Abstract

In the context of Italian colonialism, relations between the colonisers and the colonised have often been constructed and conducted through materialities (objects, things and artefacts) as means for the transmission, exchange and exercise of power. Practices of architecture, infrastructure and spoliation have then created and intensified systems of circulation connecting the metropole to the periphery. Along this axis the movement of materialities justified the colonial order within a capitalist system of production, trade, migration, communication and conquest.

This dissertation interrogates the relationship between ‘materiality’ and ‘circulation’ as central categories of analysis that allow the evaluation of Italian colonialism as a historical event and the deciphering of the complexities of Italy’s post-colonial present. It offers an in-depth analysis of specific materialities that from the earlier phases of Italian colonisation in the Horn of Africa and Libya up to the post-colonial present have circulated between Italy and its colonies, tying the centre to the periphery. This thesis reveals that as a parallel to the movement of humans between the metropole and the colonies, between the Global North and the Global South, an ensemble of materialities – road infrastructure, an obelisk, anthropometric artefacts and skeletal remains - seem to be epistemologically crucial in describing power relations between the colonisers and the colonised in both the colonial and post-colonial epochs. Formerly instrumental for civilisational claims of Italian superiority in relation to native populations, since decolonisation these materialities have turned into objects of dispute, emblems of postcolonial identities and bargaining chips for posthumous justice for colonial violence and pillage. Within such a context, the discourse on memory and the elaboration of the colonial past together with the definition of new power relations and techniques of government over ‘others’ – migration policies, development and humanitarianism – constantly develop while revolving around those same materialities that, in the first place, served the purposes of the colonial mission.
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Declaration for PhD thesis

Whilst registered as a candidate for the above degree, I have not been registered for any other research award. The results and conclusions embodied in this thesis are the work of the named candidate and have not been submitted for any other academic award.

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## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFIS</td>
<td>Amministrazione Fiduciaria Italiana</td>
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<tr>
<td>AFRICOM</td>
<td>United States Africa Command</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMISOM</td>
<td>African Union Mission in Somalia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAI</td>
<td>Centro di accoglienza e identificazione</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CARA</td>
<td>Centro di accoglienza per richiedenti asilo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CJTF-HOA</td>
<td>Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPT</td>
<td>Centri di permanenza temporanea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENI</td>
<td>Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAO</td>
<td>Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations headquarters</td>
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<tr>
<td>KFOR</td>
<td>Kosovo Peacekeeping Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICRC</td>
<td>International Committee of the Red Cross</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IOM</td>
<td>International Organization for Migration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISAF</td>
<td>International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NATO</td>
<td>North Atlantic Treaty Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OCHA</td>
<td>Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPLF</td>
<td>Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UAE</td>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNHCR</td>
<td>United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees</td>
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Introduction

Aims and arguments

In the aftermath of the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty, which set the blueprint for the process of European decolonisation, Italy’s chances of playing an active role in the process of decolonisation of its colonies in Africa were shattered. After Italy lost control of the colonies in Libya and the Horn of Africa (Eritrea, Somalia and Ethiopia) that it had held since the end of the 19th century – a consequence of its military defeat in the Second World War – post-fascist Italy embarked upon a long reconciliatory process that involved exhausting disputes with the newly formed Libya and Ethiopia. This centred on compensation for the colonial exploitation of these countries, and the restitution of looted cultural goods, and it lasted until the late 2000s. This research is focused on the material and artefactual dimensions of this reparation process.

This thesis examines the way in which the historical path that Italy followed from the period of colonisation up to the time, in the late 2000s, when it accepted its responsibilities for the violence and dispossession of its colonial era, was informed by disputes regarding different material artefacts. These materialities have been circulating across time in two opposite directions along the centre/periphery, north/south axis. Indeed, the movement of things across this frontier has had two functions. On the one hand, material resources, human labour and cultural treasures, were the promised spoils that led to colonial conquest. On the other hand, the return of some items and investment in the opposite direction, were symbolic devices that sought to mark the end of the tortuous and long path of decolonisation.

Since ‘materiality’ provides my entry point into this research, it is thus important to briefly explain why and how I use ‘materiality’ and ‘materialities’ as critical categories to investigate political relations. Traditionally, a materialist discourse can refer to the nature of being in a material sense – and it can also mean a certain emphasis on material cultures tuned to the nature of objects, things and artefacts. In this thesis I will look at these concepts, and attempt to draw together these different interpretations of ‘materiality’. In so doing, this research refers to the Marxist tradition to find a way to study the dynamic constituent within the formation
of human subjectivities and human social structures – through labour, relations of production and commodification. However, in what follows I shall be making use of these notions as a platform to expand the debate around the epistemic power of materiality as discussed by post-Marxist thinkers and scholars coming from dialectical materialism, Post-structuralism and phenomenologist traditions. This thesis attempts to articulate and bring together in a hitherto less familiar way, interpretations of materialism that are traditionally in disagreement with one another, which offer divergent readings of the subject/object relation and conflict. Where different materialist interpretations of the world fiercely debate whether there exists autonomy of the material world independent from human agency this thesis attempts to overcome such a theoretical impasse.

In so doing, I will treat materialities in the sense promoted by Bruno Latour, as congealed sets of social relations, objects in which social relations lie dormant. The social sphere he describes is one in which the modernist divisions between humans, non-humans, the material and the cultural are blurred (Latour, 2005). This frame will allow me to demonstrate how the cultural, the social and the political depend on objects as much as they depend on human actors.

As the title of this thesis clearly demonstrates, this research also uses ‘materiality’ in strict correspondence with ‘circulation’. In this framework, I will conceptualise ‘circulation’ as a Foucauldian category and object of analysis as an essential method to examine the epistemic preponderance of materiality. Marking the relation between materiality and circulation within Foucault’s theories of governmentality and the microphysics of power, this thesis sees the artefactual world as the *conditio sine qua non* for a better understanding of empires and colonialism.

The historical contexts of Italian colonialism, decolonisation and ultimately the post-colonial present, show what kind of role ‘materialities in circulation’ play in the organisation and exercise of power.

The objects I study in this thesis – roads, monuments and human remains – are active participants that stir and influence historical processes. They generate interchangeable semiotic flows, and influence the way in which the social and the political evolve. Materialities, objects and their circulation thus pose key questions about history and intersect and connect with the circulation of humans. Without paying attention to the movement of these materialities across the Mediterranean...
frontier, we cannot understand the full spectrum of the forces that shape contemporary post-colonial relations between Italy, Libya and Ethiopia.

Therefore, the thesis follows two parallel circuits across time and space. The first, during Italian colonialism, involves a circular movement in which state and private capital, settlers and labour, move southwards whilst some cultural goods and other plundered artefacts move northwards. The second, which occurs in the post-colonial present, revolves around the opposite movement of such materialities. While the politics of return and reparation for colonial crimes inaugurated in the 2000s has endeavoured to return some cultural artefacts it has paved the way for more significant elements of investment flowing southwards. At the same time, migrants and refugees moving northwards are forcibly prevented from crossing borders, the Mediterranean having become a virtual battle ground and a barrier space where, according to estimates, 20,000 migrants have lost their lives in the last two decades (Guardian, 2013). Other forms of ‘materialities in circulation’ include humanitarian and development aid, which, as I shall explain in chapter one, though providing material assistance, are also used as alternative modes of government over the ex-colonial world.

The movement of objects serves as an optical device with which it becomes possible to study the way power structures mutate across time. Studying the circular movement of materialities can help us reflect on the problems of human mobility and tie together different temporalities, such as the era of colonialism, with the post-colonial present. This thesis investigates colonial materialities as catalysts for new sets of relations and paradoxes: from being objects of dispute and symbols of colonial oppression they turn into objects of exchange within a neoliberal economy and bilateral agreements concerning development and migration policies. Therefore, materialities and humans – through circulation – interconnect in a transnational network where colonial legacies are culturally, geographically, spatially and politically articulated. This, in a nutshell, is the core of my research project.
Case selections

This project began with the idea to shed more light on Italian colonialism as a historical event and its aftermath as the *conditio sine qua non* in order to understand the complexities of the dynamic Italian post-colonial present. Unlike in other countries where colonial and post-colonial studies are firmly rooted in academic and intellectual spheres, Italy can be considered as a latecomer to the discussion. Due to historical and cultural circumstances, such as the late migration from the ex-colonies and the late decolonisation of the historiography and academic discourse on Italian colonialism, colonial studies arose in Italy only during the 1970s, and indeed Italy as a nation still struggles today to acknowledge the strong impact that the colonial legacies have on its political present. This thesis aims to unveil present and past relations of power between Italy and its colonies by studying the life of colonial materialities across different epochs. Using the framework of spatial research, I introduce the notion of ‘materialities in circulation’ as the basis from which to understand the formation of power structures as spatial arrangements where territorial projects, cultural artefacts and architecture, and human bodies form the three scales of analysis that structure this thesis.

The materialities I wish to take into consideration are the following: *firstly*, a motorway built in fascist-occupied Libya for a metropolitan design of the colony. In the aftermath of the Second World War, a new road, parallel to the old one, became the main form of compensation Libya demanded from Italy in order to recompense thirty-one years of colonial occupation. The case of the Libyan motorway unveils the entanglements between colonial practices of government and post-colonial ones through the domestication of the colonial territory and landscape as essential to practices of power (Duncan, 1992: 86). The discussion around the ‘road’ demonstrates that from being the symbol of power, violation and penetration of colonial territory, it evolved into a symbol of compensation for colonial injustice in exchange for shared control of migrant mobility in the Mediterranean.

*Secondly*, this thesis examines the case of an ancient obelisk from Axum in Ethiopia, which was looted by Mussolini’s troops and then erected in Rome to re-establish an Italian imperial aura. At the end of the Second World War Ethiopia claimed that the restitution of the obelisk was the only condition for a complete reconciliation with Italy. The case of the obelisk and the use of architecture as
imperialist means to support the marking of the colonial identity within the city of Rome, demonstrates how the erection of the obelisk set “the spatial order of imperial imaginings” (Jacobs, 1996: 4). The story of the obelisk and its square, assumes additional importance, as after the restitution of the obelisk to Ethiopia, the empty square became the theatre where the shift from colonial practices of government to post-colonial ones (development, humanitarianism and pre-emptive military operations against global threats) were aesthetically and architecturally played out.

Thirdly and finally, this thesis investigates the colonial legacy of anthropometric devices such as plaster masks and relics of native human remains. From the early stages of Italian colonialism up until the time of fascism, these items were collected by Italian and foreign colonial travellers, traders and anthropologists and stored within Italian evolutionary and anatomy museums for the study of human variability and the production of racial taxonomies. These latter materialities, unlike the other artefacts, ended their circulation in a museum space and still today constitute a silent, anonymous and undisputed colonial legacy. The cases of anthropometric tools together with samples of human remains of subjected peoples show the way in which colonial and post-colonial spatial relations are mediated by and through the human body, and how this conditions practices that fabricate otherness across time.

Each of these frames is a materiality in movement. Each started its path at the time of colonialism and subsequently became performative – the disputes around restitution and reparations having a major impact on the ecology of Italy’s post-colonial present.

The colonial materialities I have chosen in order to develop my argument are essential for two reasons: firstly they describe shifts of powers from colonial practices of government to post-colonial ones around which the relation of the coloniser/colonised revolves. Secondly, while introducing an aesthetic and spatial dimension that is representative of such evolution, they introduce cross-temporal homogeneous forms of domestication and creation of otherness.

The three cases I have investigated all testify that the politics of identity and the politics of space are indissolubly intertwined. Space is considered here as a part of “an ever shifting social geometry of power and signification” (Massey, 1994: 3) in which, within the context of Italian colonialism and the post-colonial present, the material and the ideological are simultaneously constitutive of structures of power.
**Methods of analysis and sources**

The idea to shape this research around single ‘objects’ and materialities takes inspiration from the principles of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who focused his research on understanding a larger process through an examination of seemingly minor events (Geertz, 1973). Furthermore, this project owes its premise to the genealogical methods of Michel Foucault and Walter Benjamin and to Foucault’s archaeology, which deciphers power structures through an examination of the margins and the peripheries of situations in order to challenge material arrangements of power.

Archaeology for both Benjamin and Foucault is not literally a dig, bringing buried or hidden objects to the surface, but rather, it is a way of unveiling particular and seemingly anonymous events, objects and spaces, which at some point are made visible and intelligible by societies. Archaeology is a set of discourses “that continues to function, to be transformed through history, and to provide the possibility of appearing in other discourses” (Foucault, 1989: 48). Furthermore, archaeology is the method of bringing evidence and intelligibility to any historical fact or legacy that contingently erupts in the present, since according to Benjamin “history is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now” (Benjamin, 1999: 252-3).

My technique of selecting objects as case studies and trajectories of research facilitates archaeological insight and methods of inquiry. In this research, ‘objects’ provide an entry point for retrieving stories from the colonial past and discussing the materiality of colonial expansions. At the same time, in the light of the historical continuity between colonial pasts and the post-colonial present, objects constitute in themselves an experience of “awakening”. In Benjamin’s terms, “awakening” stands at the inception of every historical presentation, where the emergence of singularities, even if bound to the instant, determines lasting temporal effects. Whether interpreted in relation to the body as opposed to consciousness, “awakening” then turns into a spatial dimension through awakening/remembering, where time and space eventually compress and generate historical experiences (Benjamin, 1999: 389). According to this hermeneutics it is indeed possible to read different and distinct historical experiences with and through the object.
According to Giorgio Agamben’s understanding of archaeological praxis, this thesis refers to a practice which “in historical investigation has to do not with origins but with the moment of a phenomenon’s arising and must therefore engage anew the sources and tradition” (Agamben, 2009: 89). Agamben continues, “the moment of arising, the arche of archaeology is what will take place, what will become accessible and present, only when archaeological inquiry has completed its operation. It therefore has the form of the past in the future, that is, a future anterior. […] the point of archaeology is to gain access to the present for the first time, beyond memory and forgetting or, rather, at the threshold of their indifference” (Agamben, 2009: 105).

An archaeological gaze sees objects as the main actors on the scene and as the material device for detecting arising phenomena from the past, describing the present and, in the ex-colonial world, introducing us to contemporary forms of influence such as humanitarian government, migration control and development politics. Objects emerge as dynamic and totemic entities through which it is possible to trace simultaneous and parallel movements, migration and cyclical processes of displacement (Knopp, 2004), thereby disclosing information of significant epistemological value.

Revolving around materialities, this thesis contributes to the analytical field of Italian colonial and postcolonial studies. Following the path of inquiry inaugurated by a new historiography that since the 1970s has been questioning the scarce knowledge around Italian colonial matters and the stereotype of Italy’s colonial endeavours as a minor case of colonialism, this thesis tends to broaden the scholarly discussion and expand the gaze of postcolonial and cultural studies from a subject-oriented to an object-oriented approach. Accordingly, through the examples of colonial materiality I have selected, this research aims to contribute to the historiographical debate, bringing to the fore a cultural reading of Italian colonial history and its post-colonial present.

Moreover, this thesis does not perpetuate epistemological battles around the subject/object divide, but instead discusses the selected case studies, establishing a discourse where humans and materialities are equally preponderant in the definition of colonial relations of power. Hence, it sheds light on Italy’s colonial and post-colonial historical contexts. In this sense, I will read the transition from colonial to post-colonial regimes of power and analyse the colonial and post-colonial
representation of ‘otherness’ using the material world as the epistemic premise for this research.

In support of the case studies I have selected, this research project entailed discourse analysis of publications (books, periodicals and journals) from fascist times, where propaganda, academic and scientific discourses meld together into a homogeneous narrative. Since this project is not grounded primarily in historical studies, but rather in spatial and political hermeneutics, these materials are dealt with accordingly: they were read first in their spatial and political setting, and then analysed critically to assess their impact, influence and legacy within the contemporary Italian post-colonial present. Since much of the material involved in this research has served to track ‘spatial’ and ‘political’ patterns that have recurred cyclically throughout Italian history, close attention was paid to the use of the language, frames and the context in which they were first produced, to the identity (political, national, social) and spatial location of the actors who produced them, and to the silences within them.

The primary research material for this thesis is an extensive collection of publications from the Italian libraries (the library of the University of Bologna, and the Biblioteca Nazionale in Florence and Rome) I visited during a research trip in 2011. The choice of sources, which include fascist bulletins, essays and pamphlets, was made within the frame of the three cases I have selected: concerning the construction of the motorway, the La strada Litoranea della Libia played a key role for this research. Published in 1937 at the conclusion of the road works in Libya, this volume is an enlightening example of fascist propaganda promoting the modernisation of Libya as a metropolitan colony. Together with other publications, from between 1933 and 1938, including newspapers and journals such as L’Ambrosiano, Rivista di Architettura, L’Illustrazione italiana and L’Azione coloniale, La strada Litoranea della Libia is the most significant document that contextualises historically the colonisation of Libya within the larger picture of an extensive plan of fascist modernisation, which throughout the 1930s characterised the Italian policies of land reclamation both within Italy and towards the colonised lands overseas.

Whilst reading volume III of Gli Annali dell’Africa Italiana - the most important collection of fascist historiography regarding East Africa – and the
monograph *Aksum. Richerche di topografia generale* by archaeologist Ugo Monneret de Villard, both published in 1938, it was possible to connect historically and culturally the looting of the Axum obelisk to a long-lasting imperial tradition of spoliation and theft. This tradition, from the Roman Empire up until modern colonialism, shaped the imperial self through artefacts, monuments and archaeological goods.

My study of the Italian anthropological discourses around African human remains and anthropometric artefacts has then focused on the writings of anthropologist Lidio Cipriani, who travelled Africa extensively throughout the 1930s and is considered the main representative of fascist racist anthropology.

The case of African human remains and anthropometric artefacts, to be more precise, expanded my fieldwork beyond the realm of written sources. In fact, a substantial part of my research trip consisted of visits to the three main anthropology museums in Italy: the Luigi Pigorini National Museum of Prehistory and Ethnography in Rome, the Anthropology and Ethnology Section of the Museum of Natural History of Florence and the Anthropology Museum at Rome’s La Sapienzena University. There I had the opportunity to make extensive visual analysis of the exhibited material and have open and informal conversations with the staff: curators, members of the education board and museum volunteers, participating sometimes as an observer of the outreach work that the museums typically carry out with primary and secondary schools. After this experience I was very much inspired to conceptualise the theoretical framework of the last chapter of this thesis, to reflect upon connections and entanglements between past and present forms of the representation of otherness, and most of all to substantiate my argument through direct experience of the collections of the most important Italian evolutionary museums.

**Chapters outline**

Following this introduction, chapter one offers a review of the relevant literature, which is divided into three sections: the first offers an historical contextualisation up to the early stages of Italian colonialism, through decolonisation up until Italy’s post-colonial present. The second part then conceptualises
‘circulation’ as a category of analysis and the way in which Michel Foucault uses it to explain the interconnections between governmentality and biopolitics. ‘Circulation’ is important for this thesis as it explains the historical transition from colonial to post-colonial forms of government and control. The last section of this chapter offers insights into and a critical analysis of the concept of ‘materiality’. Materiality is introduced here as the dynamic actor around which the fixation of identities of objects and the subject which relates to them takes place. While not advocating a sort of material ‘agency’ of material forces, this thesis nevertheless argues that materiality exercises and develops power through its creative capacity for connectivity in a process of circulation. Here, ‘materiality’ and ‘circulation’ are complementary categories, as they shape historical homogeneity between the age of colonialism and post-colonialism. This part de facto opens the discussion on the three case studies that constitute the main body of this thesis.

Chapter two examines the impact of colonial materiality on territory, and introduces the story of the Litoranea Libica, a motorway built by the fascists in the 1930s on the Libyan coast. Following the political, social and cultural reasons which inspired fascist Italy to pursue a massive project of road infrastructure in Libya, this chapter presents the Litoranea as a vivid example of colonial materiality wedded to conquest and invasion. In so doing, this chapter investigates the functional and symbolic features of the motorway: first, as the essential tool for the improvement of technologies of government and military command in the colony, and then as a fetish embodying Italian technical and cultural supremacy over its colonised subjects. Following the early stages of decolonisation, this chapter also looks at ‘the road’ as a way to define the formation of an Italian post-fascist identity in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Chapter three is dedicated to the post-colonial life of the Litoranea Libica; the Libyans demanded the construction of a new coastal highway parallel to the old one as part of the compensation plans for colonial crimes. Focusing on the role played by Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, this chapter unveils the role of the highway as a bargaining-chip, used in negotiation during colonial compensation programmes, and Libya’s cooperation with Italy in the joint-patrol of the Mediterranean coasts in order to stop the flow of illegal migration from North Africa. This chapter concludes with the 2011 Libyan revolts and the removal of Gaddafi. In this scenario the road returned to serve an old material use: humanitarian government was established at
the Libyan/Tunisian border to face the refugee crisis and organise human mobility along the old, crumbling fascist motorway. The chapter demonstrates how the old Litoranea eventually emerged as the material witness bearing the testimony of distant and different technologies of governments.

Chapter four shifts the discussion around materialities and circulation to the controversial story of the obelisk of Axum, an Ethiopian funerary monument looted by Mussolini’s troops in the aftermath of Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia in 1936. This chapter illustrates, through the erection of the obelisk in a central square of Rome, how architectural forms participate in the process of producing colonial and post-colonial national identities. After being sited in Rome for almost seventy years, the obelisk was eventually returned to Ethiopia as part of a bilateral agreement. This chapter demonstrates how this act of restitution sharpened Italy’s post-colonial identity, maintaining continuity with old-fashioned colonial stereotypes such as Italy being a civilising influence. Furthermore, the restitution itself introduces the obelisk as an object of exchange around which new discourses on identities have been set and upon which important development programmes have been agreed. In so doing, Italy, while apparently bringing to an end the long process of decolonisation, has opened up new possibilities for cooperation with a strategic ally in East Africa.

Chapter five considers and evaluates the departure of the obelisk from the square in central Rome, and concentrates on the new ‘beginning’ of the square, where a process of spatial and architectural conversion is being finalised. Illustrating a process of spatial transformation, which saw its inception in the 1950s with the transformation of the Ministry of the Colonies into the new FAO – Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations headquarters, the chapter analyses this process of semantic conversion up until its ultimate stage, when the space left empty by the removal of the obelisk was taken by a monument to the victims of the 9/11 attacks in New York.

Working through a parallel visual analysis, I question the dual architectural representation of the twin spaces of Rome and Africa occurring at different times in history. The first of these was during the time of fascist imperialism, through a palimpsest built on the dual presence of a symbol of imperial hegemony (the looted obelisk) and the emblem of vertical colonial power (the Ministry of the Colonies). Then, after the departure of the obelisk, a new design for Rome’s cityscape was drawn. This materialised around a monument (the memorial to the 9/11 victims)
which, while participating in a modern trope of international trauma, signified global forms of intervention and violent retributions – the spread of the so-called ‘global War on Terror’ to the North and North Eastern Africa – and became an emblem of liberal technologies of government operating in areas of crisis and emergencies. This chapter eventually investigates power transitions and shifts from colonialism to the post-colonial present through its architectural forms and aesthetic representation.

Chapter six, concluding the argument of this thesis, deals with the most complex of all objects: the human body. The human body is the main object of concern around which technologies of government from colonial times up to the present have progressively revolved. From early anthropometric practices studying human diversity and producing racial taxonomies up to the most contemporary technologies used for border control and for limiting migrant mobility, those techniques cyclically create and manufacture otherness. Through cross-temporal tropes of representation, different others are confined to the same forced ‘anonymity’ and a-historical forms of existence.

Today, whether development and humanitarianism act simultaneously on the living, producing images similar to Edward Said’s “Orient” as “an enclosed space” and a “stage affixed to Europe” (Said, 2003: 63), technologies of surveillance against undocumented migration set the trope and the image of otherness which is de facto linked to a compulsory loss of identity – from the voluntary acts of irregular migrants to get rid of proof of identity before border crossing in order to prevent identification and expulsion, to anonymous deaths at sea borders and burials – as an inevitable consequence of such technologies in the first place. Through a historical path that leads from early colonial anthropometric practices to the most contemporary operational technologies of border control, this chapter introduces the representational aspect of such technologies. Considering the government of others as indissolubly intertwined with practices of representation of otherness, I examine how processes of de-identification work and how they have relied on human remains throughout history. Additionally, this chapter introduces human remains as epistemic objects and as perfect natural-cultural artefacts bearing witness to present and past forms of violence and traces of identity.
Chapter One
Materialities and Circulation within Italian Colonial and Post-colonial History

As this thesis deals with materialities in circulation, it follows a circular rather than linear and chronological organisation and narrative of historical events: it moves back and forth in time from the colonial to the post-colonial, north to south and centre to periphery, following the endless traffic of objects, humans and capital. Accordingly, this chapter will first describe and discuss the case of Italy within the larger framework of European colonialism and then outline the important elements of Italian colonialism as a historical event, following the work of major historians. The second and most important part of this chapter will introduce the key concepts of ‘circulation’ and ‘materiality’ and their interrelation, as they stand at the heart of this research. As a whole, this chapter sets the foundations for the thorough analysis of the particular case studies that will be presented later.

From the colonial to the postcolonial

Introducing Italian colonialism. The historical representation of Italian colonialism has undergone two major shifts since the post-war period, which place Italy within the post-colonial frame. The first brought a radical transformation of the academic discourse and the post-war historiography around Italy’s colonial concerns. While earlier representations depicted the Italian experience as a mere footnote to European imperialism (from the work of historians such as Carlo Giglio and Enrico de Leone up to the popular journalistic history writing of Indro Montanelli and Mario Cervi), a new school of historians has emerged since the 1970s and revolutionised our understanding of Italy’s colonial past (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller, 2005). This new wave has also underlined how the colonial discourse played a central role in constructing national identity in Italy, from the post-unification period onwards (Labanca, 2002; Mellino, 2006: 265). Moreover, this shift brought about the decolonisation of the academic discourse within Italian universities. For the first
time, a new generation of historians started to investigate state archives and query the myth of a colonial past uniquely shaped around fictional humane and pacific premises (such as the demographic necessity to drive migration flows and export national labour) unfit for colonial exploitation. The pioneering work of the researcher and journalist Angelo Del Boca, followed by that of historians such as Giorgio Rochat, Giampaolo Calchi Novati, Alessandro Triulzi and Nicola Labanca has progressively introduced a more complex understanding of Italian colonialism as a historical event.

Thanks to this new historiography the indulgent post-war discourse around Italian colonial crimes and abuses, which relies on the Brava Gente or ‘good-hearted people’ stereotype (Labanca, 2005: 36), has undergone a major transformation. Brava Gente is a common self-deceptive stereotype defining the character and nature of Italians abroad: a lasting tradition within Italian popular culture which, since the dawn of Italian liberal colonialism, through the peaceful mass migrations of the 20th century, up to the present worldwide humanitarian commitment, has aimed at depicting a ‘unique’ Italian temperament in relation to otherness. Within this setting, the case of Italian colonialism – aside from the fascist parenthesis, devoted to reinstating the firm imperial identity inherited from the Romans – was the controversial emblem of self-representation in terms of ‘ragged’ and ‘poor’ settlers, who were particularly keen to export skilled labour overseas.

For many years such a narrative contextualised Italian colonialism within the frame of European colonialism as vulgar, sloppy and miserable, and indeed anti-modern. The outcome, as embodied in the writing of Indro Montanelli, the most influential liberal journalist of the post-war period, was the description of a lesser-evil form of colonial occupation. Hence, the figure of the good-hearted Italian soldier assumes an aura of natural humanity and innate inexperience, which prevents him from doing deliberately harmful deeds.¹

Against such a representation the new wave of the 1970s contributed to releasing the academic discourse from such a stereotype. It also helped to locate Italian colonisation in North and East Africa historically within the more appropriate European scheme of colonial exploitation, which was described by Ania Loomba “as the conquest and control of other’s people land and goods” where “the imperial country is the metropole from which power flows, and the colony or neo-colony is the place which it penetrates and controls” (Loomba, 1998: 7).

The second shift occurred in the 1990s, following the geopolitical changes at the end of the Cold War, global migration and the worldwide explosions of refugee crises that unfolded as a result. Unlike post-war Britain and France where migration from the ex-colonies constituted an important social and political phenomenon, Italy started experiencing mass migration from the ex-colonial world only at the end of the Cold War. The analysis of historians and sociologists highlights how, in contrast to other postcolonial countries, Italy between 1940 and 1960 protracted its tradition of being primarily a country of migration - an exporter of labour forces towards neighbouring European countries (Colombo and Sciortino, 2004). Only in the 1970s, after reaching a sort of economic balance, did Italy become a country of immigration. Migrants from Ethiopia and Eritrea formed the second largest group of foreigners residing in Italy. But with the end of the Cold War migration from ex-Soviet republics and other African nations became statistically more dominant (Pastore, 2004; Andall, 2005). At this point Italy, because of its geographical position, became a transit area for transnational migration. Since the 1990s, many migrants and refugees, escaping situations of conflict and humanitarian distress in Mediterranean Africa and the Horn of Africa, have encountered Italy as Europe’s southern gate. Subsequently, throughout the 2000s, Italy has progressively shaped relations and agreements with its former colonies around development plans and the containment of migrant flows coming from the Global South. Therefore, these events present the opportunity to re-open the chapter of Italy’s colonial history and to discuss the impact of colonial legacies on its political present.

which the myth of Brava Gente has been readapted as a rhetorical device to justify Italy’s post-colonial military interventions with a UN mandate in the ex-colonial world (Triulzi, 2005: 435; Mellino, 2005: 464). They refer to a lasting tradition which stems from the famous case of the 1993 humanitarian mission to Somalia within Operation Restore Hope and which, as Michele Nani points out, has continued recently with the case of the public commemorations of nineteen soldiers who died in a suicide bombing against the Italian military base of Nasiriya in occupied Iraq in 2003 (Nani, 2004).
The analysis presented in this thesis stems from the historical representation produced by the academic research of the 1970s and intertwines it with a study of the impact that migration and the refugee crisis have had on Italy from the 1990s up until the post-colonial present. Indeed, these historical developments function as the condition sine qua non to understand Italy in both its colonial and post-colonial frames, and enable the investigation of Italy’s colonial legacy in current times.

**Italy within the colonial frame.** Thanks to the evolution within Italian historiography during the 1970s, Italian colonialism has been defined as an area of interest around which new scholarship has been developing. This scholarship has opened up a debate about the intersection of the social, political and economic elements at the foundations of the Italian colonial enterprise, where relations of gender, race, class and sexuality set the structures of power.

As part of this debate, Nicola Labanca has pointed out that colonialism in Italy was not a mere ideological projection of the nation overseas, but was properly conceived as an imperial and capital driven project in both liberal and fascist times, where the overseas colonies in Libya and the Horn of Africa were to set the boundaries of an exclusively Italian domain of exploitation, similar to the other major European powers’ enterprises (Labanca, 2005). That Labanca also argues that the fact that the results of such efforts, like economic exploitation and programmes of settlement, did not offer profitable solutions to Italian capital and did not create long-lasting conditions for economic expansion, does not prevent us from historicising the Italian case as a significant piece in the European colonial puzzle.

Following this line of interpretation the Italian colonies have been analysed by multidisciplinary scholars variously as sites for economic and sexual opportunity (Barrera, 1996; Sorgoni, 1998), privileged markets for land and labour (Casanelli and Bestelman, 2000; Cresti, 1996; Larebo, 1994; Pankhurst, 1973), and as laboratories for new strategies of governance and repression (Del Boca, 1991, 2006), anthropological inquiry and racial engineering (Barrera, 2003; Sorgoni, 2002).

Within this debate and building on these ground-breaking research projects and new scholarship, this thesis expands the study of Italian colonialism by emphasising the epistemological value of colonial material legacies. It also underscores how Italy’s colonial project has always featured the circular movement of humans and objects between the homeland and the colony, namely migration,
trade and spoils, as a solid base on which the colonial system was built. Similar to the other countries in the European colonial milieu (French Algeria, British South Africa, Australia and New Zealand), Italy’s history of empire and colonial ventures is also a history of the circulation of white migrants, who, while looking for residence and welfare at the metropole frontiers, built up a settler colonial project.

In the case of Italy, Dudley Baines argues that settler colonialism was a direct consequence of such intense circulation. Between 1815 and 1930, settler colonialism came to be seen as a great opportunity, and after Britain, Italy had the second largest outward migration towards other countries. Therefore, also in Italy colonialism was an occasion to develop a strategy to control and direct the flows of national migrants (Baines, 1991: 9-10).

The prospect of an Italian settlement project presented an opportunity to manage a redundant peasant and urban-unemployed population coming from the unproductive lands of the south and the northeast of the country. Indeed, according to the settler colonialism model presented by Caroline Elkins and Susan Pedersen, following the colonial conquest and the defeat of native communities – in the form of either extermination or assimilation into an autonomous entity – the settler population was commonly “intent on making a territory their permanent home while continuing to enjoy metropolitan living standards and political privileges” (Elkins and Pedersen, 2005: 2).

Historian Frederick Cooper identifies another key element of the settler colonialism system of domination: the settler’s project relied on the economic integration of the colony into the metropolitan system of production. Hence, ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ generated a dialectic around which the rules of the colonial economy were set, where the metropole worked to assure a new market and a new source of raw materials, obtaining land for metropolitan settlers, peasants and labour, whilst the periphery was “allocated the task of producing primary commodities” (Cooper and Stoler, 1997: 19). Generally, this sort of relation and dependency has always created a sort of opposition between the metropole and the periphery within the framework of colonial relations. This is due to progressive forms of political autonomy, which the settler society demanded as concessions from the central authority of the homeland.

However, contrary to this model, the case of Italy – from its liberal inception to the peak of fascism – presents a different experience, one where the settler society
did not constitute an independent political force, and saw the settlement project as merely serving the expansion of the metropolitan area of the homeland. In relation to this, Elkins and Pedersen identify the Italian colonial model as a sort of state-centred settlement project that was “undertaken primarily by imperial latecomers moving into geographically contiguous areas under pressure of geopolitical rivalry and sometimes populationist anxieties” (Elkins and Pedersen, 2005: 7).

Nevertheless, through the breach that was opened in the 1970s, it was also possible to overcome the *Brava Gente* stereotype and understand how the management of otherness in the Italian case was to a great extent homogeneous with the European colonial scheme. This entailed a better understanding of racial discrimination and segregation on the one hand, and confinement, exile and the use of violent retribution as forms of collective punishment on the other. For instance, Mia Fuller has shown that during the fascist phase, racial segregation separated non-whites from whites in almost all spheres of public and private life (Fuller, 1992). Furthermore, according to studies by Del Boca and Rochat, just like other colonial schemes, the Italian responses to anti-colonial resistance were not a mere matter of atrocities, such as mass deportation from Eritrea, Libya and Ethiopia and internment in concentration camps in Cyrenaica in Libya and Somalia (Del Boca, 1987; Labanca, 2005), use of chemical weapons and poisonous gas in 1935-36 to fight Ethiopian insurgents in violation of the 1925 Gas Protocol (Rochat, 2008), and ethnic cleansing as a form of retaliation committed by the army and armed settlers (Rochat, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c); rather, as in many other colonial contexts, they defined a strategy of collective punishment and discipline of populations, where the objective was forced pacification of the colonised populations.²

Following these historical and cultural interpretations, this thesis, in order to historically locate the case studies that have been selected, will recall the vicissitudes of Italian colonialism from its inception, up to its conclusion and its aftermath.

Italian colonialism stretched from the period starting at the end of the 19th century, with the purchase of East African strips of land on the Red Sea (current day Eritrea and Somalia) through the liberal occupation of Libya, up to the fascist

² See the cases of the 1945 French bombing of Algeria, the British use of mustard gas in 1920 in Iraq, the 1948 massacre of Battang kali in occupied Malaya and the mass detention in British camps in response to the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya between 1952 and 1960, as famous and dramatic examples of colonial retaliation against native populations.
occupation of Ethiopia and the birth of the Empire in 1936. As anticipated, the focus will not be upon a temporal and chronological historical overview but instead it will be on its spatial and geographical dimensions. In so doing, this part of chapter one revolves around the idea that Italian colonialism, throughout its different historical phases and forms of propaganda, sought to break the spatial barriers between the homeland and the periphery for the sake of an imaginary spatial continuity crossed by white migrants. For this reason, I will firstly approach the case of Libya and Mediterranean colonial politics and later the vicissitudes of the colonies in the Horn of Africa that in this narration follow the conquest of Ethiopia and the creation of the Empire.

**Italian colonial endeavours.** The occupation of Libya in 1911 represents the first Italian colonial achievement in history obtained by military means. The colonial aggression against Libya launched by Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti triggered a war with the Ottoman Empire that was itself the result of several longer-term convergences. First, there had been enduring disaffection in public opinion towards Italy’s foreign policy under liberal governments since Italy’s poor achievements in the Berlin conference in 1884 at the beginning of the ‘Scramble for Africa’. Subsequently, the failure of Italian diplomacy on the occasion of the French rush to establish a protectorate in Tunisia in 1881 made Libya the last conquerable strip of land facing the Mediterranean. Additionally, two more reasons materialised as an intrinsic expression of Italian society and its internal politics: the urgency to control Italian migration and limit the flow of Italian labour forces towards the Americas, and the pressure of new waves of nationalist propaganda designed and shaped around the stereotypical European imperialist prism of the “white man’s burden” and the cultural and evolutionary backwardness of the native population in Africa.

Against pragmatic anti-colonial representatives such as the politicians Gaetano Salvemini and Filippo Turati, who used Italy’s backward capitalism and weak economy as a deterrent against exporting labour overseas and free grant investments (Ipsen, 1996; Gabaccia, 2000), the rhetoric of the nationalist right-wing discourse relied on a much more powerful imagery: one devised to stand up to the Ottoman Empire’s depiction of it as “the sick man”, not capable of providing for the Arab population of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. Thus, according to the written testimonies of Salvemini, the nationalist discourse created the myth of Italy’s duty to reinstate
civilisation and culture in the territory, which formerly had been a land of lustrous traditions and customs under the rule and influence of the Roman Empire (Salvemini, 1963).

Therefore the Italian claims of Italy’s legitimacy over Libyan coasts – at the time of Ottoman control – were shaped around a historical and temporal continuity between glorious imperial pasts, uncertain presents, and a future potentially open to greatness. The memory of Roman times, reinforced by images and traces of archaeological sites along the Libyan strip, helped to visualise Italy’s right to reclaim paternity over Tripoli and Bengazhi and liberate them from the decadence brought upon them by the Ottomans. Thus, the verses of poet and nationalist political agitator Gabriele D’Annunzio, depicted the Libyan shores not as a mere spatial extension or physical continuation of the country’s lands, but as something to which Latin civilisation had a right and a duty to reclaim since those Mediterranean territories had been progressively brutalised by Islamic barbarity (D’Annunzio, 1968: 933).

Historian Emilio Gentile argues that the question of Italian migration in relation to the necessity of colonialism became the main focus of the political discourses of the next decades of fascist propaganda and pride, which eventually led to the colonial occupation of Ethiopia and the foundation of the Empire. Through the rhetoric of the pioneer nationalist Enrico Corradini, the dramatic phenomena of migration switched from being a symptom of poverty and backwardness to being evidence of the vital exuberance of the Italian nation (Gentile, 1997). According to Corradini, migrants were then asked to change from being unproductive forces attending upon foreign competitors to masses looking towards new lands where they could exercise direct ownership (Corradini, 1904). Italian migration towards North Africa became, in the words of Corradini, the symbol of the “anti-imperialism of servitude” where the chance of a smooth and spontaneous extension of Italian territory into the coast overseas, shaped the collective imagery around the promise of new lands for cultivation as the first step in the realisation of the dream of agrarian colonisation (Corradini, 1985: 185).

However, together with the importance of ideology in defining the colonial horizon, historians also agree about the role that migration played in Italy’s colonial project, as a response to and consequence of Italy’s backward capitalism. Within a complex European framework where imperialism meant “the extension of capitalism into new territories” (Luxembourg, 1976: 153), and in which colonial project was
“integral to the struggle for greater modernity and state legitimacy” (Fuller, 2007: 6), the Italian colonisation of Libya, from its liberal inception, had to come to terms with late industrialisation and large masses of unutilised labour forces. Due to these circumstances Italy fostered the myth of the ‘Great Proletarian Nation’. Therein, Italy’s colonial identity was founded on the fictional figure of a ragged settler as the embodiment of the redemption of masses of Italian migrants, who for decades had been overcrowding boats bound for the distant lands of the west. Migration and colonial ventures as a result of an interclass movement became a key rhetorical device in building the idea of a specific and fictional Italian exceptionalism. In the Italian colonial vocabulary the civilising mission was indeed synonymous with ‘exported skilled labour’ as the distinctive element separating civilisation and barbarity.

Italian colonialism is historically linked to parallel national mythologies, which then became part of a unique narrative in fascist propaganda. According to Gentile’s study, after fascism took over in 1922, the conflation of the notions of the ‘Proletarian Nation’ with the myth of Romanità or ‘Romanity’ and the idea of a ‘return’ to the black continent following in the footsteps of ancient Roman conquering heroes, became indissoluble, and through the mobilisation of 20,000 new settlers in 1938, Italy reached the highest level of colonial consciousness it had ever seen (Gentile, 1993).

After 1922, Mussolini deployed ‘great police operations’ in Libya with total disregard for the codes of war and local customs. At the end of 1925, after three years of military raids, Mussolini managed to impose Italian order and rule in the whole northern part of Tripolitania, erasing any trace of agreements formerly institutionalised by earlier liberal governments in Cyrenaica. The primacy of military force over diplomacy became a mere matter of fact. By the 1930s the issue of migration and the necessity to optimise the military occupation of Libyan lands became the main concern of the fascist regime (Cresti, 2005; Fowler, 1973). Military pacification and repression were brought under the rule of fascist ‘top brass’ Marshal Badoglio and General Graziani, and subsequently after 1934 projects of settlement became more ambitious under the government of Italo Balbo (Rochat, 1986; Segrè, 1985). Historian Federico Cresti, who focuses his research on the fascist attempts to realise Italy’s agricultural revolution in overseas lands, describes how in 1934 Mussolini’s regime inaugurated the Agency for the Colonisation of Cyrenaica and
Tripolitania, in order to facilitate the projects of agricultural colonisation and introduce the fascist programmes of demographic colonisation (Cresti, 2005). This was meant to transform Libya into a part of Italian territory for the accommodation of huge masses of Italian unemployed urban labourers and peasant settlers.

In 1937, after the conquest of Ethiopia, Italy created *Africa Italiana Orientale* or ‘Italian East Africa’, through the unification of Ethiopia with its earlier possessions Eritrea and Somalia, thus placing *de facto* a large part of the Horn of Africa under Italian control. Like Libya, which was considered to be a natural extension beyond the Mediterranean of the Italian motherland, the conquest of Ethiopia further expanded the colonial project of Italian settler colonialism. The conquest of Ethiopia set the boundaries of the new fascist empire: from Libya to the Horn, passing through other countries facing the Mediterranean, such as the Greek islands of the Dodecanese archipelago, which it had colonised previously during the war with the Ottoman Empire over Libya (Doumanis, 2008; Carabott, 1993). In this regard, looking at Italy’s colonial geography, the 1970s historiography demonstrates how military rule was, for the Italians, a strategic and long lasting tool of government. In relation to this, Labanca and Rochat in fact agree about the frequent impractical use and abuse of the military by the Italian authorities to govern and administer the colonies. Rochat insists on the fact that this was a casualness that would turn out to be crucial, especially if we consider how the colonial wars *de facto* weakened Italy’s preparation for the forthcoming European warfront (Rochat, 1971, 2008).

