event, gives priority to suffering that postdates, and in some ways exceeds, what *Asmarini* endured under Italian colonialism, which has long since been relegated to an unthreatening past.

When asked to name Asmara's most important site, interviewees' typical response was “the Cathedral,” meaning the red-brick, neo-Romanesque Roman Catholic Cathedral, rather than Nda Mariam, the Orthodox one. Not only is the structure inescapably European, but its interior sports a stone plaque commemorating the donors who made its construction possible in 1922-3 – including members of Italy's royal family; Luigi Federzoni, Minister of the Colonies in 1922-1924 and 1926-1928; and Benito Mussolini himself. Despite the Cathedral's unambiguous imprint of colonial penetration by both Italy and the Roman Catholic Church, interviewees framed it as the site of fond childhood memories involving basketball and Sunday movie screenings, and the ice cream shop across the street. More overwhelmingly, it stands for Eritreans' greatest

triumphs: this is where *Asmarini* flocked ecstatically at the struggle's end in 1991, and to rejoice together when they learned of their referendum's outcome two years later. In this instance too, Eritrea's successes and travails in the intervening decades have made Italian colonialism – and thus, the symbolic charge of its physical remnants – comparatively toothless in the present.

Under the Sign of Heritage: Collaborative Colonial Nostalgia

While such interviews are essential to understanding citizens' everyday sentiments regarding Italian structures, in principle the city's rulers, along with private or commercial interests, could well have made drastic changes to Asmara's appearance. What governmental mechanisms have enabled or supported the preservation of the city's Italian structures? As Christoph Rausch demonstrates, Eritrean officialdom has colluded in fostering outsiders' colonial nostalgia, accepting international funding toward preservation of the colonial built heritage, all while manipulating this heritage's value for national sentiment and ultimately, ruthless domestic control.²⁰

This general description is simple enough, but the process of defining and capitalizing on Asmara's cultural heritage has been fraught with internal conflict and opacity, particularly affecting non-governmental participants engaged in efforts to preserve the city. 2001 saw the creation of the Cultural Assets Rehabilitation Project (CARP), financed with a loan from the World Bank, and headed by architect Naigzy Gebremedhin. As its name suggests, the group's agenda was broad, including 'cultural assets' well beyond Asmara's buildings – intangible as well as tangible, and rural as well as urban. Nonetheless, the bulk of CARP's efforts went into delineating Asmara's heritage, planning for its preservation, and not least, promoting the city for future investment and tourism. (It hoped to have the city added to UNESCO's World Heritage list, to no avail.) In the process, it produced the 2003 volume *Asmara: Africa's Secret Modernist City*, as well as the *Asmara City Map & Historic Perimeter* (Denison and Ren 2003), and *Asmara: A Guide to the Built Environment* (Gebremedhin et al. 2003). The organization also had a direct hand in shaping the documentary *City of Dreams*, noted earlier, and its views on architectural value and preservation are further reflected in a volume on *Italian Architecture in Eritrea* (Godio 2008).²¹

Gebremedhin noted more than once that CARP's emphasis on preserving Italian colonial architecture was justified by its essential place in the formation of Eritreans' national identity;²² and in this, he met with no government opposition. Paradoxical though it may seem, the Italian colonial past has served positive political ends since Eritrea's long fight for independence from Ethiopia and through the post-independence

²⁰ I draw heavily in these paragraphs on Rausch, article ms. in preparation, with thanks to the author for his permission. On Asmara's 'heritage' specifically, see Casciato (2006), and Rausch (in progress).

²¹ Although CARP also provided assistance to Borelli, her documentary project does not speak for the organization's goals or views (Borelli and Anonymous Productions 2008). Also see Sallinen and Bizen (2003) for a depiction of Asmara that appeared to a remarkable lack of fanfare compared with CARP's book of the same year. Written and photographed by a resident foreigner, it provides the most historically grounded, least romanticized depiction of recent decades.