Through the vast archival research carried out by Angelo Del Boca and thanks to the extensive studies of Nicola Labanca, it is also possible to read the military campaign in Ethiopia as the perfect propaganda-opportunity to increase popular consent within the regime. Moreover, their accurate analysis of Italian propaganda in the 1930s illustrates clearly the fascist attempt to overturn Italy’s historical subalterm position within the European political order and foster a sense of national victimhood and forced isolation in front of the assembly of the League of Nations. Labanca argues that the fascist propaganda manufactured a political war, which *de facto* sacrificed military strategy and intelligence for imperial ambitions. Whether or not it is seen from a merely military perspective, the use of gas as a tool of terror already embodied a disputable truth of modern warfare, and the nature of the colonial rule, excluding any concessions to Ethiopian elites and notables, brought further evidence
of Italian imperialism’s strategic blindness (Labanca, 2002). After his triumphal march in Addis Ababa, Marshal Badoglio made his way back to Rome, leaving the titles of Viceroy of Ethiopia and General Governor of Italian East Africa to General Graziani, arriving from Libya. Thereafter the Italian commitment to pacify the region eventually occurred through countless massacres and deployments of technologies of terror.

Del Boca shows how Graziani’s rule brought with it the highest level of deliberate violence and brutality against the Ethiopian population under Italian occupation (Del Boca, 2006). After his former performances and experience with Libyan pacifications, Rodolfo Graziani inherited the title “Butcher of Ethiopia”, becoming de facto the man in charge of doing Mussolini’s dirty work overseas. Following the same Libyan pattern, the resignation of Graziani came about only once the Ethiopian resistance was supposedly weakened and, inspired by Balbo’s former plans for Libya, a new phase of indigenous politics was inaugurated through the nomination of Viceroy Amedeo D’Aosta: the deliberate massacres ceased, the concentration camps were closed, and many Ethiopian notables were allowed to come back from exile. However, Labanca claims that this late attempt to convert Italian colonialism in Ethiopia to indirect rule is further proof of strategic blindness and historical delay: colonisation had been already compromised and marked by the introduction of racial laws and segregation imposed by the fascist regime (Labanca, 2002: 411-24). If, until 1935, the Eritreans, Libyans and Somalis were appointed as subalterns with no rights as in all of the other colonies, the birth of the Empire saw the proliferation of segregation practices which resulted in the 1938 institution of racial laws in Italy and in the overseas territories.

The Italian declaration of war on 10 June 1940 on the side of Nazi Germany, set the destiny of Italian East Africa: the Italian military commitment on the European front relegated the eastern frontier of the Empire to a subaltern role,

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3 There is a general historiographical consensus around the figure of Graziani as an emblem of fascist brutality in the colonies. In this regard, Del Boca and all the other scholars consider as emblematic the reactions of the Italian army under Graziani’s command, after an attempt on his life was foiled in Addis Ababa: during a public demonstration, several bombs exploded on the central stage. The viceroy miraculously survived and afterwards did not hesitate to launch and tolerate the brutal repression organised by the army and autonomous squads of Black Shirts. Between the 19 and the 21 February 1937, 3,000 victims fell under the blows of fascist retaliation. Several Ethiopian notables and Copt religious authorities were accused of backing the bombers and were therefore sent to concentration camps or into exile. The apex of the repression was reached with the massacre in the holy Copt convent of Debra Libanos, when under the command of General Maletti, Italian troops slaughtered 500 hundred monks.
neglected by Italian military tactics. In 1941, Eritrea, mostly known as *colonia primogenita* or ‘first born colony’, was the first stronghold to fall after being attacked by British troops and a revived Ethiopian resistance. The capital Asmara and the port of Massawa fell first; then Mogadishu and the whole of Somalia followed. Ethiopia’s fall followed after Addis Ababa was taken by the British on 5 May 1941, and Italian East Africa was wiped from the map of the African continent.

The story of Italian colonialism in the Horn of Africa was brought to an end after the British Empire took back what originally was given to Italy as a concession in 1881, when it authorised the transformation of a private settlement owned by the Italian trade company Rubattino, into official state property and a colony. Due to the British need to counter-balance the French influence in the Horn of Africa after the Berlin conference in 1884, the British Empire suddenly approved the rise of an Italian rule that could compete in the colonial arena against other powers. Italian colonial ambitions moved quickly to Ethiopia as the main region to concentrate its efforts and resources for colonial conquest. Despite Italy’s aspirations, the kingdom of Ethiopia – at that time named Abyssinia – managed to establish a strong military resistance and political movement against the Italian attempts to violate its borders. After the resounding defeats at Dogali in 1887 and most importantly at Adwa in 1896, Italian dreams to penetrate Abyssinia were shattered, and Ethiopia kept its independence until the advent of fascism, with the new wave of colonial fervour which took over Italy throughout the 1930s (Del Boca, 1998a; Labanca, 1993). After the first collapse in Dogali, the control of the port of Massawa on the Red Sea allowed for the creation of the Eritrean colony in 1890 and Italian settlements in Somalia between 1889 and 1905. Eritrea was formed and named as such under the liberal government of Francesco Crispi, who was Prime Minister and also an influential liberal politician who strongly supported the Italian penetration and occupation of territories along the coasts and archipelagos of the Red Sea.

The colonisation of Somalia occurred again due to a British concession (Hess, 1968; Lewis, 1982), through the chartered company *Compagnia Filonardi* initially operating in Mogadishu’s harbour. The purchase of the Somali coasts turned out to be significant, firstly as a strategic border with Eritrea, and secondly, because they were useful in proceeding with the progressive encirclement of Ethiopia, the main target of Italian colonial expansionism. Since the earliest steps that led to its formation as a colony, Eritrea became a confined territory for settler colonialism
(Fuller, 2007; 29; Taddia, 1986), thereby setting the standards of government for the future colonial achievements in Libya and the Horn of Africa. Nevertheless, the colonial enthusiasm of Crispi’s government for expansionism in the Horn was not enough to sustain it after the humiliation at Dogali and Adwa – unique cases of disastrous European military defeat at the hands of an African power – and in 1896 Italy agreed a peace treaty with Emperor Menelik, giving up any ambitions to occupy Ethiopia. As a reaction to the impossibility of proceeding further with colonial plans of occupation, colonial affairs became of secondary importance and efforts to reinforce the colonial possessions in Eritrea and Somalia occurred without leaving any impact on Italian public opinion. Under the liberal governments up to the early years of the fascist regime, Eritrea was a territory for infrastructure, trade and commerce, whereas Somalia was kept as a far and exotic distant colony, from which only private investors derived any sort of excitement.

Only with the *fascistizzazione* or ‘fascistisation’ of the colonial discourse in the 1920s was there suddenly a radical change of policies. In Somalia, between 1923 and 1928, a new interventionist approach supported proper policies of settler colonialism, backed by furious campaigns for the disarmament of local tribes and clans, which saw a total militarisation of the region with an increase from 2,500 to 12,000 troops, until the re-conquest of the Somali lands was completed in 1928 (Labanca, 2002: 170-2). Somalia became a sort of Italian armed bulwark, ready to support a military campaign in Ethiopia. Moreover, Eritrea became a stage for preparing for the invasion of Ethiopia, and there was a dramatic increase in military presence, overcrowding the Eritrean borders with Ethiopia. After the war of conquest and the deposition of Emperor Haile Selassie, Ethiopia composed - together with Eritrea and Somalia - Italian East Africa. In combination with Libya, this signified the birth of the Empire. Accordingly, in 1937, following the changes, the Ministry of the Colonies - formerly opened in 1911 in the aftermath of the colonisation of Libya - was renamed the Ministry of Italian Africa. The Empire lasted only few years, ending in 1941 after the eruption of the Second World War, when Eritrea and Somalia became British protectorates and Haile Selassie was reinstated to his throne. In 1943, it was Libya’s turn to fall after the military collapse of the Italian-German Axis in El Alamein in Egypt.
**Italy’s post-colonial relations.** One of the most distinctive traits of Italian colonialism, as commonly recognised by historians, is the way in which it reached its conclusion. Decolonisation in Italy, rather than being a gradual historical process arising with nationalist movements in the colonies, consisted of circumscribed historical events due to Italy’s military defeats in the Second World War. Jacqueline Andall correctly defines the dispossesion of the Italian colonies by the Allied forces as “external decolonisation” (Andall, 2005).

After the forced decolonisation between 1941 and 1943 during the war, it took a few more years to see the true end of any Italian colonial ambitions: the post-war peace agreements in Paris in 1948 saw the Italian aspiration to preserve substantial control over its ex-colonies crumble. In 1949, the Council of the United Nations voted for the independence of Libya, which, after a temporary British Military Administration in the northern coasts and a French Military Administration in the South, became a sovereign state in 1951 under the crown of Idris al Sanusi. In 1956 an independent Libya raised the issue of war damages and asked for compensation. Italy agreed to a minimal amount, which was presented to the public as a contribution towards the reconstruction of Libya. Only with the revolution of Gaddafi in 1969 were the issues of reparations and acknowledgement of historical guilt brought to the fore within negotiations. These issues would remain unsolved until the late 2000s and they constitute an important part of my argument in chapter three.

As with Libya, the post-colonial relation with Ethiopia kept in suspension the reconciliation process until the restitution of the obelisk of Axum as a symbolic gesture marking the end of colonial tensions. From the return of Emperor Haile Selassie to Ethiopia’s throne in 1943, through the military coup of the communist Derg under Haile Mariam Mengistu, to the birth of modern Ethiopia under Meles Zenawi, the former rebel leader against the Derg, Italy and Ethiopia took more than sixty years to bring to completion the long path of pacification.

Whether post-colonial bargaining and disputes around colonial compensations divided Italy from Libya and Ethiopia until the 2000s, the cases of Eritrea and Somalia are slightly different, as they did not have any suspended dispute with Italy. The peace agreements in 1948 recognised the status of Eritrea as a federal province of Ethiopia, and it was integrated with Ethiopia in 1952 at the end of the British mandate. In 1962, after Emperor Haile Selassie dissolved the federation annexing
Eritrea as the fourteenth province of the empire, Eritrea started a war of independence against Ethiopia, which lasted until 1991. The conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia progressed throughout the 1970s under the silence of the United Nations. Italy, while standing in between the two ex-colonial possessions, reacted passively, accepting the principle of non-intervention in favour of Ethiopia. Only after Eritrea’s independence in 1991 did Italy begin to progressively invest in development and aid while acknowledging the legacy of colonialism. Giampaolo Calchi Novati estimates that until current times, Italian aid and development have supported most of the economic and infrastructural sectors of the Eritrean system (Calchi Novati, 2008).

On the contrary, the relations between Italy and Somalia from decolonisation up to the present time have been set around a strong and regular reciprocity. After the collapse of the 1946 plan suggested by British Foreign minister Ernest Bevin, who proposed to unify all Somali regions (Somalia Italiana, British Somaliland and Ogaden), in 1950 Italy obtained a ten year mandate of trusteeship, commonly known as AFIS (Amministrazione Fiduciaria Italiana or ‘Italian Trusteeship’) in Somalia, to lead the country to independence and support development. Between 1950 and 1960 Somalia was indeed appointed to Italy under the UN mandate, which made it de facto “an extension of the Italian peninsula” (Del Boca, 2003: 30) and the main target of Italian development policies among its ex-territories overseas. According to Del Boca’s study, the ten-year mandate failed to realise the main goal of its mission, namely revitalising a dead economy, forming a reliable bureaucracy and ruling class, and securing Somalia’s borders. After ten years of Italian mandate, Somalia eventually reached independence. However, Del Boca emphasises how during the mandate, under the pressure of a still influential fascist colonial bureaucracy, Italy kept control of trade and of a few functioning factories, and did not create any conditions for a sustainable economy. For instance, the capital Mogadishu was left without a functioning harbour or sanitation and in isolation from the rest of Somalia.

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4 Between 2001 and 2006 Silvio Berlusconi’s government increased development aid towards Eritrea. This was accompanied by a peak in nostalgia for the colonial past and pride in the first born colony, whose actual borders reflect the original Italian colonial design for Eritrea.

5 In this regard, as reported by Del Boca’s reconstruction, it is interesting to recall the words of Italian Christian-democrat representative Giuseppe Brusasca in the 1950s: “we came back to show the world that we were able to inaugurate a new politics for Africa: no exploitation but cooperation. A successful return to Somalia could entitle us to a peaceful penetration of Africa” (Del Boca, 2001: 222).
because of the lack of paved roads and railways (Del Boca, 2001: 350). After only nine years of independence, in 1969 the Somali army took over a fragmented and devastated political entity and Siad Barre’s military junta established “scientific socialism” as the inception for a total degeneration of the Somali republic. In this context Calchi Novati reports that in spite of the recurring failures and belligerent activities of Barre’s government – including the undeclared attack on Ethiopia to get control over the Ogaden region between 1977-78 – Italian aid never ceased to sustain the weak Somali political system (Calchi Novati, 2008: 45). Moreover, Italy was the first supplier of arms to Somalia. As Calchi Novati has pointed out, “a prolonged provision of financial and technical aid was aimed at promoting economic linkages and strengthening political partnership without paying too much attention to the nature of the regime” (Calchi Novati, 2008: 46).

Throughout the 1980s Italy aimed at playing an equidistant role among its ex-colonies, in spite of the conflicts between Ethiopia and Eritrea and between Ethiopia and Somalia. In spite of the strong linkages built up with Somalia during the trusteeship transition and the dispute with Ethiopia that started in the aftermath of decolonisation around the restitution of cultural properties, Italy managed to create a parallel relationship with Mengistu’s Ethiopia through vast programmes of humanitarian aid and development cooperation. In the 1980s at the peak of Italian politics of development, Italian aid relentlessly accompanied the slow decline of Barre’s government until his escape in 1991.

The 1992 wave of famine that followed the political fragmentation and civil war in post-Barre Somalia, inspired the launch of Operation Restore Hope by the United States of America and United Nations for humanitarian purposes and to secure food convoys for the starving population. This occasion saw the participation of Italy in the mission and consequently the return of the Italian army to Somalia for the third time in history. The deterioration of the mission started and Western media coverage – which had initially shown televised images of soldiers providing food to grateful, emaciated people – soon had to change course to document a transnational military mission which de facto was aimed at state building and the removal of

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6 In regard to the Italian presence in Somalia, as the result of a weak agreement within the UN, the Americans denounced the lack of coordination and cohesion among the multinational coalition. Moreover, concerns were raised regarding the massive role and location of the 2,500 Italian forces and the prejudice that the politicians in Rome were “anxious to see more publicity for a prominent Italian role in the former colony” (Oakley and Hirsch, 1995: 74).
Somali warlords.

Fifteen years after Operation Restore Hope, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the global War on Terror eventually reached Somalia, after it was labelled by the George Bush administration as the hot spot in the Horn of Africa of terrorist activities and organisation. In October 2002, the United States of America, as part of their response to 9/11 attacks, launched a massive counter-terrorism operation named CJTF-HOA - Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa. The operation was designed to conduct aerial and naval patrols to counter the activities of terrorist groups in the region. As a response to “weak states vulnerable to terrorist networks and drug cartels within their borders” (Bush, 2002), CJTF-HOA represented the largest American military operation in Africa. It was located at Camp Le Monier, a once French Foreign Legion outpost in Djibouti. The Americans were backed by a multinational naval force from France, Italy, Germany and other NATO allies.

In 2006, Ethiopia, backed by US and European support, attacked Somalia to counter the rise of the Islamic Court Union as a new hegemonic political power. In 2007, in order to allow the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops, the AMISOM - African Union Mission in Somalia was created from a UN mandate, with the support of the US and NATO, as a peacekeeping operation from Uganda, Burundi and Djibouti, to protect Somalia’s Transitional Federal Government and defend the capital Mogadishu against the Islamist insurgents.

While today the AMISOM mission is still fully operative as it expanded its military and humanitarian operations in order to re-gain full control over the Somali space, CJTF-HOA became subordinate under unified United States Africa Command - also known as AFRICOM - which was created in 2008, and at the present time coordinates peacekeeping activities, humanitarian aid missions and military partnership operations all over the African continent.

Within a confused context where the former European colonial powers struggle to regain autonomy within the African space, since the end of the Cold War Italy’s political influence in Somalia and in the Horn (via state and private enterprises) has dramatically downsized. According to the analysis of Calchi Novati, since the collapse of the regimes in Somalia and Ethiopia in 1991, Italy’s attempts to exercise influence on the ex-colonies have failed “to provide effective support for the reorganisation of the region’s political institutions and economies in the era of globalisation” (Calchi Novati, 2008: 55). Calchi Novati argues that unlike Britain
and France, which by means of military interventions in Sierra Leone in 2000 and the Ivory Coast in 2011, have revived and justified the colonial past, Italy operates militarily strictly within NATO and UN mandates following the leading role of US governance and the global politics of human rights. Within this global perspective, Calchi Novati maintains that, “the relative ‘innocence’ claimed for Italy’s colonial records can no longer benefit its policies in Africa” (Ibid: 55).

As much as such an interpretation reflects correctly a post-colonial context where Italy exercises a weak influence, this thesis intends to bring to the fore the bilateral agreements that Italy signed with Ethiopia in 2002 and with Libya in 2008, as the key events that have revived Italy’s political activism in regard to Mediterranean and African matters. Moreover, it is the intention of this thesis to analyse these events through the links between Italy’s most recent discourse of historical guilt regarding colonialism and its actions for posthumous justice, and the emergencies of the post-colonial operational present. Such an intersection emerges in a context in which both Ethiopia and Libya play a vital role in the containment of what are conceived to be global threats of a different nature. Ethiopia is considered to be a strategic partner of the US and Europe, because of its military activity in the Horn of Africa in waging de facto the global War on Terror at the heart of East Africa. In parallel, in Libya, until his removal in 2011, Gaddafi played the role of a strategic ally to Italy in the war against irregular migration from ex-colonial Africa across the Mediterranean.

Starting with an investigation of colonial road infrastructures, an obelisk in movement, anthropometric devices and human remains, this research proposes ‘materialities in circulation’ as a method of inquiry into the complexities of Italy’s colonial past and post-colonial present.

Historical events such as the forced decolonisation and a late and marginal migration from the ex-colonial territories are just a few elements that describe Italy’s historic detachment from colonial questions in terms of political and legal responsibilities, culture and identity. In this void, where forgetfulness and negligence intertwine, Libyan and Ethiopian campaigns for reparations and justice began and lasted for more than sixty years. Within this historical framework, the next sections will introduce ‘circulation’ as an essential category to track the shifting of power from colonialism to the present and how new crystallisations of powers form and develop. Before addressing theoretical considerations around ‘materiality’ and
material powers, it is first essential to discuss ‘circulation’ as a concept that deciphers colonial and post-colonial practices of government over humans and things.

**Understanding circulation**

**Foucault’s governmentality and biopolitics.** In order to understand complex terms such as ‘circulation’ and ‘circularity’ this thesis interprets them through a Foucauldian perspective. In so doing, it first considers two important categories at the core of Michel Foucault’s political lexicon: governmentality and biopolitics.

Whilst governmentality and biopolitics are commonly used symmetrically to explain Foucault’s political theory, this thesis argues that these concepts can be taken into consideration separately. Foucault introduces governmentality as inclusive of various ‘techniques of government’ (Foucault, 1997: 299). Accordingly, governmentality works beyond the sphere of the state and embodies an architecture of power that is heterogeneous, multi-scalar and pervasive. During the 16th century, in the historical passage between the Middle Ages and Modernity, the mutation of sovereign power evolved into a new ‘microphysics of power’ (Foucault, 1977a: 26-7), where the state as an institution was insufficient to embody the new geography of power. Hence, Foucault argues that discipline, control and government over humans and things were no longer confined to the state’s monopoly, but on the contrary were generated by a growing network of institutions, entities and agencies that functioned by virtue of their relationality.

Far from announcing the collapse of state authority, governmentality helps us to understand how state power becomes truly effective through the detachment and spread of competences, skills and expertise beyond the control of a vertical power.

However, to speak in terms of the dispersion of powers or autonomy of powers from the state, does not mean to be entirely outside of it. According to Foucault’s perspective, the state still preserves and exercises its power of ratification upon such processes of dispersion. Moreover, as Gilles Deleuze claims, the state is “even content to cover rather than institute” (Deleuze, 1988: 25) since this mechanism of dispersion through proliferation implies the creation of a more efficient and polymorphous matrix of governance over people and things (Walters,
Michel Foucault originally historicised his concept as peculiar to the European invention of liberal systems of government.

Within the bigger frame of Foucault’s studies on the connection between liberalism and governmentality, he subtly introduces his concepts of biopolitics and biopower as rather minor and marginal critical issues. More specifically, in his lectures on neo-liberalism, biopolitics and biopower emerge originally as liberal ideas within the sphere of governmentality, as representatives of “the attempt, starting from the eighteenth century to rationalise the problems posed to governmental practice by phenomena characteristic of a set of living beings forming a population: health, hygiene, birth-rate, life expectancy, race” (Foucault, 2008: 317).

Foucault’s notions of biopolitics and biopower entail at this point a different space and object of government. Instead of indefinite masses of individuals forced into disciplinary frames through panoptic technologies, the object of government becomes a whole population: “a global mass that is affected by overall processes characteristic of birth, death, production, illness and so on” (Foucault, 2003: 242-43).

From here, the invention of statistical expertise, professions and sciences, studies on human reproduction, health care, epidemics and dietary needs of a population, became the epicentre around which political rule and government were forming towards the goal of protecting human life as the *conditio sine qua non* for the safety of the sovereign.

As a complementary component of the protection of such sovereign order, the concept of ‘circulation’ emerges as the key element of rational government over things and people. According to Foucault, protecting the living necessitates the capacity to guarantee control over a steady and fluid circulation of people and things in order to maximise the benefits and contain the damages of such circular movement (Foucault, 2007: 18). Circulation is carried out through the deployment of apparatuses of security, which aim at generating spaces of security as specific modes of governing. Through a broad set of relations of power introduced by governmentality, technologies of security operate out of the monopoly of the state, addressing the governance of towns through material solutions over issues such as food scarcity, health safety, epidemics, crime and many others (Foucault, 2007: 62).

Therefore spaces of security work via circulation while such circular movement across space can be guaranteed by a certain openness. On the one hand, separating walls between towns and countryside and many other barriers had to be
removed in order to improve the biological life of the subjects. On the other hand, the control over people had to improve and increase in order to limit those collateral damages engendered by such circulation. Security is indeed built on the connection between government and freedom at the base of a liberal context of power.

**From colonial to post-colonial governmentality and biopolitics.** It is well known that the work of Foucault on governmentality and biopolitics is generally circumscribed to Europe and liberal systems of power. However, the absence in Foucault’s analysis of any trace of the liberal imperialist and colonialist endeavours of modern European nation states does not preclude his lexicon from being applied to other geopolitical contexts. Indeed, William Walters points out how the work of Foucault on governmentality, rather than being an incomplete political theory, is in fact incomplete and non-exhaustive by design (Walters, 2012: 39). Reading Foucault means to use his rich conceptual toolbox as a set of hypotheses and methodologies that enable us to study the evolution and changes of power relations and how the governance of modern societies develops over time. To agree with Foucault on modernity as the foundational moment that brought about radical mutations of power mechanisms, linearity and consequentiality is indeed not enough to decipher chains of command and decisional paths. Studies on governmentality are *de facto* studies on the ontology of power depending on non-linear articulations, juxtapositions and infinite combinations. In this sense, this thesis uses ‘governmentality’ not as a restricting category for a mere inquiry into the historical past, but as the tool to decipher the present. In fact, Foucauldian studies on governmentality have developed autonomously to interpret neoliberalism as a system of power (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Larner 2001; Lemke 2001; Osborne 1994). For instance, post-colonial studies, feminist theorists, critical legal theorists, theorists of political subjectivity and theorists of international relations have all made extensive use of Foucauldian categories such as power, discourse and the body, even if these were never Foucault’s own research interests (Brown, 2006: 76).

As part of this debate, the absence within Foucault’s writings of any reference to the connection between governmentality, biopolitics and colonialism constitutes a basic premise for my argument, and serves to address possible entanglements with the case studies I wish to investigate. For instance, in relation to this ‘absence’, this thesis agrees with Stephen Legg’s claim that since Foucault’s earliest work on
discipline, punishment, the panopticon and madness, colonialism is a sort of “absent presence” in his discourse (Legg, 2007). More specifically, it can be said that important literature on colonial governmentality has emerged focusing on how from literature to medicine, themes of sexuality, gender and state racism in the colonies were constitutive of a European bourgeois sense of identity (Mitchell T., 2003: 3; Stoler, 1995). The use of governmentality as a category of analysis has also helped to unveil colonial power structures and shed more light on the relation between ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ and how colonialism depended on the movement of technologies between centre and periphery, where practices, expertise and inventions circulated, generating exchanges of power. These include many examples: the introduction of fingerprinting, colonial frontiers guarded with heavy military artillery, military technologies for fighting colonial wars and local guerrillas, and the use of concentration camps for the repression of anti-colonial uprisings (Mezzadra and Rahola, 2006; Mitchell T., 2000; Osborne, 1994; Smith and Stucki, 2011).

Considering the popularity of studies on governmentality and biopolitics that have arisen in order to decipher mechanisms of power introduced by neoliberalism, Walters correctly highlights that studies on colonial governmentality are essential to understand “that the world became a laboratory for government long before the advent of neoliberalism” (Walters, 2012: 97).

According to orthodox Foucauldian grammar, governmentality and biopolitics in a colonial context can be seen separately. The former addresses the dispersion of powers for the re-organisation of the colonial domain, in its territory and population, whereas the latter has to be seen in relation to policies referring to the health, welfare and mortality of colonial subjects. A solution to biopolitics in colonial governmentality has been offered by Achille Mbembe, who differentiates the European context from the colonial one as different spaces for the implementation of liberal policies. Whilst in Europe the government of people operates through a set of technologies of government, which protect and foster “life” for the creation of spaces of security, the example of colonial Africa is emblematic of the fabrication of death to define the microphysics of power. There, systematic killing and terror spread among the colonial population worked through state power and simultaneously through the autonomous spontaneity of individuals or groups of settlers, who freely committed atrocities without fear of state violence. This, according to Mbembe, is necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003).
In order to speak about the relation between biopolitics and the colony, it is indeed necessary to recount how liberalism adapted to the event of decolonisation and how relations of power with the ex-colonial world have changed. In the aftermath of colonialism, Mbembe’s necropolitics seems to evolve towards a more Foucauldian symmetrical form of biopower. The wellbeing of a population and its discipline defines the strategy through which the production of spaces of security can be effective. The political control over life eventually takes over in the ex-colonial world.

Hence, this thesis understands governmentality and biopolitics as complementary categories of analysis to understand flows of power and the mutation of their forms over time and investigate the impact of colonial legacies on the present.

However, whether or not governmentality itself has been originally conceptualised as in no way confinable to the restricted sphere of the state, the microphysics of power develops accordingly through paths of creative dispersion. If Foucault thought of modern Europe as an open milieu, an interstate constellation of power and responsibilities, studies on governmentality and biopolitics have subsequently opened the debate to include network theory, which, since the end of the Cold War, must by its very nature be global.

The global mobility described by Etienne Balibar as a primary effect of decolonisation has created new spaces of conflict between the ex-centre and the ex-periphery. According to Balibar, investment in technologies to exercise control over such fluid movement along the south/north axis has progressively increased and become a strategic primary interest in order to guarantee welfare within new, restricted spaces of security (Balibar, 1991).

In order to do so, techniques of government and biopolitics have progressively become more dependent on each other, even if, as Walters explains, it is true that it actually becomes a problem of biopolitics only when the health, welfare and mortality of a given population are a target on a global scale due to famine, drought, floods, earthquakes, tsunamis, wars and many other natural or man-made disasters. In this sense migration controls and border security depend more on apparatuses of security – and hence belong to a discussion around governmentality – which are implemented to pre-empt the risk of global threats to the welfare system and those of international terrorism (Walters, 2012: 155).
However, in spite of such differentiation, the conflation between
governmentality and biopolitics in the control over a global order of things seems to
progressively become a mere matter of facts. Practices of government and
management over the movement of global migration and asylum seekers serve to
safeguard the internal and external borders of nation states, which intend to preserve
their right to decide on residential permits and entitlements to social security and
welfare. States, with the support of internal and international non-state actors such as
UN agencies and NGOs, protect their integrity through immigration and asylum
systems, which, through expulsion and resettlement, programmes and policies of
containment, manage the distribution of populations among states and borders.

**Foucault, humanitarianism and development.** Many scholars argue that in
the post-colonial present the entanglements between governmentality and biopolitics
are most evident in the management of global migration. Since the Cold War
governmentality has learned how to work through emergencies, risk, resilience and
crisis (Amoore, 2009; Aradau and van Munster, 2008). The emergence and global
spread of humanitarian disasters have established new spaces of operability.
Consequently, entanglements between biopolitics, sovereignty and war, technologies
of security (Dillon and Neal, 2008; Dillon and Reid, 2009; Jabri, 2006),
development, humanitarianism and aid (as anti-famines campaigns and policies)
(Duffield, 2007; Fassin, 2007; Ilcan and Lacey, 2011), government of refugees
(Lippert, 2004) have opened new spaces for analysis around the rising nexus
development/humanitarianism/migration. International projects for sustainable
development in areas of conflict in the ex-colonial world where scarcity of foodstuffs
or famines have stricken the population, and humanitarian intervention operating in
buffer zones and refugee camps, work in parallel favouring the containment of the
northward movement of migrants and refugees. Humanitarianism and development,
even if from different standpoints, both intervene in the biological life of the
population in distress. The former operates through immediate participation in the
resolution of emergencies from a short-term perspective. The latter targets the
population through calculations of mortality rates, food rates and dietary needs,
health projects addressing water scarcity and massive plans of vaccination and
agricultural projects, for the progressive improvement of the biological conditions of
life.
In this sense, to guarantee the safety of one space of security means to enhance the proliferation of parallel and distant spaces of security, where humanitarianism and development emerge as techniques of government operating through biopolitical means.

Before introducing further the use of humanitarianism and development as biopolitical techniques of government, I would like firstly to dedicate more space to how techniques of government actually function. In so doing, I take Mitchell Dean’s question as my own: “by what means, mechanisms, procedures, instruments, tactics, techniques, technologies and vocabularies is authority constituted and rule accomplished?” (Dean, 1999: 31). The answer I wish to offer is that from the colonial period to the post-colonial present there has been no such thing as governmentality without material mechanisms and inventions. This means first and foremost that it is impossible to separate materiality from the conceptual framework that inspires and produces the creative action of mechanisms of power.

The most intuitive example of the material power of colonial governmentality is represented here in the first chapter by the Libyan motorway which, as an ideal symbol of colonial penetration, shows how physical and engineering problems define strategies of government, and how government functions through technologies. The case of the looting of an obelisk shows how Mussolini’s attempt to reinforce Italian imperial identity functioned through the difficult engineering tasks of loading, transport, assemblage and erection. Moreover, the presence of plaster masks and human skulls from the colonies in Italian evolutionary museums serves to justify racial discourses on superiority and separation as the result of processes of material production through casts of gypsum and plaster and scientific analysis of the mineral layers of the bones. When it is not enough to espouse the logic of empire and colonialism through ideological claims, this is suddenly allowed to happen through the deep materiality expressed by asphalt, mortar bolts holding together fragmented pieces of obelisk, or the chemical process used by colonial anthropological tests to study human variability. These different forms of materiality erupt onto the scene and demonstrate how, through the artefactual world, it is possible to better comprehend empires and colonialism through the Foucauldian microphysics of power.

But rather than being simple static examples of materiality, the main characteristic of the case studies I have selected is their mobility across time and
space. The connection between power and circulation is well presented by Foucault in relation to his use of the term milieu, which is “the medium of an action and the element in which it circulates, combining an ensemble of natural and artificial phenomena” (Foucault, 2007: 21). The presentation of a circulation of materialities through a milieu – which in my case is both colonial and global – aims at demonstrating how travelling objects become vehicles of power.

In the 2000s, colonial compensations to Libya and Ethiopia put colonial materialities at the fore of public debate, around which restrictions on migration from the ex-colonial world became part of the bargaining game. Simultaneously, with globalisation and in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in New York, certain trends of movement southwards – such as development, humanitarian aid and the military presence – intensified as security systems (digital technology and surveillance through biometrics, fingerprinting, iris scan) improved and restrictive policies on human mobility – border control and visa regulations – were tightened on a global scale.

Bruno Latour claims that the dispersion of modern power operates through governmentality as ‘government at distance’ (Latour, 1987). According to this scheme the power structure defined around forms of dependency between the Global North and the Global South unveils the way in which such practices originated in the colonial milieu.

The colonial milieu, which was spatially definable through the circulation of the military, capital, commodities, industry, culture, texts, images, ideas, settlers and political prisoners, expanded after decolonisation, inverting the flows of human migration and introducing new forms of circulating material powers in the shape of aid and development. Here, humanitarianism and development represent the perfect example of a dispersion of powers projecting a broader spectrum of government outside of the traditional form of the nation state.

As Walters explains, humanitarianism or ‘humanitarian government’ cannot be reduced to an ideology or conceptual framework, nor can it be reduced to the operations of singular non-state actors. As reported by anthropologist Didier Fassin, “humanitarian government can be defined as the administration of human collectivities in the name of a higher moral principle which sees the preservation of life and the alleviation of suffering as the highest value of action” (Fassin, 2007: 151). According to Walters and Fassin, humanitarianism emerges as a network of
“humanitarian reason, specific forms of authority (medical, legal, spiritual) but also certain technologies of government – such as mechanisms for raising funds and training volunteers, administering aid and shelter, documenting injustice, and publicising abuse” (Walters, 2011: 143). Humanitarianism is a form of government, which, while operating within and outside the space of action of state power, works within biopolitical boundaries as a form of contingent intervention for the protection and fostering of the human existence in cases of emergency. Because of its seemingly limited range of action, as resolute intervention to save biological life, humanitarianism has also been defined as “minimalist biopolitics” (Redfield, 2005: 329).

On the other hand, international development, like the humanitarianism born out of the geopolitics of the Cold War, embodies a technology of government which, while working at the same time through state power and international or external agencies and institutions, addresses issues such as the alleviation of poverty and amelioration of conditions of life in the Third World, from a long term perspective. From decolonisation onwards, international development has often been labelled as the completion of modernity itself, where the West in opposition to the Soviet Bloc has represented the “transcendental pivot of analytical reflection” (Slater, 1992: 312) for the interpretation of the modern world. Since the boom in the 1960s, which has been labelled by the United Nations the Development Decade, development has progressively grown as the symbol of a sort of liberal internationalism- as proof of the progressive historical penetration of capitalism on a global scale. According to Mark Duffield, development works as a civilian strategy and as a state-building technology. Following Duffield’s line of thought, this thesis uses development as a strategy of post-colonial bargaining and international deterrence against the proliferation of fragile states and the risk of the increase of poverty, mass migration, insecurity and terrorism on a global scale (Duffield, 2007: 160).

This allows the understanding of what power relations, collateral effects and paradoxes such fluid circulation of materialities entails. Moreover, it helps to understand two main aspects: first, the linearity of mechanisms and technologies of

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7 International development has always worked through cooperation between national governments from the Global South and Global North, international organisations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, UN agencies such as FAO and many other national and international associations and consortiums born out of civil societies’ commitment and initiative (Cooper and Packard, 1997).
powers from colonialism up to the present; and second, the way in which the identities of the colonisers and the colonised have been inflected in the circulation and exchange of materialities between centre and periphery across history.

In this thesis, materialities are powerful tools in conducting historical inquiry and function both as documentary evidence and as mediators of reality. First, following Marc Bloch’s theorisation of history as retrospective science designed around footprints (Bloch, 1992), materialities also participate as material traces that inform past events and things. Second, rather than playing merely an instrumental role, materialities expand hermeneutics from the textual to the material dimension of reality, rendering it more intelligible. As Ewa Domanska states, “human interpretations of reality are not to be understood in terms of textual and linguistic structures only, but also as mediated by artefacts” (Domanska, 2006: 341). Within this conceptual framework, this thesis tries to re-unite an anthropocentric and constructivist approach to the past, with a Latourian epistemology that emphasises the role of objects in the construction of subjectivity. Moreover, as archaeologist Biornar Olsen points out, the interconnections between present and past develop through and around “silent, tangible, visible and brute material remains: machines, walls, roads, pits and swords […]” (Olsen, 2003: 100). Through the cases I have selected, this thesis employs a methodology of research that enables us to conceptualise the political dynamism expressed by materiality. Moreover, it is through their combination with circulation, that materialities and human agents establish a solid network where humans move objects and simultaneously objects inspire the movement of humans (Law and Hassard, 1999). Therefore, this methodology helps to organise the historical material in terms of a network of relations rather than a chronology of events. ‘Materialities in circulation’ inform a proper cosmology, where materialities express a performative potential in designing colonial and post-colonial international relations, and creating human identities at a collective level.
**Understanding materiality**

**Theories of materiality.** Materiality is a category open to many conceptualisations and therefore it cannot be self-explanatory. Traditionally, it refers to different approaches in the human sciences to defining cultural, social, political and economic aspects of human life. Acting both as a recipient of various semiotic flows for the definition of cultural identities and as constitutive of chains of production for the definition of economic values, materiality has constantly worked through its ‘symbolic’ and ‘functional’ components in defining the boundaries of the social, political, and economic dimensions of humanity. However, before analysing the entanglements between materiality and colonial power, and the implications of specific examples of materiality in Italian colonial and post-colonial history, I will firstly explore different philosophical readings of materiality and materialism.

The most classic example is represented by Marx’s notion of materiality. Marx’s conceptualisation of materiality looks at economic structures and exchanges as they impact on human society. The novelty of the Marxist contribution in the materialist discourse consists of a radical epistemology where materiality does not refer to raw and fixed matter, but to a medium of signification of human interactions, conflicts, exploitation and hierarchies, where the struggle between labour and capital emerges (Sohn-Rethel, 1978; Chow, 2010: 223). Materialities inform human social structures and, as Jane Bennett explains, they also refer “to the human meanings ‘embodied’ in them and other objects” (Bennett J., 2010: xvi). Described by Friedrich Engels as dialectical materialism, Marxist theory, while revolving around ‘production’ and ‘meaning’, 8 weds the discourse on materiality to Hegel’s subject/object duality. Beyond Hegel’s idealism, the materialist dialectic relies on a rationality of negation within material reality, history being the result of human beings producing their means of subsistence through labour. Despite the endurance of the Hegelian duality within dialectic materialism, Daniel Miller has suggested that “there cannot be fundamental separation between humanity and materiality – that everything that we are and do arises out of the reflection upon ourselves given by the mirror image of the process by which we create and form and are created by this

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8 In relation to this, Daniel Miller points out that if we consider the dialectical interposition between materiality and humanity, the Marxist theory of praxis reveals that “humanity is viewed as the product of its capacity to transform the material world in production, in the mirror of which we create ourselves.” (Miller, 2005: 2).
same process” (Miller, 2005: 8). According to this formulation, materiality indeed shapes sociality, culture and human conduct as the signifier of a medium of reality invaded by human consciousness.9

From a different perspective the poststructuralist critique (Foucault and Derrida) has presented an important challenge to the classic Marxist materialist prism through the introduction of “the determinacy of the signifier” (Chow, 2010: 226): here the definition of subjectivity depends on a continuous circular process of identification which is autonomous of the Hegelian dialectic between subjects and objects. On the contrary, it sets aside the idea of ‘consciousness’ in favour of a subjectivity that develops in imperceptible ways and is materially given in the world, where the economic ground – the structure – of Marxist theory, is absorbed within a destabilising chain of circular signification (Chow, 2006). In this way reality and worldliness are ‘textualised’ and interpreted through structures and dialectics that explain reality at large through discursive metaphors. In this scenario, Clifford Geertz theorised the integration of non-literate objects to forms of scrutiny as literary productions through acts of “close reading” (Geertz, 1973). This set the paradigm of an epistemological move that connects micro-texts to macro-contexts and relates different bodies of knowledge in a circular exchange and interaction.10

However, dialectical materialism and poststructuralist theory, in spite of their many differences, both interrogate materiality through a mechanism that works from “the outside in” rather than “the inside out” (Grosz, 1994). In this way, those models, by emphasising the ways in which subjectivity arises as the reflex or expression of social practices around the discourse of ‘production’ as “constitutive of the ‘interior’ domains of subjectivity, intentionality, and meaning”, both preserve the same constructivist approach towards subjectivity formation (Kruks, 2010: 259).

On the other hand, these theories have been criticised for being incapable of highlighting the existing discrepancies between objectivity and materiality where, on

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9 While recounting Pierre Bourdieu’s famous allegory of the Kabyle house (Bourdieu, 1970), Miller points out that “the house is not some natural emanation. It is created by artisans of greater or lesser skill to become the cultural object within which these same artisans see their own identity as Kabyle reflected and understood.” (Miller, 2005: 8).

10 However, against such an interpretative scheme some argue that materiality cannot be merely read as alternative forms of textuality. In relation to this Hodder and Christopher Tilley notice that reading materiality exclusively through textual and literary analogies has often led to confining the realm of materiality to discourses around the ideas of ‘symbol’ and ‘icon’ as if the ontology of the artefactual world was enclosed within the boundaries of limited actions such as ‘attractions of meaning’ and ‘semiotic revolutions’ only (Hodder, 1986; Tilley, 1990 and 1991).
the one hand, objects are seen solely as codes, screens and signs, through which humans attach meaning to reality and create identities and empirical facts (Brown, 2001: 4), or, on the other hand, materiality can express a sort of autonomy from human agency. This alternative approach owes much to the phenomenological theory and ontological distinction made by Martin Heidegger between “objects” and “things”: whilst objects stand as examples of materiality upon which we can reflect and about which we can make statements, things express less anthropocentric materiality as they possess a nature in excess which is ready to hand but which does not exist only for subjects (Heidegger, 1971: 174-82). As Bill Brown explains, things are “temporalized as the before and after of the object, thingness amounts to a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects)” (Brown, 2001: 5). The ontological distinction between objectivity and thingness is indeed the crucial premise for the autonomous and performative self-sufficiency of the material world outside of human agency (Thomas, 2006), which, as Heidegger explains, exercises a power that ‘gathers’ (Heidegger, 1996: 62-71).

Rather than reproducing the existing debate between conflicting epistemologies around objects and things, this thesis rejects Heidegger’s dichotomy between objects and things. This research follows Latour’s criticism of Heidegger’s dichotomy (Latour, 2004: 234-36) for two reasons. Firstly, things participate themselves in the ‘gathering’ of objects: asphalt, cement, sand and water compose motorways; meshes of carbon fibres, mortar bolts, steel reinforcements and joists maintain the verticality of the obelisk; and inorganic and organic materials are constitutive of human bones. Secondly, as Latour states, “all objects are born things”, which means that every object can return to being a thing.\(^\text{11}\) Therefore, according to Bill Brown, “we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition has been arrested,

\(^{11}\text{Latour in Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern, develops his argument around the metamorphosis of an object into a thing debating the tragic case of the shuttle Columbia in 2003: a mastered object that after exploding in the atmosphere was transformed into a shower of burning debris falling on the planet earth, whose fragments were then collected by thousands of people and served as evidence for scientific and legal investigation. Through the case of the shuttle, Latour, in opposition to Heidegger’s dichotomy, illustrates the way in which an object can turn into a thing. Latour points out: “if a thing is a gathering, as Heidegger says, how striking to see how it can suddenly disband.” (Latour, 2004: 235)\)
however momentarily” (Brown, 2001: 4). Specifically, the cases of the obelisk and human remains will shed light on the possibility of tracking the movement from thingness to objectivity as fluctuant motion under the supervision of scientific and technological mastery, as proof of the unfoundedness of the ontological separation between things and objects. However, this thesis considers Heidegger’s intuitions to be essential premises for this argument and for creating a wider understanding of materiality. Specifically, the power of “gathering” with regard to colonial materiality will be considered in relation to each case study examined.

Within this theoretical architecture, this thesis interrogates the material presence of objects, things and artefacts as historical traces that mark the multiple ways in which humans access reality: from textual and linguistic structures up to a direct mediation of artefacts, as both the outcome of human production and as initiators of human activity. This is materiality that ‘gathers’.

**The materiality-effect and the actor-network theory.** This research is inspired by Bill Brown’s suggestion to unveil the *materiality-effect* behind reality, as the “process whereby you are convinced of the materiality of something. The material turn that spotlights the role of objects in the drama of the everyday life. A way of illustrating how identities are mediated materially – mediated via objects” (Brown, 2010: 60). In relation to this, the concept of ‘materialities in circulation’ introduces objects, things and artefacts as “simultaneously material and meaningful”, assuming that matter necessarily “constrains meaning and vice versa.” (Daston, 2008: 17). This eventually leads to an ontological re-formulation around the subject/object dialectic. Stephen White, while expanding the theoretical discourse on ontology from the nature of being to the relationality between humans and the material world, states: “Ontological commitments in this sense are thus entangled with questions of identity and history, with how we articulate the meaning of our lives, both individually and collectively” (White, 2000: 3f).

My understanding of materiality works in this thesis through case studies that highlight two ways in which material objects become effective: first, by being integrated into the subjective world; and second, as Tony Bennett and Patrick Joyce note, through the difference objects make as a consequence of their material properties. Therefore we can take account “of the distinctive kinds of effectivity that material objects and processes exert as a consequence of the positions they occupy
within specifically configured networks of relations that always include human and non-human actors” (Bennett T. and Joyce, 2010: 5).

In order to achieve this, this research connects and combines the critical aspects of Foucault’s biopolitics, governmentality and micropowers with the impact materialities have on the mechanism of dispersion of power.

In this framework, Foucault’s notion of a “system of dispersion” (Foucault, 1972: 38) combines with the “system of relations” introduced by his other notion of dispositif or apparatus. This works as “a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral or philanthropic propositions […]” (Foucault 1980: 194). Through such a scheme a heterogeneous network of humans and materialities simultaneously interact and inform each other in terms of functions, substance and identity. Actor-network theory introduces a web of material and human actors, which dissolve the dualities of subject/object and human/material through the production of temporary and unstable crystallisations of power. Within such a network, semiologist Algirdas Julien Greimas has then introduced the actantial model, which helps to understand the dissolution of the Hegelian duality.

Greimas introduces the term actant for the subject that determines a certain sphere of action that affects the social level of a narrative programme, wherein the interaction between subjects and objects generates reference values and places them in a frame of a structure of exchange (Greimas, 1983). Bruno Latour has borrowed the actantial structure, and shown that objects can be substituted for subjects as actant. According to his conceptual framework, the term actant refers to both human and non-human actors. Latour then investigates forms of non-human agency through the calculations of performed actions, produced effects and altered situations, where social life is performed by and around material things as much as by human agents. This network works through the creation of centres of connectivity and structures of exchange and power (Latour, 1999: 303).12

In this thesis the actor-network theory works in perfect harmony with the actantial model as the cases of post-colonial reparations and restitution of colonial

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12 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have suggested in A Thousand Plateaus, a translation of social life in terms of overlapping assemblages made up of simultaneous semiotic flows, material flows and social flows (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 22-23).
materialities lend themselves to different and parallel narratives. This demonstrates that it is the object, and not only human agents participating in the scene, that can be found at the origin of many narrative paths. These range from the mythology of the 1930s of an Italian fascist identity built around objects reflecting the glory days of the Roman Empire, to the post-colonial present when returned artefacts gain new symbolic value, informing the post-colonial identities of both the ex-colonisers and the colonised. Colonial materialities upsurge in different epochs as the epicentre of a real network and within reparation agreements, they establish inclusive regimes of meaning and inspiration for action. The actant/object is indeed that which gathers - which establishes lasting connections - while connecting subjects and objects in time and space and creating a network through which sociality can be explained.

**Materiality in circulation.** As the title of this thesis indicates, the materiality-effect becomes constitutive and essential once materiality is taken into consideration as related to circulation. This thesis reads the relationality between humans and non-humans through ‘materialities in circulation’. In order to do so, this research owes much to Arjun Appadurai’s conceptual framework as expressed in *The Social life of Things*, and Bruno Latour’s *Dingpolitik*, which both – albeit from different insights – improve the architecture of the actor-network theory. Appadurai introduces his “methodological fetishism” by inviting us to “follow the things themselves” as “even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context” (Appadurai, 1986: 5). There, Appadurai highlights the nature of exchange at the basis of the circulation of materialities, and explains extensively the role that things and objects perform in shaping the subject/object relation. Echoing Marcel Mauss’ famous work *The Gift*, which revolves around the precept of materialities in motion and circulation and their ability to perform differently in different scenes (Mauss, 1990), Appadurai can be considered as the forefather of a wave of anthropological studies on exchange and gifts that, according to Nicholas Thomas, depend on “the mutability of things in recontextualization” (Thomas, 1991: 28).

On the other hand, Bruno Latour’s *Dingpolitik* is a neologism that includes things in the discourse on politics and ‘the social’, through the socialising functions that they perform (Latour, 2004: 231). Latour, opposing the modern idea of an
ontological distinction between inanimate objects and human subjects, claims that “things do not exist without being full of people” (Latour, 2000: 10). Bill Brown, while recalling the importance of Latour’s works in the creation of alternative discourses on materiality, argues that only through “patterns of circulation, transference, translation and displacement” (Brown, 2001: 12), is it possible to rephrase an even relation between the human and the material world.

In Latour’s version, materiality is not literally animated, but like humans, affects relations, the creation of identities, individual and collective changes, and indeed defines frames of power. Following a Foucauldian scheme, the dispersion and distribution of power implies that the material, the cultural and the social normally coexist with no separation. Power is never centred; it is always in motion with the circulation creating dynamic rather than fixed power relations.

Furthermore, according to John Law, the materiality-effect entangles with the actor-network theory through a division between ‘relational materiality’ and its performativity. The former refers to the relationality of mobile semiotic flows that concerns material forms as much as discursive and linguistic ones, promoting a hermeneutics which is not only textual but indeed material. The question of performativity instead concerns how “things get performed (and perform themselves) into relations that are relatively stable and stay in place” (Law, 1999: 4). Here, according to Law, institutions play a major role in the coordination of such relations between humans and non-humans. Accordingly, in the context of this thesis, the role of colonial (the Ministry of Colonies and fascist Agencies for the promotion of colonisation) and post-colonial (UN and State agencies) authorities and institutions, is pivotal for the understanding of the cyclical circulations across time of polymorphous materialities (archaeological goods, asphalt, technologies, weapons, aid, food, shelters) and humans (settlers, migrants, labour, military, aid workers and refugees).

Following an epistemology that sees materiality as a category of analysis based on the intersection between ‘production’, ‘textuality’ and ‘material presence’, this thesis brings to the fore key elements and cases that explain how the Italian discourse around materiality is performed on behalf of a broad political agenda. Through shifting geopolitical relations, this thesis will read national and global politics by looking through the Italian micro-level processes at broader geopolitical developments.
In such a scenario the Italian case emerges, and the backward movement of old colonial materialities testifies how power structures have mutated and shifted from colonialism to the present, and how the central authority of the colonial state progressively gave way to the dispersion of power embodied by the global triumph of liberal politics. The politics of return and compensation implemented by Italy in the 2000s, rather than simply bringing to an end a certain discourse on colonialism, responsibilities and illicit trafficking of cultural goods, represents at its best the mutation of the power relation between Italy and its former colonies. Informing progressive rather than static forms of government, circulating materialities express different ontologies that depend on their relation with the territory and architecture, and the human body. This research intends to explore through this diagram how the circulation of objects and materialities has conditioned and shaped the power relations between the coloniser and the colonised; how this has happened and evolved throughout the period that stretches from the early phases of Italian colonialism, through the period of fascism, up to the present day times of reconciliation.

First, the material transformation of colonial territory across time unveils ‘materiality’ through the impact that technology and distant forms of government have on a territory and its population. Second, through architecture, the textual dimension of artefacts weds ‘materiality’ to discordant semiotic flows that introduce monuments as identity markers for different cultural narrations. Last, materiality as the ultimate stage of human reification, finds in human remains and anthropometric human replicas the crucial epistemic sources to inquire into questions relating to race, science, justice and identity.

**Materiality and territory.** As Lorraine Daston suggests, the materiality-effect emerges in territory at least at two levels: “in the stuff of and gestures by which the work is made and in the material objects depicted or invented therein” (Daston, 2008: 17). The first level refers to the way in which human work intervenes as a transformative power of the ‘outside’ world. The second refers to the outcome of a given action and how it becomes metaphorically readable as a ‘text’ rich in iconic and symbolic signs. The materiality-effect on territory will be analysed in this thesis through the case study of the Libyan motorway through the scheme introduced above. The Litoranea Libica is the outcome of the transformative work of humans
upon a natural world, constantly shaped and re-shaped to its ends, through the particular configuration of the use of capital, tools, engineering plans and raw materials within a particular mode of production of colonial material life (Otter, 2010: 31). It also embodies textual reality, which exposes the concrete ground of the economic base and opens it up to a fluctuant chain of signification.

Here, colonial road systems demonstrate how materiality first and foremost works for humans. Accordingly, silent things (Latour, 1993: 83; Latour, 1999: 197) act as “material agents that constitute the very condition of possibility for those features we associate with social order, such as asymmetry, durability, power and hierarchy” (Olsen, 2003: 88). In this sense, reading history can be seen as something more than Dipesh Chakrabarty’s definition of history as a ‘semiotic field’ (Chakrabarty, 1996: 67); it pushes us to inquire about the materiality around which historical narratives are produced.

The penetrative power of road infrastructures, affecting territories, also helps us to conceptualise differently the idea of surrounding environments, where the materiality of the territory under colonial narratives becomes readable through new forms of action, process and movement. The materiality of speed is both represented by vehicles running on asphalt and by the physical change that the landscape rapidly undergoes through road works.

The connection between materiality and power indeed becomes clearer if we take into consideration the work of W.J.T. Mitchell, who tried to describe “landscape” not as a noun, but as a verb, as part of a material process and no longer as a static object. Thinking about historical contexts defined by European imperialism, Mitchell identifies the materiality of the colonial landscape in terms of culturally driven action; the landscape summarises the visual, scientific, and engineering performances of European explorers and settlers, and plays as a materiality which can be static and mobile at the same time (Mitchell W.J.T., 2002).

Whilst the functional features of colonial territories highlight the intrinsic material power of the artefactual world in determining and conditioning hierarchies, the symbolic-communicative value cannot be easily dismissed. In relation to this, my approach to colonial territories and landscapes illuminates them also as representations of “how we move around, how we attach meaning to places, entwining them with memories, histories and stories, creating a sense of belonging... We have seen that landscapes are experimental and porous, nested and open ended”
The porosity of territory and materialities stands specifically at the background of the 2008 Italy–Libya Friendship Treaty, signed by Colonel Muammar Gaddafi and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi to conclude the long path of reconciliation that eventually led Italy to commit to war reparations in exchange for tighter control by the Libyan authorities over the Mediterranean sea borders.

The paradox of the highway, being both an expression of the old colonial power, and being used as a bargaining tool for reconciliation and control over migrant mobility, will provide evidence of the deep materiality of road infrastructure. In this manner the motorway acts as a ‘text’ open to overlapping semiotic configurations for the creation of identities, but at the same time it acts as materially constitutive of new configurations of power and government.

**Materiality and architecture.** Eyal Weizman claims that architecture can be seen simultaneously as a field of knowledge, a mode of interpretation and also as a documentary form: not to be relegated to the construction of buildings and monuments, architecture is primarily a *medium* for the establishment of relations between people and things. This thesis looks at architecture through its relation to the art of memory, and the ways in which it performs according to the following scheme: “architecture first *registers* the effect of history, and then contains or *stores* history in material configurations” (Forensic Architecture, 2014: 15).

More specifically, this thesis deals with the politics of memory produced by colonialism across time through monumental architecture, for the creation of a long-lasting sense of belonging and solid identity. The role of architecture in relation to commemoration practices traditionally worked to create a sense of coexistence of different temporalities, staging the simultaneous cohabitation of the living with a dead past in a confined physical place, and aiming at shaping an intergenerational sense of cultural unity through the creation of an eternal present (Barshack, 2010: 223). Monumentalisation is generally seen as a multi-faceted architectural process. It aims at the transformation of landscapes and cityscapes by introducing vertical aesthetics through the erection of buildings, monuments, statues and obelisks.

Since the foundation of the Roman Empire, the appropriation of archaeological monuments has represented a way to canonise empires’ world hegemony. The specific case of monumental obelisks is ideologically invested as a
symbol of eternal dominance. In a manner similar to territory and road infrastructures, architecture and cultural artefacts are examples of materiality which simultaneously define a material process of production and generate meaning. On the one hand, looted obelisks experience the impact of technology and human labour – works of dismantlement, loading, transportation, new assemblage and re-erection – through which the obelisks are kept vertical. On the other hand, they express a textual dimension that is open to paradoxical relations of meaning.

This research studies ancient obelisks as totems around which contrasting discourses on memory have revolved from colonial times up until the post-colonial present. Reading obelisks’ materiality through architecture means to unveil it in terms of ‘legacies’. Here, colonial legacies perform through polymorphous overlapping memories, and as a “claim-making concept in international relations, [are] used to exert pressure for obtaining ‘compensations’” (de l’Estoile, 2008: 368). Both uses inform Paul Gilroy’s theory of colonial pasts constructing the political life of the present (Gilroy, 2000) and the idea of post-coloniality built upon conditions of mutual dependency between the former colonisers and the colonised (Chambers, 2001; Gilroy, 2000, 2004; Young, 2001).

Obelisks, while being very sensitive to semiotic revolutions, have marked different regimes of meaning and constitute, within the history of European imperialism and colonialism, the perfect example of “travelling objects”. Therefore their movement across history (through looting, re-erection and return) implies an impact on the various surrounding landscapes, as a consequence of their circulation.

The case of the departure of the Ethiopian obelisk from Rome in the 2000s is evidence of the disappearance of neo-imperial architecture as designed by the fascists in the 1930s. The erasure of the last colonial traces from the square eventually brought to an end a long social process of forgetting, which began in the aftermath of the Second World War with the conversion of the building of the Ministry of the Colonies into the FAO – Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations base. According to Ernest Renan, an act of collective forgetting is crucial for the formation of national identity (Renan, 1947-61; 892).13 In this thesis

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13 Thinking of Ernest Renan’s famous saying “or l’essence d’une nation est que tous les individus aient beaucoup des choses en commun, et aussi que tous aient oublié des choses”, his claim “doit avoir oublié”, which originally addressed the French population referring to the Saint Bartholemew’s Day massacre and the slaughter of Midi in the 13th century, shows the “prime contemporary vivid duty” (Anderson, 1991: 200) of a certain community in order to succeed in the nation-building
the act of forgetting emerges as an architectural practice in itself. Here, the story of the obelisk recalls John R. Gillis’ theory on memory, according to which the construction of national identities is strongly connected to a cult of new beginnings (Gillis, 1994). Therefore architecture means transformation, mediation between the human and material world, and indeed reflection of historical contingencies. The removal of the obelisk and its substitution with a memorial for the victims of the 9/11 attacks in New York indicated that a new beginning was set. The case of the obelisk and its departure ultimately left an empty colonial square where the old-fashioned aura of ‘eternal dominance’ needed to be adjusted to new architectural forms. This demonstrates, contrary to Pierre Nora’s famous classifications in *lieux de la memoire*, that the labile concept of collective memory is no longer bound to the container of the nation state but, on the contrary, has indeed become global and cosmopolitan (Levy and Sznaider, 2002: 90).

**Human materiality.** Peter Pels suggests that the peculiarity of the anthropology of colonialism consisted in its use of the scientific classification of human beings as different and separate in order to manufacture an ideological and racialised representation of otherness (Pels, 2008). From the early stages of colonialism – European and Italian – knowledge about human diversity developed around anthropometric plaster masks reproducing facial traits of natives and ancient human remains. The museum space became the ideal repository for these objects. Timothy Mitchell argues that the colonial museum has introduced mechanisms of representation, which have shaped human diversity and otherness as natural rather than historically constructed (Mitchell T., 1989). According to Johannes Fabian, their ideas of “lack” and “incompleteness” in front of a European super-subject confined the colonial subject to an ontological status of temporal inequality, on which human differences were set (Fabian, 2003). Thereby the opposition between modern and traditional forms of human existence divided humanity into two halves, living in two different times.

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14 Cooper and Stoler argue that this practice obscured the historical relationship (gender and class) between “us” and “them” through the forms of power generated by colonialism (Cooper and Stoler, 1997).
In his book *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour individuated the rise of Modernity as the great ontological divide between human beings, objects and zones of non-humanity, which served to create a separated ontological space equally shared by non-human others and the material world. All around Europe, through the production of plaster masks and the collection of human remains, ethnographic museums turned out to be ideal spaces in which to celebrate the aesthetic union of materiality and non-human others. After decolonisation, most of these specimens became examples of colonial legacies and silent testimonies of colonial violence. Museum spaces and their archives came to represent a reciprocal relation where the government of ‘others’ was indissolubly intertwined with practices of representation of ‘otherness’. So far, looking at humanity in terms of materiality unveils the potential risk of justifying the instrumental use of persons, or their objectification or commodification.

However, the relationality between humans and materiality introduces an opposite and dual epistemological function: first, human materiality, raising the centrality of corporeality within mechanisms of power and representation unpacks the connections between governmentality and biopolitics. Second, human materiality becomes essential as a counter-power to these same technologies. This assumption depends on the important ontological distinction that occurs between anthropometric plaster masks and human remains. The former resemble Foucault’s definition of *simulacra*, as an anomalous type of materiality with only surface and no depth. They correspond to a sort of materiality that “dissipates the density of matter” (Foucault, 1977b: 169-70). On the contrary, human remains are the embodiment of a human material transmutation and transition from flesh to bones, which introduces the idea of the co-existence of organic and inorganic matter as constitutive of the human body. In respect of this, philosopher Jane Bennett reminds us that, “materiality is a term that applies more evenly to humans and non-humans”. The minerality of bones demonstrates how humans are composed of material parts and that “materiality is a

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15 The encounter between materiality and humanity materialised on the shelves of the European evolutionary museum as the ultimate stage of human reification under colonial power. Refinement of racist thinking, invention of African traditions, design of an African political geography through the classification of tribes (Amselle, 1998; Apter, 1999; Mudimbe, 1988), entanglements between colonial governmentality and ethnographic classification and taxonomies can be considered as some of the most relevant outcomes of colonial knowledge expressed through the museum space. The development of imperial cultures found in evolutionary museums the theatre where colonial optics could find its horizon, through the reproduction of a highly spatialised and temporalised alterity.
rubric that tends to horizontalize the relations between humans, biota and abiotas” (Bennett J., 2010: 112).

Through these ontological considerations, the last chapter of this thesis looks at human remains as the ultimate epistemic traces for history telling. Accordingly, human remains are the prime objects around which technologies of government have evolved throughout history, shaping images of otherness as natural and therefore alien to the discourse of history, culture, progress and civilisation. Within this context, human remains stand as epistemic objects and as perfect natural-cultural artefacts bearing witness to present and past forms of violence and traces of missing identities. It is therefore possible to understand how the ontological and epistemological value of human remains informs the politics of repatriation in the post-colonial era: as objects of reclamation for posthumous identification and justice from their aboriginal communities and descendants in the ex-colonial world, human remains, while dealing with the right of identity and repatriation, address questions of human rights and International Humanitarian Law. Following these parallel trajectories, human remains are both evidence of a crime and the reference point for the practice of mourning. Human materiality in a way expresses the continuous tension that exists between the world of the dead and the world of the living. “The dead are made to exist for the living and provide justification for their existence; the living refer to their predecessors as a sort of ‘historical manure’, which legitimates power and helps create social bonds as well as history” (Domanska, 2011: 120). In this sense, it is possible to understand how human materiality embodied by human remains simultaneously functions as both an emblem of death and a symbol for mourning and justice.

This thesis intends to address the Italian post-colonial case, expanding further these reflections on colonial anthropology, identity and justice. Reading history through human remains allows us to understand how de-humanisation and the objectification of ‘others’ do not belong exclusively to old-fashioned colonial praxis, logic and technologies of representation. On the contrary, human remains can be considered as objects around which technologies of government have progressively

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16 Manuel De Landa also finds in bones a vivid example of interior materiality: “ [...] soft tissue (gels and aerosols, muscle and nerve) reigned supreme until 5000 million years ago. At that point, some of the conglomerations of fleshy matter-energy that made up life underwent a sudden mineralisation, and a new material for constructing living creatures emerged: bone” (De Landa, 1997: 26-27).
revolved, from the colonial time, through decolonisation up to the post-colonial present.

Achille Mbembe describes the transition from the colony to the “postcolony” as the interval that preserves the ex-colonial subject under the yoke of the Western stigma of ‘absence’, ‘non-being’ and ‘nothingness’ (Mbembe, 2001: 4). Following Mbembe’s scheme, the final task of this thesis is to unveil the connections between governmentality, biopolitics and genealogy within the Italian post-colonial context by showing the way in which human remains and anthropometric plaster masks embody such an ‘absence’ and represent the continuity between the colonial and the post-colonial eras.

‘Materialities in circulation’ and the post-colonial question. Following a long-lasting scholarly debate that since the 1990s has focussed on how the postcolonial emerges, this thesis follows an interpretative scheme that refers, by the term ‘postcolonial’, to both non-Western colonised societies and colonising societies. As Stuart Hall points out, use of the term ‘post-colonial’ is often confused between evaluative and descriptive modes. Therefore this thesis considers Italy as ‘post-colonial’ in relation to “the shift in global relations, which marks the (necessarily uneven) transition from the age of Empires to the post-independence or post-decolonization moment”. This might help us “to identify what are the new relations and dispositions of power which are emerging in the new conjuncture”. In this sense the postcolonial applies to Italy as it refers “to a general process of decolonization which, like colonization itself, has marked the colonizing societies as powerfully as it has the colonized” (Hall, 1996: 246).

Following this line of analysis this thesis uses ‘materialities in circulation’ as an additional methodology that deciphers the postcolonial, its complexities and paradoxes across time and space, and between centre and periphery. As an alternative way to understand the inside/outside duality brought about by colonial systems of power, ‘materialities in circulation’ contributes to a further displacement

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of the centre and periphery dichotomy. It also highlights the continuities and discontinuities that exist between colonial encounters and those taking place in the post-colonial present.

Through the stories of the Libyan motorway, the Ethiopian obelisk, and colonial anthropometric devices and colonial human relics, this research will highlight how in the interchange between colonialism and post-colonialism, the past and the present, centre and periphery can be understood as temporally and spatially part of “a unitary analytical field” (Cooper and Stoler, 1997: 1).

In relation to this, this thesis intends to shed light on those “contact zones” that Mary Louise Pratt has described as “the space of imperial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict” (Pratt, 1992: 7). In such spaces, recognition, creations of identity and processes of identification reciprocally inform the lives of both the colonisers and colonised. However, this thesis does not focus on the impact that colonial encounters had in the formation of syncretic, anti-colonial identities, resistant subjectivities and the complexities of diasporic identification. Instead the focus is on the construction, through the other, of Italian colonial and post-colonial discourses, and the way in which this reflects and justifies the formation of power structures and the representation of otherness. This research investigates the role of otherness in the Italian colonial discourse as it plays a double function: on the one hand “alterity” depends on “exclusion” as part of the universal colonial discourse of civilisation. On the other hand, as the cases of the obelisk and anthropometric artefacts will demonstrate, the consolidation of Italian colonial and post-colonial identities relies on “inclusion” as the appropriation of the peripheral “outside”.

Similar to the centre/periphery binary relation, modern materialism has offered a vision of reality and society as they emerge through an ongoing and productive dialectic between the objective and the subjective that echoes the inside/outside

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18 The postcolonial critique has developed an understanding of colonialism and colonisation as a system of power that is not simply summarised by the impact of the command and violence that the imperial powers exercised over certain areas of the world. On the contrary, the expansion and dispersion of capitalism to peripheral areas on a global scale caused a process of gradual homogenisation, according to which centre and periphery can no longer be seen through neat divides.
separation. Therefore, the gaze of this research on materiality and the artefactual world tenders a contribution to expanding the boundaries of post-colonial critique regarding the centre/periphery relation and demonstrates how the exteriority of materiality does not simply imply an opposition to the inside. Echoing the dissolution of the centre/periphery dichotomy, materiality as ‘outside’ is constitutive of the coloniser’s ‘inside’. In this way, the convergence between the material and the peripheral explains their epistemological role in the understanding of the simultaneity between the outside and the inside, the centre and the periphery.

Therefore ‘materialities in circulation’ describes how the politics of reconciliation treats Italy’s post-colonial bargains as instrumental tools for international governance over global de-territorialised threats – migration, humanitarian disasters and terrorism. Here colonial history and the post-colonial present entangle around the organisation of opposite yet simultaneous circulations of materialities and human actors, whereas a global network made up of security strategies, development policies, humanitarianism, and a war on terror force the collapse of the centre and periphery dichotomy inherited by colonialism.

Through the impact that Italian colonialism had on territory, architecture and the human body, this research explores the entanglements between the politics of reparations and the creation of spaces of security – from border controls to humanitarian government – and the way in which this perpetuates images of colonial identities of otherness. These interplays and intersections are the key elements around which the transition from the colonial to the post-colonial takes place.

This thesis aims at disclosing how, in the Italian scenario, distant temporalities such as colonialism and the post-colonial present re-unite through the circular movement of travelling materialities. It also intends to explore the way in which those materialities trigger the parallel circulation of many other objects and humans in different and opposite trajectories along the centre/periphery axis. Moreover, it is vital for this research to demonstrate how the movement in such a space constantly functions as a premise for the construction of identities, of both material and human worlds.
Chapter Two
The Litoranea Libica, a Motorway for the Empire

Rather than simply representing surfaces for mobility, roads have always embodied the materiality of journeys: a material space where – across different temporalities – the spontaneous movement of people, state-oriented migrations, forced evacuations and deportations, labour forces in transition, military campaigns and popular uprisings take place. Referring to road networks William Walters clearly points out that, “vehicles and their infrastructure are also nodes, relays, surfaces, volumes in a dispersed and uneven governance of population and territory” (Walters, 2011). Power relations are intrinsic to such an environment, taking the form of borders, spaces for surveillance or spaces of dispute and conflict. The road is per se a space of circulation, but it is also an artificial surface that stands as both a tool and a telos of the government of a territory.

During the colonial period, transport infrastructures and road communication systems were crucial elements of the ecology of the colonies for various economic, political and administrative reasons. Across the 19th and the 20th centuries the two major competitors in colonial Africa - Britain and France - improved the construction of roads and railways to keep safe and fluent the circulation of goods, people and capital between the central state and the periphery of the colony (Sunderland, 2012). Roads provided many benefits for colonial administrations: they facilitated the construction of settlements in the countryside, and the spread of civilising education and control over the native African population beyond the colonial urban districts. As a tool for the exercise of power, roads gave the colonial administrations the chance to demonstrate the presence of the state to the locals, bringing it directly to the native population – for example colonial officers started touring and easily accessing the colonial districts by car. More roads meant not only the establishment of new towns and an increase in local migration, but also a dramatic reduction in the natives’ living standards.

According to Tony Bennett and Patrick Joyce, in the colonial context road infrastructures were the clear embodiment of the muteness of power, which “lies in the creation of durability and connectability in objects and process” (Bennett T. and
Joyce, 2010: 10). But even if mute, colonial roads, while cyclically featuring the controlled circularity of individuals, crowds, material goods and conflicts, have never been static infrastructures themselves. By the 1920s, motors, cars, asphalt and paved highways were quickly evolving in Europe and North America and soon after, also in the colonial world. Nevertheless, as David Arnold has noted, commenting on the relations between European technologies and colonialism, “while Europe often saw itself as the originator and exemplar of big technologies […] what it often fostered and sustained in the colonies and ex-colonies were basic technologies that were obsolete or increasingly marginal in Europe itself. These were essentially technologies that relied upon an abundance of cheap manual or semi-skilled labour rather than advanced mechanical technology” (Arnold, 2005: 96).

However, contrary to this model, the specificity of Italian colonialism is represented here by the fascist coastal motorway in Libya, the Litoranea Libica, which shows how the use of paved roads as a new technology affected the colonial ecology. Echoing the best examples from northern Europe, the Italian transformation of the Libyan landscape through road infrastructure sought to highlight Italian technological superiority. Asphalt became functional for the colonial government and worked as an example of best technology, which “is not an intrinsic and timeless property of an artefact, but is the result of a constructed multi-functionality enabled by that technology” (Mom, 2004: 76). The material power of road infrastructure demonstrates how the artefactual world works as a technology of government by being the constitutive premise of colonial power. Through a penetrative capacity of access to and control over vast spaces, the motorway shapes new landscapes and creates new colonial “territoriality” (Gray, 1999). The materiality of such colonial territorialities expressed symbolic and functional features that served the colonial enterprise: civilisational stereotypes blossomed around the eruption of ‘speed’ technologies violating Africa’s ‘heart of darkness’, and the penetrative power of roads enhanced the capacity to control a territory and could be used as an instrument for warfare at the time of the Second World War. However, James Scott argues correctly that whilst on the one hand the road system expanded the colonial gaze over the occupied lands, on the other hand it exposed the administration to the risk of a proliferation of accessible spaces – an increased mobility among colonial subjects posing a threat to its control over the territory (Scott, 1998). According to this interpretation, it is possible to understand how the problems of human mobility and
the construction of spaces of security in the colonies anticipate what since
decolonisation has defined post-colonial mechanisms of power and the north/south
divide.

In this regard, the case of the Litoranea Libica, originally built by the fascist
colonisers in the late 1930s as a coastal highway in occupied Libya, presents an
original case. Since its inauguration in 1937, the motorway has had three different
‘lives’, which are relative to three different temporalities: colonialism, decolonisation
and the post-colonial present.

This chapter will investigate the life of the motorway at the time of its
development during the fascist colonisation of Libya and its dual function. First, the
motorway led to the geopolitical unification – along the Mediterranean coastline
between Tunisia and Egypt – of the Tripolitania and Cyrenaica provinces into one
territory. In this way, the movement of bodies (natives and settlers), goods, military
equipment and capital, expressed the connective power of the motorway which itself
traced the colonial geography of the Italian administration of Libya, showing the
impact of infrastructures on the life of the colony.

From an aesthetic and symbolical point of view, the image of a linear
motorway penetrating Libya also served to foster geographical imaginations and
project a virtual spatial contiguity between the ‘homeland’ and the ‘colony’, tying
Italy to its possessions overseas (Gambi, 1994; Atkinson, 2000; Fogu, 2003). The
project of the Litoranea defined a line of continuity with the fascist politics of
bonifica or ‘reclamation’ – rural transformation, the construction of new settlements,
public spending increases, and the organised internal movement of migrants and
settlers – which Mussolini had begun a few years earlier in the provinces named the
Pontine Marshes near Rome (1926-1937). In this sense the construction of a colonial
motorway aimed to represent the ultimate stage of the fascist modernisation of
unproductive and ‘decadent’ lands and territories – internal and external. The
reclamation of unutilised lands and communication networks was indeed perceived
as both a ‘symbolic’ and ‘functional’ tool to support the Italian colonial enterprise
overseas. On the one hand, the vision of a motorway running along the Libyan coast
embodied the idea of the completion of the modernisation project that had imagined
the virtual unification of the centre with the periphery. On the other hand, the
highway represented the best device to support colonial settlements, perform quick
military manoeuvres and facilitate the movement and distribution of Italian colonists among the new towns erected on the Libyan coast.

In a second stage, this chapter looks at the road in the aftermath of the Second World War, when fascist modernist dreams ended and decolonisation started. This section highlights how, in the aftermath of the conflict, the material deterioration and decay of the road gave post-fascist Italy the opportunity to subvert the old colonial materiality of the road towards new, antithetical discursive uses, giving rise to alternative meanings being ascribed to the old, crumbling imperial geography. Once fascist imperialism collapsed, this symbol of Italian modernity overseas turned into a silent and meaningless space, the road losing any trace of its former colonial functions. Indeed, in the eyes of Italian society, the entire territory marked by the Litoranea became a ‘blank’ space devoid of colonial identity and a past. Open to ‘new identities’ and ‘attractions of meaning’, the silent road would eventually allow Italy to project itself in a new, post-colonial configuration where the colonial traces could be neutralised.

Whilst it is the object of the analysis and debate in the next chapter, it is important to state here that it is the post-colonial identity of the coastal highway that defines the singularity of this case study and allows us to trace the connection between the three epochs of the road’s space. Since the early stages of decolonisation, the motorway, as if it were a sort of fetish, has triggered new conflicts around issues of reparation for past colonial crimes and abuses. The construction of a new road, parallel to the Litoranea, but not intended as a tool or space of conquest and colonial penetration, became instead a symbol of a Libyan anti-colonial identity, an object of compensation for Italian crimes against the Libyan people. A historic agreement – the Treaty of Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation between the Italian Republic and the Great Socialist People’s Libyan Arab Jamahiriya – was reached only in 2008 (La Repubblica, 4 September 2008), and this saw Italy committing to the construction of a new motorway, among many other duties, as the way to fulfil its obligations towards Libya (Varvelli, 2009). According to the treaty, a new motorway was to be built alongside the old fascist highway, to close the chapter of Italian colonialism in Libya and to reinstate friendship between the two countries that had formerly been in conflict.

Beyond the important new forms of collaboration and cooperation between Italy and its former colony, the treaty of 2009 also presented Colonel Muammar
Gaddafi with the chance for a first official visit to Italy. When Gaddafi landed, his stage presence also unexpectedly became instrumental in the unveiling of historical details and anecdotes about the Italian colonisation of Libya, which, until then, had remained unknown to the Italian public.

**A postcard from Libya**

On 10 June 2009, more than sixty years after the collapse of Italian domination in Libya, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi landed in Rome for his first visit, in order to sign the bilateral agreements between Libya and Italy, which marked symbolically the conclusion of the normalisation process following the end of Italy’s colonisation of Libya.

Once Gaddafi stepped out of the plane for the induction ceremony in the presence of Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, the attention of the whole Italian media focussed on the picture that was pinned on Gaddafi’s uniform: the image in the frame was of the Libyan patriot and rebel Omar al-Mukhtar, chained by the Italian fascist colonial forces, just before his execution in the Soluch concentration camp in occupied Cyrenaica (La Repubblica, 10 June 2009; Corriere della Sera, 9 May 2009).

Although the Italian press did not hesitate to mark Gaddafi’s gesture and downgrade it as a bizarre oddity typical of his repertoire (Corriere della Sera, 2009), Gaddafi’s visit unexpectedly became an occasion for awakening the ghosts of Italy’s colonial past and shedding light on the 2008 Friendship Pact and the new logic and perspectives of Italy’s Mediterranean politics. Since the first instance the figure of Omar al-Mukhtar looked totally officious to the Italian media. The press were suddenly forced to change the standard routine generally imposed by tedious international visits and go beyond an ordinary description of events and news related to the historical treaty.

An unexpected disclosure of national history was taking over, and a chapter from the past was entering the public domain: the capture and the execution after a show trial in 1932 of al-Mukhtar, a seventy-three year old school teacher and pan-Islamist anti-colonial leader who fought the fascists in the region of Cyrenaica for more than a decade (Del Boca, 2006: 188; Amhida, 2005). According to Rochat’s
study, his execution allowed for the colonial re-conquest and pacification of the northern Libyan coast conducted by Marshal Badoglio and General Graziani for the unification of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica into a single region named Libya (Goglia, Rainero, Rochat, Santarelli, 1986). According to the fascist plans, the Libyan Fourth Shore was indeed ready to undergo a radical modernisation and metropolitan transformation.

Once the military pacification of Cyrenaica was completed, Badoglio and Graziani could retreat behind the frontline and give space to a new ruler of Libya: on 1 January 1934 Mussolini appointed Italo Balbo as the new governor of Libya. After a year under this administration, Tripolitania and Cyrenaica were finally united into a single colony, officially named Libya, under the rule of General Governor Italo Balbo. After the pacification, fascism eventually realised its purposes, namely to render effective the modernisation plans of the colony, to achieve full colonisation, and to celebrate Italian colonialism as the highest form of settler colonialism in the foreground of European imperialism.

After the phase of violent repression the colonial system of power created by Balbo aimed at constituting efficient colonial governance that was properly attuned to the necessities of the agricultural colonisation plans and demographic colonisation programmes. The consolidation of the regime led to the implementation of deep structural changes for the organisation of Libya as a fully Italian territory, ready to welcome the exportation of Italian labour. Financial and economic plans for optimisation of the quality of life in the colony introduced a type of ‘Colonial Keynesianism’ (Diggins, 1972; Labanca, 2002: 303). In this respect, Wolfgang Schivelbusch argues that following the 1929 crisis, new programmes of public works

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19 As documented by British reporter Martin Moore in 1940, Italy’s Quarta Sponda or ‘Fourth Shore’ was “the fourth side of the national quadrilateral completed by the three coasts of the Adriatic—on which respectively were Bari, Trieste and Durazzo [in occupied Albania]” (Phillips, 1940). More realistically the Fourth Shore aimed at representing the fourth point of access to the Mediterranean sea after the Adriatic, Tirrenic and Ionic.

20 Since the earliest post-liberal policies deployed by Mussolini’s first governor of Tripolitania Giuseppe Volpi, alongside progressive reinforcement of state capitalism, private Libyan capital, properties or lands automatically became a target for expropriation by lawful decree of the Italian governrate.

21 According to Federico Cresti, the transformation in October 1934 of the Ente per la colonizzazione della Cirenaica or ‘Agency for the Colonization of Cyrenaica’ into the more developed and comprehensive Agency for the Colonization of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, aimed at the development of the existing areas of settlement for the arrival of more colonists from the motherland (Cresti, 2005).
and plans for rearmament were evidence of public spending policies that amounted to a re-interpretation of Keynes in totalitarian terms (Schivelbusch, 2007).

In Italy, as well as in the colonies, by means of processes of economic rationalisation to counter-balance the hegemony imposed by the American New Deal, fascism struggled to implement new policies aimed at overcoming the traditional opposition between ruralisation and industrialisation (Macchioro, 1970). On the one hand the official propaganda was supporting the idea of “a return to the soil” where agriculture and agricultural revenue embodied a line of resistance against the penetration of capitalism and international trade. On the other hand, according to Carmen Heider, who analysed these phenomena during the 1930s, the flattening of economic policies under the influence of the de-Taylorisation of the economy – namely the breaking down of important elements of the industrial complex into delocalised single units – risked compromising the destiny of the Italian nation, which was meant to tie the fascist myth of community with imperial greatness (Heider, 1930).

The new industrial plan focussed on public spending and saw in the *bonifica integrale* or ‘integral reclamation’ of the area of Agro Pontino near Rome its pioneering example, launching Keynesian colonial policies on domestic soil.22

The campaign for reclaiming unproductive and unfertile lands and the urbanisation process taking over in Agro Pontino, through the fascist synthesis of monumentalism, technological development and industrial planning, offered a new design for urban and non-urban reclamation: new settlements, new accommodation, and translocations of qualified settlers to inaugurate a new style of living. As presented in the fascist journal *Architettura* in 1933, this project was developed in demographic terms and became the symbolic preliminary step to imagining and visualising the reconversion of Libya into a metropolitan area (Architettura, 1933).

Since the unified colony of Libya was supposed to embody the linear continuation of Italian soil overseas, the plan for the reclamation of Libyan lands was supposed to follow in the footsteps of the massive plans for the reclamation of the Agro. In this sense, in 1935, the magazine *Civiltà Fascista* described the Pontine

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22 The concept of ‘integral’ land reclamation was developed by agronomist Arrigo Serpieri (Serpieri, 1929: 1991). Federico Caprotti claims that “on an operational level, it materially facilitated institutional integration between government and local institutions in the actuation of the regime’s reclamation and agricultural policies” (Caprotti, 2007: 654-655).
marshes as similar to “certain zones of Africa and America, a region totally wild” where its Italian inhabitants were “desperate creatures living as wild animals” (Morandi, 1935: 1009-10), as if they were specimens of some prehistoric age.

Mussolini’s regime openly presented to the Italian public the new Pontine reclamation and its new plans for cultivation and drainage as a type of warfare. The promise of cultivable lands and reclaimed marshes shaped an epic narrative where tractors and ploughs simultaneously wounded the soil and made it fertile (Schmidt, 1938). The Agro Pontino suddenly became a battlefield where bare nature was the enemy to be defeated. The fight against the “marshy water” did not merely entail a war against the dying natural landscape but, as Carl Ipsen’s studies on fascist demographic policies demonstrate, it was the allegory of a colonial challenge that fascist Italy was ready to take on (Ipsen, 1996: 58).

**Drawing metropolitan Libya**

The project of the Pontine Marshes created a new horizon for the overseas fascist mission of modernisation. Conceptualised in demographic terms as land reclamation and urban planning, it became a tool for controlling migration through internal displacements, coerced rural-urban migration (Ipsen, 1996: 115), and the expansion of communication networks (Chrimes, 2010) as well as the training ground for designing the future demographic colonisation of Libya and Oriental Africa (Antliff, 2002: 162).

Hence the regime’s domestic and foreign politics converged in the planning of new colonial demographic policies in an example of what Ipsen defines as “spatial population management” (Ipsen, 1996: 90). According to this plan and vision, ruralisation, resettling, and the attempted control of migration became the emphasis in the new goals for the demographic colonisation of Libya.

Thanks to the benefits of the experience already gained, the colonisation of the Fourth Shore indeed proceeded on the same lines as that of the Pontine Marshes. The colonisation of Libya was at that point restricted to the low-lying coastal area where “the region stretches along the north coast of Africa from Ras Ajdir in the west to the Bomba Gulf in the east” (Russell, 1939: 280).

Moreover, between 1934 and 1940, the fascist regime sponsored the
construction of settlements for Italian farmers in Libya. According to the descriptions in Rivista dell’Architettura in 1935, thirty-one villaggi agricoli or ‘rural villages’, housing at the moment of maximum expansion around 40,000 Italian farmers (Cabiati, 1935), were built in the centre of vast farms scattered on the land, featuring a house for each farmer’s family. In the village itself, the religious, administrative and commercial functions (church, casa del fascio, school, police station and small shops) were gathered, often organised around a central piazza, offering a “recognisable ‘map’ of spatial and social life inhabited by the Italian rural classes” (Fuller, 2007: 181). The villages became the principal means through which the project of ‘demographic colonisation’ was carried out and functioned both as a ‘solution’ to Italian over-population, poverty and emigration (Gabaccia, 2000), and an architecture of occupation. In this way the regime could take political and military control over vast areas that had just been freed from the Libyan resistance, hindering the reorganisation of the guerrillas. Carefully orchestrated and documented by the media, the translocation of 1,800 families to the newly built villages was organised as a prodigious spectacle. The general lines of the large-scale public works were settled by the Ente per la colonizzazione della Libia or ‘Agency for the Colonization of Libya’ in agreement with the Istituto nazionale fascista per la previdenza sociale or ‘National Fascist Institute for Social Security’ for the foundation and regulation of settlements and villages, which involved planimetrics, cropping and building surveys of underground water for efficient irrigation of the land on the one side, and the improvement of health and social security for the settlers on the other.