²² See Gebremedhin (2007, 18-20), for an eight-point development of this position.

war with its neighbor in 1998-2000, for although Ethiopia claims that today's Eritrea has 'always' been part of Ethiopia, Eritreans turn to the colonial borders created by Italy as a key part of the legitimate, historical basis for their separateness. In Rausch's words,

[F]or the Eritrean government...[the] appropriation of Italian colonial heritage serves to assert the newly won Eritrean national sovereignty...the Eritrean government fundamentally depends on references to Italian colonialism in inventing its national tradition...it is...difficult to establish cultural differences with the enemy Ethiopia that reaches [sic] further back than the experience of colonialism. (ms. in preparation, 12)

To this extent, then, CARP enjoyed government support, and it was successful in shaping Asmara's international image. Its success was also its undoing, however. Even though the government was happy to make use of Asmara's uniqueness for its domestic insistence on Eritrean autonomy, its wariness of outside interests also put CARP in an impossible position, making it the target of internal isolation. Content to allow CARP to act as a go-between with the World Bank and other outside agencies, the government nevertheless did not want to accord CARP any internal political authority, or voice. Internal distribution of its publications was suppressed; and finally, the organization was dissolved in 2007. The government's willingness to take advantage of outsiders' investment in heritage has not abated altogether, though: in 2009, the European Union National Heritage Program was allowed to resume the project, this time with an explicit focus on modern (i.e., colonial) heritage.

The making and unmaking of CARP have drawn some scholarly attention, but there has been next to no discussion of parts of the city that lie outside CARP's, and the government's, areas of interest. And yet, examining what CARP's investigations obscured brings to light further ways in which Eritrean officials' stance converges with outsiders' colonial nostalgia. For one, the city's 'historic perimeter', as identified by CARP and documented in its publications, corresponds alarmingly to what Italian planners included in the city's European and 'mixed' zones (comprising the markets, and residences of non-'native', non-Italian residents: Greeks, Arabs, Jews, and Indians). Today's delineation of what is valuable in Asmara, in other words, excludes the same area Italian colonizers excluded under the rubric of *quartiere indigeno* [native quarter], along with the growth it has seen since Italian rule. While it is not unusual to find economically marginal zones outside the city center, here these are also excluded from what the city officially embraces as 'historic' – a move that cannot help but remind us of the myriad ways in which colonial powers routinely dehistoricize, or temporally displace, conquered populations.

At another level, attention to the European-built city has not been matched by investment in the documentation or preservation of local vernaculars. Eritrea overall holds a great variety of domestic vernacular architecture. Asmara and the highlands more generally – including the Ethiopian province of Tigray – feature two typical constructions: the *agdo* (or *tukal*), a cylindrical hut that is comparatively simple and inexpensive to build; and the *hidmo* (or *hudmo*), “a masonry structure with a flat mud

roof with well-finished plastered and painted interiors that are furnished with built-in benches, beds, grinding tables, granaries and cupboards” (Lyons 2009, 143; Lyons 2007). These sizable houses, fit to hold large kin groups, require a greater investment of supplies, time, and labor, and are more durable than *agdōs*. Their numbers have been dwindling, however, likely since Italian rule (which preferred the *agdo* for its ‘native’ populations); nonetheless, they have not been targeted for preservation.

Of course, *Asmarini* have far more pressing concerns. For example, some of the city’s hilltops – at one time, ideal for taking in Asmara’s panorama – are occupied by the dictatorship’s armed forces, the better to keep an eye on them. For reasons such as this, as well as enforced conscription, the absence of any free media, and the unchecked use of state force, it is hardly excessive to say that Eritrea’s current government exercises colonial control over Eritreans – has colonized their independence, in effect. From this perspective, its complicity with outsiders’ colonial nostalgia, and its prolongation of colonial arrangements on the ground, are most chilling.

Postcolonial Capital

It must be underscored, however, that Eritrean authorities could not make use of outsiders’ colonial nostalgia, or rely on the Italian-colonial past to reinforce national sentiment, if Eritrea’s ordinary citizens did not concur in viewing that past as a basis for national solidarity and distinction. I turn now to the workings of political and cultural capital in the post-colony: to how the Eritrean state derives political capital from the Italian colonial past; and how *Asmarini* in general attribute distinctive cultural capital to their once having been colonized by Italians.

As described above, Eritreans have made their capital Eritrean through experiences good and bad. The Italian trace remains, but Eritreans’ collusion with a self-indulgent Italian image should be regarded as their re-use of a painful past toward a non-Italian future. Let me add that although the city’s core is almost entirely unmodified, a few uniquely Eritrean monuments to independence have been added. On a main road sits a gigantic pair of sandals, representing the plastic footwear worn by all the fighters in their epic struggle. The monument stands for the cause that united Eritreans against Ethiopia, regardless of class, gender, or age, and the war that brought them victory. A more discreet monument in the shape of Denden, the mountain where the fighters made the greatest sacrifices, was erected in a central city park. With these minor additions, what still looks to foreigners like an Italian city has been transformed into an Eritrean monument. The whole city – indeed, its wholeness in spite of years of war – celebrates Eritreans’ triumph in separating from Ethiopia. Whether the original constructions were Italian is outweighed by the fact that they pre-date the country’s federation with Ethiopia, and that they withstood the atrocities of Derg occupation.