However, in April 1937, the image of impatient masses of landless peasants and settlers waiting for a great migration was in reality a final attempt to respond to the gloomy results of the census commissioned by the fascist Commission for Migration and Colonization. Basically, the report stated the failure of previous migration policies as “there were 124,000 hectares taken up, but only 79,000 operated and the total number of Italian families was only 1,300, mostly wage earners. It looked as if the result would be simply to establish latifundia in Libya” (Russell, 1939: 282).

Furthermore, another problem surfaced: contrary to fascist intentions, the legacy of the colonisation plan designed by former governor of Tripolitania Giuseppe Volpi in the early 1920s had left an economic system based on little more than large estates hiring cheap Libyan labour; poor private investments at the
expense of Italian colonists and the development of a full metropolitan population of Libya (Piccoli, 1926; Del Boca, 1988; Romano, 1979). Balbo’s understanding of the emergency made him think of an intensive and long-term plan for demographic colonisation, and he envisaged the settling of 20,000 people per year for the duration of five years (Cresti, 1990). After approval by Mussolini, Balbo announced this programme in May 1938 and six months later the first Ventimila or ‘Twenty-thousand’ reached the Libyan coasts after a spectacular fanfare. Through the deployment of 10,000 Italian workers and 23,000 Libyans, new rural villages, houses, roads and aqueducts were built, and Balbo’s fanterie rurali or ‘infantry of the land’ were eventually ready to be welcomed to the colony. The “army of the twenty-thousand” was the main part of that fanterie rurali that, through their work in the fields, would have redeemed the land of Libya. These squads of workers, capable of holding a spade in one hand and a gun in the other, became the emblem of fascism. This symbology, grounded on the combination of labour and military power, marked the fact that skilled labour was the essential pre-condition for full military control over the colonised territory. Beyond realising the dream of the Proletarian Nation, the colonial Keynesian plan evidently achieved some success since, as noted by Claudio G. Segre, “the Libyan example of large-scale public works and resettlement projects suggested some new answers to a world troubled by un-employment and depression” (Segre, 1972: 142). And again “Like the Pontine Marshes, the colonization in Libya was part of the Duce’s attempts to create more ‘living space’ to resolve Italy’s mounting social and economic crises” (Segre, 1972: 147). The fulfillment of the colonisation of Libya came only in 1939, when the Fourth Shore became legally part of the Italian kingdom. British journalist Martin Moore directly reported on the Libyan enterprise and the new farms in the late 1930s. He described these lands as if they were “reclaimed from a shifting sea of sand” and aimed at the transformation of the Libyan desert into the new “granary of Rome” (Phillips, 1940: 130).

The emulation of the French Algeria metropolitan model was finally

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24 Balbo led a second emigration of about 10,000 colonists in 1939. By 1940, the Italian population numbered 110,000 persons of whom about 39,000 were agricultural settlers. In relation to the Libyan population as a whole, the Italians made up about 15% and had established themselves as the largest non-Libyan minority.
completed when the division of Libya into four metropolitan provinces (Tripoli, Misrata, Benghazi, Derna) under four prefects became effective. However, the Fezzan desert, - the inaccessible southern border - remained an insecure military frontier.

**The Litoranea Libica on the Fourth Shore**

The process of public spending accompanying the agrarian change and project for demographic colonisation reached its peak with the organisation of roads and a communications network for the colony. The Libyan plan for communications, following a gradual expansion of colonial domains by nationalisation, expropriation and confiscation of the cultivable areas, marked the completion of the colony-formation and empire building process.

As Ministry of the Colonies Emilio de Bono clearly pointed out in 1933, “this great development in communications holds a great moral significance: after the conquest, roads embody the most durable appropriation. The native too understands how road works are a sign of lasting domination which is the real seizure of the colony: invention and creativity materialise only on a land doomed to permanent domination” (De Bono, 1933). After 1929 the fascist regime inaugurated important road works in Libya. The purposes and expectations of the administration towards a new communications network were not simply oriented towards general civic improvement of the colony. Roads were designed as the main tool for quick military manoeuvres to break the Libyan armed resistance.

Following the mythological footsteps of its Roman predecessors, fascism imagined a modern motorway network that would echo the Roman imperial road system. In so doing, Mussolini’s colonial ambitions focussed on the development of 1,000 km of roads in northern Libya.

In the first twenty-five years of Italian occupation only the road systems in the urban areas of Tripoli and Benghazi were made suitable for modern vehicles. Thanks to renovations and new pavements, Tripolitania and Cyrenaica experienced a separate planning of public road works. After Balbo took over, the creation of Libya under the General Governorate needed both material and symbolic unification

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25 The translation from Italian is mine.
through a finally unified and linked road system to celebrate the new metropolitan lifestyle of the Fourth Shore.

Since the early months of his mandate, Balbo had tried to find a solution to the problem of coastal communications. Stefano Maggi argues that the real trouble for Libya’s communications consisted of the inconvenient lack of a line of conjunction between the Tunisian border and the Egyptian one: the whole Great Sirte Gulf lacked roads. Because of the division of Libya into two colonies between January 1913 and December 1928, the Tripoli and Benghazi governorates had taken separate care of their own internal road systems. In so doing, while facilitating urban traffic and preserving conditions of security, they had dismissed any possibility that the two capitals could be joined by a modern road infrastructure running along the median strip of Sirte (Maggi, 1996).

Therefore, the project of the fascist motorway was a great cause, a large-scale public works project that aimed at bonding Egypt to the French colonies in North Africa, connecting the Atlantic Ocean to the Nile and creating a continuous automobile itinerary along Mediterranean Africa.

Nevertheless, aside from any political, bureaucratic, commercial or touristic reasons for the construction of the new road, in the two year period 1934/1935, new military necessities unfolded: the fascist regime, near imminent military engagement in Ethiopia, shaped Libya as the strategic bulwark for both the protection of Italy’s Mediterranean security and safeguard of both the east and west Libyan borders. The eastern border, due to its proximity to hostile British occupied Egypt, was indeed crucial. In case of war, without a modern system of communication, it would have been difficult to transport troops from one extremity of the colony to the other. Modern warfare called for speedy manoeuvres such as lightening raids and the efficient movement of provisions and reserves. As reported by the fascist journal L’Ingegnere and by the academic analysis of the Annali dei lavori pubblici in 1937, fascism created, in the coastal modern motorway, an artery capable of preserving and expanding the colonial order over North Africa, and optimising the circulation of population, material goods and military vehicles (L’Ingegnere, 1937: 155; Bonamico, 1937: 310-17).

The convention in El Agheila on 14 February 1934 gave Balbo the chance to finalise the organisational details regarding how to connect Tripolitania to Cyrenaica.
The works officially started in Tripolitania on 15 October 1935 and in Cyrenaica on 15 January 1936 (Ornato, 1935). The dream of the Litoranea Libica officially started to materialise.

Similar to the Pontine Marshes, the fascist mythology of waging warfare against the wilds of nature encountered the obstacles of the Libyan sabhka, namely marshy lands covered with saline water and shifting sand, which in the early stages of the agricultural colonisation of Tripolitania had already obstructed experiments of sedentary cultivation as part of the networks of Italian agricultural settlements within the steppe.

Where “not even the Romans dared to venture into roadwork” (La strada Litoranea della Libia, 1937: 36) the imperial gaze of Mussolini was designing an artery along the whole of littoral Libya between the Tunisian border and the Egyptian one, linking the coastal urban areas with the promise of military security, intensity of movement and new chances for incrementing tourism (McLaren, 2004: 223).

Contrary to the idea of Italian colonialism as a celebration of the Italian labouring masses, the works of the Litoranea saw the participation of no more than 10% Italian labour, the majority of the workers being native to Libya. The monumental work La strada Litoranea della Libia, published in 1937 after the road works were completed, is a good example of how bombastic fascist propaganda portrayed the making of the road. The text is an important document as it reveals nuances regarding the nature of life in the colony at the time of the construction of the motorway.

According to the book, daily life in the construction sites relied on the strict separation of the Italian and native workers. The Italian Government arranged accommodation for the workers maintaining a strict racial separation between the Italians and Libyans: wooden sheds for the national labourers and tent cities for the Libyans. Their wages were also different. For a motorway which had an average cost of 100,000 lira per kilometre, each national worker earned a sum of 25-30 lira per day and had access to collective rations of food, whereas the Libyans were paid much less, which only enabled them to purchase flour, tea and sugar for their sustenance (La strada Litoranea della Libia, 1937: 40).

The work in the colony was also often reported on for the domestic Italian audience. The book reports the dramatic and epic conditions of the works overseas,
highlighting the harshness of the lifestyle in the colony. However, anecdotes about slow columns of camels and tanker lorries, heavy transport and chipping of chalky blocks, scarcity of drinking water, reclamation of the sabkhas and the heat produced by the boundless Syrtic desert (Ibid: 68), actually hide a reality that, according to Mike Chrimes, besides the harsh working conditions, they never faced any major engineering trouble (Chrimes, 2010).

The engineering plan divided the works into sixteen sections with the goal, together with the existing roads, of creating a modern paved motorway with a length of 1,822 km (Valori, 1937). At the west Libyan extremity of Ras Ajdir, at the border with Tunisia, where the last road section built by the French encountered the Libyan frontier, a milestone was erected as the symbolic outset of the Litoranea near to the Tunisian border. Once the works were concluded, a second milestone was finally laid at the Egyptian border together with two pillars holding up the Italian kingdom’s coats of arms, the fascio littorio, and the following dates were carved in the stone: 12 April 1926, celebrating the first visit of Mussolini to the colony, and 19 April 1929, the date of the permanent fixing of the colony’s border.

In Cyrenaica, the Litoranea came to complete the road system constructed in the years of the pacification of the area of the Gebel, connecting Benghazi to Derna and Cyrene. Next to this road junction new rural villages were built by the Ente per la colonizzazione della Libia to host the flows of peasant colonisers (Ornato, 1936). According to the narrative of the fascist propaganda, the stretch of road between Derna and Apollonia was the perfect example of environmental and archaeological protection coexisting with military design. The involvement of military engineers, and the presence of additional military troops used as workers in the construction sites, demonstrates the key role that the army had within the Italian colonial scheme. In this way fascist propaganda could narrate the Libyan success as being thanks to the combination of military efficiency and the capacity of skilled labour. Therefore, the trope of the fanterie rurali was a fascist type of civilisation shaped around strong social cohesion and on the metaphysical unity of war and labour. In October 1936, following a slowdown in the works, ten battalions of Black Shirts from the Cyrene Division, plus four Eritrean Battalions and two Battalions of Libyan askari, came

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26 The term Askari refers to official regiments of the Italian Army, composed of solely native soldiers. The Libyan and Eritrean battalions became strategically important for colonial warfare against
to support the works around the motorway. In this manner the regime presented a harmonious picture of the synchrony and social cohesion among the population of settlers, workers, soldiers and natives living overseas. Through this image, the construction sites of the Litoranea were used as metaphor for the solidarity at the basis of the fascist social contract.

Often described as “merciless” and “wild”, the Libyan soil became the operation field of fascist civilisation. Hence, the Litoranea was celebrated as an indelible carving on the hard and desolate soil where the advent of civilisation, according to the propaganda, “breaks a millenary silence, as a human foot-mark over the desolate nature. While driving at high speed along the new road you can feel the soil fanning out in front of the car” (La strada Litoranea della Libia, 1937: 119). According to this modernist fascist understanding, the civilisation of ‘speed’ was eventually taking over, the noises of technology and engines overwhelming the silences of a dead African world. As testimony to Italian determination to subjugate Libyan nature, it was decided that the route of the motorway must be “straight and even with no diversions or second thoughts” (Ibid: 135).

The need to protect the investment and preserve the integrity of Litoranea Libica over the years determined a further step in the colonisation plan of the coastal strip: the Italian Governorate decided to build along the stretch sixty-two road workers’ houses hosting 130 settler families, who would be placed in charge of the maintenance of each section of the motorway (Ibid: 136).

Half-way along the Litoranea, near Ras Lanuf, Governor Balbo, inspired by the Latin poet Sallust in his Bellum Iugurthinum, on the occasion of the inauguration of the coastal motorway, commissioned architect Florestano di Fausto with the project of the Arco dei Fileni. The Marble Arch, while evoking Egyptian, Hellenistic, Punic and Roman architectural traits as a distinctive sign of di Fausto’s Mediterraneita’ or ‘Mediterraneity’ (von Henneberg, 1996: 385; Munzi, 2001, 2004), was erected on the historic border, which for centuries, had traced the line of separation between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. According to the myth, the boundary separating the two regions that marked the division between the Greek territory of guerrilla groups, whereas in the Second World War the North African front was revealed to be a too challenging war scenario for these light infantry corps (Scardigli, 1996; Quirico, 2002).

The translation from Italian is mine.
Cyrene and Carthaginian holdings to the east, was set around the graves of Fileni, two legendary Carthaginian brothers.

The thirty-one metre high monumental gateway requested by Balbo, besides demonstrating proof of unity and strength to the unified Libyan colony, was further occasion to revive the historical and spatial continuity traced along the Roman line of Leptis Magna, Sabratha, and the Arch of Marcus Aurelius in the centre of Tripoli (Ornato, 1937a). While bringing ideological pungency and furore to the colonial appropriation and aggressions, the erection of the Arch gave the Italians the confidence to celebrate “on the Syrtic beaches, that Mussolini’s Italy came to bring, with its Roman road, the sign and the seal of the Roman imperial civilization” (Pattarino, 1938). If, on the one hand, the erection of the Arch on the mythological milestone dividing Tripolitania from Cyrenaica aimed at appointing the authority and associative power of fascism, on the other hand, the monument, shaped as a gateway, suddenly became the allegory of a neo-roman imperial project.

In February 1937 the Litoranea was finally completed and on 12 March Mussolini landed in Tobruk for the inauguration of the first section of the motorway. Against the backdrop of a staged welcoming, arranged by Balbo, of Libyan tribes rushing to the roadside to honour the Duce, Mussolini appointed Libya as the new Italian Mediterranean frontier. Reassuring the Libyan subjects by proclaiming himself the protector and seizing the “Sword of Islam”, he inaugurated a new ‘Islamic policy’ that portrayed him as the European leader most naturally inclined towards sympathy with the Muslim communities of the eastern Mediterranean (Burdett, 2010; Wright, 2005; Wright and Burdett, 2010: 151-70).

At this stage, the Italian public’s consent around colonial politics was reaching its peak; the fascist propaganda manufactured a colonial truth that no longer mirrored Dante Alighieri’s antiquated lines depicting silent, desert, bare and flat lands empty of life. On the contrary the regime managed to shape a new public imagery around Mussolini’s race along the coastal highway, with the hope of encouraging the

28 In relation to the fascist fascination with archeaological research in Libya, please see Angelo Piccioli, (1933). La ricerca archeologica in Tripolitania, in La nuova Italia d’Oltremare. L’opera del Fascismo nelle colonie Italiane, vol. II: 1168-238.

29 “And I beheld therein a terrible throng, Of serpents, and of such a monstrous kind, That the remembrance still congeals my blood. Let Libya boast no longer with her sand; For if Chelydri, Jaculi, and Phareae, She breeds, with Cenchri and with Amphisbaena” in Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy, Inferno Canto XXIV, 82-87.
domestic audience to follow in the footsteps of their Duce in exciting new experiences overseas.

Inspired by Balbo’s famous claim “where there is a will, there is a road”, the modern coastal highway offered Italian tourism a new opportunity to visit a safe colony and discover those vestiges of the Roman Empire that had emerged after huge investment in archaeological excavation (Balbo, 1937). Whilst on the one hand the colony provided a real bourgeois escape from the metropolitan cage and its moral and cultural boundaries, on the other hand, in the late 1930s, colonial travelling became structurally part of a comprehensive governmental project to develop the colonisation further. The tourist industry, in order to counter the “romantic” expectation of wilderness and savage nature, began to project a comfortable experience that was in keeping with metropolitan Italy. The creation of an efficient and comfortable system of travel, refreshment stands and accommodation provided a means to present comfortable and familiar environments as safe havens away from the harshness of the colonial world.

Brian McLaren, in his study on fascist architecture within the Italian colonial touristic system, notes how after the cruel pacification, the dream of a new tourist experience of Libya “existed in a space of interaction where the modernization of the colony and the preservation of the indigenous culture were negotiated” (McLaren, 2004: 75). According to McLaren, the incorporation of the native into the modern defined the new colonial policies addressing the preservation of customs and practices of the local population for touristic and entertainment purposes. The spectacle of the colony was presented as the miracle result of two years of hard work and struggle against hostile nature.

The motorway also represented the radical transformation of a territory where only few years before, the Libyan guerrilla force had kept Graziani’s army in check. Now the straight stretch of the Litorana was a symbol of safety and comfort, and “sneaking as a ribbon around the un-linear rises of Gebel it gives high velocity even to the most demanding tourists” (La strada Litoranea della Libia, 1937: 111).

According to the most popular colonial stereotypes of Africa, Libya was visualised as an uncontaminated and primitive land, untouched by Western decadence. Libyan lands were perceived as the ideal space to rediscover spontaneity and instinctive vital energy. Through the realisation of the modern highway the Libyan world embodied, in the eyes of Italy, an ideal where the development of
industrial civilisation and the supremacy of technology could be celebrated (Ornato, 1937b).

**The motorway enters the conflict**

At the end of Mussolini’s 1937 tour of the colony, fascism was eventually ready to consign to Italy a modern, equipped and militarily efficient frontier of the Empire. Hopes to complete the road and incorporate the region into a larger Italy materialised in January 1939, when Libya became the nineteenth region of the kingdom. Italy’s entry into the Second World War on the side of Nazi Germany was about to come, together with the involvement of Libya as an important theatre of war. On 28 June 1940, in the skies of Tobruk, Italian anti-aircraft artillery claimed their first victim on the Libyan front: the plane of Governor Balbo was shot down by friendly fire in obscure circumstances only eighteen days after Italy’s entry into the conflict.

The Litoranea, then named Via Balbia to commemorate the premature passing of Governor Balbo, soon became an intense battlefront that would change the destiny of the Second World War and shatter the last fascist imperial aspirations. Libya was definitively lost two years later, after the defeat at El Alamein.

Once the Fourth Shore was lost, Italian colonialism in Africa was finally over.

Whilst during the 1930s the great success and excitement brought about by the Litoranea and its modern hotels network encouraged the development of national and international tourism around archaeological excavation and Roman ruins, at the time of the war, the highway uncovered the structural limits of Italian colonial transportation policies and road infrastructures in Libya. The Italian attack was launched on 13 September 1940: the Italian trespassing of the Egyptian border under the command of General Graziani, materialised the extension of the Balbia along the stretch that connects the Egyptian towns of Sollum and Sidi al Barrani, only 35 kilometres from Mars Matruh, where the railways towards Alexandria begin and where the British troops were quartered. The perseverance of fascist strategy in designing military tactics inspired and shaped around the model soldier/labourer this time did not bring any benefit to Graziani. The General soon looked totally unfit as a strategist for such an open conflict. Once the distance from Tripoli progressively
increased, the lack of facilities and means became undisputable and the lack of a properly paved road ready for use put the chances of success at stake; Graziani asked Mussolini to discharge him from the command. After a British counter-offensive, which temporarily pushed back the Italian troops to Tripolitania, the hopes of the Axis under the command of Rommel lasted up to the final collapse at El Alamein.

The Italian and German authorities, which had already evacuated the majority of Italians from Cyrenaica to Tripolitania in 1942, hurriedly abandoned Libya, escaping temporarily to Tunisia. From there the Anglo-Americans eventually started their invasion of Italy, which took place on 25 July 1943. Mussolini was arrested, and the fall of fascism followed.

Similar to Paul Virilio’s claim addressing the dialectic between masses, revolution and space with regard to the German Spartacist uprising in 1919, “they called to the streets, and the streets killed them” (Virilio, 2006: 29), Mussolini’s desire for road networks unwittingly paved the way for his own defeat, confirming that asphalt is a political territory.

According to Maggi the exclusive role of Balbia and the early mistake of privileging a paved road system at the expense of an adequate railway system became clear. At the end of the 1930s, Libya had 392 kilometres of railways and passenger trains (Maggi, 1996: 220). Despite the successful unification of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica into a unique metropolitan territory and the realisation of the Litoranea as the symbolic embodiment of the fascist control over the territory, the two separate railway systems were exempted from any modification or improvements. Still perceived as infrastructure of local interest, the two railways preserved their role of only providing regional services towards oases and colonial settlements around Tripoli and Benghazi.

The automobile sector was given total precedence. Whilst for many years the road system looked like the appropriate tool for “great colonial police operations” to repress the resistance of al-Mukhtar and penetrate the rural areas external to the urban districts, it was suddenly revealed to be totally unfit for modern warfare waged against properly equipped armies. Military historians Mario Montanari and Alberto Bongiovanni point out how the issue of supplies set the ground for a logistics based form of warfare, which established British superiority over Italy. Whilst British trucks and wagons were able to make the journey from the Nile Delta to the front and back in a day by railway, the 60% of Italian supplies coming from Libya to the
Italian front, were *de facto* unusable for the troops, while Italian trucks needed at least three days to travel to the front from Tobruk and five to reach it from Benghazi (Montanari, 1989; Bongiovanni, 2003). The only suitable way for such dangerous travel was across the Balbia without the support of any railway.

After El Alamein, Tripoli was occupied and the Axis troops, using the French railway, finally escaped to Tunisia before retreating to Europe. By that time what was left of the Balbia was nothing more than a cemetery of trucks, a road sunk by the endless raids and the heavy traffic of retreating tanks.

**The postcolonial life of the Litoranea**

From the perspective of Italian imperialist expectations El Alamein saw dispelled all the modernist motives that had inspired the transformation of Libya into a metropolitan area: ‘comfort’ and ‘velocity’ as the pillars on which the modern colony had been conceptualised. The images of colonial adventures combined with those of thrilling automobile races along the Litoranea, realised the visualisation of ‘speed’ in terms of reorganisation of the colonial space where the highway ‘broke’ the silence and the slowness of a ‘static’ African land. Technological mastery via motorway systems inspired an extreme feeling of mobility through an African world, which was deliberately constructed as ‘immobile’ and ‘stagnant’. Echoing the Futurist furore, the Litoranea aimed at embodying a sliding surface where the flow of high-speed vehicles could contribute to realising a fictional sense of spatial and material continuity between the centre and the periphery. Indeed not only through a visionary spatialisation of colonial landscapes, but also through the hasty acceleration of time, the experience of ‘speed’ intended to break the temporal distance between the homeland and the overseas as if, as Futurist pioneer Filippo Tommaso Marinetti envisioned, “Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute” (Marinetti, 1973: 22).

Apart from the symbolism embodied in the motorway, the concrete possibility up until 1942, of seeing an Italian-German triumph in North Africa, demonstrates the historical importance of the Litoranea as an imperialist means of conquest. The road was in fact planned to express a final stage of imperialist penetration and the highest
form of colonial material power, functioning to create new spaces for economic and military security, and the circulation of material and human resources.

The Litoranea, as the perfect emblem of the 1900–1930s era of high modernism, speed technology and culture, was indeed a combination of the ‘symbolic’ and ‘functional’. The realisation of the motorway aimed at preserving the stereotypical antinomy of primitiveness versus technology at the base of any colonial order. In so doing, it created an idea of otherness “that our nostalgia desires to encounter and recognize in distant cultures because it has been excluded by capitalism from our own direct experiences” (Shelton, 1997: 36). In this way the penetration of the Litoranea into Libyan soil, before the disastrous military defeat, as reported by 1930s Italian magazines, presented an opportunity to transform the African wilderness into a more bourgeois orientation of high living standards, ecology and architecture:

“[…] while being suspended on the desert, we would like to feel the harshness of life, through the food and the absence of comforts. And in some way we would like to approach the black indifference of the Tuareg people: but instead the butter is always here in little rolls, the milk is fresh, the salad is crispy and slowly we learn that cows just arrived from Tripoli on a lorry, and that the salad represents the victory of modernism over barbarity, the victory of the water taken from the artesian well over millenary sands”30 (del Corso, 1940: 886).

Moreover, the Litoranea represented for some years one of the most interesting examples of 20th century European modernism and development which, as Schivelbusch points out, emerged “with the conquest and mastery of space and time [through] its most general expression in the concept of circulation” (Schivelbusch, 1986: 194).

Looking at the multiple uses of the motorway, the Litoranea Libica did indeed serve for almost a decade the circulation of humans and things, connecting settlements to archaeological sites, and in times of war it represented the peak of military expansion, covering more ground than Italy had ever before on the North-African eastern front.

30 The translation from Italian is mine.
Consulting a fascist geographical map of Libya in 1937, it is possible to see how the line of the Balbia has been drawn like a thread. Running from the Libyan/Tunisian border to the battlegrounds of El Alamein in Egypt, the Litoranea offers a precious insight into the spatial configuration of Italian colonialism in North Africa.

Indeed, the line of the motorway takes on an epistemological value of great importance: as if it were a modernist version of Ariadne’s thread, the highway becomes the tool to understand how fascist modernism conceptualised colonial expansions and how this was spatially and geographically organised. But unlike the Greek myth where Theseus uses the thread to make his way out of Minos’ labyrinth, the Italian motorway became the site of the collapse of the colonial dream, and the quintessential emblem of Italy’s failure.

Once the drive for modernity gave away to forced decolonisation, Italy had to come to terms with a colonial destiny that had been materially carved out for it on the line of the Balbia.

In the introduction to his *Threads and Traces*, Carlo Ginzburg recalls Theseus and Ariadne as well, and how the former navigated the labyrinth, found the Minotaur and killed it. Ginzburg reminds us how the myth never mentioned the traces left behind by Theseus in his labyrinth path (Ginzburg, 2006: 7). Following his argument, the discovery of traces does indeed stimulate historical inquiry and raises the possibility of developing alternative narratives around history. In this sense, this chapter looks at the Litoranea as both an example of material power and a repository of material traces that allow us to decipher the complexities of Italy’s colonial and post-colonial role in Libya and North Africa. Following Ginzburg’s allegory, the Litoranea leads us to the discovery of many important traces otherwise overlooked in the historical record. In the aftermath of the El Alamein disaster, the Litoranea was the main battlefield and the only escape route that the Axis troops had in their retreat from Egypt to the border of Ras Ajdir, across Libya: the motorway, from being the material testimony of superior colonial technology suddenly became proof of disastrous military deficiency.

However, whilst the aura of colonial material power quickly vanished, in the aftermath of the Second World War the motorway brought evidence of the transition from a colonial to a post-colonial identity. Following an opposite path to the Italian colonial advance from west to east, the Litoranea was the material platform on which
the 1942 Italian withdrawal from east to west took place. When the North African front was lost, among pieces of iron and carcasses of trucks and tanks, the asphalt of Balbia bore testimony to the end of Italian colonialism. Moreover, the surface of the motorway, among these many inorganic traces, was also covered with different traces of material residues: many abandoned bodies of dead Italian soldiers lay anonymously in the desert.

During the post-war reconstruction, Italy started to feel that it was important to investigate and collect these human traces as a way to narrate and re-contextualise its military and civilian presence in North Africa between 1911 and 1942. Far beyond the mythological dimension expressed by Ariadne’s thread, Italy was urged to think about how to use these traces in order to justify thirty-one years of Italian colonialism in Libya and relieve the Italian presence in North Africa of any fascist and belligerent ideological furore and legacy. As a matter of fact, this attempt was not an easy task for several historical reasons. In her article on Italian repatriates from Second World War warfronts, Pamela Ballinger says that Italy’s changing of sides in 1943 and the post-Mussolini “government’s ambiguous wartime status as Allied co-belligerent, together with the emerging political exigencies of what would become known as the Cold War, complicated the debate at war’s end as to which (if any) of its colonial possessions Italy should be permitted to retain” (Ballinger, 2007: 117). Moreover, she argues that while the many European repatriates from the colonies symbolised the end of colonialism (Cooper, 2003: 172), the Italian repatriates and survivors “bore the additional burden of a repudiated history of fascism” (Ballinger, 2007: 717).

In an attempt to turn this tide, finding the traces of Italian dead bodies in the desert became historically and epistemologically essential for two important reasons: through the collection and the identification of these bodies Italy foresaw the occasion to close a painful chapter of national history. While serving the rhetoric of memory as a reference point for the work of mourning, the collection of human remains in the Egyptian and Libyan deserts served a political purpose. As Ewa Domanska points out, bodies turn into politicised entities when the experience of death becomes itself a political fact (Domanska, 2005b: 402). In the case of post-fascist Italy, the search for, and the identification and eventual burial of the dead bodies from the North-African front served the new democratic cause against attempted fascist nostalgic appropriations of the memory of El Alamein. Hence, the
asphalt of the Balbia became the perfect stage for conflicting historical experiences, knowledge and opposed visions of the sacred. In the post-war period, after being the embodiment of fascist domination and imperial design, the Balbia was symbolically reduced to a far narrower focus: the dead end of El Alamein. Such spatial density, reflecting a new post-fascist Italian subjectivity, necessitated alternative narratives, architectural forms and configurations to inaugurate a new beginning and minimise the humiliation at El Alamein. In this scenario El Alamein was eventually revived, not as the cul-de-sac of Italian Colonialism in North Africa, but instead as a vital political territory, insightful for an alternative account of Italy’s role within the European imperialist frame.

**El Alamein’s legacy on the fascist asphalt**

The modernist myth of the Balbia ended with the triumphant march of Rommel and Italian troops towards Alexandria, following the line of the highway deep down beyond the Egyptian border. The final stop was around the Depression of al Qattara at El Alamein between 23 October and 4 November 1942. After this date, Rommel ordered a retreat.

After the war the motorway, a former symbol of the Italian organisation of power along the Libyan coast, was emptied of its functional and imaginative uses and lost its ‘colonial materiality’. The post-war image of the Balbia was a matrix of empty and suddenly noiseless spaces cross cut by flows of local migrants returning to populate the lands where battles had been fought: lost survivors, improvised gravediggers, ex-prisoners and former *askari* on the payroll of the temporary British authority. Eventually shed of the mythological speed imposed by fascist modernity, a ‘silent’ Balbia and its new regulars were coming to terms with a heavy legacy of sprawls of iron and rubble sunk into the sand and rows of anonymous dead bodies lying in solitude. The Balbia quickly turned into an opaque surface whose past was forgotten and whose present was uncertain. The post-war Balbia was an unspecific ‘thing’ empty of signs, and it was indeed hard to look through it and discover traces of Italian history. The road was seemingly an irrelevant materiality devoid of any iconic signifier.
Furthermore, after the forced decolonisation, the fear of a suddenly hostile Libya occupied the post-war Italian imagery, reviving the early colonial stereotypes of Libya as an anonymous, meaningless and empty “big sandbox” (Nitti, 1921; Salvemini, 1963). Once the vision of Mussolini as the “Sword of Islam” vanished, the local population rapidly went back to representing the racist stereotype of “filthy and treacherous Arabs”, which was typical at the time of the fascist re-conquest of Libya between 1929 and 1934. After the collapse of the colonial order, fear and terror were brought back to the fore while the image of the Fourth Shore regressed to a pre-historical state of total wilderness.

After the construction of a British Commonwealth War Cemetery in 1950, Italy felt the pressure to collect and take care of the bodies abandoned in the desert and put a stop to “the unconceivable profanations committed by indigenous people in Egypt and Libya during the two year period 1948-49” (Caccia Dominioni, 1962: 276). At this time Egyptian nationalist movements and campaigners asked, “why are we waiting to throw all these bones and skulls into the sea?”. This contributed to shaping an atmosphere of anguish and inadequacy, with which post-fascist Italy did not know how to come to terms. At the same time, the call for re-appropriation of the liberated land revealed the rising protests by Egyptians and Libyans, who had experienced the theatre of El Alamein as war victims standing in a crossfire “blackmailed and hit both by the Italians and the British” (Del Boca, 1988: 316).

The rescue of the Italian bodies and the following burial operations were started as an initiative out of the personal commitment of the soldier Paolo Caccia Dominioni, a survivor of El Alamein and then amateur gravedigger, who tried to return dignity to his dead comrades forgotten in the desert and along the Balbia. The occasion to commemorate the honourable defeat and the need to preserve the memory of the battle followed as a natural consequence.

Still today, the imposing presence of the Italian Military Memorial to the 5,200 dead of El Alamein stands vertically in the middle of the desert. The stage presence of the memorial is powerfully represented by an octagonal tower that hosts the mortal remains of the fallen soldiers. Aesthetically detectable as a phallic, slender obelisk, slightly tapered at the top, the tower was erected to dominate the whole pavilion. The plan of the mausoleum visualised the tower as an entity detached from the rest of the memorial complex: erected at the end of an austere blind alley, which connects at right angles to the Litoranea, the ‘needle’ joins the ‘thread’ while
standing solitarily and vertically in the middle of the Egyptian desert. Nearby a modest mosque was erected as a liberal gesture and as a symbolic protector over the Libyan cemetery that hosts 232 fallen askari who stood on the same line as the Italians. The space left for a Muslim cemetery was indeed the only testimony to the Arab presence in the conflict and the last trace of the colonial regiment operating along the Fourth Shore. Against the re-erupting fear of rising Arab voices, the pervasive presence of Italian victimhood embodied by the memorial counter-affirmed the invisibility of the natives: the materialisation of modest graves in honour of the askari, as a concession to the ex-colonised, came to reinforce the sense of paternal benevolence, becoming a tribute to the natives’ servility.

The gathering of post-war Italian society around the new memorial silently witnessed the end of the Empire and the celebration of its victims; colonial dreams and previous colonial relationships of power finally emptied of exoticism, and broke against the image of the central tower overlooking the memorial site in the Egyptian desert. Therefore, as Daniela Baratieri states, the landscape of El Alamein and the Memorial’s skyline became “the recurrent [and only] image through which it was possible to talk about Africa around this time” (Baratieri, 2005: 78). The exclusive focus on the space around El Alamein was subterfuge to conceal the past decades of Italy’s presence in Egypt and Libya, and the whole Italian colonial commitment in Africa.

**Conflicting narratives on the road to El Alamein**

The post-war period saw the memory of El Alamein developing around the collision between nostalgic fascist culture and the narration of a new democratic spirit. In both cases, the cult of El Alamein entered the narrative of glorious defeats (Isneghi, 1997). The affirmation of republican values over a fascist nostalgia engendered attempts to dissociate history from its political context: first the dissociation of El Alamein’s memory from fascism, and then the ‘evolution’ of the memorial as a destination for pilgrimage and modest icon of the sacrifice of the Italian soldiers- victims of the conflict. The leitmotifs of the public democratic discourse regarding the battle of El Alamein and the epic withdrawal of the Italian
soldiers along the Balbia were: military and technological inadequacy combined with heroism. The crystallisation of colonial memory in El Alamein, as a site of memory eventually worked as a palimpsest generating inverted commemoration practices, whilst the defeat along the Balbia was portrayed in the national memory as a glorious sacrifice by Italian soldiers.

The inclusion of El Alamein as a lieu de la memoire came about as a result of a long process of construction of a shared Italian history, devised to overcome the rubble left by the civil war and the Nazi-fascist occupation of North Italy following the fall of Mussolini in 1943. The idea was to snatch out of fascist narratives not only the ceremony and the rhetoric shaped around the myth of Italian honour, but also the whole historical meaning of El Alamein. This belongs to a lasting tradition of republican attempts to re-appropriate the past under the trope of Italian bravery and objective military deficiency. In this sense, in spite of the republican disassociation of what happened at El Alamein from nostalgic fascist narratives, both fascist and post-war propaganda founded their discourse on the nation on values such as courage and perseverance. Whilst on the one hand the process of victimisation of the defeated Italian regiments overseas led to the revision of the legacy of fascist pride, assimilating the burden of the defeat into a meta-historic innocence peculiar to the docile Italian character, on the other hand, it also preserved the fascist attempt at ‘rehabilitation’ and moreover facilitated a generally exculpatory narration of the historical role of Italy in North Africa. The victimised soldier assumed an aura of de-historicised valour, poverty and solitude due to the inefficient conditions of warfare that led to his failure, while the depictions of emaciated survivors eventually deteriorated into a permanent condition of despair and hopelessness.

Finally, out of the fascist yoke, the misfortunes of the defeated Italian army became an object of celebration and commiseration. No more chauvinist or bellicose propaganda were used to describe the souls and the deeds of Italian soldiers overseas; on the contrary, while reinforcing the stereotype of Italians as Brava Gente, sorrow and remorse arose to compensate the wounded pride of the Nation. With regard to this, Giovanna Tomasello, in her studies on Italian colonial literature,

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31 The term is borrowed here from the Pierre Nora memory lexicon: “The moment of the lieux de memoire occurs at the same time that an immense and intimate fund of memory disappears, surviving only as a reconstituted object beneath the gaze of critical history” (Nora, 1989: 10-11).
underscores how the heroism of the post-war period, reflecting earlier liberal slogans of an army incapable and unfit for ferocity and destruction, became the bravery of inexperienced and unsupplied soldiers, who were trained not to kill but to die (Tomasello, 2004: 125). On the occasion of the inauguration of the El Alamein Italian Military Memorial in 1959, Christian Democrat Prime Minister Amintore Fanfani used an emotional rhetoric, addressing the battle and the fallen soldier:

“[…] we come here to comfort your sleep. We send you the kisses of your mothers, spouses and children” (Archivio Luce, 1959).

In the same year, the periodical La Domenica del Corriere referred to the necropolis in the desert in the following way: “one of the most important and noble projects ever built by Italy abroad since the war” (Baratieri, 2010: 267). Therefore, war, devoid of its historical and political contexts, cannot correspond to anything but bereavement. The memory discourse around El Alamein finally became the occasion for celebrating the sacrifice of the soldiers who fell in the desert and were left dying in objective conditions of powerlessness. From the 1950s, the presence of El Alamein became progressively hegemonic, occupying the sphere of public debate around the Republican renaissance out of the rubble of fascism. With the acquiescence of leading political parties such as the Christian Democrats, the post-fascist memorial machine aimed at turning El Alamein into an atypical site of memory, which still today is included within the narrative shaped around the triptych Risorgimento-Resistance-Republic. Whilst it was essential for the construction of a shared history, right from the start it appeared as an anomalous site because the events involved did not belong to any geography dear to Italian democratic traditions.

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32 The translation from Italian is mine.
33 For an enlightening example of the nostalgic euphoria of the El Alamein legacy see Dino Campini, (1952). *El Alamein Quota 33*. Moreover, as historian Giovanni De Luna explains, the ambiguities commonly present during the ritual speeches by Italian authorities in El Alamein show the tendency of Italian society towards historical paradoxes. The paradox finds its representation on the occasion of the annual military parade in Rome celebrating Republic Day every 2 June, where the victims of the El Alamein battle, together with the soldiers from Acqui Division, victims of a massacre perpetrated by German troops in the Greek island of Cephalonia in October 1943, are simultaneously commemorated. Paradoxically, de Luna concludes, while they were certainly all Italian soldiers, the Italians in Egypt fought on the side of the executioners of their compatriates in Greece (De Luna, 2002).
However, since the foundation of the memorial site in 1959, the hot spot of El Alamein and the surface of the Balbia still resist attempts to depict them as familiar landscapes and as part of the legacy of the Italian colonial occupation of North Africa. In such a context, Franz Overbeck’s claim that “history begins only where the monuments become intelligible” (quoted in Agamben, 2009: 85) helps us to understand the function of this early example of Italian post-colonial monumental architecture. The huge memorial encircling the phallic tower provides new degrees of intelligibility as material colonial traces and the materiality of Italian colonisation of Libya itself eventually vanish under the shade of El Alamein’s palimpsest. Whilst the reason why the Italians were present in Libya and Egypt still remains a scarcely debated chapter of Italian colonial history, on the contrary, the silent presence of the mausoleum in the Egyptian desert keeps intact the spatial homogeneity of a seemingly a-temporal colonial geography.

Formerly a cul-de-sac of fascist modernity and last Italian bulwark in occupied North Africa, the point where the epic dream of the motorway and the myth of speed shatter, the sanctuary of El Alamein works like a “needle” that re-connects to its “thread”. As a fragment of a dissolving European colonial presence in North Africa, since decolonisation the El Alamein theatre has represented the Italian attempt to redesign the myth of the nation in a post-colonial guise, as a celebration of the good hearted soul of the soldier. 34

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34 In 2002, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the battle, in the speech given by the President of the Republic Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, he stated “the best of our youth had for years been fighting against each other” (Corriere della Sera, 21 October 2002) when confirming the pacification and re-established equality between the nations formerly in conflict. At the dawn of the unilateral US military invasion of Iraq in 2003, El Alamein was presented as the cradle of generations of survivors who suddenly contributed to shaping the new European democratic order as the basis of the United Nations constitution. Within the international framework defined by the attempt to use El Alamein as the symbol invigorating the strategic role of the United Nations in conflict resolution today, the expectations and previsions of Italy looked particularly challenging: the necessity to re-gain international credibility passed through the obligation to be rid of the yoke of the double evil complex, historically determined by the intertwining between colonialism and fascism. The ceremony, in which 5,000 representatives from Germany, England, France, Scotland, New Zealand, Australia, Greece and Italy participated, became the unexpected occasion to mark a return to the old colonial world and revive the image of a united Western front raised from the rubble of World War II and the collapse of totalitarianism. In the Egyptian desert, the former enemies celebrated the origins of their union under a common project for peace and civilisation founded on law and cooperation among the States. On the memorial day for the Western victims of the battle of El Alamein, the theatre of old colonial Africa was asked to stage the re-launch of the international commitment in peace-keeping operations with direct references to recent missions such as the Kosovo Peacekeeping Force (KFOR) in the Balkans and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan (Ciampi, 2002). It is especially through the official accommodation and adjustment of Italy’s troublesome past in Libya and North Africa, and its tragic ending, that the process of beatification of the victims continues. President Ciampi’s successor, Giorgio Napolitano, has continued with a national rhetoric built on the parallels
El Alamein displays the need of former colonial powers to preserve and produce colonial spaces as axiomatic models for making their history on other peoples’ lands and for living traces of colonial geographies. In these terms, the annual gathering in the desert of El Alamein to commemorate the anniversary of the battle and its victims exposes the immortal seduction of nostalgic colonial remembrance, revealing seemingly invisible footmarks of what remains of the last Italian outpost in the east.

Between Ras Ajdir, where the first stone of the road was laid on the Libyan/Tunisian border, and El Alamein in Egypt, the motorway symbolically marked the inception and the conclusion of the Italian colonial dream. There, the horizontal aesthetics of the Balbia end and re-connect to the mausoleum’s verticality representing a late example of colonial spatialisation. The memorial, standing at the eastern extreme of what is left of the old Balbia, and remaining as the last living trace of Italian colonialism on the eastern side of the former North African front, has until current times operated as a palimpsest of multiple and conflicting representations – Italian colonial technological supremacy, military inferiority, the Nazi defeat and the end of Italian colonialism, and the post-fascist renaissance.

By focussing on the coastal motorway system brought by the Italians to Libya in the 1930s, my purpose in this chapter has been to bring to the fore a sort of ‘materiality’ that, operating through technology and labour, transformed colonial Libya in a space of circulation. Far from being an artery with the exclusive purpose of directing Italian migration, labour and goods across the colony, the Litoranea Libica worked from the outset as a tool for military power and colonial expansion. Paradoxically it was also because of an unconditional reliance on the material power of road infrastructure, that Italy saw its colonial ambition shattered. However, after the forced decolonisation of Libya, the post-colonial life of the motorway showed how the asphalt of the Balbia was emptied of all of its former material powers.
In spite of that, in the aftermath of the conflict, the Litoranea unveils many traces that have contributed to the creation of Italy’s post-fascist reality. There, in Libyan territory, following the motorway westwards – from El Alamein to Ras Ajdir – new chains of signification in opposition to fascist configurations have materialised from the Litoranea’s asphalt.

However, after considering the motorway as a tool of colonial domination and as a blank surface on which post-colonial Italy could camouflage its colonial role, the next chapter will focus on the central role played by the highway in the post-colonial disputes between Italy and Libya, where new meanings and uses emerged and defined the new Litoranea’s material features.
Chapter Three
The Litoranea Libica in Post-colonial Libya.
Reparations, Migration and Humanitarian Government

Since Mussolini’s inauguration as dictator of Italy in 1937, the fascist-era motorway, the Litoranea Libica or Via Balbia, has run along the Mediterranean coastline between Tunisia and Egypt. Originally designed to unify the colonial provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica into one region, it has progressively informed and served to shape colonial and post-colonial relations between Italy and Libya.

The multiple practical and discursive uses of the road range from the early fascist plan of settler colonialism in Libya and the silences brought about by the subsequent decolonisation. Throughout the 1930s Italian farmers and ragged settlers were protagonists of state-sponsored migration towards the African colony. Later, with the eruption of the Second World War, the motorway staged the furious deployment and circulation of Nazi-fascist troops trying to win the conflict on the East African front until the military collapse in El Alamein where the Axis advance was brought to an end. The post-war period eventually saw a crumbling Litoranea in the shade of El Alamein’s legacy, around which post-fascist Italy tried to construct a common democratic narrative.

This chapter focuses on the motorway as an object of dispute between Italy and Libya in the reparation process for colonial exploitation and crimes, which lasted from after the war until the late 2000s. To be precise, the bargaining started in the early 1950s when Libya asked Italy to commit to war reparations through the construction of a new coastal highway parallel to the old crumbling Litoranea. However, only after Gaddafi’s revolution in 1969, did the motorway return to the foreground of the Italian public sphere as a main issue of post-colonial reconciliation.

These various existences have indeed cyclically defined the fascist motorway as first, a space of contact and circulation at the time of Italian colonisation, and second, an object of dispute for colonial reparations. A historical agreement – the
Treaty of Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation between the Italian Republic and the Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya – was reached only in 2008, and this saw the construction of a new motorway running parallel to the old Litoranea, as the manner in which Italy could finally fulfil its obligations towards Libya. At the same time the agreement around the new highway unveiled other important aspects: colonial reparations became effective – among various economic agreements – in exchange for Libyan support in controlling and preventing illegal migration across Libya’s Southern land border and at the Mediterranean sea borders towards Italy and Europe.

This chapter emphasises the way in which the Friendship Pact between Italy and Libya of 2008 re-introduced the road as material power, as de facto a tool and a space for control over human mobility. This chapter is interested in the post-colonial paradox that reconnects Italy to Libya at the conclusion of the reconciliation path: the way in which Italy’s politics of regret and promises to commit to reparations made the road simultaneously a symbol of posthumous justice, a bargaining chip, and a ‘border device’ for migration control. Through this intersection, the material power of the road is eventually reinstated.

Moreover, the surface of the motorway has staged parallel and cross-temporal migration flows and circulations: while at the time of the fascist dream of demographic colonisation of metropolitan Libya the road was instrumental for organising and directing the circulation of Italian migrants/settlers and the military around the colony, in the post-colonial era, under the pretences of reparations for colonial crimes, it became a medium for the control of opposite flows of migration-people fleeing the post-colony (Corriere della Sera, 30 August 2008).

Moreover, following the Libyan revolt and the overthrow of Gaddafi in 2011, the number of African migrants, asylum seekers and refugees fleeing northwards towards Europe grew significantly, and Italy, while seeing the fall of its ally Gaddafi, unilaterally decided to suspend the friendship pact with Libya (Corriere della Sera, 26 February 2011). The construction plan for the new motorway was eventually suspended and Italy reluctantly agreed to suspend the bilateral agreements with Libya and provide strategic support to the NATO operations. In the meantime, a UN call for a humanitarian mission to solve the refugee crisis received wide international support, and saw active Italian participation. Following the bilateral agreement around reparations and joint migration controls, the humanitarian response to the
refugee crisis along the old colonial road next to the Tunisian border *de facto* concluded the Italian return to its old territories. Across time the motorway has expressed a material power that features different but specular forms of government: from being an evident example of the pervasive power of the colonial state in the 1930s, the most recent humanitarian crisis sees the motorway performing a role in new practices by government to control human mobility in the post-colonial area.

Humanitarianism, which also manages the refugee crisis within Italian national borders, denotes a continuation of the same policies of containment developed around the Friendship Pact between Italy and Libya, which was meant to conclude the long wave of decolonisation. Moreover, Italy’s commitment to relief operations at the Libyan/Tunisian border of Ras Ajdir marks a virtual spatial continuity, which symbolically connects Italy to the old Libyan occupied territories. The former modernist dream of creating a symbolic artery unifying Tripoli with Rome into a single metropolitan area sees a posthumous and virtual geographical reunion, via the humanitarian connection between the refugee camps erected at the Libyan/Tunisian border and the reception/identification centres erected in the island of Lampedusa and in the whole south of Italy. This spatial continuity, as this chapter illustrates, furthermore restores and revives old-fashioned colonial notions of time towards the construction and spatial/temporal containment of ‘otherness’. This is an event that in spite of the advent of globalisation revives in the present day the epistemological separation between centre and periphery through a thorough distinction between temporalities, historicities and forms of existence.

Indeed, right from the outset and up to the present day, the asphalt of the Litoranea Libica has turned out to be political territory, which across the decades has been the site for a gradual drifting of colonial and post-colonial traces that progressively have allowed for and legitimised the return of colonial mastery in a different guise. This chapter demonstrates that the story of the Litoranea is indeed that of the epicentre of the Italian colonial adventure in Libya that stands simultaneously at the forefront of present interventions, performances and representations of ‘otherness’ in the ex-colonial world.
Colonial reparations and post-colonial bargaining

Whereas the Balbia lost its modernist features at the end of the Second World War, it never disappeared from the post-colonial debate involving Italy and Libya. Moreover, whilst its image disappeared under the shade of the memorial erected in El Alamein, the highway never ceased to be an epistemic resource for disclosing details regarding contemporary relations between the two countries.

The impact of Balbia’s legacy on both Italian and Libyan post-colonial conditions is crucial for understanding how the insurgency of colonial traces is at the root of contemporary forms of influence and intervention on the Libyan territory.

Following the line traced by the Balbia, the previous chapter described the material power and colonial aesthetics of the motorway, revolving around two opposite ideas/stereotypes: the modern dynamism embodied by road networks; and the caricature of an African timelessness and slowness. Subsequently, during decolonisation, Italy progressively camouflaged its colonial role in North Africa. The erection of the memorial to the victims of the battle of El Alamein – de facto the turning point of the Italian colonial venture in North Africa – marked a naïve and disenchanted Italian narrative, which became functional in concealing Italy’s presence in Libya as a stable colonial force of occupation. Whilst under the shade of the memorial the role of the Balbia together with thirty-one years of Italian colonialism in Libya have progressively disappeared from public discourse; since decolonisation the road has defined the political territory and marked the Libyan opposition to weak reconciliatory paths that try to minimise Italian responsibility.

As many historians from Del Boca to Labanca underscore, the recent history of post-colonial relations between Italy and Libya revolved for many years around the key role played by Colonel Muammar Gaddafi and his anti-colonial agenda. However, in spite of the clamorous expulsion of Italian settlers from Libya in 1970, after the Gaddafi revolution in 1969, despite the occasional bombastic skirmishes and a chronically belligerent rhetoric, Italy maintained an influential presence in Libya. For instance, the Italian gas and oil company ENI (Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi) - present in Libya since 1959 when the pioneering “Concession 82” was obtained (ENI, 2004) – kept on playing a key role in the energy industry as the only foreign oil and gas multinational corporation exempted from Libyan’s government
nationalisation programme (December 1971). Thus, in spite of the expulsion, many Italian citizens and professionals made their return to Libya and work for the Italian corporation. Throughout the 1970s ENI progressively became the main bridge between Tripoli and Rome, and Italy grew some important investments. By the end of 1999, ENI had become Libya’s largest partner, buying 43% of its exports, mostly oil and gas (La Repubblica, 3 December 1999). However, the 1980s were a troublesome decade for Italian-Libyan relations: Libya was accused of international terrorism and was included in the ‘list of rogue states’ drawn up by Washington’s State Department during the Reagan Administration (De Maio, 2006). After the 1986 launch of two Libyan missiles towards the island of Lampedusa and the 1988 bombing of the Pan Am flight in the skies over Lockerbie, international sanctions and a trade embargo were deployed against Libya (Del Boca, 1998b: 159). However, those actions did not put any obstacles in the way of Italy’s realpolitik towards Libya. After the 1990s, in spite of Italy’s reluctance to commit to war reparations and obligations for the reconstruction of Libya as previously set out in the 1956 agreements, the Italian governments followed a successful political strategy that aimed at breaking the international isolation of Gaddafi’s regime. Gaddafi’s extradition of the Lockerbie suspects in 1999 allowed for a suspension of UN sanctions and the embargo. After this, economic relations between Italian enterprises and Libyan funds started to be conducted openly (Paoletti, 2010: 119) with the aim to increase the possibility of Libya joining the international community, thereby increasing stability in the Mediterranean region and creating a bridge with Europe (Il Sole 24 Ore, 6 April 1999). Italian diplomatic visits to Libya became more frequent and historic achievements between the two countries were gradually reached: through the 1998 Joint Communication agreement, Italy expressed official regret about Libyan colonial sufferings. This entailed the institutionalisation of important Italian-Libyan centred businesses, infrastructure and developments projects, and preliminary joint-intents addressing drug trafficking, terrorism and illegal migration, to the tune of $100 million.

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35 According to Del Boca “It is for this reason that we helped the Libyan leader to defeat those that were opposing the regime, provided him with weapons, organized for him an intelligence service and helped with the modernisation of his armed forces” (Del Boca, 1998b: 131).
36 In 1986, 17,000 Italians were resident in Libya, constituting the second largest community living abroad after South Africa (Del Boca, 1998b: 131).
However, in spite of Italy’s support for Gaddafi’s anti-terrorist new way, the persistent delays in committing to colonial reparations preserved the anti-colonial and anti-Italian façade of the Colonel’s public rhetoric. Emanuela Paoletti, in her study of the bargaining game between Italy and Libya, notes how words such as ‘vengeance’ and ‘revenge’ remained the binding elements at the basis of the Libyan hatred towards its former colonialist perpetrators (Paoletti, 2010: 120).

In spite of the huge budget allocated by the Joint Declaration, colonial reparations remained an open issue, just as they had been in the aftermath of forced decolonisation. From the earliest request for 100 million Libyan dinars in 1951, these include: the 1984 request for the construction of a hospital in Benghazi, the removal of landmines and the restitution of looted archaeological goods, the return of the remains of those Libyan patriots who were exiled to Italian islands at the time of Italian liberal colonisation (al-Jefa'iri, 1989; Giolitti, 1962: 69; Paoletti, 2010: 115), and most important of all, the construction of a new motorway running aside the old Balbia.

As of the year 2000, all of these disputes remained unresolved.

The early 2000s, which inaugurated Silvio Berlusconi’s political decade in Italy, eventually marked the new parameters of diplomatic relations between Libya and Italy, which gradually matured, leading to the Friendship Pact of 2008. Between 2001 and 2004, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi visited Libya four times. The implementation of joint patrols on the Libyan coasts to prevent unauthorised migrant movements and flows and the inauguration of the gas pipeline Greenstream connecting Mellitah to Gela in Sicily, running under the Mediterranean, were at the top of the Italian agenda. However, colonial compensations remained unresolved as Libya insisted on the construction of a coastal highway as the only possible way to bring an end to the long path of reconciliation. Only in 2002 did Berlusconi, while elaborating on Italy’s commitment to fulfil its obligations, write a public letter to Gaddafi and bless the construction of a new Litoranea: “Italy and Libya are finally ready to transform their friendship into a real partnership ... When I started to consider a potential ‘special project’, I suddenly imagined a ‘great work’ that could symbolize our flawless relation” (Mezran and De Maio, 2007: 447).

The agreement around the highway eventually came hand in hand with the strategic agreement between Rome and Tripoli around joint-control over migratory flows from Libya to Italy and the management of illegal immigration. The end of the
The Friendship Pact: “Asphalt for migrants”

Before the Friendship Pact, the period between 2004 and 2006 was considered essential for the refinement and improvement of joint actions and strategies for the control of migrant flows at both sea and land borders. In October 2004, while Gaddafi announced the abolition of ‘the day of hate’ against Italy, twisting it into a new surprising ‘day of friendship’ between Italy and Libya, the embargo against Libya was formally suspended by the Council of the European Union, and the diplomatic bridge connecting Europe to Libya through Italy was formally erected. However, after the 9/11 attacks in New York and the NATO operations in Afghanistan, followed by Italy’s political support for the US unilateral invasion of Iraq, Italy started to fear the threat of international terrorism. In such circumstances, the eruption of a global sense of insecurity was used domestically for a proper declaration of war against clandestine migration in the rhetoric of the Italian government, politicians and mainstream media (Il Sole 24 Ore, 13 July 2005; The Economist, 16 July 2005). There, through the arbitrary conflation between migration and terrorism, post-colonial bargaining around colonial reparation produced some preliminary effects and consequences. First, Italy promoted and financed the forced
repatriation of irregular third-country immigrants with return flights to Libya – who were afterwards displaced by air or land to other countries by Libyan officials. Subsequently, pre-emptive arrests of undocumented migrants on Libyan soil set the boundaries of Italy’s new strategy of containment. Even before the stipulation of the Pact in 2005, Libyan units had repeatedly participated in joint patrols with Italian deputes across the Mediterranean to prevent illegal migration.

An open politics of ‘zero tolerance’ towards migrants, erupting from the return of the colonial past, also emerged through the open cooperation between Italy and Libya around information sharing, training for the Libyan police (Il Sole 24 Ore, 16 September 2006) and the construction of reception and detention camps for undocumented migrants. In 2003 for example, Italy financed the construction of a camp in Gharyan, near Tripoli, and then in 2004-2005 two other camps in Kufra and Sebha in the south were built. Additionally, Italy provided specific equipment to carry out the operations in the Mediterranean and improved its political standing on the basis of the success of ‘push-backs’, namely the interception of undocumented migrants and asylum seekers in Italian territorial waters and returning them to Libyan ones.

After a short parenthesis of a moderate left government (2006-2008), which pursued a path of continuity regarding the politics of migration policies and war reparation matters (La Repubblica, 26 November 2006), Berlusconi’s comeback in 2008 was symbolically inaugurated by a diplomatic trip to Libya, as a celebratory visit for his third term in office. The historic deal of the Friendship Pact, dated the 31st August 2008, but officially ratified only on the 6th February 2009, was eventually signed in a tent outside Benghazi, on the basis of a promise of $5 billion for colonial reparations. The agreement included the important construction of the long-disputed modern coastal highway parallel to the old crumbling Via Balbia. The bid to build the highway was eventually won by an Italian consortium led by oil services ENI company Saipem (Reuters, 11 February 2011). Through making this agreement, Berlusconi became the first Italian Prime Minister in history (Il Manifesto, 31 August 2008) to apologise for the crimes Italy had perpetrated against the Libyan population since 1911:
“In the name of the Italian people, as head of the government, I feel it my duty to apologize and express my sorrow for what happened many years ago and left a scar on many of your families” (Ronzitti, 2009).

Nevertheless, an additional declaration by the Minister of Interior Roberto Maroni clarified the agreement; he unequivocally closed the debate around reparations and historical guilt, stating that, “the most relevant part of this pact is the highway, which is the payback in order for us to patrol in Libyan territorial waters” (Paoletti, 2010: 201).

However, the maritime borders of the Mediterranean were not the exclusive object of concern in terms of migration control. As a consequence of the Friendship Pact, the Italian company Selex Sistemi Integrati was appointed to realise an electronic ‘security barrier’ to limit the flow of immigrants trying to traverse Libya’s southern borders (Sudan, Chad, Niger) before crossing the Mediterranean. The estimate of €300 million to build the control system included “a remote ‘operations and monitoring centre’ (presumably in Italy), on-the-ground mobile detection devices (such as truck-mounted radar and infrared scanners) but also blimp-like patrol drones” (Bialasiewicz, 2012: 859; Marks, 2010; Selex, 2007).

Ultimately, these details reveal the dual nature of the Friendship Pact, as the claims for justice for colonial crimes were vigorously intertwined with the strategic demands of the post-colonial operational present. The motorway, as both a material space of penetrative colonial power and an object of post-colonial bargaining, does indeed bear testimony to the slow and progressive evolution of technologies of control over time. From being a space of conquest at the time of colonialism, the road exists in the present day as the medium around which the security of the borders must be preserved against the free circulation of people from ex-colonial Africa.

Via Balbia and its alter ego thus project an endless intermingling of colonial traces and post-colonial interventions in constant evolution and mutation. The friendship pact allowed the old colonial road to renew its dual symbolic and functional features: as an embodiment of anticolonial reclamation, and at the same time as a functional tool to preserve Italian interests in relation to control over the movement and circulation of the population in the area of old colonial Libya.

The case of Balbia, as the epicentre of colonial reparations, helps to disclose more truths about the post-colonial agreement and its focus on economic cooperation.
and migrant issues. Italy and other EU countries for years sought the cooperation of Colonel Gaddafi’s Libya – a non-state party to the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees – to stem the flow of people arriving in Europe from Africa, which resulted - and still does - in serious violations of human rights of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants. After 2003, Italian/Libyan deals around migration became the object of huge public debate, raising criticism and condemnation from Amnesty International (Amnesty International, 2005) and the European Court of Human Rights (European Court of Human Rights, 2005). According to Human Rights Watch, the agreement around the Italian/Libyan joint-operations for border protection known as ‘push backs’ (Human Rights Watch, 2009), was set up in complete defiance of International Humanitarian Law.

The post-colonial Friendship Pact between Italy and Libya has de facto transformed the former Fourth Shore into a space where the de-localisation of frontiers and the externalisation of border control work as technologies of surveillance connecting Italy to its former colonies.

Didier Bigo and Elspeth Guild define the processes of the de-localisation of frontiers and the externalisation of border controls as a shift or transfer of responsibility and as the dislocation of operational spaces beyond the territorial border of the sovereign state (Bigo and Guild, 2005). The idiomatic expression widely used within the field of migration studies, “policing at distance” (Guild and Bigo, 2003: 22-37), aptly describes this projection of EU territorial borders onto surrounding states and regions by exporting its migration and asylum policies (Geddes, 2005). In this sense, as William Walters explains, rather than a space of dispute between nations, “the border becomes a joint responsibility and the locus of a new practice of police cooperation” (Walters, 2004: 682): there, “the response to migration is de-located and de-territorialised” (Ibid: 680-1).

These considerations are indeed essential to understand the Italian/Libyan agreement around migration as they show how the Friendship Pact de facto produces a sort of virtual spatial homogeneity between Italy and Libya, where Libyan territory ultimately functions as an integrated frontier linking the centre to the periphery.
The motorway: symbol and tool

The bargaining game between Italy and Libya – linking the promise of a new motorway to migration control techniques around maritime and land borders – introduces a new perspective on colonial and post-colonial relations between communication systems, government of a territory and the movement of people. This network marks the connection between colonial times and the post-colonial present with regard to colonial materialities. Even if belonging to different epochs, the Litoranea stands still as a space and medium, through which the movement of people is kept in constantly controlled circulation.

The striking example of the Litoranea as a modern highway introduced in the 1930s, shows how road infrastructures and networks were essential to fascist colonial government of Libya: as a clear surface on which Italo Balbo organised an intense circulation of settlers, labour forces, goods and troops, the Balbia perfectly echoes Foucault’s notion of a milieu as “the medium of an action and the element in which it circulates” (Foucault, 2007: 21). As Foucault explains, the milieu requires circulation and in the case of a road system, it inter-connects the development of infrastructures, the management of bodies and their movement. Hence, the milieu does not operate at the level of individuals but works at the level of a population, as its means and resources for sustainment. The conceptualisation of the road in terms of a colonial milieu presents the Litoranea as both a ‘symbolic’ and ‘functional’ device. On the one side, the Litoranea as symbol gave an aesthetic and ideological force to the modern concept of velocity, here applied to the domestication of the Libyan land. On the other side, the functional element at the root of the Litoranea project, is determined by the structural changes that road infrastructures entail: acting on the territory (through a politics of public works) as well as on the people (via the occupation, organisation and transformation of the land, and the creation of a settler community), the road brings with it a deep mutation in the ecology of the colony. Moreover, thinking of the fanfare of the inauguration of the motorway and Mussolini’s car racing along the coast, the road combined perfectly the symbolic and the functional elements at the basis of colonial government. At the time of empires and the colonisation of Africa, road communication networks – together with railroads and the telegraph – were instrumental in the creation of proper disciplinary regimes at distance. In the same way, the Italian Litoranea was the central trunk of a
power from which branches could rule on the margin (Carey, 1989: 212), imposing a spatial transformation of the colony through the separation of the settlements from native villages, the distribution of food and material goods, and the circulation of arms and troops. With the collapse of Italian rule in Libya the old colonial use of the Litoranea as a space and medium of circulation and control per se has been de facto dismissed.

The historical changes brought by the Friendship Pact in 2008 put a new perspective on the Litoranea affair. The road, having been for a long time the main object of concern as part of complex post-colonial bargaining, has turned out to be the main device through which new flows of capital and technical expertise circulate. In this scenario, the motorway deploys new ‘symbolic’ and ‘functional’ features, which are determined by the nature of the agreement itself. Whilst on the one hand the road embodies a symbol of colonial reparation, on the other it appears as the instrumental device to exercise control, in accordance with the Libyan authorities, over migrant circulation across the southern Libyan borders and across the Mediterranean. While the road no longer constitutes a physical, material platform of movement and conflict, it nevertheless constitutes a virtual medium, element and space for control over mobility. At the time of the post-colonial compensation, the Litoranea, even if not materially functional as a “space of circulation” and a “privileged object of policing” per se, exercised material power for the government over mobility, in the same way that colonial roads set disciplinary regimes at distance.

2011: the humanitarian scramble for the Mediterranean

After the eruption of the popular revolts in Tunisia and Egypt between late 2010 and 2011, Libya’s turn came on 15 February 2011. Early signs of the uprising started in Benghazi, once capital of Cyrenaica before the unification brought about by fascist colonialism in the 1930s. The protests of Benghazi spread to Al-Bayada in the eastern side of Libya and then, after a copy-cat effect brought the protest to the western region of Libya, it reached Al-Zawia on 20 February 2011 (Kashiam, 2012: 558). Even if located on two opposite sides of the Libyan coast, these cities stand on the same line formerly drawn by the fascist motorway. The highway, allowing the
rebels quick manoeuvres, set up most of the Libyan coastal urban centres as ideal stages for the popular uprising. Until the end of the conflict, the asphalt of the old crumbling Balbia went back to being a territory of physical collision and a space of conflict. Staging on the ground the moves and tactics of the rebels and the loyalist battalions and in the air above it NATO’s airstrikes, the road was once again a theatre of war.

The military escalation brought about by Gaddafi’s reaction, and then the UN resolutions 1970 and 1973 followed by the NATO attack which eventually led to the collapse of the Colonel’s regime, initiated a chain reaction that brought about the forced suspension of the Friendship Pact. As part of the treaty, the agreement on colonial reparations through the construction of the new Litoranea was also put on hold. Whereas the old Balbia was revitalised as a space of furious circulation of the military, insurgents, refugees and humanitarian operators, the Italian government abandoned the project of the new motorway and still today it remains incomplete.

However, it was the UN humanitarian mission that was to define a new ecology for the road. In the aftermath of the Libyan revolts and the NATO attacks, the site of Ras Ajdir at the Libyan/Tunisian border, formerly known for being the starting point of the Litoranea works in the 1930s, became the hot spot of the North-African refugee crisis.

At the dawn of a potential collapse of the political order brought about by decolonisation, the old colonial geography mapped by the fascist highway was revived as vital political territory, given that it included the area of Ras Ajdir, the epicentre of the humanitarian government of the refugee crisis. There, I argue, a symbolic bridge between the old colonial geography and the present day humanitarian geography could be built. The impact of humanitarianism on the strip of Ras Ajdir produced new spatial arrangements that change the former colonial geography drawn by the line of the motorway. Moreover, it introduced new forms of circulation in and domestication of Libyan territory. Through the 2011 humanitarian management of the refugee crisis, the region of Ras Ajdir underwent new spatial articulation and aesthetic configurations. While the fascist colonisation of Libya dismissed both the territory and natives as inflexibly ‘immobile’ and ‘static’, in 2011 the masses of refugees overcrowding the border of Ras Ajdir were to be subject to new forms of representation under biopolitical terms. In such a context, this chapter argues that the spatial re-organisation of the border area under the humanitarian
government ultimately preserves old-fashioned forms of ‘temporalisation’ and ‘spatialisation’ of otherness.\textsuperscript{37}

Echoing Hegel’s claim that “only through a connection to the sea can a European state become great” (Presner, 2010: 200), which describes the expansion of empires through the progressive acquisition of new spaces, French President Nicholas Sarkozy, as a response to the refugee crisis of 2011, called for the establishment of vast ‘humanitarian zones’ around the Mediterranean. According to Sarkozy, the proliferation of refugee camps was the only way that European leaders could guarantee themselves “peace of mind” in the face of a potentially huge upsurge of illegal migrants into southern Europe (Reuters, 15 February 2011).

After authorising “all necessary measures” to protect Libyan civilians from Gaddafi’s loyalist forces, the UN security council resolutions 1970 and 1973 in March 2012 approved a maritime blockade, the imposition of a no-fly-zone and massive use of air-strikes. The increasing number of refugees fleeing the Libyan war theatre pushed the European governments to allow international humanitarian aid organisations access to the areas of emergency. Italy initially accepted the UN resolution with a cold diffidence. This can be explained as follows: first, the increasing alarm seeing the island of Lampedusa being ‘assaulted’ by crowds of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants; second, the huge investments of Libyan funds in the Italian economy dampened any sort of enthusiasm;\textsuperscript{38} and thirdly, the idea of direct participation in the NATO operations risked compromising Italy’s new post-colonial course and reviving its past as a former occupier.\textsuperscript{39}

However, as described by Paoletti, after the attacks the first impact on the Italian public sphere was the deepening of the security narrative on migration, building on the proven political discourse founded on the arbitrary connection between migration and terrorism (Paoletti, 2010: 59). In this sense the fear of migrant flows of biblical proportions reaching the Italian southern coasts provided an

\textsuperscript{37} As Vivienne Jabri claims, rather than merely exoticising and essentialising them, this ‘spatialisation’ operates through letting ‘others’ only emerge “into history when called forth or recognized by the European subject” (Jabri, 2013: 63).

\textsuperscript{38} 7.5\% of Unicredit Bank is controlled by the Lybian Investment Authority and by the Central Bank of Libya; the same for the 2.01\% of Finmeccanica, a major Italian high-tech industrial group, 7.5\% of Juventus football club, and 2\% of ENI, the Italian multinational oil and gas company.

\textsuperscript{39} This fear created some hindrances to Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi who over the years had managed to build a strong personal relationship with Muammar Gaddafi, to the extent that in the preliminary stages of the Libyan revolts Berlusconi claimed he did not intend to interfere with Libyan internal affairs and would “not disturb Gaddafi” (La Repubblica, 2011).
opportunity to excite a dormant paranoia that the interplay between human trafficking, drugs and weapons smugglers might hide the threat of international terrorism. This was manifest in specific regard to those undocumented migrants and refugees coming from the Horn of Africa where Islamic fundamentalism was evidently spreading rapidly (Corriere della Sera, 5 April 2011). Additionally, panic spread further after rumours regarding Gaddafi’s intention to free 15,000 inmates from Libyan jails, push them towards the Italian coasts and thus increase the number of migrants already present in Italian territory.40

Regardless of Gaddafi’s alleged threats, Italy’s fear of losing influence over Libyan resources and being excluded from a new geopolitical order in the Mediterranean pushed the Italian government to accept the UN resolutions. Therefore, Italy decided to participate in the international humanitarian mission established at the Tunisian/Libyan border to face the refugee crisis, and on 4 April the Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini recognised the new Libyan National Transitional Council as the only legitimate representative of the Libyan people (Talmon, 2011).

As the UN started to organise humanitarian support for the refugees who were escaping from Libya towards Tunisia, the old Balbia was revived as the main battlefield, witnessing the clashes between Libyan rebels and Gaddafi’s forces. At the same time, on the humanitarian front of the crisis, the old motorway was the only artery across Libya that could contain and direct the flows of people out of the country towards the western Tunisian border.

As mentioned before, the UN together with singular initiatives of European countries such as Italy managed to provide assistance and aid at the site of Ras Ajdir around the strip of land that separates Libya from Tunisia. A report in early March from OCHA - Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs stated that, “the situation of thousands of people fleeing Libya stretched the capacity of Tunisian border authorities to the limit” (OCHA, 1 March 2011).41 Thousands of people (the

40 Contrary to any of these warnings, at the end of the Libyan crisis, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres, claimed that “Italy had less than 2% of the refugees, who have been hosted in Tunisia and Egypt” (Caritas Italiana, 2011).

41 The images of refugees overcrowding the borders therefore became unavoidable and the potential threat of a migrant invasion twisted the Italian media response as had been generally deployed since the early 2000s after the military occupation of Afghanistan, when the absence of images of refugees without food, water and medicine defined a new space of “constructed invisibility” (Guardian, 11 October 2001; Gregory, 2004: 68). According to the statistics of the IOM (International Organization
majority being workers from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sudan, the Horn of Africa and Asia) without access to food, healthcare, water and sanitation suddenly found themselves stuck on the Libyan side of the border. While thousands of Egyptian workers managed to get evacuated from Tripoli to Alexandria through airlift operations arranged by the United Kingdom and Canada, the western front with Tunisia rapidly became the hot spot of the whole humanitarian crisis. There, on the Tunisian side of the Ras Ajdir border, the humanitarian effort was arranged into four facilities: a reception camp contiguous with the frontier, which was fully managed by the Tunisian Army, allowing a maximum permanence of twenty-four hours; a transit camp under the supervision and control of Tunisian Red Crescent and International Federation of Red Cross; a refugee camp organised and managed by the United Arab Emirates; and the main Choucha refugee camp under the supervision of the UNHCR - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Tunisian Army (OCHA, 8 March 2011a). According to reports by Amnesty International, the site of Choucha, locally known as “The door to the Sahara” (Amnesty International, 2011), defines an isolated area of desert hosting refugees and asylum seekers living in the camp. At their peak, the camps set up at the border accommodated up to 20,000 stranded migrants, mainly in the Choucha camp (IOM, 2011).

**The case of the Choucha camp**

According to the testimony of the Italian Director General for Development Cooperation, Elisabetta Belloni (Il Sole 24 Ore, 5 March 2011; La Repubblica, 6 March 2011), Italy’s aid campaign became effective in the early days of the crisis and consisted of the donation of 5 tons of rice and 5 tons of milk delivered in Tricolour wooden boxes, multiple sets of emergency shelters, generators, oil stoves and several field tents for the strip of Ras Ajdir, where the Italian task force for the coordination of the humanitarian mission operated. Raising the stakes, Franco Frattini at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, confirmed that extensive Italian

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42 The way in which the Italian authorities carried out the mission also raised criticism and sarcasm. For instance the daily newspaper *La Repubblica* expressed criticism around the decision of the Italian government to name the camp “Villaggio Italia” as if it were a touristic resort.
engagement in the Libyan war-zones was paving the way for massive development projects (Il Sole 24 Ore, 6 March 2011). According to the OCHA report regarding the humanitarian situation in Libya, on 8 March 2011, Italy committed $4.21 million to the humanitarian crisis, becoming de facto the leading donor from continental Europe (OCHA, 8 March 2011b).

The mission developed between April and July 2011 under the direct supervision of the Italian Red Cross in the UAE - United Arab Emirates camp for the distribution of hot food and drinkable water - whereas in the Choucha camp the Italians were involved in coordinating work. Reports and diaries published by the Italian Department for Civil Protection indeed describe the efforts of Italian humanitarian operators and volunteers in establishing an integrated family centre, a playground for children and a field hospital (CESPI, 2011).

The Choucha camp was conceived and designed around two distinct groups – on the one side migrant workers who could return to their home countries, and on the other side Somalis, Eritreans and other “persons of concern” who could not go back for political or security reasons. Moreover, the risk of “ethnic” clashes between the different groups hosted within the camp increased in the harsh meteorological conditions and the poor hygienic and sanitary conditions in the camp deteriorated. Control over the camp eventually got out of hand in May 2011, when during one night arson caused the death of four camp inmates and the injury of nineteen others (OCHA, 27 May 2011). According to the UNHCR reports, two-thirds of the camp was destroyed, 3,000 tents were burnt, the camp health facilities and the integrated family centre were destroyed and other tents at the UAE Camp were looted, as was the humanitarian aid in the storage areas (UNHCR, 27 May 2011). After the UNHCR internal investigation led to the conclusion that unrest and violence in the Choucha camp had erupted because of nationality-based rivalries and prospects for repatriation/resettlement, the new plan for restructuring the camp was consequently based on community affiliation (nationality), family status (single or married) and prospects for repatriation. Among them there were refugees from Somali, Ethiopian and Eritrean communities. As Save the Children has reported, after the UAE refugee camp was dismantled in September 2011, the Choucha camp around the Ras Ajdir crossing became the only option for relocating all of the refugees waiting for asylum. Amnesty International stated that so far only “Australia, Canada and the USA have offered to resettle refugees stranded in response to the situation in Libya, while most
member states of the European Union have shown little willingness to help them” (Amnesty International, 2011).

Initially born out of the spontaneous settling of displaced refugees and then re-designed as a UN refugee camp, the Choucha camp has progressively assumed a non-temporary spatial configuration, which *de facto* reflects the non-temporariness of life in the camp. According to the description provided by Italian volunteers operating in Choucha, “in the camp there are progressive signs of permanence and sedentariness, some farmers from Darfur even started to plant maize outside of their tents; a few TV satellites stick out of the tents as if they were ears...children are going to school...Choucha is a kind of village with its small market, a barber, some leisure centres, a poor but efficient hydroelectric network, a decent service of garbage collection and a little field hospital”43 (Cooperazione Italiana allo Sviluppo, 2011).

A path that started in the 1930s with the fascist attempt to transform part of the African wilderness into a modern metropolitan area continued in 2011 with the humanitarian government of the Libyan refugee crisis in the area of Ras Ajdir. From colonial occupation, through post-colonial disputes around reparations and development projects, up to the government of migration and the recent refugee crisis, the old motorway can be read as an open ‘text’ wherein the evolution from colonial to post-colonial technologies of government over humans and things has run its course. The case of humanitarian government in Ras Ajdir represents a fundamental stage of such a process.

According to anthropologist Michel Agier, “in a context in which some sort of war is constantly brewing, the compassion and the care actually provided by humanitarian projects belong to a politics of ‘containment’ of poor countries and of the migratory flows coming from areas that are politically, socially, or ecologically weakened” (Agier, 2010: 1). The reality of synchronised but opposite movements and flows of humanitarian aid moving from the north to the south and flows of undesirable migrants moving from the south to the north (Benthall, 1994), suggests how the humanitarian government is participating in what has been called a “war against migrants” (Migreurop, 2007 and 2009).

43 The translation from Italian is mine.
The prominent role of camps and the development of waiting areas on the borders of the countries of the South, are only one part of a broader political process that promotes a more important position for humanitarian action in the world at large. Thus, if the camps are the most developed example of this contemporary governmental reality, humanitarianism extends over a number of situations and can be described in terms of the following triptych: extraterritoriality, relegation and emergency.

Italy’s return to the Ras Ajdir area by humanitarian means - the place where the celebration of the modernist dream of ‘speed’ was initiated - this time highlighted the totally opposite dimension of the ‘camp space’ where the myth of speed was shattered, the inhabitants of the camp experiencing a static, never-ending present. According to Michel Agier, against the traditional Augustinian partition of time between past, present and future, where the ‘present’ is the connective moment that realises temporal unity, the partition of time in the camp space is organised in the following way: the ‘before’ is commonly determined by war, violence and wilderness (as a common representation of a-historical forms of sociality and community, where ‘tribal clashes’ can generally describe ‘other’ political territories), the ‘after’ is shaped around the Western ideas of ‘peace’ and ‘civilisation’ (projecting the horizon of eventually hegemonic Western values), whereas the ‘during’ is geographically confined to the camp space and generates a suspended and static present whose duration is unknown and uncertain (Agier, 2008: 49). Apart from reviving colonial depictions and representations of time, the tri-partition of the time of the refugee experience within the camp space serves to explain the way in which temporary or permanent strategies of separation work.

Taking the example of Choucha, the need to dampen the growing tension among the inhabitants of the camp and prevent ethnic clashes shows how separation produces effects on a micro-level: for instance the division into separate groups changes the nature of the category of ‘refugee’ itself as this is now “split in several distinct subcategories of ‘vulnerability’ which end up creating a hierarchy of misery” (Agier, 2008: 39). Additional segregation and separation between ethnic groups within the camp, which is imposed after security requests from the humanitarian aid workers, gradually leads to the crystallisation of borders within the camp itself, which seems to stage a sort of postmodern, living ethnographic exhibition where everyone reconstructs their native habitat. Moreover, the extraterritorial condition of
the refugees is deepened by an additional displacement that is generated by the lack of contact with the local population.

The Choucha camp, while giving a spatial and aesthetic dimension to what William Walters has called the ‘humanitarian border’ (Walters, 2011), is also the locus where separation works through the production of taxonomies and a nomenclature of migration. According to Sandro Mezzadra and Martina Tazzioli, the Choucha camp is a heterogeneous space for control over mobility and for humanitarian purposes, which work alongside other governmental devices and practices (Tazzioli, 2012): for instance while the dispossession of passports by the Tunisian army engenders a sort of identity vacuum and “sets the stage for the taxonomic operations and exercises of migration and humanitarian officers” (Mezzadra, 2013), the inmates of the camp are ‘stamped’ by the Border Team of the IOM - International Organization for Migration and made visible by bracelets of different colours, corresponding to their elusive status (asylum seekers, economic migrants, refugees, vulnerable subjects, unaccompanied minors). In such a context the entanglements between humanitarianism, human rights procedures, security concerns and practices of separation demonstrate how the identity of the inmates is also at stake and how through the dismantling of the temporal unity between past, present and future, the spatial dimension of the camp, shaped around an immutable and static rhythm, represents the hegemony of temporal fixity, where the identity of the inmate is temporarily abducted.

**Lampedusa and Manduria: humanitarianism in Italy**

Medical anthropologist Didier Fassin, when commenting on the controversy raised between 1999 and 2001 around the French reception centre of Sangatte with regard to the management of immigrants and the deterrence of asylum seekers, stated that, “the liminality of the situation of refugees and the ambiguity of the hospitality they are provided offers a transition between the national and the international scenes” (Fassin, 2012: 16). Considering such a conceptual framework, the case of the Tunisian/Libyan humanitarian crisis presents a constant intertwining of the national and the international. There, the politics of containment, besides the commitments in
the ex-metropolitan area of former colonies, had to face new emergencies and become operational within the national boundaries.

The stories of the island of Lampedusa and the camp of Manduria are other emblematic cases for a better understanding of the dynamic previously described with the case of Choucha: in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab revolts in North Africa the Italian government, being unable to determine a stable solution to the migrant crisis, orchestrated a diffuse displacement of migrants in the Italian territory. From Lampedusa (Sicily), the main point of disembarkation, migrants and refugees coming from Tunisia and Libya were firstly sent to the CARA camps (Centro di accoglienza per richiedenti asilo or ‘Reception camp for asylum seekers’) in the regions of Calabria and Puglia for identification, and then sent back again to Sicily into the Villaggio della Solidarietà or ‘Centre for Solidarity’ in Mineo for temporary asylum.

On 25 March 2011, in order to put a stop to the rising tension on the island of Lampedusa between the 4,500 migrants and the local population, the Italian government authorised the construction of a new reception camp for identification in the commune of Manduria, in the southern region of Puglia. Onto this former Second World War airfield, the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Interior organised a mass displacement and re-location of detained migrants from other Italian camps in an indistinct assimilation of refugees coming from the Tunisian coasts to the general trope of the undesirable ‘undocumented migrant’. According to the initial intentions of the government, the camp became a new site for identification and expulsion, wedding the humanitarian premises to security concerns. But the need for the Italian government to use the ‘threat’ of illegal migration to emphasise issues such as ‘protection of national borders’ and ‘sovereignty’ had to reckon with those migrants who were escaping Ben Ali and Gaddafi’s police, and were unprepared to accept new forms of imprisonment overseas under a humanitarian façade. On 2 April 2011, 1,700 migrants broke the police blockade around the camp, staging a protest outside the fences and reclaiming their right to have valid visas for travelling across Europe. Such tensions and struggles can be read as consequences and indeed bring further evidence of the intertwining of humanitarian principles and security purposes within the Italian system of aid facing the 2011 migratory crisis from North Africa. Moreover, the juridical void embodied by camps such as the one in Manduria was also additional proof of inadequate EU legislation around migration management and control. For instance, this is demonstrated by the diplomatic clash that Italy had with
France in the aftermath of the first arrivals of Tunisian migrants to the Italian coasts in spring 2011: the French government intended to block the passage of migrants who wanted to cross the Italian/French border and continue their trip towards other destinations. Facing the risk of putting at stake the whole architecture of the Schengen free-circulation system, Italy and France eventually reached an agreement and the Italian government released temporary visas for humanitarian reasons (valid for 6 months) allowing circulation in the Schengen area.

The option of such emergency legislation was in addition to the most frequent and common practice, already represented here by the case of Gaddafi’s Libya, of legitimising bilateral agreements around the shared patrol of the Mediterranean coasts and coordinated push-backs in order to prevent illegal migrants entering Europe. On 4 April, Minister of the Interior Roberto Maroni flew to Tunis and signed a new agreement with the new Tunisian authorities (Corriere della Sera, 5 April 2011; Il Sole 24 Ore, 5 April 2011). Towards the end of the crisis, when the release of temporary documents for circulation became effective, the fortification of the Manduria camp proceeded silently through the construction of a three metre high fence, legitimising the idea of a closed area still deprived of any clear juridical status, which swings between the CPT (Centri di permanenza temporanea or ‘Centre for Temporary Permanence’) and CAI (Centro di accoglienza e identificazione or ‘Reception Camp for Identification’). According to these terms the militarisation of aid erupts out of the deliberative proliferation of legal voids, where the lack or suspension of civil rights aims at accustoming migrants, refugees and asylum seekers to a transitory existence and precarious life (De Giglio, 2011).