Keeping Asmara’s Italian-era buildings in their original form allows, in visual terms at least, for Eritrean history to resume in the precise setting where it was unfolding before Ethiopian domination. In other domains as well, we can identify continuities, or repetitions, of patterns of governance and social conduct from the Italian era into the present, regardless of Eritrea’s forty years of Ethiopian control. Ruth Iyob (2005b) has

been most articulate in calling attention to the abuses perpetrated by today's state hand-in-hand with its exploitation of the vestiges of the colonial apparatus in continuing to subjugate the population. On a historical plane, Uoldelul Chelati Dirar (2008) has pointed out the crucial role of the 'native troops' (*askari*) who served the Italians in their East and North African wars, in forming a national Eritrean identity that is distinct from Ethiopians'. Furthermore, the emergence of an Italo-Eritrean population dating to the Italian era inevitably altered Eritrean society's stratification, creating a new, partly marginalized, and yet sometimes privileged, sector (e.g., Barrera 2005). If Italian colonialism was constitutive of the Italian nation-state, as I argued earlier, in these respects we must note that it was of the Eritrean nation-state too.

Indeed, Eritreans' sense of separateness from their Ethiopian neighbors was in some senses created, or developed, by their years under Italian rule; the city's intact appearance is also proof of that historic separateness, which legitimizes (for Eritreans) their separateness from Ethiopia now. But there is even more at stake. For many *Asmarini* the cultural capital attached to the Italian past provides them with a claim to a long-standing cosmopolitanism. It is integral to the anecdote recounted above that the older *Asmarino* responds in Italian, not only because the tourist somehow assumes he will, but because he is *of course* in command of the former colonizers' language. This too is a form of re-appropriation, and of control over what was once one of the many instruments of Italian power over Eritreans. A further example of Eritreans' colonization of Italian cultural capital in the present appears when they report that the first time they visit Italy, they are overwhelmed by how much they are reminded of Asmara – not the other way around.²³

Yet these claims to Italian culture provide more than *distinction from* the Ethiopian enemy; they are also claims of *superiority over* Ethiopians. Iyob puts it most trenchantly: "[Eritrean] proponents of *mal d'Italia* exhibit an innate sense of superiority over neighbors who escaped colonial rule and were thus bereft of Italian roads, cuisine, and fashion" (268-9). Italians of the Risorgimento particularly abhorred the fact that the occupying forces controlling the peninsula were Europeans – their closest relatives, so to speak – and the same holds here. In addition to the horrors perpetrated by the Derg, being subsumed and ruled as subalterns by fellow East Africans added insult and shame to the injury of colonial subjugation. A great deal of Eritrean rhetoric and positioning since independence can be read more clearly in this light: the nation must assure its symbolic difference from Ethiopia, no matter what the human cost involved, for example, in fruitless border wars.

On a lighter but still meaningful note, this helps explain the fact that the owners of an Italian cinema, restored in 2001, decided to name it Cinema Roma and decorate its façade with neo-classical pilasters. Meanwhile, the posh Bar Zara announces its date of establishment using Roman numerals – MMII – as the fascist government did in the 1930s. In cases such as these, *Asmarini* are not just repeating or continuing Italian-era usages; they have created new businesses trafficking in entertainment, but also in the cultural capital of superiority by a transitive association with Roman antiquity, arguably the most important foundation of European civilization, on the basis of their past as Italian colonial subjects. In the process, they have revived the fascist practice of invoking

²³ See Iyob (2005b) on the now-affectionate uses of Italian terms (265-7), and the Eritrean-ness of Italian cities. For other postcolonial perceptions inverting the original metropole-colony relation between cities such that the 'original' is seen as resembling the 'copy,' see Scego (2010) and Comberinati (2010).

that antiquity. And yet, this seemingly philo-Italian or even philo-fascist trend is ultimately in the service of addressing neighboring Ethiopians as less worldly, or less European. Most importantly, Eritreans' apparent colonial nostalgia is above all a function of their politics of differentiation from their African neighbors.

The Eritrean state, and many *Asmarini*, require all the symbolic foundations of distinction from Ethiopia they can muster in order to propel Eritrea into its own independent future. For this reason, we can expect that the vestiges and threads of Italian colonial culture will be preserved and nurtured for the foreseeable future as well. Italian colonialism, long since disowned by Italy, continues its own forward motion nonetheless.

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