The cases of Lampedusa and Manduria are just two emblematic examples that demonstrate how, from the 2008 Friendship Pact to the refugee crisis in 2011, it was
possible, under the government of migration, humanitarian protocols and the proliferation of camps across the Mediterranean, to form a geographical continuity between Italy and Libya: the posthumous and virtual reproduction – under a different guise – of the metropolitan homogeneity between Italy and Libya, as it was envisioned at the time of colonialism.

**Italy “re-connects” to Libya**

Referring to Michael Ignatieff’s human rights discourse of “a moral vernacular for the demand for freedom within local cultures” (Ignatieff, 1999: 319), Aihwa Ong defines it as the “universal standard of the moral good that will provide the language for articulating human freedom in a range of presumably ‘bad’ cultures in the global south” (Ong, 2009: 159). This interpretation seems to suggest how the return of former colonial powers to ex-colonies can justify and validate a rigid division between zones of humanity and zones of inhumanity.

However, while on the one hand this spatial separation attempts to minimise the proliferation of ‘contact zones’, on the other hand the 2011 ‘humanitarian scramble’ for the Mediterranean and the case of the humanitarian government of the refugee crisis at the Tunisian/Libyan border *de facto* contributed to the multiplication of new contact zones – camps and aid areas. Here it is possible to visualise a spatial continuity between the centre and its ex-colonies overseas.

Originally the embodiment of the colonial modernist vision of a metropolitan contiguity between Rome and Tripoli, in 2011 the Fourth Shore was eventually reconnected to Italy and to Europe under the impact of a post-colonial humanising spatial politics. Here, through the externalisation of security practices, the limitation of the circulation of migrants and the proliferation of static humanitarian spaces, the projection of the ‘sovereign’ beyond the borders of the nation state practised during the colonial epoch was revived in the post-colonial present.

Within such a scheme, the examples of the humanitarian government of the Ras Ajdir strip and the humanitarian intervention on Italian territory to face the refugee crisis, demonstrate how borders constantly shift in the ex-colonial world: while colonial geographies strictly depended on the formation of borders as fixed lines, on the contrary, in the post-colonial present borders are polymorphous and, as
Ann Passi suggests, they proliferate “as processes, practices, discourses, symbols, institutions or networks through which power works” (Passi, 2011: 69).

William Walter’s idea of “humanitarian borders” is much like what Passi suggests. The concept of the “humanitarian border”, as the locus where separation functions through the classification of migrants, explains how border strategies inform the post-colonial condition. Louise Amoore also contributes to this debate by emphasising how today borders are not simply a mere “matter of disciplinary practices that stop, prohibit, enclose, delimit or proscribe. The work of the contemporary border is conducted in and through movement itself”. In understanding the essential tie between borders and movement, Amoore’s study echoes Foucault’s theory, according to which spaces of security develop through circulation itself “sifting the good and the bad, ensuring that things are always in movement” (Foucault, 2007: 65).

Therefore, the inter-play between borders and circulation is the *conditio sine qua non* for creating spaces of security and proves that, as Edward Said famously theorised, post-colonial politics, echoing the colonial model, function as spatial practice (Said, 1993: 71). The case of reparation for colonial abuses intertwined with Italy’s politics of migration has also shown how such spatial practice develops through the interchange between de-territorialisation – externalisation of border control, development policies, humanitarian containment in buffer zones serving as external borders – and re-territorialisation, the proliferation of reception camps for migrants and asylum seekers within the home territory.

However, despite these analogies, it is also important to underscore how such practices do not reflect the operational procedures of colonialism: in fact whether or not colonialism primarily aimed at conquest, post-colonial geopolitics revolves around populations as manageable entities and as the object of transnational government. As Vivienne Jabri points out, through developmental and humanitarian means this politics has gradually transformed the ex-colonial territories into zones of military and civilian operations (Jabri, 2013: 28).

Therefore, Italy’s post-colonial politics of reparation with Libya must be framed in this context. The case of the motorway is epistemologically essential to understand the two major events that explain the parameters of difference between Italy and its others: as already discussed, the first is the transition from colonial to post-colonial forms of governmentality, as this shows the past as a constitutive
power in shaping present hierarchical relations between the former colonisers and the colonised.

The second unveils the mutual dependency of technologies of government of otherness and the practices of the representation of such otherness. For a better understanding of this relation, it is essential to refer to the lesson of Edward Said, found in his discussion of ‘Orientalism’, as providing the framework that allows us to understand how in both the colonial and post-colonial epochs it was the knowledge of the Orient that supported and reinforced mechanisms of power that were aimed at the production of a “political vision of reality” based on the opposition between “the familiar” and “the strange”.

Thinking of this orientalist polarisation, we can then return to the case of the motorway and read it as the material surface on which across the years the separation between “the familiar” and “the strange” has been implemented. Moreover, following the vicissitudes of the motorway from fascism to the present, it is possible to look at the littoral highway as ultimate material evidence for and testimony of the simultaneous evolutions of technologies of government and practices of the representation of otherness.

The story of the Litoranea is therefore a great testimony of how power relations develop and necessarily synchronise with changes in the aesthetics of power. This is the key element around which the transition from the colonial to the post-colonial takes place.

**Imaginative geographies at humanitarian borders**

Edward Said, while classifying colonial forms of representation, introduced the concept of “imaginative geography” to define Western attempts of representing and differentiating otherness in various cultural, textual, spatial, temporal and natural forms. Visual metaphors, visionary descriptions of other places and types of humanity, rather than simply elaborating differences and separations through cultural constructions, served to create figurative values that influenced the identity formation of the Western observer or coloniser himself. The production of antithetical images such ‘our space’ and ‘their space’ indeed served to mark the spatial and temporal distance which Said described thus: “imaginative geography and
history help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away” (Said, 2003: 55). The dramatisation of distances became an object of concern at the moment of absorbing – materially, aesthetically and geographically – the ex-colonies into the homeland. The formation of the Western subject is thus reflected by the “imaginative geography” as it is made functional in the proliferation of spaces of separation and to immortalise otherness.

In relation to that, Anne Orford, extending the use of Said’s imaginative geography, looks at the proliferation of humanitarian spaces in areas of crisis in the Global South and assumes that “humanitarian intervention narratives work in this way – to reassure the ‘international community’ that there is a differentiated other, and to locate this other ‘somewhere else, outside’” (Orford, 2003: 124). According to this pattern of representation, the “imaginative geographies” underpinning the recent humanitarian crisis in Libya, reiterate the separation between areas of humanity and relegate the refugee’s existence to an unconditional state of spatial and temporal distance.

Said’s uses of imaginative geographies produce configurations that combine ‘distance’ and ‘difference’ through a series of spatialisations. This framework has been further developed by Derek Gregory’s concept of ‘architectures of enmity’ that considers the productive and performative power of such imaginative projections as a figurative value, founded on the radical dichotomy between civilisation and barbarity (Gregory, 2004). An important scholarly debate has thus been raised in relation to the collateral effects of this dialectic, which is exemplified by strict and deliberate differentiations between rational forms of violence and irrational ones (Springer, 2011; Pain, 1997).

While it is not the intention of this thesis to elaborate on this further, it is essential to notice that humanitarian practices of spatialisation and temporalisation are the direct consequences of such an unsolved dichotomy. Paraphrasing Said and Gregory regarding imaginative geographies, Simon Springer for example argues that, “places are accordingly transformed through fabrications where narratives inform us of meaning through the inflective topographies of desire, fantasy, and anxiety” (Springer, 2011: 94).

According to these considerations I want to emphasise that from colonial times to the post-colonial humanitarian present, the border-zone in Ras Ajdir has
been used for the production of overlapping images that recall Said’s use of imaginative geographies. Therefore, we can note how fascist era images such as ‘home-like’, ‘fluency through velocity’ and ‘utopia’ as representative of colonial modernism stand compared to the most recent aesthetic of the ‘prison-like’, ‘claustrophobia’ and ‘static reality’ of the camp spaces erected at the Tunisian/Libyan border for the containment of migrants and refugees. In relation to these reflections, at this point a better focus on the material dimension of the Libyan motorway is needed in order to highlight the connections between the old-fashioned colonial sense of African immutability, endless limbo and depressive silence, and new forms of the artificial suspension of time brought about by humanitarian government.

There is an enlightening allegory within the earliest and most famous case of Italian post-colonial novel – *Il tempo di uccidere* (A time to kill) by Ennio Flaiano – that helps reinstate the material function of the highway in relation to the resurrection of an ‘endless African present’. Flaiano’s 1947 novel, reflecting Joseph Conrad’s gaze on Africa as the metaphysical battlefield emptied of humanity, is the earliest example of Italian literature coming to terms with the vanishing colonial world and imagery.

Set in occupied Abyssinia, Flaiano narrates the misfortunes of a young Italian officer on a few days leave taken due to a toothache. The protagonist, after the accidental killing of his occasional Abyssinian lover, starts fearing that he will contract leprosy. His fears of contagion and of being caught start a chain reaction that eventually leads the soldier to further crimes and killings, as the only way to hide his secret. Besides returning to an image of Africa which is similar to the earliest colonialist depictions, where the surrounding nature and humanity are so hostile and insalubrious that one character pronounces that, “once a land creates hyenas, something must be tainted in it” (Flaiano, 1990: 5), the book is also a great testimony to the collapse of Italian modernist expectations and colonial visions. In fact, in the first pages of his novel, Flaiano introduces the turning point that will shock the very existence of the protagonist. The misfortunes of the soldier begin just after a banal accident he has with a lorry along a colonial road paved by the fascists. This event forces him to leave the convoy, set out on foot and face his dramatic fate.

In an allegoric sense, I argue that the accident shows how a sense of abandonment and moral decay takes over at the moment the engine stops working.
and the lorry gets stuck on the desolate land. Then, after the collapse of the
mythology of speed, the protagonist of Flaiano’s novel is suddenly thrown into the
world of the Abyssinian natives, which is then described as tremendously slow and
passive: landscapes are static and silence dominates, while men and women carry on
a repetitive routine in which they are depicted as relentlessly apathetic and almost
indifferent.

Within Flaiano’s fictional scenario, the trope of the broken-down vehicle used
by the author reinforces the idea of speed technologies as devices that set the divide
between types of humanity in the colonial discourse. Moreover, they also perpetuate
the colonial division of anthropological time between north and south, which to a
certain extent seems to have left its traces in today’s humanitarian operational
present.

In this sense, building a parallel between Flaiano’s allegory and the case study
debated in this chapter helps us to understand the centrality of colonial materiality to
practices of separation and representation of ‘otherness’. Motorways, as much as
engines and vehicles, symbolically and functionally serve the logic of both colonial
and post-colonial imaginative geographies as they reinforce material and
epistemological divides between ‘familiar’ and ‘strange’, centre and periphery, and
north and south. Therefore, they function as platforms on which the transition from
the colonial to the post-colonial takes place.

Reflecting upon ideas previously debated in this chapter, such as Michel
Agier’s tri-partition of time in the camp space as the pre-condition for sedentariness
and immobility, together with the use of taxonomies of migration as preconditions
for the de-personalisation of migrants and refugees, gives us the opportunity to
understand how the present-day humanitarian praxis, while intervening in
emergencies of a different scale, also organises and shapes identities and landscapes,
images and tropes that recall certain epistemological and anthropological separations
that were popular at the time of colonial domination.

In this way, the non-temporary and suspended dimension of the “humanitarian
border” in the camp of Choucha at the Ras Ajdir border echoes old-fashioned
colonial ‘temporal’ cages in which ‘other’ landscapes and people were confined.

Moreover, it is through such an interchange that the transition from the
colonial to the post-colonial dramatically emerges, while in both contexts the
“epistemological separation of colony from metropolis” and “the systematic occultation of colony from metropolis” (Said, 1993: 51) perpetuate relentlessly.

From fascist era colonialism to the 2011 humanitarian crisis in Libya, opposing forms of ‘spatialisation’ and ‘temporalisation’ – the acceleration of time through the highway experience against the a-temporal ecology of the camp space – overlap on the asphalt of the old Balbia. In 2011, along these lines, a new metropolitan topography arose out of the spread of humanitarian intervention across the Mediterranean. This setting has allowed for the coexistence of humanitarian spatial continuity and technologies of separation at the basis of a politics of containment towards threatening migrant flows. With the intertwining of a humanitarian praxis and politics of separation, the return to the Libyan shore has opened up the possibility of new forms of interventionism in decolonised areas. Moreover, it links the a-temporal ecology of the camp to the reproduction and restoration of those colonial images of a seemingly far-off, endlessly still, silent, a-historical African world which, across history, has kept on representing ‘otherness’ as a menace of enmity.

In this context, on the surface of the old fascist motorway, while different and specular forms of governmentality and representation have mutated symmetrically, different forms of circulation have also interchanged.

While at the time of the colonial excitement regarding metropolitan Libya, the inaugural works of the motorway in Ras Ajdir were celebrated as a victory for the modernist utopia of fast circulation over the ‘static’ Libyan world, today’s post-colonial humanitarian geography instead points to a slow and organised circulation of a constructed immobility.

However, in spite of contrasting ontological and epistemological pronouncements and discursive uses of the strip of Ras Ajdir across time, the motorway has kept its primary material use par excellence: the road is a space of circulation and a privileged object of government (Foucault, 2007; Dias, 2010: 175). Across time, the Litoranea has indeed embodied the medium between the homeland and the periphery, preserving a strong reciprocal dependency between the two. This is the materiality-effect produced by the motorway throughout time.

The Libyan road also lasts as the ultimate expression of the colonial legacy and material power as it served for the orchestration of opposite movements of
people and objects across history. The story of the motorway is evidence of the many complexities that lie at the origin of the centre/periphery relation. In fact, as illustrated by historian Fredrick Cooper, “colonization itself, far from just imposing a high degree of connectivity on an isolated continent, at the same time connected and disconnected, created new networks and severed ancient bonds. To study colonization”, he writes, “is to study the reorganization of space, the forging and un-forging of linkages” (Cooper, 2001: 190).

Accordingly, this chapter has demonstrated how along the road built by the fascists in the 1930s, different forms of spatialisation and temporalisation have been set across history linkages and networks but also distances and separations. From colonialism up to the post-colonial present, the Litoranea’s asphalt has been a political territory that has always played a role as an epistemic source for the understanding of past and present relations between Italy and Libya.

Around the site of Ras Ajdir, the road has cyclically given evidence of its performative power, symbolic and functional. First, the road has continued to serve as a cross-temporal material space for the construction of otherness. On its surface, the colonial image of ‘speed’ vs. ‘slowness’ produced in the 1930s overlaps with the recent representation of ‘African timelessness’ brought about by humanitarian articulations of space.

Second, the road has preserved its instrumental function as a space and medium of circulation; first, as a line of colonial penetration for military, touristic and economic purposes, and then as a humanitarian border where the optimisation and the organisation of migratory and refugee flows take place.

The case of the Litoranea Libica demonstrates how the links between coloniality and post-coloniality are visible in the operational present, but most of all it represents a long-lasting symbol of colonial materiality. From being a territory of conquest at the time of fascist imperialism, then a post-colonial bargaining chip for colonial reparations, up to the creation of a space for humanitarian relief, the Litoranea is the epicentre around which different forms of circulation – humans and things – and technologies of government and containment have constantly revolved.
Chapter Four
The Circular Life of the Obelisk of Axum

Our things in our hands must be equals, comrades.
Alexandre Rodchenko

The Roman Empire’s practice of looting archaeological goods from satellite territories inaugurated a long lasting tradition that symbolically describes imperial world dominance. In this context, the plunder of monumental obelisks represents the ultimate symbol of such a practice. Their theft, transfer and re-erection in the coloniser’s homeland as emblems of triumph, have indeed embodied for centuries a lasting model of imperial hegemony over other cultures. Monumental obelisks have also played an important role in the history of Western Imperialism as multifunctional markers of ceremonial places and national identities.

However, in the course of history, obelisks have also played a contradictory role. After the fall of the Roman Empire no obelisks were plundered for more than a thousand years. During the Renaissance the Roman Catholic Church rediscovered the importance of Rome’s existing obelisks in proving the weakness of Paganism under the shade of Christianity (Dibner, 1950). Only the rise of European empires and the dispute between Napoleon’s France and the British Empire over Egypt as a colonial territory gave a symbolic aura back to the plunder of ancient obelisks.

Moreover, the age of Empires contributed to creating a new way of looking at obelisks as part of monumental architecture. From symbols of mastery to commemorative monuments of imperial feats, displaced obelisks progressively became “non descript-monuments” totally absorbed and immersed into the ecology of modern cityscapes. For modern Europeans obelisks were indeed “unattached to any cogent sign system and available for a multiplicity of readings” (Haxell, 1989: 1-2), representing the total detachment of signs from what they signified and abandoning the surrounding space as dramatically void and empty of substance (Burton, 2001: 41-71). Cases such as the erection in 1833 of the Luxor obelisk in Place de la Revolution in Paris – then named Place de la Concorde – saw the obelisk functioning as a marker for pacification, carrying no political meaning and being strategically instrumental to transforming the square, famously known as the
revolutionary theatre of the guillotine, into a space of unity and retrieved harmony. Ancient obelisks, while becoming symbols of empty cultures, became indeed what the novelist Robert Musil, in relation to the French case, defined as a “compass or distance marker” (Musil, 2006: 65), as sorts of totemic needles which stand vertically as an embodiment of the inability of a certain community to come to terms with its founding violence.45

Only in the 20th century with the rise of fascism in Italy, did ancient obelisks regain their symbolic and performative power in the wave of a new European colonial venture: the conquest of Ethiopia achieved by Mussolini in 1936. Here, the looting of an ancient funerary obelisk from Axum, situated in the north-east of Ethiopia, arose as a symbol of power and domination and gave to the fascist regime the illusion of following in the footsteps of Ancient Roman conquerors and the confidence to proclaim itself as their legitimate successor (Philipson, 1994).

The obelisk of Axum was looted by fascist troops in 1937, transported to Rome and erected in the Piazza di Porta Capena as a symbol of pride in Italian expansionism. At the end of the Second World War, with the Paris Peace Treaty in 1947, the United Nations issued an eighteen month deadline for the restitution of the obelisk to the Ethiopian people, together with other stolen goods, archaeological finds and works of art that had been purloined during the fascist occupation (Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, 1947).

This chapter investigates the Italian colonial presence in the Ethiopian plateau through two significant and symbolic moments, one that marks its inception and the other its conclusion. The drawn-out process of decolonisation shares a narrative form with the dawn of the fascist occupation, metaphorically built on the communicative message and material power expressed by the Axumite obelisk and its uses across

45 Beyond the case of Paris, also in the examples of London and New York, as a final destination for Alexandria’s obelisks (respectively in 1878 and 1880), can ancient displaced obelisks be seen to have an “uncanny” role in the spectrum of Western Modernity. While the French used the obelisk as an anti-monument to sanitise its public space, the British relegation of the obelisk to the Thames Embankment rather than to a ceremonial place, symbolised the thorny presence of a monument which, at the dawn of a forthcoming British takeover of Egypt (1882), could have been perceived as an unnecessary exercise of strength and risk for the fragile geopolitical order in the Middle East. On the other side of the Ocean, the erection in Central Park in New York of the second Cleopatra needle, received as a donation from the Egyptian authorities to praise the neutralist role played by the US in relation to the British/French clash over Egypt, while becoming a sort of early acknowledgement of the rise of US influence in global affairs, was nevertheless labelled as a foreign monument with no roots in American culture and history and no commemorative relevance for the American public opinion (d’Alton, 1993; Carrott, 1978).
time. The temporal extremes, namely the symbolic inception and conclusion of Italian colonialism in Ethiopia, reveal a more general perspective on the Italian post-colonial condition, which relies on the symbolic use of this monument as a narrative tool and device for disclosure on the historical complexity of the phenomenon of Italian colonialism in the Horn of Africa as a whole.

This chapter sheds more light on the political discourses around the obelisks during Mussolini’s regime and in post-colonial Italy. Furthermore, it explains how those discourses are founded on complementary narratives, namely the myth of an act of dominance and the gesture of an honourable concession, both having their reference points in political actions relying on the same object: the antique obelisk.

In spite of the conditions of reparation set out in the Peace Treaty of 1947 and the regular reminders and official protests from the Ethiopian authorities, the restitution of the obelisk to Ethiopia was kept on hold for almost seventy years. Italy’s responses alternated between silence, improbable exercises of justification, and requests for more time, systematically delaying the fulfilment of its international duties until 2002, when a bilateral agreement set the return. The transfer in 2005 and re-erection in Axum in 2008 subsequently led to a symbolic reconciliation with Ethiopia.

The obelisk of Axum, also known as the *stele*, has been an object of circulation between Italy and Ethiopia across different epochs - colonialism and the post-colonial present - first as an object of colonial plunder and then as a disputed artefact, until its return to its legitimate owners.

Within the economy of Italian history the stele serves a double, cross-temporal function: in fascist times as the medium, the object, through which the regime’s narrative and propaganda celebrated its victory over Ethiopia, which together with Eritrea and Somalia defined the borders of Italian possessions in East Africa. Then, sixty-eight years later, it was again through the stele that Republican Italy decided to symbolically end the long path of decolonisation of Ethiopia.

The chapter shows the body of the stele to be the epicentre around which the narrative of the Italian nation has changed across time, from fascism to the present day. I will concentrate the analysis on the identity of the obelisk itself. In the 20th century the story of the obelisk was a story of spoliation, circulation and exchange. Therefore, this chapter narrates the vicissitudes of the obelisk through its circular movement, the transportations between Ethiopia and Italy and the erections therein.
Through this description, the chapter argues that it is exactly to these movements and the skilled expertise and tools of the colonial master that the obelisk owes its verticality. In so doing it will also show the way in which the obelisk, either as a material marker for national identities or as a symbol of both colonial power and anti-colonial struggle, traces a line of material continuity between the colonial era and the post-colonial present.

**The way to Axum**

Before the attack on Ethiopia was launched in 1935, the lack of a mature Italian colonial consciousness was considered by the fascist regime as the cause of the dramatic historical delay that had relegated Italy to a minor role since the time of the colonial partition in 1884. Hence, in the wake of the *scossone coloniale* or ‘colonial shakeup’ inspired by the Duce’s first visit to Libya in 1926, the words of Arnaldo Mussolini, “the British colonial possessions are 99 times bigger than the area of Britain, those of Belgium 80 times bigger than their motherland, those of Holland 61 times, those of France 20 times, whereas the Italian ones only 7 times” (dei Gaslini and de Magistris, 1930-31: 27), *de facto* called for a stabilisation of the existing colonies, foreshadowing the intention to expand Italian territorial possessions in the Horn of Africa – beyond Eritrea and Somalia. As historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat correctly points out, the conquest of Ethiopia and “the consolidation of the country’s power-bases in the Adriatic, Mediterranean, and Red Seas would allow [*Italy*] to emerge from marginality by positioning it as the crucial bridge between Europe and Africa” (Ben-Ghiat, 2006: 389). Following the same geographical imaginative pattern which previously saw the annexation of Libya as the southern geographical continuation of the Italian peninsula, the Ethiopian *ambe* or ‘plateau’ represented for the imperial fascist imaginary the ideal continuation of the Italian alpine barrier as the natural defences of the Empire’s borders in East Africa (Micaletti, 1938: 140).

At the time of the invasion, images of military and civilian lorries, convoys and automobile races along the modern Libyan arteries inspired fascist colonialism to expand the process of modernisation to the Horn of Africa and export the engineering progress to Ethiopia. Therefore, the intertwining of colonial enthusiasm
and the consciousness of technological prowess was used as Italian propaganda to stir public opinion, embracing the spirit of velocity and metropolitan comfort:

“[…] suddenly a painful pang hits me and I hear in a whisper:
'take the car and go, it does not matter where nor how. As if you were a knight of fortune leave for the unknown, and take with you Italy’s roar throughout the skies, the stars, and the continents!'”

(dei Gaslini and de Magistris, 1930-31: 10-12)

In May 1936, through the conquest of Ethiopia, fascism reached the peak of popularity and consensus: after forty years of waiting, revenge for the Battle of Adwa, which on 2 March 1896 saw the crushing defeat of the Italian troops at the hands of Emperor Menelik II forces, eventually materialised.

Like in Libya, through demographic colonisation, the plan of the fascist “corporativist” social revolution expanded into Ethiopia as a fertile ground for its implementation: slogans such as the civilising mission, the wish for a “place in the sun” and the demands for equal rights just like any other colonial power, fostered the idea that with Ethiopia, Italy could reach the maximum expression of colonial modernity.

As Nicola Labanca argues, the attack on Ethiopia in 1935 is also historically marked as the last case of colonial warfare in the history of European colonialism (Labanca, 2002: 192). However, while European empires were forced to compromise with rising anti-colonial and nationalist movements shaking the architecture of power in the colonies, fascist Italy nurtured the dream of the Empire, chasing after the chimera of an Italian modernity.

The loot

Ben-Ghiat argues that in the eyes of Mussolini, Ethiopian lands embodied the perfect opportunity for the continuation of the settler colonialism project, as had already been experimented with in Libya under Governor Balbo, towards a progressive European re-population of Africa (Ben-Ghiat, 2004). In order to reach

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46 The translation from Italian is mine.
such a goal, new infrastructure was needed and a new road system in East Africa was essential for sustaining the full military occupation of Ethiopia and to guarantee modern standards in the Italian settlements. In so doing, successful colonisation of Ethiopia depended mostly on the development of engineering plans for the expansion of the road networks that already existed in Eritrea and Somalia. As has been previously shown by the story of the Litoranea, road infrastructure played a strategic role in every colonial context as a strategic device for military purposes. In fact, according to fascist propaganda, “the first order given by the Duce to His Excellency [Viceroy Pietro] Badoglio for the glory of the Empire was: roads, roads, roads” (L’industria in A.O.I., 1939: 51). In 1937, after the occupation of Ethiopia, the Minister of Public Works, Giuseppe Cobolli Gigli, decided to use 43,700 native workers plus 10,000 Yemeni and Sudanese labourers to accelerate the works along the stretches of Asmara-Gondar and Massawa-Addis Ababa (Rassegna economica dell’Africa Italiana, 1938: 1689).

The working conditions were described as harsh. At this stage, according to the fascist propaganda, the modernisation plan was forced to come to terms with a scarcity of skilled labour, lands with few building materials, awful meteorological conditions and the objective problem of leaving Addis Ababa under the crossfire of Ethiopian rebels. In order to gain independent access to the sea, without going through the French colony of Djibouti, the artery connecting Addis Ababa, Gondar and the Eritrean port of Massawa in the Red Sea became a work of high priority.

David Rifkind, in his study on Italian colonial infrastructure in East Africa, points out that the fascist desire to emulate ancient imperial Rome’s footsteps, inspired Mussolini to deploy State power for the realisation of two main projects: road infrastructure and looting antiquities (Rifkind, 2011: 501). Therefore, while making their way towards the Red Sea and carving a road network through the rocky Ethiopian plateau, fascist troops and road workers marched through the city of Axum, already occupied on 14 October 1935 in the early stages of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (Arnold A. C., 1937).

In antiquity, the Kingdom of Axum (100 B.C. to 700 A.D.) represented the earliest form of Ethiopian civilisation and a pioneering attempt to achieve integration among Ethiopian people under a common imperial system envisioning the horizon of a Greater Ethiopia. Axum was in fact the heart of a kingdom that extended across the areas of modern Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, Somalia, and Yemen (Mariam, 2009).
Despite progressive political decline and the rise of Christianity as a hegemonic religion, Ethiopian emperors continued to be crowned in Axum, as a gesture to symbolise the antique sacredness of the city (Munro-Hay, 1991). To underscore the sacredness of the city, historian Alessandro Triulzi highlights how Axum “is also the holiest lieu de memoire of Ethiopian Christendom with its time honored and highly symbolic Ark of Alliance” (Triulzi, 2006: 439; Hirsch and Fauvelle-Aymar, 2001).

When fascist troops entered the ancient site of Axum, they saw an impressive number of pre-Christian monarchic steles, that had originally been carved and erected to mark the location of underground burial chambers, and which in part were still standing vertically although many others were lying solitarily, broken into pieces as a result of an earthquake centuries earlier. Each monument had “at ground level its surface carved with a false door; tiers of a false windows climb to the top, as in a multi-storied building, perhaps representing royal residences in the next world” (Curran, Grafton, Long and Weiss, 2009: 293).

Once the military occupation of Ethiopia was completed (1935-36), the second largest obelisk – 24 metres high, lying broken into five fragments respectively weighing 57, 54, 25, 25 and 11 tons – was plundered by the colonial troops of Minister of the Colonies Emilio Lessona, under personal orders from Mussolini (Calderini, 1936). In 1937 the regime sent the archaeologist Ugo Monneret de Villard to start an archaeological survey in the area of Axum and supervise the works of dismantlement and transportation of the stele (Maffi, 1954). According to the written testimonies of de Villard, from the outset this was known to be a complicated engineering task (Monneret de Villard, 1938).

The narration of the entire process of transportation respected the traditional prism of the fascist propaganda: the chronicle alternated between moments of swagger – the transportation company Fratelli Gondrand declaring “for the greatness of Rome nothing is impossible” (Ficquet, 2004: 173-74) – with moments of thorough and detailed technical description about the journey of the five heavy granite blocks to Italy (Gli Annali dell’Africa Italiana, 1940: 963).

In this manner, the colonial propaganda captured the attention of the whole of Italian public opinion: the journey was described as “perilous” and “brave”, the fascist narrative getting carried away with descriptions of “high altitude gaps”, “perilous and narrow bow-streets”, “weak bridges incapable of bearing the heaviness
of the stele” and “lorries crossing water courses on river beds to reach the opposite banks” (Ibid).

Once the convoys reached the port of Massawa in Eritrea, the fragments of the stele were then loaded onto the steamship “Caffaro” and eventually shipped to Naples. After its arrival in Rome, the obelisk was re-assembled, and on 31 October 1937 it was finally erected in Piazza di Porta Capena in front of the Ministry of Italian Africa, for the celebrations of the fifteenth anniversary of the fascist March on Rome.

In 1947 however, the Paris peace treaty forced Italy to fully renounce claims to its overseas territories and article 37 stipulated the restitution of the looted works of art, objects of religious and historical value belonging to Ethiopia. After that, a new odyssey for the obelisk started. As reported by historian Richard Pankhurst, the written testimonies of the Ethiopian ambassador Ato Emanuel Abraham tell us about the way in which Italian diplomacy started new exhausting negotiations to elude the restitution. According to his statement, Italy firstly pushed Ethiopia to give up to the obelisk and declare it to be a donation from the Ethiopians to the Italian people, as a sign of friendship (Pankhurst, 1999: 237). Then in 1956, a new bilateral agreement was approved, but the restitution of the obelisk was kept on hold by an ambiguous clause: while Italy agreed to remove the obelisk, the plan was limited to its transportation to Naples, leaving the Ethiopian government to do the rest and bear the costs of the whole operation.

When in 1974 the revolution of Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam took over Ethiopia, the demands for the return of the obelisk and compensation gradually lost their intensity. Only after the fall of the regime in 1992 did new pressure begin to come from Ethiopian and international activists (Pankhurst, 1997). Then, in early 1996, the Ethiopian Federal Parliament instructed the Ethiopian Government to demand that Italy return the obelisk immediately.

In 1997, the Italian President of the Republic, Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, went to Addis Ababa; he was the first Italian head of state to visit Ethiopia. While acknowledging the Italian colonial crimes against the Ethiopian people Scalfaro formally promised the return of the obelisk. As reported by Krystyna von Henneberg, Scalfaro also “laid a wreath of flowers at the Monument to Victory. Located in the central Arat Kilo district of Addis Ababa, at Meyazia 27 Square, the monument
consists of a mounted obelisk that commemorates the defeat of Italian fascist forces and the return of Haile Selassie to his country in 1941” (von Henneberg, 2004: 70).

Through the mediation of UNESCO – The United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture the bureaucratic process that eventually led to the restitution and re-erection of the stele in Axum in 2008 got underway. Then, under Silvio Berlusconi’s government in 2002, new bilateral agreements were signed with Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. These agreements ratified the transfer of ownership of the obelisk to the Ethiopian government.

The first segment of the stele came back to Ethiopia on 25 April 2005, thus beginning the process of return and re-erection that was eventually completed three years later, on 4 September 2008.

As a conclusion to this long process, the Italian ambassador to Ethiopia announced that “the stele has now another meaning: it represents the eternal friendship between Ethiopia and Italy” (Corriere della Sera, 19 April 2005). The stele’s restitution after such a long wait finally promised to give closure to the era of brutal fascist colonisation.

The return

The return of the obelisk to Ethiopia brought to an end a long process of reconciliation, which was also characterised by a spirit of technical prowess. From the beginning of the dismantling process in Piazza di Porta Capena the attention of the Italian public focused on the details of the technical aspects of the operation: the difficulty of splitting the stele into three blocks to facilitate the loading procedures, the 160 ton weight of the obelisk, and the challenge of finding an appropriate cargo plane able to contain each separate piece for its journey to Ethiopia.

During the six years that separated the first phases of the dismantlement and the effective re-erection (2002 - 2008) the Italian public remained entranced and enthralled by the operational details, which created out of the act of restitution, a genuine feat of technology and engineering. Echoing the audacious tones of the fascist descriptions of the first journey of the obelisk to Italy, the press narrated its trip back to Ethiopia as an epic tale of adventure: there were risks including adverse weather and monsoons, the objective difficulty of landing planes at the airport of
Axum, as well as a site 2,300 metres above sea level which would expose the plane to the rarefaction of the air and to a short landing strip. Furthermore, the only aircraft suitable for the task, the ‘Galaxy’, was at the time being used by the American army in its military operations in Iraq.

As reported by Corriere della Sera, the Italian supervisor of the Ministry of National Heritage and Culture, there were no alternative options to air transport: road transport appeared impracticable due to the lack of accessible routes covering the distance of 1,000 km between Addis Ababa and Axum, whilst navigation to an Eritrean harbour, following in the footsteps of the former fascist transportation, was impossible due to the on-going tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea (Corriere della Sera, 15 July 2004).

Despite threats of earthquakes and tropical storms being forecast by the research centres appointed by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to coordinate the operation, the central block of the stele, three years after the dismantling, was finally loaded into an ex-Soviet Antonov AN 124 aircraft - “the biggest plane in the world”, as described by the Italian press - borrowed from Ukraine. As Lattanzi, the Italian company responsible for transporting the obelisk to Axum emphasised, the obelisk was the largest, heaviest object ever to be transported by air. The conditions for the transportation were also very strict: heaters had to be installed in the plane to protect the monument from low air temperatures. The obelisk was then wrapped in steel bars to stabilise it in case of turbulence during the six-hour flight.

After the agreement of 2004, which made official the terms of the joint-operation between the governments and UNESCO when the last block of the obelisk arrived in Axum, the President of the Republic Giorgio Napolitano finally found the words “an example of scientific and technological efficiency” to describe the operation. According to the President it was a celebration of a genuine feat of Italian modernity, a masterpiece of Italian scientific excellence, achieved in spite of difficult geographical, meteorological and political conditions (ranging from the skirmishes between Asmara and Addis Ababa to the American cargo planes busy in Iraq). After a delay of more than half a century, it was a mission of high technological accomplishment.

47 As the Corriere della Sera observed, these included “the air temperature (the landing required less space in low thermic conditions) and the risk of critical weather (Axum airport does not have radar so the pilot is obliged to improvise the landing)” (Corriere della Sera, 26 April 2005).
The technological aspects of the restitution of the obelisk played an important role. Through the restitution of the obelisk post-colonial Italy could finally regenerate a paternalist discourse around the preservation of cultural heritage, which traditionally stands as a premise to any debate over colonial civilising missions. Hence, in the next paragraphs I argue that the Italian discourse around the engineering ‘miracle’ of the dismantling, transportation and re-erection of the stele in its native land revives the timeless opposition between modernity and barbarity, repeating first the model of separation of European colonialism, and subsequently that of fascism.

The Axum affair within the Italian discourse on civilisation

In post-colonial Italy the persistence of a mythology such as the civilising mission relies on the fascist equation made between civilisation and archaeology which, while tracing a line of separation between moderns and barbarians, places the Italian colonial experience into the realm of a more general European faith in the exceptional primacy of culture in the Western world.

As Mia Fuller explains, the civilisation/archaeology equation of the Italian nationalist discourse in the 1930s aimed to trace a continuous line through Italian history, tying the Roman ruins as proof of the great ancient civilisation to the great expectations of a future hegemonic fascist empire. The high degree of civilisation expressed by the ancient Roman architecture was meant to symbolise a modern outpost in the underdeveloped African colonies (Fuller 2009: 19). According to the fascist visions, the erection of the obelisk was meant to revive an imperialist and civilisational role, which, from the time of Augustus up until the rise of the Church as a temporal power during the Renaissance, Rome had had as the cradle of civilization. In this sense, the looting of the obelisk from Axum and its erection in

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48 Since Emperor Augustus, obelisks have been an integral part of the imperial and civilisational cityscape of Rome. After Egypt fell under Rome’s control in 30 BC, obelisks became the main target of imperial looting, and through slow transportation and shipment across the Nile and the Mediterranean, they made their way to Rome as a final destination. Afterwards, with the Renaissance and the rise of the Church as a temporal power a radical change to the politics of obelisks and to the design of Rome’s urban landscape was brought about. No more looting, but instead a spatial reconversion and re-organisation of the ancient Roman sites and heritage set the priorities. Hence, obelisks materialised as objects of internal movement, restoration and re-erection. The evolution of Rome as the cradle of Christianity inspired the papal power to rediscover the monumental legacy of Roman booties and reconvert them as cultural heritage, functional for the hegemonic spirit and
1937 completed the imperial skyline, together with the thirteen obelisks already present in Rome. Mussolini chose the obelisk of Axum to be a symbol of the temporal and spatial unity between present and past. As the fourteenth obelisk in Rome, it was the ultimate marker of a lasting imperial tradition.

The Axumite ‘needle’ was erected as the ‘connective’ between Ancient Rome and the fascist Empire; it was able to absorb spatially and temporally the legacy of the past. Moreover, for Mussolini’s purposes, it also played a role as internal architectural palimpsest reflecting the external colonial space. In this way, the obelisk, through its verticality, gave evidence of and represented its aggregative power. The obelisk’s erection eventually shaped a colonial geography aimed at the realisation of the symbolic union between the centre and the periphery by means of architectural forms.

Similar to the case of the Litoranea Libica and the impact of road infrastructure on the Libyan territory (reclamation of lands, modernisation of infrastructures and repopulation) where colonial geographies contributed to the formation of Italian colonial identity, the looting of the obelisk worked for the same reflexive purposes. The construction of the Italian imperial self indeed progressed in parallel ways. In this sense, the cases previously discussed of land reclamation projects in the Pontine Marshes and Libya, have demonstrated how Italian colonialism always worked on a dual level of action. In fact, the fascist re-conquest of Libya followed internal colonisation and aimed at the homogeneous organisation of the Italian territory through the unification of the homeland with its overseas possessions. The formation of an Italian colonial identity thus passed through different and simultaneous practices of spatialisation.

In the same way, the case of the obelisk of Axum, as a parallel to the architectural transformations in the occupied cities (Tripoli, Addis Ababa, Asmara), demonstrates how architecture became functional for the regime’s purposes as both ‘external’ and ‘internal’ practice. The erection of the obelisk shows the urgency of the Catholic Church. The internal circulation, exhumations and re-erections of pagan obelisks within the space of Rome defined the core of a strategy aimed at projecting the holy space of Rome as the centre of a dominant Christian world. In this sense, the realisations of engineer and architect Domenico Fontana under Pope Sixtus V in the late 16th century, represented the most enlightening example of such a practice: the number of exhumations, restorations and manipulations – from Latin inscriptions to installations of Christian crosses on their top part – and the displacement and relocation of Egyptian obelisks, illustrates the attempt to use the past heritage to build a new hegemony against other civilisations and religions (Curran, Grafton, Long, Weiss, 2009).
within the fascist regime to invest in the homeland as much as overseas where the restyling of cityscapes completed the Italian identity making process by architectural means. The consolidation of colonial geographies is indeed spatially divided into two complementary spheres of action where it is possible to imagine the historical continuity between the past, present and future in the name of a timeless greatness. In this sense the erection of the obelisk of Axum in Rome demonstrates the “solipsism of Italians using colonial architecture to tell themselves a certain kind of story about Italians, their magnificent past and the glorious future” (Fuller, 2009: 15).

In relation to this last aspect, Krystyna von Henneberg emphasises the role of the obelisk of Axum as the ‘connective’ between distant temporalities. In so doing, she analyses its capacity to mark place in Italy during fascism.

Taking into consideration the role of colonial monumentalism in Italy, von Henneberg refers to the hazardous attempt to transform distant events and unknown places into colonial place makers able to inspire collective and shared practices for the commemoration of battles and death. Von Henneberg assumes that the fascist erection had to “craft a lasting story, capable of surviving through the decades” (von Henneberg, 2004: 60).

However, she argues that unlike other former European imperial powers, the plinth supporting the stele in Piazza di Porta Capena was not decorated with low reliefs representing the epic journey of the obelisk. On the contrary, fascism wanted to envision the idea of Rome’s eternal greatness “forgoing even the plaque with names of the heroes or the fallen, the Latinized inscriptions or the triumphal headgear in the form of a star or globe perched on the top. It offered no fertile mothers or plump children, and no soldiers leading their comrades into battle. It had no fascio, the ubiquitous symbol of fascist power” (von Henneberg, 2004: 53).

These considerations demonstrate the way in which the challenge for the regime consisted of avoiding the possibility that the static verticality of the obelisk could reflect an aesthetic of immobility and represent the Empire’s ‘paralysis’. Against this, the fascist regime actually tried to envision the obelisk as an eternal architectural reality able to preserve temporal and spatial continuity across historical time, tying together the glorious Roman legacy with the new horizons inspired by fascism. Therefore, the material power expressed by the obelisk in the 1930s can be seen as the embodiment of an a-temporal imperial geography, which was designed to become hegemonic in the official and popular attitudes towards colonial imagery,
where Italy’s past and future could finally unite under the shade of Rome’s architectural eternal mastery and technological supremacy.

The 2008 process of re-erection of the stele on the plain of Axum – a joint operation that involved the cooperation of several national and international institutions, such as the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of National Heritage and Culture and UNESCO – celebrated not only technical efficiency, but also Italian concern for the preservation of their cultural heritage. While, as many scholars have claimed, the return of the stele has eventually set a precedent in the current process of formation of new principles of international law in the field of cultural heritage and restitution (Cornu and Renold, 2010; Scovazzi, 2008), the restitution *de facto* renewed and decontextualised the civilisation/archaeology equation that was hegemonic in the fascist discourse on cultural goods and vestiges.

Moreover, I argue that this equation has been revived in the post-colonial present and inscribes the Italian policies of restitution of looted goods within a wider European context and discourse where the politics of reparations through restitution establish new relations between former empires and ex-colonies (Taylor, 1992).

For instance, the value of the primacy of culture in the Western world has been represented by the British writer Christopher Hitchens with regard to the subject of looted goods, works of art and other stolen items being returned to their original places (Hitchens, 2008). Looking at the possibility of Britain returning the Elgin marbles to the Parthenon in Athens (Hamilakis, 2007; Yalouri, 2001), Hitchens shapes his argument around the conceptual invention of a timeless eternal Hellenism. He claims that the promotion of a change of direction in the politics of restitution of looted colonial goods is literally aimed at doing justice to the ideal Hellenic ethos and history. This offers the public the rediscovery of the classical discourse on ‘origins’, by virtue of which the marbles need to get to the Parthenon, as this is the original location where they were born. In so doing, Hitchens supports policies of restitution and compensation in respect of others’ legitimacies and sovereignty. This also seems to contradict the discourses of nationalist right-wing movements. If we take into consideration the example of the Axum obelisk, it is possible to see how the Italian right-wing parties stood firmly against any possibility of return and pretended to be the ‘true’ defenders of the national cultural heritage upholding the old-fashioned fascist equation of civilisation/archaeology.
Yet I argue that Hitchens’ views also lead to less obvious and intuitive conclusions: his argument simply looks at Greece in terms of the cradle of Western culture and civilisation. According to this, I consider Hitchens’ theorisation of *retrieved* humanism in relation to Walter Mignolo’s explanation of Occidentalism as “the geopolitical figure that ties together the imaginary of the modern/colonial world system.” Mignolo considers Occidentalism as “the condition of emergence of Orientalism: there cannot be an Orient, as the other, without the Occident as the same” (Mignolo, 2000: 51). Through the interpretative lens offered by Mignolo, Occidentalism can be interpreted as testimony to a lasting European tradition and perception born out of the Renaissance humanistic conceptualisation of science and philosophy where “[…] the perception of the Arab world at this time was not a perception that we can call ‘Orientalism’ and not even the perception of the ‘Other’, but rather the perception of an enemy whose knowledge had the same foundation: Greek thought” (Mignolo, 2000: 60).

Following Mignolo’s argument, we can then consider his classification of “colonial semiosis” as dispelling of the notion of culture:

“Because culture is precisely a keyword of colonial expansion, according to sign system (language, food, dress, religion etc.) and ethnicity (skin colour, geographical locations)” (Mignolo, 2000: 15)

According to this conceptual framework, it is possible to understand how ‘culture’ as a concept became, in the Western tradition, a word with a meaning approximately between that of nature and civilisation. Hence, rather than supporting the restriction of the European geographic margins, Hitchens, under the umbrella of a ‘shared’ and ‘universal’ cultural origin, calls for a new symbolic expansion of those margins. In so doing, this practically advocates a new design for the euro-centric discourse on ethnicity, opening up *de facto* to the necessity of a restyling of geopolitical and economic orders within the ex-colonial world.

Following this pattern, we can understand how the 2008 festivities following the agreements between Italy and Ethiopia around the restitution of the obelisk and the re-erection of the stele celebrated their ‘new friendship’ and marked the closure of the reconciliation process. The common, constant reference to antiquity when the Ethiopian civilisations of the Horn of Africa were opening up new bridges, first to
Ancient Greece and then to the Roman Empire, justifies the loyalty to the prism of European Classicism and displays the adherence to the discourse on origins cited above. Following the social prism of inventing traditions, the reparation decided on by Rome is part of a discourse that re-invents cultural borders and stretches them to expand Italy’s political hegemony. The need to support the idea of a primordial ‘blood kinship’, instead of looking at reparation for colonial responsibilities, develops with an urgent need to focus on the geopolitics of the post-colonial present. In this sense the celebrations also represented the *mise en scène* shared by both the counterparts – Italy and Ethiopia – of a parade, and the ostentation of the ancient powers of Ethiopian civilisation. While the political establishment of Addis Ababa looked at the re-erection as proof of their strength against Eritrea, senator and Italian Foreign Affairs undersecretary Alfredo Mantica claimed, “Ethiopia plays a strategic role in the politics of the Sub-Saharan Africa for the resolution of the conflicts in the Horn of Africa” (La Repubblica, 23 October 2008). Italy thus gave Addis Ababa the responsibility and the duty of being *de facto* the only barrier to the advance of the Somali Islamic courts in the Horn.

Together with renewed forms of imperial arrogance, the reconciliation with Ethiopia projects the imagery of the entire country in a new international role, finally taking Italy back to its preferred African corner as the Western rampart for the containment of Muslim Africa.

**Overlapping national identities**

The return of the obelisk to Axum, according to the words of undersecretary Mantica, was also advertised to the Italian public as a gesture of generosity or a gift to reinforce the Ethiopian sense of identity (Del Boca, 2004).

As Alessandro Triulzi clearly points out, “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” (Triulzi, 2006: 439).

The removal of the stele from the centre of the city, rather than simply representing an end to the colonial time, has played an important role in the
formation of identities in both Italy and Ethiopia. While the obelisk under fascism became a symbol of a retrieved Roman imperial identity, after 1989 the myth of Axum became an integral part of the discourse on the Ethiopian nation and served the institutionalisation of an Ethiopian identity after the years of the dictatorship of Mengistu. The new Ethiopian government used the return of the obelisk to shape the Ethiopian national identity around the revolutionary experience of the Tigrayan’s People Liberation Front (TPLF), which led the fight against the Derg.

On the contrary, in Italy, once the fascist imperial infatuation with Roman symbolism had vanished, the obelisk of Axum was slowly drained of its symbolic features. After the Ministry of Italian Africa was abolished in 1953, the stele was softly assimilated within the post-colonial urban landscape of Rome until its restitution. Then, before its final dismantlement, in late 1998, the obelisk “stood wrapped in scaffolding, adorned with government posters that explained the reasons for its imminent departure” (von Henneberg, 2004: 46). Only after the decision to return the stele back to Ethiopia was taken, did a public debate develop around the return of the obelisk. Reactions among political representatives spread rapidly, reviving a sense of ownership around the stele. A new preservationist discourse developed, as Maurizio Gasparri, MP for the post-fascist right-wing party Alleanza Nazionale clearly illustrated, when he commented that the obelisk should have stayed where it was because it was “by now part of the urban landscape of Rome and recalled a precise historical period, however one wants to judge it” (Del Boca, 2003). Undersecretary in Culture Ministry Vittorio Sgarbi claimed that the obelisk should have been considered a “naturalised citizen” of Italy, which caused a proper uproar in Ethiopia (BBC, 10 January 2002). Furthermore, Mr Sgarbi insisted saying that Italy should not give its consent to move a well-preserved monument from a safe place to “a war zone” with the risk of seeing it destroyed (BBC, 28 May 2002). At the same time, though from a different standpoint, the Italian press raised another debate around Italy’s exceptional role within the history of European colonialism:

“We are the only ones, among the European colonialist nations, to have given back a part of our war booty, and it is still not clear if this should please us or make us feel like authentic fools” (Il Messaggero, November 2003, quoted and translated by von Henneberg, 2004: 46).
In spite of a new delay to the restoration works, caused by a lightning strike that hit the top of the obelisk in 2002, the final stage of dismantling started. The Italian government had agreed to general supervision by UNESCO, which received from Italy a financial contribution of $5 million. Eventually the Istituto Italiano per la Conservazione ed il Restauro or ‘Italian Institute for Preservation and Restoration’ became operative at the Axum site, to provide scientific and archaeological expertise to restore prestige to the Ethiopian valley – already named by UNESCO in 1980 as a world heritage site (UNESCO, 1980) – and, in a quasi evolutionary approach, to “donate” identity to the Ethiopian nation.

However, in spite of several cases of loud and nostalgic protest around the restitution of the obelisk, it is important to emphasise that after the end of the Second World War, the stele of Axum had lost almost all of its symbolic meaning for Italy as a nation. From the 1950s onwards, the silence around the obelisk became the emblem of a clear attempt to purify Italian history from the memories of violent colonialism. In spite of the protest against it and the nostalgia for the past among some of the Italian public, the removal of the obelisk de facto embodied the erasure from the urban space of Rome of an important testimony to the colonial past. Paradoxically enough, through its obligation to do its duties and the acknowledgement of historical injustice, Italy brought to an end a revisionary project aimed at the epistemological re-organisation of former colonial spaces. The rhetoric around the restitution and the silence that surrounded the stele for almost seventy years demonstrates how the formation of an Italian post-colonial identity has relied on the spatial negation of colonial history.

After considering the role of the obelisk in forming the identities of different nations throughout history, at this point it is essential to understand how in such a

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49 Against all of the preservationist claims of better protection for the obelisk on Italian soil, before the final handover, the body of the stele underwent another shock that put at risk its stability and verticality: in 2002 during a violent storm, lightning hit the obelisk causing a deep fracture at its top. A part of the obelisk then fell down in Piazza di Porta Capena and broke into pieces. Italian undersecretary Sgarbi, after Ethiopia blamed Italy for the damage to the obelisk, again raised his polemic verve creating new controversies: “this is indeed the good time to send the obelisk back” Mr Sgarbi claimed. While claiming that his objection to the restitution merely revolved around technical issues, as the movement of the monument could have damaged it, Sgarbi said, “But now it has already been damaged, we might as well give it back. […] It would be meaningless to restore it first and then send it back, as the operation involved in moving it would damage it again” (BBC, 31 May 2002). Regardless of these provocations, the restoration of the obelisk followed. Engineers, archaeologists and restorers intervened and tried to reassemble the fragments, to solve delicate technical problems and to avoid any damage to the stones, which in 1937 had been connected by the fascists with mortar and bolts (Croci, 2008).
process, the identity of the obelisk must also be taken into consideration. For many years, the stele of Axum, like a subaltern border object, shared its identity of being an ‘outsider’, as a forcibly exiled object, with the role of an ‘insider’ within Italian history and especially within the ecology of the space of the Piazza di Porta Capena in Rome.

The problem of the obelisk’s multiple identities exposes the stele to the question of origins. Therefore, the following sections will investigate the multiple identities of the obelisk through the cyclical processes of dismantlement, displacement, circulation and re-erection. These phases de facto explain the obelisk of Axum as the ‘connective’ between two distant temporalities, the colonial past and the post-colonial present. In so doing, my focus on the material process at the base of the obelisk’s erections will help to understand the transition from colonial relations of power to post-colonial ones.

**The obelisk’s troubled identity**

In order to investigate the polymorphous identity of the stele across time, I argue that it is necessary to focus upon the technical assemblages that the obelisk underwent in 1937 and 2008. This means that the stele’s verticality, as a symbol of both imperial Italy during fascism and of post-colonial Ethiopian identity, is related to the technical expertise of the colonisers. It is the chronic dependency of the stele’s verticality on the expertise and ‘tools of the master’ that renders the debate around the stele’s identity a difficult dilemma.

Since it was placed in the Piazza di Porta Capena, the stele of Axum bears testimony to a displacement that lasted sixty-eight years. The scenario of the 1937 looting complicates any simple inquiry into discourses on the stele’s identity, or multiple identities, since the Italian records describe the nature of its retrieval in terms of the discovery of a huge, solitary and abandoned stele, broken and fragmented into five pieces, which lay anonymously on the Axum’s valley floor, just waiting to be erected in Rome for a full recovery of their authority and majesty (Monneret de Villard, 1938). Its plundering de facto generated a narrative that forced the obelisk to be a part of the contemporary history of Italy, which through its dislocation, shaped and reinforced the imperial identity of the conquerors. This
narrative begins from the ruins of a broken and ‘abandoned’ stele, whose historicity within the European world was due to its re-erection in Rome. This act created an image of restored verticality to the monument and the conceited claim of a higher evolution of Italian identity.

The identity of the obelisk to which Italy related from the late 1930s until its restitution, arose through the ‘Italian discovery’ and through the procedure of re-erection, which, from the loading and the transportation phases up to the final erection in Rome, completed a process of identification. The accomplished identification was founded on the transformation/translation of amorphous rubble into ruins, and the production out of the broken stele of an image of dormant raw material that needed a new shape, a new physical reconstruction and indeed a new identity. That it is possible here to make a proper distinction between ruins and rubble constitutes the founding act of a colonial policy towards objects: while the term Ruine, according to Georg Simmel’s reflections on modern architecture, refers to a form that celebrates its conciliation with the environment and drives human agents to reason out the past as the symbol of the cultural and historical identity of a certain community, the term rubble corresponds to a rootless raw material which requires a transformation that can lead either to the generation of an identity or to an erasure, to forgetfulness (Simmel, 1958). The technical efficiency and capacity of Italian engineering was able to turn the Axumite obelisk from being a grave marker for royal burial chambers into first, a symbol of the glorious dreams of the fascist regime, and later into a representation of Ethiopian national identity, which was symbolically received by the Ethiopians as a gift from their former oppressors. The result is a fragmented reality generated by the cyclical overlapping of different and opposite narrative programmes within the historical experience, which are due to the communicative capacity of the object/obelisk itself.

The possibility of interchanging different spheres of action or texts makes the discourse on origins dependent on the logic of ‘where you are’ and on Jacques Derrida’s principle “there is no outside to the text” where “every text is only part of a context” (Bennington and Derrida, 1993: 90). According to such a theoretical framework, any identity that is constituted participates only in fragments of reality, giving an opportunity to each text and its interpreters to propagate infinite new meanings. In this way identity is never given, received or reached, and only a boundless and indefinite process of identification exists. Derrida’s idea of
“deconstruction” *de facto* forces any inquiry into origins to read between the lines of a given reality or textuality.

However, contrary to Derrida, such indeterminacy is often due to the lack of what Edward Said defined in his critique of literary texts as the ‘worldliness’ of the text. According to Pal Ahluwalia, Said’s ‘worldliness’ defines the materiality of the being of the text, within which its material and cultural presence can be proven to face the risk of an apolitical view of the world and of a weak adherence to historical reality (Ahluwalia, 2010: 86-92). Following Said, it was precisely within the space of the Piazza di Porta Capena that the stele, through its erection, became the *alter ego* of its Western super-subject, “whose historicizing and disciplinary rigor either takes away or, in the post-colonial period, restores history to people and cultures ‘without’ history” (Said, 1993: 35).

Nevertheless, there is a risk that the case of the stele might be absorbed by a Derridean indeterminacy of origins. The theoretical burden of finding the “true origins” or essence of something has been widely debated in the philosophical arena. However, against a fixed notion of identity, Said also speaks in terms of an “atonal” and “contrapuntal” interplay of self-ness and otherness in defining identity. In this sense, “fixation” itself needs to be read through the relation between identity, space and place, as well as mobility, as the constitutive parts of the life and evolution of subjects and objects. No pre-given essences are definable as such if we consider together with Said the overlapping territories and intertwined histories at the base of an identity making process, as being en-framed within a certain architecture of power (Said, 1993: 56).

Following Said’s interpretation, I would argue that the most appropriate tool to investigate the multiple origins and transitory existences of the stele is given by the genealogical methodology offered by Michel Foucault in his famous essay *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*. In particular, the issue of the identity of the obelisk recalls the distinctions that Foucault made about Nietzsche’s different uses of the term “origin”.

Against the search for a true origin – *Ursprung* - Foucault chose the terms *Herkunft*, which he translates as “descent”, and *Entstheung* meaning “emergence, the moment of arising”. Against immobile forms of existences “that precede the external world of accident and succession” (Foucault, 1998b: 371), Foucault thinks in terms of objects of genealogy, where a genealogical approach – as opposed to a metaphysical one – investigates “the historical beginning of things” against the
“inviolable identity of their origin” (Foucault, 1998a: 373). According to this methodology, it is indeed possible to investigate the different discursive uses that the stele has had, from its antique erection, through the fascist appropriation up to its recent return to the Axum valley, without dismissing Said’s call for ‘worldliness’, which enable us to ‘access’ the obelisk in various episodes in history.

From the fascist looting to its return, the identity of the stele has been historically determined in relation to the impact of technology and scientific expertise in temporally distant phases of assemblage, organised mobility and circulation, and complex procedures of erection. All of these phases of the life of the obelisk – that are temporally and spatially distant – define in some way a sort of material reproduction, which was arranged under the scrutiny of Italian engineering skills.

After the first spoliation in 1937, during the process of erection, the fascists raised the obelisk to perform a plan of colonial government with a dual function: while shaping the colonisers’ identity as modern and imperial agents, the stele’s new verticality was chained to the technological skills of its master. Moreover, its 2008 re-erection on Ethiopian soil, under the supervision of Italian engineering excellence, also followed standard European colonial practice in terms of establishing relations of power, and interceding with the valorisation of history and archaeological goods. This parallelism clearly indicates how the colonial mentality expressed itself at its best in relation to otherness (that in our case refers primarily to an object) based on the disciplining of bodies with the aim of making better use of them. As Michel de Certeau suggests, the conqueror “will write the body of the other and inscribe upon it his own history” (de Certeau, 1975: 3). Therefore in the minds of the ex-colonisers, the body of the stele necessitates the precise techniques of scientific knowledge, able to guarantee full safety during the procedures of dismantling, assemblage, and the separate loading of each piece of the obelisk onto the Antonov aircraft that would carry it to its final destination in Axum.

Therefore Italy relegates the identity of the stele to a process of material assemblage that stands at the base of both acts of erection of the obelisk.
Materiality and paternalism

Since the period following its first removal from Axum, the identity of the stele has been cyclically determined and defined through proper processes of technical assemblage that echo practices of material re-production.

First, the Italian colonial venture took the credit for having returned the stele to a status of ‘objective’ greatness that saved it from a fate of being an anonymous ‘thing’ in exile from glory, as a collection of rocks lying scattered on the Ethiopian plateau, doomed to deteriorate into rubble. Arranging the transformation from “thing-ness” – as debris empty of signs – to “objective-ness” – as organised, man-made and mediated materiality – the colonial discourse set the distinction between “man made materiality” and “trash” that originally describes the distance between objects and things and their respective cultures. Moreover, this idea of materiality based on its improvement under technological mastery marks the ultimate relation between colonial arrangements of power and the material world.

As anticipated in chapter one, the dialectic between objects and things, while standing at the base of colonial politics around materialities, as a matter of fact belongs to a lasting debate in Western philosophy. Dialectical materialism traditionally looks at objects and things as entities that are reducible to the contexts in which human subjects set them.

Following Marx and Adorno, dialectical materialism builds its discourse on social theory on the symbiotic dependency of materiality upon human agency: things are relentlessly humanised objects. Hence, Adorno claims that the ‘object’ is reachable only “as it entwines with subjectivity” (Adorno, 1973: 186). Jane Bennett argues that in Adorno’s view, “the object's ‘preponderance’” functions “merely as a counter to the dominant philosophical presumption in favour of an absolute, transcendental subject” (Bennett J., 2004: 363), whereas the ‘thing’ is impenetrable to any process of conceptualisation. It is unintelligible and there is always an a-symmetrical relation between concepts and things (Adorno, 1973: 184-187). Thinking about the case of the obelisk, I would argue that the discourse on objectivity relating to the Italian colonial and post-colonial supervision over the stele’s phases of erection relies exactly on the possibility of using ‘objects’ as exclusive historical facts, whose social dimension depends exclusively on human mastery.
Similarly to Adorno, Jacques Derrida adds to the debate by claiming that “the thing itself always escapes” (Derrida, 1973: 104), so that the condition of ‘thingness’ expresses a sense of infinitude that makes the thing, the fragmented broken pieces of the stele, incapable of surviving in opposition to the subject, thus revealing its dramatic incapacity to occupy a proper position in an active space or sphere of action. In this sense the Italian appropriation, as an enlightening example of Western paternalism, labels the stele as an unmarked and deposited ‘thing’, which is unstable and dispossessed of substantial identity in itself. In fact, if we compare the fascist ‘transmutation’ of the debris into a vertical monument in the 1930s, and the high-tech re-erection in 2008, they both embrace a paternalist spirit.

According to the classification of Gisli Palsson, paternalism, as a constitutive concept of the Orientalist approach (Palsson, 1996), expresses a kind of ‘natural’ right to protection that “implies human mastery and relations of hierarchy, but presumes a certain responsibility not only toward other humans but also toward non human beings” (Domanska, 2006: 346).

The relation between colonial architecture and the issue of the preservation of cultural heritage constitutes an important aspect of this relation. Indeed Italy, while using the protection of cultural heritage as an essential tool to define relations of power, portrays the idea of colonialism as the only history of colonial societies. In this way, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak suggests, the pre-colonial can always be reworked by the history of colonialism and is not available to us in any pristine form that can be neatly separated from the history of colonialism. In this sense the creation of the ‘Third World’ by the colonial powers persists in the post-colonial present where distant cultures are exploited “but with rich intact heritages waiting to be recovered” (Spivak, 1988: 271-313). Accordingly, via the discourse around protection and the capacity to find a remedy to the waste of ‘substance’, both the colonial and contemporary Italian discourses on heritage build their model of cultural mastery against the ex-colonial world. In this sense, the promise to restore justice to a historical object – either as a symbol of a retrieved Ethiopian identity or as an archaeological monument – maintains the hegemonic role of Italy and imposes a cross-temporal preservationist approach to colonial materialities. Furthermore, in a strict materialist sense, the stele, while depending strictly on colonial agency, emerges as a mere object of possession and dis-possession at the mercy of mutations brought about by historical events.
The story of the Axum obelisk shows how the stele, from its pioneering fascist ‘reclamation’ from ‘rubble’ and through alternating moments of assemblage/dis-assemblage, was strictly forced into an Italian scheme of representation and discourse, which depended on ‘skilled’ colonial mastery, labour and mechanical processes of material production.

The process of re-erection that took place in 2008 appears indeed as the logical conclusion of this process. In this sense, the re-erections of the stele work like any other process of material production, which according to Marxist theory is the basis of the materialist theory of objectification. This relies on the realisation of human subjectivity through objects, which are considered to be the outcome of technical procedures that constitute production itself. However, if the subject is formed in the process of making objects of the sphere of production, in the case of the obelisk we have witnessed instead an inverse process wherein an object itself owes its identity, materiality and worldliness to all of those technical phases that stand as premises of such a process of material production.

Moreover, for a better understanding of the obelisk’s process of changing identity we can borrow the famous allegory of the “table” and shed more light on the transformation of the obelisk performed by the Italian colonisers. In order to consider the verticality of the obelisk of Axum as the effect of overlapping historical processes and periods, we can use the example of the “table” that Marx uses to develop his theories on commodity fetishism. According to Marx’s argument, the “table” is the result of the interaction of “matter and labour”. In Capital labour is understood as a process of “changing the form of matter” (Marx, 1990: 50). Hence, the “table” is given through the work of labourers that change the wood into new forms.

Without getting into the debate around the Marxian distinction between use-value and exchange-value at the base of Marx’s critique of commodity fetishism, this chapter is interested in Marx’s understanding of the “table” as dynamic matter, as it undergoes a transformation in form. In relation to this, Sara Ahmed considers the Marxist approach in relation to the “dynamic history of things being moved around”. Accordingly, the table moves around, and changes its location, uses and hands. The table has a history of transportation and a biography that “allows us to tell a larger story: a story not only of “things” changing hands but of how things come to matter by taking shape through and in the labour of others” (Ahmed, 2010: 243).
In a similar way the obelisk functions as a polymorphous marker for national identities, whilst it owes its symbolic and functional values to the power of the technology of the (ex) colonisers.

Moreover, Ahmed continues, an alternative way to look at the “table” case is that of Heidegger. Heidegger’s gaze expands the discourse around the table from a story of transportation and production to the work that tables do for us, to understand the way in which an object occupies space and the humans around it. Heidegger focuses on the characteristic of being of the object, which is given by what the object allows us to do. According to this, the obelisk, like Heidegger’s table, highlights the use we have with it, providing a space, a point around which people gather. As if it were a table around which a family meets, acts and performs, the obelisk is the catalyst for different gatherings; whether in Rome during fascism or in Axum at the time of reconciliation, different crowds of people have moved and performed around the Axumite needle. Accordingly, Ahmed explains the power of gathering around Heidegger’s table: “those who are ‘at’ the table are also part of what makes the table itself. Doing things ‘at’ the table is what makes the table what it is and not some other thing” (Ahmed, 2010: 244-45).

In such a framework, the actantial model of Greimas and Latour as illustrated in chapter one integrates Heidegger’s notion of ‘gathering’: the obelisk has seen different crowds gathering around it, and as an actant/object it has performed in different epochs. While dismissing the neo-Roman imperial identity marked by fascist Italy, the stele has become the new symbolic driving force for the reconstruction of an Ethiopian identity in the post-Mengistu era. At the centre of a real network and multiple congregations, the stele has gathered, established polymorphous regimes of meaning and inspired action. It has exercised attraction and aggregative power. This network of actions has developed through multiple and overlapping levels and degrees of actions where theft, engineering works, naval transportation, Italian celebrations, legal battles, diplomacy, restoration, disassemblage, air transport and erection, and the Ethiopian celebrations, have taken place around a seemingly vertically static obelisk.

The obelisk between exchange and forgetfulness

So far the stele’s ‘objectiveness’ has been seen as being due to its multiple uses as a symbol, a fetish and a totem. Then, from a materialist perspective, the stele has been introduced as a totally humanised object, undergoing symbolic and physical transitions, manipulation and transformation.

Moreover, following the post-colonial dispute until its restitution, transportation and final arrival in Ethiopia, we can also write the cultural biography of the obelisk as an object of exchange and, borrowing the words of Igor Kopytoff, as an object that “moves through different hands, contexts and uses” (Kopytoff, 1986: 34). The bilateral agreement of 2004 between Italy and Ethiopia around the restitution of the obelisk also introduces an economic perspective, which de facto sheds more light on the nature of the new relations between Italy and Ethiopia. The cooperative agreement was set around an Italian contribution to the development of food security, rural development, privatisations, and hydro resources and energy in Ethiopia. Moreover, following the first treaty, a second bilateral agreement was set in 2005 to erase the entire public debt that Ethiopia had accumulated towards Italy up until 20th of June 1999. Then, in the same year, the Italian Development Cooperation made an important contribution to the realisation of the hydroelectric system Gilgel Gibe II in the Omo river region in Ethiopia (Cooperazione allo Sviluppo, 2012). The system of the Gibe Dams (I, II, III have already been built whereas IV and V are in the planning stages and are being reviewed by international foreign investors), financed at the time of the bilateral agreement of 2005, forms a cascade of structures along the Omo River and aims at solving the chronically low rate of electricity production in Ethiopia. This project revolves around the management, optimisation and improvement of Ethiopian ‘unutilised’ land for extensive cultivation and food production, and serves a modernisation ideology that stimulates Ethiopian elites towards “state building” via technology-driven development aimed at “poverty eradication and economic growth” (Abbink, 2012: 134).

The return of the stele to Axum demonstrates how the traditional modern colonial scheme of vertical power has been overcome, as development politics rely on a circuit where private and public foreign firms act in accordance with local policy-makers and governments. In such a frame, the symbolic return of the Axum obelisk, as a peacemaker for Italian involvement in developmental affairs, overturns
the subaltern role that Italy has played in the development chain since the early stages of decolonisation. Post-war reconstruction and internal development preoccupied the Italian government during the 1950s and the 1960s, when most Western donors were allocating budgets and creating institutional capacity for development aid. Italian development aid during the 1960s and 1970s was limited to mandatory contributions as a member state of international organisations, with additional limited aid given to the ex-colonies of Somalia and Ethiopia (Bollini and Reich, 1994). Until the mid-1970s, part of Italian aid was dedicated to war reparations. During the 1980s and the Cold War, the Italian public became more familiar with the problems faced by developing countries, due to the experience acquired from its involvement in development aid, the leading role played by the Catholic Church and its support for missionary work, and the influx of immigrants from the ex-colonial world (Carbone, 2008). Since the end of the 1980s, Italy has started to align its development efforts within the framework of the European Community, in the light of increasing EU policies of integration, and has consistently supported the governments of Somalia and Ethiopia both in foreign policy and for diplomatic reasons.

In the last ten years Ethiopia has become a key country for the Italian Development Cooperation strategies and policies. Since 2000, Ethiopia has been the main beneficiary of Italian aid. As mentioned before, the Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi’s visit to Italy in 2004 to celebrate the return of the Axum Obelisk, saw Ethiopia and Italy agreeing on the cancellation of $432 million of debts, and signing agreements for a loan of €220 million for the Gilgel Gibe II hydropower project, the most important donation for development made by Italy in the last twenty years (Cooperazione Italiana allo Sviluppo, 2012).

On 13 January 2010, after a bilateral summit around piracy and international terrorism with PM Zenawi, minister Frattini inaugurated the dam system. As minister Frattini pointed out, “Italy has helped build a dam that will give millions of Ethiopian citizens access to electricity – a fact that will change their lives” (Farnesina - Ministero per gli Affari Esteri, 2011). The speech by the Italian minister, while addressing Ethiopian development strategies, de facto belongs to a popular trend among foreign donors and UN agencies rooted on “backwardness resolutions”, which implies a certain denial of the whole human impact around development factors. Hydroelectric power lies at the very centre of the country’s broad development plan, where a modernisation ideology shows a seamless continuity with earlier socialist-modernist planning in Ethiopia at the time of the Derg. However, the construction of dams might put at risk the ecosystem of the Omo Valley. Human Rights Watch states that the alteration of the river could also jeopardise the water level of Lake Turkana at the border with Kenya (Human Rights Watch, June 2012). Moreover, according to the estimate of anthropologist David Turton, the local seasonal flooding along the riverbank, which is essential for the agrarian and pastoral livelihoods of ca. 180,000 people (Turton, 2010), might be dramatically
The Gilgel Gibe development project *de facto* demonstrates how the 2004 historic agreement between Italy and Ethiopia forced the obelisk to be a mere means of exchange. The return also produced important socio-cultural and geopolitical consequences: besides defining new international relations and shaping new Italian economic strategies in Ethiopia, the restitution of the stele of Axum drew new lines for the geography of forgetfulness of post-colonial Italy.

The physical void left by the stele in the *piazza* can be seen as a representation in urban space of Italy’s general condition of oblivion with regard to its colonial history and past. Whether the return of the stele to Axum was meant to conclude the process of reconciliation with Ethiopia by opening up new developed forms of Italian influence in the area, it also sheds light on the cultural failure to decolonise Italy’s collective memory from on-going forms of self-absolution and a certain faith in the acquittal and comforting illusion of a ‘humane’ and ‘soft’ colonialism.

Moreover, the echoes of the restitution of the obelisk in the Italian public sphere demonstrate how an outbreak of colonial history and memory, rather than enhancing the debate around crimes and historical responsibilities, on the contrary reinforces a sense of national belonging that is deeply rooted in the myth of an archetypical ‘generosity’ peculiar to Italy’s culture, politics and military history. In this sense, the return of the obelisk, whilst glorified by undersecretary Mantica as a “gift to Ethiopian identity”, benefits Italy in its revision of its past: Alessandro Triulzi points out that Silvio Berlusconi’s government, while bringing to an end the reconciliation with Ethiopia, *de facto* reinforced a already sanitised image of Italian

Local economic systems will thereby be affected, despite the promise in the official Gibe III impact assessment documents that an annual 10-day water release will try to imitate that flooding. As Jon Abbink highlights “this global discourse was taken over uncritically and carried further by the Ethiopian state – there is no effort to modify or build on local models and approaches to development”. In this way, according to Zenawi’s censures against the dam detractors “They don’t want to see developed Africa; they want us to remain underdeveloped and backward to serve their tourists as a museum” (Guardian, 7 March 2007) the peoples of Lower Omo region are declared to be “in need of reform and ‘civilising’ to bring them into line with modernity and with the dominant society’s norms” (Abbink, 2012: 140). Abbink argues that the status of these populations and their “alleged socio-cultural ‘backwardness’ can be remedied by displacement, re-education and training, so as to allow them to ‘partake’ of modernity and development” (Abbink, 2008: 140). Moreover, according to Turton, as a probable outcome of this developmental chain, the region will face the deployment of intensive commercial irrigation schemes, supported by foreign investors, creating a labour intensive jobs market and dynamic internal migrations on the axis north/south. According to this perspective the majority of these jobs – and most definitely the technical positions – will go to Ethiopian northerners. This might cause more inter-group conflict with the local population. These commercial plantations will grow, but the people of the region may be forced into wage labour, with the high risk of exclusion after expropriation. Therefore, the risk of depending on food aid, threatening an already precarious food security, is very high (Turton, 2010).
colonial memory exhibiting the self-deceptive good-hearted myth of Italians as *Brava Gente*, which since the war has depicted Italian-ness as exceptionally tolerant and ‘different’ (Triulzi, 2005: 439). As a cross-temporal marker of identity, the obelisk has therefore served the rhetoric of the Italian nation in both colonial and post-colonial times. Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan correctly point out that now that the obelisk has left Rome and there is no more evidence of Italy’s colonial history in Piazza di Porta Capena, “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).

Moreover, Triulzi argues that whilst on the one hand the recent influx of African migrants has forced Italy to revise its colonial past (Ellena 2001; Palumbo 2003), on the other hand it is hard to think of Italy as “a postcolonial country that has reckoned with its past” (Triulzi, 2005: 432). In this scenario terms such as ‘amnesia’ or ‘forgetfulness’ appear insufficient to describe the progressive revisions that Italy performs around its colonial identity and past. The return of the obelisk of Axum to Ethiopia works perfectly as an example of this dynamic, as it reinforces what Nicola Labanca calls a “scattered and weak” colonial memory that is “more troubled today” than it was in the past (Labanca, 2005: 29-40).

Therefore the restitution of the stele produces a reconfiguration of Italy’s colonial memory in terms of confusion, self-absolution and displacement. While on the one hand the departure of the obelisk brings Italy’s colonial era symbolically to an end, on the other hand it is also the *mise-en-scène* of the ultimate stage of Italy’s “postcolonial politics of disappearance”, which according to Robin Pickering-Iazzi, engenders “the erasure of memories of injustice and aggression” (Pickering-Iazzi, 2003: 198). However, the removal of the obelisk *de facto* does not simply constitute an erasure or an act of collective forgetfulness; it also represents an effort of revisioning the past that neutralises and contains it.

The case of the restitution of the stele of Axum to Ethiopia demonstrates how the removal of material markers of colonial history and memory can be read in multiple ways. It shows how Italy’s acceptance of committing to its legal obligations simultaneously inspires contrasting narratives: as a symbol of Italy’s peculiar ‘generosity’ and ‘diversity’, as an occasion to revise the historical past, as the revival of colonial civilisational purposes through the use of technology and the care for archaeology in order to enhance a sense of Italian modernity, and as the premise for
the reconversion of public spaces. Therefore the story of the obelisk of Axum demonstrates the power of artefacts and monuments to create polymorphous regimes of meaning, while the change of contexts and scenarios remakes them, and gives them new uses, valence and legibility.

Having followed the circular vicissitudes of the obelisk across history, the next chapter will complete the analysis of the imperial space of Piazza di Porta Capena, which was formerly designed around the vertical stele and the Ministry of the Colonies. The disappearance of the obelisk from the Piazza di Porta Capena in Rome is the perfect example of a performative void that remakes and transforms former imperial spaces. Now deprived of its old colonial plunder, the former heart of the fascist empire is today an ‘empty space’ which, although it hosts the FAO headquarters, is mostly known by the Roman population as the busy traffic junction that interconnects famous archaeological sites such as the Circus Maximus and the Baths of Caracalla to the promenade that leads to the Arch of Constantine and the Colosseum.

There, the space of Piazza di Porta Capena emerges as a post-colonial arena, where in front of the FAO base the revision of the past goes hand in hand with new spatial arrangements aimed at the sanitisation of a yet inconvenient and anachronistic lieu de la memoire. After the abolition of the Ministry of the Colonies in the 1950s and its reconversion into the FAO headquarters, the final departure of the stele represents the ultimate act of re-appropriation of the former colonial space. Then, a finally “clean” Piazza di Porta Capena can set a new beginning.
Chapter Five
After Axum. The Aesthetics of Development,
Humanitarianism and the War on Terror

There is no carnival without loss. No Luna Park without a slaughterhouse. 
*Denis Hollier, 1992, xxiii*

During the 1930s the imperial square of Piazza di Porta Capena in Rome owed its fame to two prominent colonial symbols: an obelisk, looted from Axum at the time of the fascist occupation of Ethiopia, and a few metres away the Ministry of the Colonies, as proof of the dual features - the ‘symbolic’ and the ‘functional’ - of colonial power. Eighty years later, what is left of the fascist colonial landscape, is a sanitised space with a memorial to the victims of the 9/11 attacks in New York, in place of the Ethiopian stele facing the old colonial building, which has been converted into the home of the FAO - Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

In spite of the radical urban transformation, the new symbols dominating the Piazza offer alternative lenses of interpretation of the move to new forms of influence over the same geographical space that was subjected to Italian colonisation in the 1930s: Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. Within these new forms and aesthetics the issue of control and government over the former colonial subjects and territories revolves around topical emergencies such as the global War on Terror, food insecurity and famines, and containment of the flow of migrants from the Global South. Therefore, in the contemporary global politics the military and civilians converge and are used interchangeably to justify current interventions, and, under the guise of international humanitarianism, they replace the old fashioned colonial premises of the nation state.

The substitution of the obelisk with a memorial to the victims of the 9/11 attacks in New York embodies the architectural transformation of Italy’s politics of memory in relation to colonial matters. First, through the loss of the Ministry of the Colonies and then through the departure of the obelisk, colonial aesthetics and old-fashioned monumentalism have been lost, as the old colonial square has become a space for cosmopolitan memories.
The notion of ‘cosmopolitan memories’ originally comes from David Levy and Nathan Sznaider’s theorisation of the Holocaust as a central trope of historical trauma. No longer bound to the sense of belonging to the nation or an ethnos, cosmopolitan memories inform the identity of those communities who did not experience or directly connect to specific and traumatic historical events.

According to Levy and Sznaider, the experience of catastrophe highlights how the enormity of the Holocaust came to create a global political and moral space where a human rights regime could be established. In a global context where human rights are the measure for global politics, cosmopolitan memories become inspirational for future military and non-military interventions to prevent outbreaks of genocide and major threats to the global order (Levy and Sznaider, 2002, 2004).52

From a different standpoint but according to a similar understanding of the interconnections between past, present and future, this chapter considers the events of 9/11 as another historical outbreak within Western culture, from which a sense of transnational solidarity started to spread globally. In relation to this, the declaration of a global War on Terror garnered international consent to become a transnational act of violent retribution, relying de facto on a discourse on memory that became global. A “future-oriented dimension is a defining feature of cosmopolitan memory” claim Levy and Sznaider, and “It is not a memory that is solely looking toward the past to produce a new formative myth. Discussions about post-national collectivities are mostly focused on the future” (Levy and Sznaider, 2002: 101).

The case of the old colonial square is indeed emblematic as it expresses a new materiality where the transition from the ‘national’ to the ‘global’ takes over via architectural means and in spatial terms.

This transmutation, while seeing Italy as a nation slowly disappearing as an object of monumentalisation, symbolically represents the political impact that architectural forms generally exercise. Therefore, the new palimpsest of Piazza di Porta Capena celebrates the aesthetic encounter between the ‘right to food’ as a basic human right and the military intervention of America and NATO in Iraq and Afghanistan in retaliation for the victims of the terrorist attacks. In so doing it

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52According to Levy and Sznaider the legacy of the Holocaust started acting in a post and transnational dimension shaping the paradigm of human rights further beyond the borders of Western world. Across the 1990s this process of universalisation turned out to be a transnational value to address new situations of global crisis such as that in the Balkans and then in Rwanda.
embodies the spirit of a transnational solidarity movement that acts through military and non-military means in order to address future uncertainties and potential threats coming from the ex-colonial world – risks of poverty, food insecurity and terrorism.

This chapter focuses on the space of Piazza di Porta Capena and investigates the way in which the departure of the obelisk brings to an end the replacement of imperial aesthetics. This architectural transformation is important for this thesis for two reasons: first it reflects the evolution in the relations between Italy and Ethiopia and the conclusion of the reconciliation path. Second, following the movement of the obelisk back to Ethiopia it is possible to track parallel movements and circulations: migratory flows, capital, food aid, development and weapons all mark the existential and biological dimensions of life and movement in the area which was formerly defined as Italian East Africa.

Originally planned to represent the twin space of Rome and Africa, the return of the obelisk to Axum has generated overlapping results: the return from ‘exile’, while opening new horizons for economic agreements, open markets and closed borders in the whole of the Horn, has also had a major impact on the architecture of Piazza di Porta Capena in Rome. Formerly designed around the phallic verticality of the obelisk at the time of Mussolini to celebrate the oneiric state of fascist expansionism overseas, the present day ‘empty’ Piazza experiences the loss of the obelisk through processes of urban re-historicisation and transformation of the old imperial landscape.

This chapter highlights how post-colonial Italy, while coming to terms with the urgency to purify an inconvenient past, has redesigned old-fashioned colonial geographies and its politics of memory through a glowing humanitarian spirit. The absence of the obelisk and the presence of the FAO headquarters encircling the space of Piazza di Porta Capena, finally produces a post-colonial and global palimpsest, where the imperial atmosphere has disappeared and in its place a humanised architecture has been established, through humanitarian and developmental symbols. There, the ancient heart of the Roman Empire and the then sanctuary of fascism have been emptied of traces of national monumentalism, giving way to post-national aesthetics and ecology.

Today the circular movement of the stele engenders new material configurations and acts as the epistemic source to uncover the deep materiality of post-colonial agreements between the former coloniser and the colonised. Moreover,
as much as the colonial administration did not just move objects from one place to another as symbols of their power, the backward trajectory of the stele illuminates post-colonial processes of acquisition, supervision and control over the same lands.

While on the one hand the stories of the Axum obelisk and the re-generation of Piazza di Porta Capena focus on Italy and Ethiopia alone, on the other hand they demonstrate how the post-colonial debate around colonial compensation plans triggers violent movements of humans and things that are no longer solely the interest of these two single nations.

**FAO/11th September in the square of the empire**

The process of erasure of colonial traces from national consciousness and identity, is a phenomenon which, given the sixty year history of Italian colonialism, does not belong exclusively to the fascist period. It also concerns the Italian historical identity as a whole, straddling all political phases of the nation – liberalism, fascism and liberalism once more. Despite the obvious and evident complexities in drawing conclusions from a single case study, the allegorical role played by the empty space of Piazza di Porta Capena *de facto* describes a peculiar case of the slow process of erasure of the past from Italian national history.

The return of the stele and the empty space left in Rome has completed the restoration work of a new geography of memory. The process began in 1953 with the closure of the Ministry of the Colonies. Then the building was transformed into the headquarters of the FAO. The architecture of space started changing and developing, while the new identity of the building and the new design of the environmental space around the Piazza marked a challenge to what Bernard Tschumi defines as “the idea of a meaning immanent in architectural structures” (Tschumi, 1987: vii). The dismantlement of this meaning in the process of converting the building constituted the first step in the operation to reclaim the historical past, along with an attempt to imagine a different design of the urban landscape able to inspire new forms of social good behaviour.

In the system and history of European spatial regenerations this phenomenon does not represent an innovation. For instance, the reinvention of the urban space studied by Georges-Eugène Haussmann for a new design of Paris goes back in time to
1848: here, slums were cleared to create new breathing space for public housing, local businesses and leisure spaces opened inside the city, and networks of boulevards were planned for modern forms of social control. Hence the cleansing of alcoholism and prostitution from the urban space which, along with the example of the conversion of slaughterhouses into urban parks and leisure spaces, became the metaphor for cultural sanitisation.

The transformation of harsh structures into soft ones is inspired by a very modern conception of aesthetics in terms of cleanliness. For this reason, Haussmanian city planning revolved around the archetypal opposition between the ideas of ‘clean’ and ‘dirty’, which is perfectly exemplified by the social need to convert a slaughterhouse into urban parks. Yet, the act of conversion of a space does not necessarily create a feeling of emptiness or loss for its users. As Emile Zola observed, the Place de la Concorde hosted both the weekly celebration of Sunday life in Paris as well as being the scene of the public guillotines during the Reign of Terror (Hollier, 1992: xx-xxiii).

In a similar way, Mia Fuller states that, “Italian city planning in the early 1930s, following in many respects the trend of other European nations, became more and more encompassing in its scope. It was described as an art, a science, and a technique that could be used to cure social ills” (Fuller, 1996: 401). As Ruth Ben-Ghiat also points out, the concept of bonifica or ‘reclamation’, within the fascist national and overseas colonial scheme, “was central to this project of collective transformation, which foresaw the purification of Italy and Italians regarding all sources of decadence. The transformation of marshlands into New Towns was merely the most concrete symbol of fascism’s larger redemption of national customs, culture, bodies and minds. Indeed, modernity itself was to be reclaimed and domesticated, underwriting a peculiarly Italian and fascist mass culture that would accommodate tradition and valorise neglected patrimonies, above all that of imperial Rome” (Ben-Ghiat, 2006: 382).

After fascist architectural and social planning aimed at easing Italy’s subordinate position in Europe through imperial urbanism, post-fascist Italy needed to neutralise the landmarks left behind by a recent inconvenient past. A new phase of spatial reclamation came about through the opportunity to neutralise from Rome’s cityscape any trace of what Charles Burdett defines as the fascist neo-imperial “utopia of the past” (Burdett, 2003: 108). From this perspective, the 1953 conversion
presented the opportunity for a first preliminary step towards an overhaul of the whole architectural and spatial hygiene, *de facto* allowing for cultural forgetfulness around Italy’s colonial past.

The new image of a ‘clean’ Piazza, emptied of its troublesome past and uplifted by the prestige of the FAO, emphasises the lack of historical consciousness in post-colonial Italy. However, it also addresses the vulnerability of public spaces to experiments in re-historicisation.

The reclamation of the whole space of the Piazza embodies perfectly the oscillation between re-historicisation and de-historicisation of a public space.

As Michael Rothberg explains, while re-historicisation “cuts through the calcified distinctions of period and identity in order to create new ways of seeing history as a dynamic force field of intersecting stories, the other is a force of de-historicisation that removes those intersecting stories from any relationship to power” (Rothberg, 2009: 152). While fascist design, architecture and urban planning, through their Roman imperial envisioning, aimed at the representation of both Italy’s present and past in one ahistorical and eternal space, the cleansing that culminated in the late 2000s activated a phase of de-historicisation. Therefore, the neutralisation of those configurations expressed by the phallic symbology of the stele and the Ministry of the Colonies relegates *I colli fatali di Roma* to collective oblivion.

After the removal of the obelisk the apparent sense of emptiness was swiftly followed by a new phase of mutation, the basis of further alteration and transformation: on 11 September 2009, the Mayor of Rome, Gianni Alemanno, in the presence of the US ambassador in Rome, David Thorne, and the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi, opened a memorial to the victims of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York on the 11th September 2001. The memorial, taking the space formerly occupied by the Axum obelisk, consists of a plaque placed between two columns that were taken from the fountain of Curia Innocenziana in Piazza di Montecitorio in Rome.

This new palimpsest clearly reproduces the profile of New York’s Twin Towers and represents Rome’s testimony against any form of political terror. Ironically, on the plaque are carved the words of philosopher George Santayana: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”.

The installation of the 9/11 memorial in the Piazza works as a transnational exercise that renders global a specific traumatic narrative. The sense of trauma of the
American community is there globalised as the basis of and anticipation for shared transnational acts of violent retribution. 9/11 rituals and aesthetics have then gradually become an essential premise to consider the spread of the War on Terror on a global scale, where a shared sense of vulnerability and suffering of political terror can yield and generate justifications of military aggression and war.

In a similar way to El Alamein, the phallic memorial and its post-colonial mausoleum, the new theatre of Piazza di Porta Capena, stages the dissolution of old-fashioned European colonial aesthetics and sets new symbols and visual paradigms for a shared ground for political actions. While recreating the twin space of Rome and Africa, Piazza di Porta Capena today embodies the need of former colonial powers to instate a post-colonial aesthetics that is necessarily wedded to the demands of extraterritorial crises and emergencies.

The twin columns facing the FAO headquarters describe a global post-colonial aesthetics that introduces ideological substance to the architecture of the square and new relations of power: the representation in Rome of the nexus War on Terror/right to food provides physical evidence of post-9/11 global security concerns and the ‘politics of fear’ reinforcing the call for international intervention practices along the axis of security/development, combining traditional military issues with developmental and humanitarian concerns.

After the attack on the World Trade Centre in 2001 and the wave of Bill Clinton’s earlier programmes that aimed to deal with African threats in relation to armed conflicts, poverty, famines, the spread of HIV/AIDS, failed and collapsed states serving as terrorist havens, the agenda of George Bush and Tony Blair for the “Securitisation of Africa” expanded to the whole international community. The conceptualisation of emergence in terms of “security as development” eventually became hegemonic within Western foreign politics.

A speech given by Tony Blair early in 2001 linked the UK and European securitisation to African poverty, when he stated that it was “the scar on the conscience of the world” (Guardian, 2002). This gave the international public a pragmatic interpretation of poverty as dangerous, as the perilous path leading to invisible threats, risks and fear. Victims can turn into enemies, and today’s victims can transform into tomorrow’s perpetrators. A new architecture of enmity could be designed and located within those failed and collapsed states “as the black holes of
ungoverned areas, which recasts Africa as the Heart of Darkness” (Keenan, 2010: 119).

**Post-colonial biopolitics**

The 9/11 events and the global spread of the War on Terror are evidence of a substantial improvement in technologies of security through the interaction between developmental, humanitarian and military practices.

From the time of decolonisation, through the Cold War, up to the proliferation of the local conflicts that have dramatically affected life in the Horn of Africa, the enhancement of security techniques and technologies has been developing up to the present day, where development and security depend exclusively on each other and define the field of intervention in ex-colonial East Africa. This evolution unveils a biopolitical root that echoes Michel Foucault’s descriptions of mechanisms of security and practices of government which, rather than exercising the right to “take life or let live”, work to administer, optimise, rationalise and discipline human life “or disallow it to the new point of death” (Foucault, 1998a: 138). Biopolitical forms of power and sustainment have indeed made their way into a global network organised around homogeneous capitalist forms of production and consumption creating a sort of interdependence between the ex peripheral world and Western metropoles.

In this scenario Mark Duffield, while commenting on Etienne Balibar’s theory of post-colonial inverted migrations (Balibar, 1991), has suggested that the eruption of development and humanitarianism is due to the need to strengthen the resilience of collectivities and populations in the ex-colonial world in order to limit their circulation and mobility along the new south/north axis of circulation. According to Duffield, the nexus between development and security stands at the base of an “expansive international security architecture” (Duffield, 2008: 145) relying on the global containment of circulation from the Global South.

Moreover, Duffield claims that protection and betterment programmes directed at the ex-colonies “function to maintain the dynamic equilibrium of a self-reproducing or underdeveloped population” (Duffield, 2006: 17). According to his conceptual framework, development and humanitarianism act as biopolitical security
mechanisms where populations are essentially self-reproducing in relation to basic social and welfare needs within a confined space, which does not imply free mobility. In such a context, the notion of ‘development’ itself reveals its colonial root: in a global scenario where “metropolitan and peripheral society are no longer seen as being in conflict, but a partnership within development” (Hewitt, 2009), international aid becomes complementary to the archetypal modern notion of ‘trusteeship’. As a quasi-evolutionary assumption about progress, ‘trusteeship’ became part of the colonial language addressing the creation of mature nation states. First, during decolonisation, the concept of ‘trusteeship’ aimed at helping incomplete or underdeveloped life to fulfil its potential. Then, it became functional in contexts where collapsed states presented a major threat to Western security and welfare.

While security looks strategically to development, the issue of global mobility after decolonisation brought about an improvement in modern technologies of security through new practices of containment.

As previously shown in chapter one, development and containment as specular forms of biopolitics, intervene to erect and fix boundaries against possible threats such as conflicts, diseases, uncontrolled migration and terrorism. Biopolitics indeed generally operates in the ex-colonial world by trying to reduce the risk of strategic collective existences, implementing technologies that optimise biological life and providing the means for its governance and control.

Development and humanitarianism complete a set of technologies of security and containment that stand at the base of what is commonly called protection of human security. According to Duffield, the concept of ‘human security’ depends on the optimisation, calculation and pre-emption of those potential dangers brought about by uncontrolled circulatory effects of crisis and emergencies – such as humanitarian disasters, famines, poverty, mass migration and the spread of terrorist networks (Duffield, 2005). In 1994, the United Nations Development Programme brought to the attention of the public the concept of ‘human security’, which marks an important change in the applicability of the notion of security (King and Murray, 2001). The application of security was moving from its traditional reference point represented by nation states to one of population. This move wanted to address issues such as the prevention of potential risks that could transform human societies into distressed ones. As much as the global crisis which occurred throughout the 2000s brought into question the efficacy of such a concept – due to the risks represented by
failed states such as the case of Somalia as the epicentre of the global War on Terror in the Horn of Africa – Duffield argues that human security brought to completion the theorisation of development as a biopolitical practice of government (Duffield, 2007: 126-131). In this sense, human security works against the proliferation of international security threats and itself reflects a relation of governance that is based on the fusion and conflation of development and humanitarianism with security itself.

The events of 9/11 and the following call for an international military commitment against Islamist terrorism has brought in the military to complete a triad with development and humanitarianism under the umbrella of human security. In this way they work for the improvement of an international biopolitical order against the risks of a disruptive global circulation.

The peculiarity of the War on Terror is that the whole strategy cannot be simply confined to its military impact but rather it is a “multidimensional conflict that also engages with questions of poverty, development and internal conflict… where development assistance is a strategic tool for the war against terrorism” (Duffield, 2005: 27).

In this scenario the War on Terror, working through the three levels of humanitarianism/development/military, has deepened the interconnections between soft powers and security.

According to this, in the following paragraphs, I argue that the aesthetic representation of such a conflation is provided perfectly in Piazza di Porta Capena by the 9/11 and FAO palimpsest. There, through the early conversion of the Italian Ministry of the Colony and the later removal of the obelisk of Axum, colonial legacies slowly vanished whilst traces of national history were absorbed by the global discourse on memory. A spatial revolution that started in the early 1950s with the ‘erasure’ of the symbols of colonial government ended in the late 2000s with the representation and celebration of post-colonial technologies of government. The regenerated space of Piazza di Porta Capena, while staging the visual encounter between the FAO and the monument to the 9/11 victims, has ultimately realised the aesthetic fusion between development and humanitarian practices with warfare.

Moreover, such an aesthetic encounter reflects the transformation of the old colonial East Africa into a post-colonial milieu where an organised circulation of humans and
materialities constitutes the medium through which the post-colonial present operates.

The twin space of Rome and Africa in the post-colonial square

The nexus of the War on Terror/development mirrored by the dual space of Piazza di Porta Capena in Rome is once again an architectural design that reflects verticality; from both the standpoints of the 9/11 memorial and the FAO headquarters. While the old imperial theatre expressed the phallic dimension of direct Italian colonial rule over its territories, the spatial transformation of the Piazza has recreated in the present day a contemporary version of the twin space of Rome and Africa. There, the interaction between the 9/11 monument and the FAO generates a semantic spatial revolution: the triptych military power/humanitarianism/development, as well as infusions of ideological furore, animate the 9/11-FAO architectural palimpsest on the basis of new contact and intersection points and around new rallying cries and values such as the ‘eradication of poverty’, which works as the ideal slogan to create and allow spatial and visual contiguity in the already sanitised space of Piazza di Porta Capena.

As Mark Duffield points out, “from communism to terrorism, through its marginalising effects, and its ability to foster resentment and alienation amongst ordinary people, poverty has been monotonously rediscovered as a recruiting ground for the moving feast of strategic threats that liberal order is constantly menaced by” (Duffield, 2008: 148).

Following this line of thinking, as explained by Derek Gregory, the key measure of poverty “is the extent to which individuals are able to secure sufficient food to conduct a healthy and active life” (Gregory, Johnston, Pratt, Watts, Whatmore, 2009: 259). From the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights in New York up to the UN Millennium Development Goals in 2000, the right to food and the elimination of hunger have stood at the foreground of the international humanitarian agenda.

The concept of food security has become hegemonic in the liberal discourse, and is understood to be achieved “when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs
and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” Moreover, the FAO claims that
in addition to conflicts, terrorism, corruption and environmental degradation, “a
major cause of food insecurity and sustainable progress in poverty eradication is
critical to improving access to food” (FAO, 1996). The FAO, which supervises
agricultural production, marketing, trade, food security, nutrition and food standards,
elaborated its concept of food security in 1983 (FAO, 1983): the world food problem
stands at the conflation between the adequate production of food supplies and secure
access to the food needed. Hence, the further distinction between hunger, generally
perceived as dependent on a decrease of food availability, and famine as an extreme
case of food availability in collapse, brings to the foreground how distribution and
entitlement, rather than merely technical problems or fatalistic thinking, are problems
of political will.

As Gregory argues, “famine is therefore a social phenomenon rooted in
institutional and political economic arrangements” (Gregory, Johnston, Pratt, Watts
and Whatmore, 2009: 240). From his perspective, rather than food production itself,
it is the control over food resources and supplies that provides a more comprehensive
understanding of processes of mass starvation. According to human rights scholar
Alex de Waal, the subject of ‘mass starvation’ can be simultaneously addressed from
a socio-economic perspective and a humanitarian point of view. The 1970s saw
Marxist socio-economic theories developing the issue of famine in terms of cyclical
processes of marginalisation and impoverishment, as the result of capitalist
interventionism during colonialism. Afterwards, in the 1980s, International
Humanitarian Law and humanitarian ethics made the link between famine and denial
of food, stating that “starvation of civilians as a method of warfare is prohibited”
(ICRC - IHL, Art. 54, add. Protocol I). De Waal, while analysing famine variability,
focuses on the deliberate denial of relief food to civilians in a war zone, starving
them into submission, as a political practice (de Waal, 1991). Moreover, the issue of
food insecurity and management of famine as an instrument of bio-control, always
played a major role in the colonial milieu (de Waal, 1997).

An enlightening form of the representation of colonial praxis and rule, Pierre
Carmody brings to the fore the example of the National Famine Memorial in
Strokestown House in Ireland, which exhibits, among other things, an old board
game in one of the children’s bedrooms called ‘The Colonial Game’, where the
objective of the game is to import raw materials cheaply and sell expensive
manufactured goods back to the colonies (Carmody, 2012). Indeed, the grand scheme of colonial exploitation and trade unveil how European rule in occupied territories (from Ireland, to colonial India and Africa) settled “the economic value of local resources for the external metropole, even at the expense of ‘letting die’ many of the people indigenous to the colony” (Kearns, 2007: 7). The proliferation of famine in the colonies cyclically erupted to mark colonial biopolitics in relation to the government of the indigenous people: often occurring as a tool for social engineering, the spread of famines worked in harmony with food relief, which was administered and monopolised by the colonial state. Hence, after the famines, the economic reconstruction of the colony generally proceeded through phases of forced eviction of a local population from rural areas, engendering proletarianisation and mass-dispossession among colonial subjects. Land confiscation and control over natural resources and food markets always stood at the centre of colonial government and European imperialism. But unlike British India and Ireland, the Italian colonies in Libya, Eritrea, Somalia and Ethiopia under both the liberal and fascist governments, did not experience cycles of famine, droughts or man-made mass starvations, as an outcome or strategy of colonial domination. Only in the aftermath of decolonisation, after the Cold War up to the most recent post 9/11 global War on Terror, did the Horn of Africa become the epicentre of recurring food security crises and famines, under which the Ethiopian and Somali population have been suffering from chronic humanitarian distress.

Controversial entanglements between famine, humanitarianism, development, and security practices have been at the forefront of the political life of the whole of the Horn of Africa.

After the deposition of Emperor Haile Selassie in September 1973, Ethiopia saw the foundation of the Derg, a communist military government that from 1977 was led by Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam. In 1984, Ethiopia was once again in the international spotlight, with news of the terrible famine hitting the headlines.

Originally dismissed by the UN as a natural disaster caused by endemic cycles of drought, the Ethiopian famine was actually the outcome of a military campaign launched by the Derg against a rebel group based in the northern province of Tigray, mostly known as the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). Forced programmes of villagisation, displacement and resettlement of the northern peasantry plus military control of food resources became a political tool for counter-
insurgency. The rebels’ access to food was denied through the systematic bombing of farms and food stores in the area of Tigray. Furthermore, truck-loads of food intended for civilian centres were diverted by military officials, while relief supplies were used to pay the soldiers or as blackmail to induce local people to join the Ethiopian army (Keller, 1992). The crisis erupted as an unconditionally man-made mass starvation. As much as foreign donors pretended not to interfere in Ethiopian politics, aid was still provided in relief and distribution centres whose locations were determined by the Ethiopian government. Therefore some humanitarian agencies and non-state actors were invariably drawn into domestic controversies, especially those that feared the Derg’s sanctions in their areas of intervention. The FAO too went as far as to support the resettlement and villagisation programmes, and other voluntary organisations that agreed to operate in certain areas also indirectly aided the Derg in its political objectives. Eyal Weizman, in The Least of all Possible Evils, analyses the role of humanitarianism in relation to the Derg’s strategy to contain the insurgents: “Aid turned out to be a tool used by the Ethiopian regime to lure residents of the rebel zones into sites for forced displacement and deportation: tens of thousands of nomads and farmers walked to these centres in search of food where they were rounded up at gunpoint and transferred to the south. Some of the transfers happened on buses and tracks seized by the government from the humanitarian organizations”. Thus, he suggests that we look at the Ethiopian famine as “the result of a combined effect of environmental, political and military factors, and later, most significantly, humanitarian ones” (Weizman, 2011: 45).

Entanglements between decolonisation, the Cold War, human-made starvation and refugee crises are also found in the conflict that erupted between Ethiopia and Somalia after the communist junta of Siad Barre took over in 1969.

In spite of the same political affiliation to communism and a parallel partnership with Soviet Russia, Barre’s Somalia and Mengistu’s Ethiopia came into conflict in 1977 over the control of the region of Ogaden. This area was formerly assigned to Ethiopia at the time of decolonisation, although it was a contested territory and desired for the unification of all Somali regions. The unexpected support given to Ethiopia by the USSR, which followed, led to a crushing defeat for Somalia and thousands of refugees were displaced across the Somali-Kenyan and the Somali-Ethiopian borders. Jennifer Hyndman claims that the legacies of Cold War rivalries resulted in this divided region loaded with large quantities of armaments and
overflowing refugees. In relation to this she claims: “The formation of borders during colonial partition was re-inscribed by infusions of arms and other investments during the period of superpower rivalry. Today these borders continue to be reinforced by the large, and no less political, flows of humanitarian assistance” (Hyndman, 1997: 165). The geopolitics of the Horn had been re-shaped around important investments of foreign capital into the national economy, while the displaced people turned out to be profitable resources. For instance, throughout the 1980s, President Barre used the refugees to obtain external aid easily, while the UNHCR – in conjunction with other international aid organisations – supplied large quantities of food to Somalia.

Indeed, the 1990s absorbed the legacies of colonialism and the Cold War, as the Horn of Africa became a post-colonial milieu. The huge flows of humanitarian capital and peacekeeping forces, and the buffer zones and refugee camps located in marginal border areas in the Horn marked a new form of indirect rule over refugee mobility.

In the early 1990s Somalia was once again an object of global concern during Operation Restore Hope, which was the first international humanitarian mission following the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Besides its historical significance, the mission presented another occasion to see the landing of Western troops and non-state actors in a territory that, since liberal colonialism, through fascism and again under UN trusteeship in the post Second World War period, had experienced multiple forms of foreign presence. The international military intervention in Somalia revolved around food as the epicentre of both the humanitarian and military crisis. American political analysis claimed that the intervention was decided upon after seeing the imported food for relief operations becoming “prized plunder of merchants, unemployed workers, and gangs of young men. Militia leaders used stolen food aid to amass wealth for purchasing weapons and keeping followers loyal” (Clarke and Herbst, 1996: 73).

In such a context, the joint-venture embodied by Operation Restore Hope represented, especially for Italy, a unique occasion to return to the poorest of its former colonies which, between 1950 and 1960, was governed under Italian trusteeship, due to an exceptional UN concession, under the name of *Somalia Italiana*. The new mission to Somalia, while triggering Italy’s fantasies as an erstwhile colonial power, immediately urged the Italian Foreign Ministry Under-
Secretary of State, Laura Fincato, to call for an ‘international protectorate’ to be established over Italy’s former colony (Tripodi, 1999: 11).

As testified by American diplomats, at the time of Operation Restore Hope, “Somalia was transformed from a famine stricken backwater where heartless warlords and hopped-up teenage gangs reigned over helpless innocents into a laboratory for new theories of U.N. peace keeping”. The vast nation-building mandate produced “the slide toward a modern version of trusteeship over an ex-colonial territory” (Crocker, 1995: 4). The earlier Italian experience of trusteeship in the 1950s demonstrates how the Italian mandate, besides its lack of success, de facto anticipated what would in the 1990s become a conflict resolution perspective and state-building craft.

Whilst throughout the 1990s Somalia went through a slow process of political disintegration, on the contrary Ethiopia experienced a powerful process of nation building. The TPLF, after the fall of Mengistu in 1991, under the charismatic leadership of former rebel leader Meles Zenawi, eventually brought a new elite into power. The leading role played by Meles Zenawi for twenty years until his recent and unexpected death in 2012, allows us to reflect upon the political allegations concerning the abuse of aid, which have put the present government of Ethiopia into turmoil, linking the humanitarian politics of the Cold War with the humanitarian strategy of the War on Terror.

According to Helen Epstein’s calculations, since Mengistu’s deposition “Meles’s government has received some 26 billion USD in development aid from Western donors including the US Agency for International Development, the World Bank, the European Union, and Britain’s Department for International Development” (Epstein, 2010). Since 2000, the Ethiopian PM, often pictured with Bill Clinton and Tony Blair for charity campaigns, has tripled the amount of foreign aid to the sum of $3 billion in 2008, more than any other nation in Sub-Saharan Africa. That Ethiopia borders largely Islamic countries such as Somalia, Sudan and Kenya, helps us to understand the massive investment in aid from Western donors.

The aftermath of 9/11 forced Ethiopia and Somalia back onto the agenda of Western governments. Somalia – labelled as a failed state without a functional government and with its population living in chronic humanitarian distress – was identified as potential exporter of international terrorism.

In 2006, the successful rise of the Islamic Court Union against pro-West
Somali warlords in south central Somalia triggered a new domino effect that hit the fragile geopolitical order in the Horn. In 2007, Ethiopia, backed by US airstrikes, invaded Somalia and a Transitional Federal Government was installed in Mogadishu, while an African Union peacekeeping force (AMISOM) was created to protect government institutions in anticipation of a UN peacekeeping mission (Harper, 2012). In a context where a functioning government had been absent for more than twenty years, the AMISOM forces fight on the payroll of Western governments. Together with the US and other European partners, Italy recently took the commendable step in Ethiopia of allocating €40 million for the African Union’s operations in Somalia, demonstrating a special concern for regional security issues, including piracy and terrorism, and security and stability in Somalia. Former Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Franco Frattini, speaking to the UN assembly, stated: “Italy is supporting these efforts by paying the salaries of 3,200 Somali soldiers\(^\text{53}\) and training the Somali forces in the framework of the EU Training Mission (EUTM) as well as providing technical assistance to Security Forces. I call upon those States that can do more to do more to help Somalia with all the resources at their disposal. Helping Somalia also means helping ourselves; protecting people by enhancing security and preventing extremists from creating a network of terror from the Horn of Africa to Northern Africa” (Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 2011). Fifteen years after the failure of Operation Restore Hope, the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia and the subsequent deployment of AMISOM backed by Western support, continues a seemingly never-ending project for the reclamation of Somali space.

**Foucault in the Horn of Africa**

According to the estimates of the UNHCR, the violent conflict between the pro-Ethiopian/US government and the Islamist militia rising from the Islamic Courts Union, named Harakaat Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen, caused the displacement in 2007 of 700,000 civilians from Mogadishu (UNHCR, 2008).

The conflict turned from a chronic humanitarian crisis into an acute one.

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\(^{53}\) The African Union force commander, Maj. Gen. Fred Mugisha, recently reported that around 3,200 Somali troops had not received their wages for the past four months. The African Union is supposed to pay them with money donated by Italy, but Mugisha said that the Italians had not yet sent the cash. The delay in payment had caused some soldiers to desert their posts, he said (Guardian, 21 January 2012).
According to the UNHCR, the number of displaced people increased from 500,000 before 2006 to 1.4 million in 2010 (UNHCR, 2010). Refugees fled the war and food shortages and went to Kenya, where the Dadaab refugee camp in the northeast of the country hosts over 388,322 Somalis. This is the largest refugee camp in Africa and one of the largest settlements of Somalis anywhere in the world. Ethiopia, with the camp of Dollo Ado and others is the second largest recipient of Somali refugees, hosting to date 246,144 individuals (UNHCR, 2013).

The intertwining of food insecurity, civil wars and refugee crises, up to the most recent involvement in the War on Terror, demonstrates how the post-Cold War Horn of Africa constitutes an area of global interest which, against the risk of seeing failed states becoming real threats to the safety of the sovereign, depends on control over the circulation and the movement of the population, aid and food resources. Reflecting on what Foucault defined in terms of milieu, the Horn aims at becoming a space of security, a “field of intervention, in which one tries to affect a population. […] a multiplicity of individuals who fundamentally and essentially only exist biologically bound to the materiality within which they live”. The milieu is again the space where “circulation is carried out”, and by circulation Foucault means “the very broad sense of movement, exchange and contact, as form of dispersion, and also as form of distribution” (Foucault, 2007: 21).

In the Horn a hierarchical distribution of food aid constitutes the basis of the post-colonial “geopolitics of mobility”, where the hypermobility of humanitarian aid stands against the immobility of the population (migrants and refugees). By “eliminating its dangerous elements, making a division between good and bad circulation, and maximizing the good circulation by diminishing the bad” (Foucault, 2007: 89-93), Hyndman claims that refugees fleeing violence, famine and poverty “are not part of a traveling culture but of a relatively immobile institutionalized culture of containment in camps” (Hyndman, 1997: 160).

In 2011, the combination of drought and war became explosive, involving 13 million people in the whole Horn of Africa, and seeing 3.5 million Somalis needing emergency assistance and protection from the threat of both the al-Shabaab insurgency and Ethiopian and AMISOM troops. The emergency refugee camps expanded to Ethiopia and Kenya to accommodate those who had been rejected from the heavily over-crowded Daadab refugee camp in Kenya (IOM, 16 December 2011). The IOM, in collaboration with the UNHCR and the Ethiopian government’s
Administration for Refugees and Returnees Affairs, continues to relocate displaced Somalis in Ethiopia.

Aiming at the constitution of spaces of security and at the creation of a strong ‘sovereign’ against the risk of seeing an uncontrolled proliferation of failed states in the Horn, humanitarian discipline applies, in the borderlands of Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya, to a wide multiplicity of migrants and refugees. Michel Foucault, while claiming that “discipline only exists insofar as there is a multiplicity”, argues that “the disciplinary treatment of multiplicities in space”, involves the “constitution of an empty, closed space within which artificial multiplicities are to be constructed and organized” (Foucault, 2007: 17). Through this mechanism the humanitarian space materialises as a space of security where “security will rely on a number of material givens”, namely food, medicines and water. While human circulation is massively contained within humanitarian camps around the Somali borders, the circulation of material goods is the main object around which humanitarian government and the military operate in order to stabilise an organised mobility and fight the war against Islamic militias. Recalling the failures of Operation Restore Hope and the bad circulation of foodstuffs in the early 1990s, the UN Security Council warned that in 2010 half of the food aid intended for the relief of two and half million Somalis had been diverted to corrupt contractors, selling food illegally for their own profit (Harper, 2012: 176). Social analyst and former humanitarian operator Mark Bradbury testifies in one of his reports that in order to prevent the diversion of food relief to Al-Shabaab and other insurgent organisations, counter-terror legislation has reduced available funds and limited access to humanitarian relief. But at the same time, Bradbury continues, on the insurgent side the fear that food distribution by foreign organisations could be used to weaken it, was used as the political reason to prevent access to humanitarian organisations in those wretched areas hit by famine (Bradbury, 2010).

The Horn of Africa crisis shows how the entanglements between military interventionism and humanitarianism, while addressing emergency situations, de facto complete and refine an understanding of development as a technology of security. This nexus sees the centrality of food security and food aid as cross-phenomena, occurring in the politics of containment along the temporal axis that from the early Third World crisis during the Cold War, through the proliferation of
the civil wars in the 1990s, continued with international non-state threats and the War on Terror in the 2000s.

Like in 1984 and 1992, it seems that food aid still lies at the heart of political and military issues in the Horn, where the safety of food aid convoys disputed by insurgents and loyalists stands as the emblem of food aid circulation.

For these reasons, the Horn of Africa again emerges as a sort of Foucauldian milieu. Moreover, according to Foucault, the milieu is also “what is needed to account for action at a distance\(^{54}\) of one body on another” (Foucault, 2007: 20).

Echoing the themes that I discussed in the previous chapters, the challenge around the correct use of Foucault’s lexicon relies on the ability to contextualise the “milieu” across both colonial and post-colonial temporalities and spaces. So far, this analysis has indeed focused on the radical connection between Foucault’s milieu and the importance of “distance” in the organisation of spaces of circulation. In fact, in chapters two and three, the creation of a colonial road infrastructure in Libya demonstrates how a motorway can be both an object and a medium for the exercise of power. Functioning over long distances, the homogenisation of the peripheral world with the metropole creates a colonial milieu through the penetrative capacity of colonial road systems to bring the power of the colonial state to the native.

Since decolonisation, the possibility for ex-colonial subjects to circulate globally – inverting the routes of migration from north/south to south/north – have shown how a post-colonial milieu once again operates as a space of circulation. This mutation has also shown how a major concern of the post-colonial has become the creation of an organised mobility. Global migration and development aid, and delocalisation and externalisation of frontiers, describe new forms of “policing at a distance”. Through the example of the Horn of Africa and its borderlands between Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya, together with the global War on Terror, we can see how post-colonial technologies of government find in humanitarianism the completion of an architecture of power that organises the circulation of humans along the south/north axis.

\(^{54}\) The italics are mine.
The FAO/11th September palimpsest

After these considerations, looking at the post-imperial space in Piazza di Porta Capena, it is possible to understand the spatial conversion as more than a simple cancellation of Italy’s colonial traces. In a context where the politics of food are complementary to the politics of containment in the Horn of Africa, the last paragraphs of this chapter focus on the post-colonial Piazza as the realisation by architectural means of the conflation of military interventionism, humanitarian relief, food aid and development.

Despite the loss of the material traces of Italy’s colonial history from the perimeter of the Piazza, the new architecture of Piazza Capena projects the aesthetic transition from colonial vertical power to the post-colonial dispersion of power, from fascist imperialism to post-colonial technologies of government.

Moreover, the Axum affair has shown the obelisk to be a powerful and allegoric epicentre around which humans (settlers, archaeologists, engineers, migrants, refugees and army troops) and many forms of materialities (private and state capital, development, food aid and weapons) have circulated between Italy and Ethiopia over time. Still today, under the aegis of the triptych security/development/humanitarianism, this on-going circular movement renovates the spatial juxtaposition of ex-colonial Europe to its former peripheral world and activates a complex matrix of relations that, while tracing multidirectional historical trajectories, set the temporal juxtaposition of the colonial past to the post-colonial present.

Since the departure of the Axumite obelisk a new ecology has defined the space of Piazza di Porta Capena, hiding the clash of multiple temporalities in a limited space. This chapter has demonstrated how, since the fascist erection in the 1930s, semiotic changes have not been entirely peculiar to the life of the obelisk, but have also concerned the whole space of the square. The replacement of the Axum “needle” by two columns as an allegory of New York’s Twin Towers eventually concluded the path started in the 1950s when the Ministry of the Colonies was abolished and substituted with the FAO base. This last transformation has redesigned in a different guise the imperial landscape of Rome formerly envisioned by a fascist imaginary identity. Moreover, through the doubling of the monument, it creates a new totem full of ideological and historical substance. Over the decades the
architectural and aesthetic transformation has progressed through multiple changes in the symbolic order of representation corresponding to the historical evolution. In such a framework, each monument or palimpsest reproduces different developmental moments in history (from colonial government to global nutrition policies and food security): a spatial metonymy that proves a simultaneous sense of mutation and contiguity in the passages from the obelisk to the 9/11 memorial, and from the Ministry of the Colonies to the FAO. This process leads to the allegoric reconstitution of the twin space of Rome and Africa. The shade of the FAO building on the 9/11 double totem shapes a matrix of relations and connection points between past and present, which de facto renders the political vision expressed by the couplet war on terror/food security intrinsic to the land and to the imperial past.

Moreover, the mutation of power relations embodied by the conversion of the Ministry of the Colonies into the FAO base in 1953 unveiled an important semantic change that enables us to understand how transmissions and transitions of power have progressively changed across the decades and how this evolution is aesthetically and architecturally given. Whilst during fascism the Ministry embodied the peak of state power against colonial subjects, the FAO itself demonstrates how issues of development are not peculiar anymore to a single nation state, but instead involve an inclusive platform of state and non-state actors where micro-operations of biopower are carried out in a less pyramidal organisational form and involve multiple knowledge and expertise permeating development efforts for the governance of food matters. In summary, we can say that the transition consists of a shift from the necropolitical ‘right over life and death’ to the exercise of power through the optimisation of biological life. Therefore, the architectural impact and implications of such a mutation are no less relevant to the whole ecology of the space of Piazza Capena.

Since 1945, development has been considered as the main goal of the three major international institutions born after the Second World War: the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the United Nations to which the FAO belongs.

After the FAO’s takeover in 1953, Italy as both a state and a nation was no longer architecturally and aesthetically omnipresent in the space of Piazza Capena. After 1953, the aura of the vertical power of the Ministry vanished and was relinquished to the UN micro-powers embodied by the FAO agency. The understanding of development as belonging to a set of micro-powers, suggests a
parallel between development and the Foucauldian concept of *dispositif* or apparatus. Such an analogy has been successfully drawn by Morgan Brigg, as he suggests that both development and humanitarianism are complementary to the notion of *dispositif*. According to Brigg, development acts like a Foucauldian apparatus, as “a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral or philanthropic propositions […]” (Foucault 1980: 194). This conceptualisation is useful to investigate how development, since the 1940s and through decolonisation, has emerged through “a range of institutions, funding and resource flows, philosophical propositions about the possibilities and desirability of social change modelled on the West, professional development practitioners, scientific efforts (the entire sub-branch of development economics), and government and non-government organisations” (Brigg, 2002: 427). In this sense development emerges as a soft power. In so doing it relies and works through state power, while not depending exclusively on it. The FAO presence in Piazza di Porta Capena embodies the completion of a slow process of power transition from colonial verticality to a platform for multi-scalar developmental technologies, which *de facto* cross the boundaries of the nation state. Architecturally and aesthetically, Piazza di Porta Capena is indeed a space in which the completion of such an evolution has been performed.

**Enemies and victims**

Michel Foucault has pointed out that the object of discipline is never the isolated individual, but on the contrary the individual exists as a subject of control as part of a multiplicity, crowd or population. Only in this relation is discipline effective. Following this argument, from a visual standpoint it is possible to expand this analysis by investigating the aesthetic representation of discipline in relation to the changes in the old fascist square.

The aesthetic of Piazza di Porta Capena, in spite of the semantic and architectural evolutions, has addressed across time the same subjects and population. At the time of the Empire, the building of the Ministry of the Colonies was a symbol of domination over Italy’s colonial subjects. Then, the same complex under the aura
of the FAO symbolises global development and government of food matter, in relation to the famines and starvation, which – among many others in the world – have cyclically hit the population in the Horn of Africa.

Within this context I argue that a distressed multiplicity – victims of famine and wars dependent on humanitarian relief – can be reduced to an anonymous crowd emptied of subjectivity and movement, where the existential condition of victimhood is potentially constitutive of a new architecture of enmity. The apparent dichotomy between victim/enemy represents in reality a conflicting dualism: as explained before, former victims of colonial violence and oppression, after experiencing decades of cyclical distress and displacement can switch to become potential threats and today’s perpetrators. According to this assumption, I claim that the spatial regeneration of Piazza di Porta Capena through the 9/11 memorial and the FAO palimpsest reflects and gives representation to the dialectic of “victimhood”/“enmity”. The aesthetics of the Piazza de facto neglect to recognise the double status of victimhood: first as colonial subjects and then as victims of famine and natural disasters. The colonial victim, together with the erasure of colonial traces from the space of the Piazza, is absent and is relegated to the status of being solely a victim of cyclical natural disasters and humanitarian distress.

Paraphrasing Homi Bhabha, the space of Piazza di Porta Capena introduces and produces a sort of “exilic optic”, which connects and combines the everyday practices of metropolitan modernity with the extreme, distant and “other” realities of war, distress and disaster. In fact, in Bhabha’s terms, “exile” corresponds to and defines another temporality that is attuned to “sites of violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, economic oppression” (Bhabha, 1999: x).

Once again, I believe that Edward Said’s notion of “imaginative geography” is inherently part of the identity making process of the Western subject and the construction of otherness in relation to humanitarian acts. The space of Piazza di Porta Capena, while shaping a post-colonial and post-fascist Italian identity, indeed stages the perfect encounter as a sort of post-colonial and humanitarian spatial conflation between centre and periphery. There, “East and West lie side by side, simultaneously (too) close and far (away)” (Pile, 1998: 222).

Then, once the Roman imperial landscape has been purified of its colonial legacies, the new palimpsest in Piazza di Porta Capena stages the aesthetic fusion between developmental and humanitarian forms of action and violent forms of
retribution at the base of the international War on Terror. “Imaginative geographies” become operational in the square as fictional tools to preserve the distance between Western spaces and ‘other’ spaces. As geographer Stephen Graham argues, in a global context where transnational migration dramatically intensifies, those geographies define the ‘homeland’ as distant from an ‘outside’, which is designed as a space where the international community can decide to act pre-emptively by military or humanitarian means (Graham, 2006). In this context the ‘other’ or ‘outsider’ is treated in both cases as a target. While on the one side the imaginative geographies underpinning the War on Terror have inherited the orientalist trope around ‘otherness’ in terms of barbarity and darkness, the spread of images of crowds of refugees suffering from humanitarian distress sustains a condition of separateness or ‘distant otherness’. Hence, the proliferation of camps and buffer zones in the areas of conflict eventually relegates the refugee to an unconditional and distant state of victimhood.

Similar to Foucault’s descriptions of the exclusion of leprosy victims from society, the humanitarian spatial arrangements at the Somali borders with Kenya (in the district of Dadaab) and Ethiopia (in the district of Dollo Ado), serve a logic of separation which inevitably has a major influence on the identity-making process of the refugee. Michel Agier describes this mechanism in the following terms:

“the individuals brought together in these spaces are so solely because they have the recognized status of victims. This justification of their presence and of the existence of the camps makes them, from a humanitarian standpoint, nameless, in the sense that no identity referent is supposed to affect the support provided to the physical maintenance of the victims (security, health, food); this care is aimed at persons belonging indifferently to factions, regions or states which may be friendly or hostile. Thus the humanitarian system induces the social and political non-existence of the recipients of its aid” (Agier, 2002: 322).

From the colonial to the post-colonial era, classifications and taxonomies of ‘otherness’ have produced representations that stem from a ‘savage’, ‘racialised other’, to ‘manpower’, ‘dangerous other’ or ‘victim’.

According to this nomenclature, the ‘savage’ and the ‘victim’ stand for the same subject in different spatial and temporal contexts and discourses. It is
interesting to highlight how across time the discourse on victimhood and colonial power has been constantly spatialised and indeed temporalised. In relation to that, how famine is described in the current debate is again exemplary: in a geopolitical context where severe famines erupt, the environmental or natural dimension overwhelms the economic and political realms and totally denies any connection to human agency and power relations. Labels connoting temporal distance do not need any explicit temporal references or specifications; hence famines in Africa are typically presented as cyclical or repetitive while ethnic clashes or civil wars are generally labelled as ancestrally tribal in spite of the current historical and political configurations.

In relation to this, within a peculiar context of a Western hierarchy of grief, Judith Butler, while questioning multiple forms of differentiation of life, asks to what extent ‘otherness’ has “fallen outside the ‘human’ as it has been naturalised in its ‘Western’ mould by the contemporary workings of humanism” (Butler, 2004: 32). Generally depicted as potential exporters of wild and fanatical violence, distant others start speaking the language of victimhood, claiming to be merely the ‘miserable’ struggling for survival in de-historicised spaces. Accordingly, the descendants of colonial subjects are forced into a dual role: on the one hand neo-colonial discourse labels them as “people out of history”, and on the other hand, as the target of humanitarian compassion, they epitomise a speechless, disenfranchised crowd devoid of political subjectivity that seeks a voice that can make its suffering public.

The former model of victimhood was based on a Malthusian blaming of the victim as it relied on the inscrutability of cyclical natural disasters and an incurable resistance to modernity. On the contrary, the humanitarian discourse, while intervening on issues of health, sanitation and food, produces a distant victim estranged from a constructed historical past. In so doing, the lineage between past colonial ‘others’ and post-colonial ‘others’ is totally dismissed.

The transition from colonial victims to victims of natural disasters or endemic violence, posits an image of victimhood emptied of historical relations of power and of the perpetrators’ prior subjection. This evolution therefore inaugurates a spectacle

55 In relation to this see Nicholas Sarkozy’s speech at Dakar 2007: “The tragedy of Africa is that the African has not fully entered into history [...]. They have never really launched themselves into the future” (Reuters, 5 September 2007).
of suffering and compassion that shapes the soothing and comforting aesthetics of a nameless and silent – and indeed graceful – victim.

Using Luc Boltanski’s description of humanitarian politics of sentiment, we can see the production of proper hierarchies of victimhood where “the victims selected by the topic of sentiment are the ‘deserving poor’”. According to Boltanski, “by thus excluding the victims who protest, the exploiters can don the mask of the benefactor” (Boltanski, 2000: 12). In this way, the classification of victims introduced by Hannah Arendt in her On Revolution is more appropriate than ever: the construction of the idea of ‘victimhood’ stands between those who are the miserable or ‘miserable’ and those who are enragés or ‘enraged’ (Arendt, 1965).

According to such a classification, the miserable victim owes his identity to his benefactor’s recognition. Here, the tender-hearted denunciation of human suffering, while commiserating the ‘miserable’, introduces a kind of post-modern flânerie – at the base of the principle of Baudelairean reflexivity – where the encounter with evil and suffering produces an aesthetic moment of absorption of the object (the victim) by the subject’s gaze (the benefactor).

However, at the same time, the victim can change and neglect his status and “invade the space of those more fortunate than them and with the desire to mix with them, to live in the same places and to share the same objects, then they no longer appear as unfortunate and are transformed into ‘les enragés’” (Boltanski, 1999: 226). This is when, according to Boltanski, the politics of pity is left behind. The evolution and the emergence of the victim as enragés, determines a new historical phase where the strategies of containment materialise, flash up and indeed become operational.

In a global order where liberal development and humanitarianism can equate and complete conflict resolution, the aesthetics of containment emerging from Piazza di Porta Capena, have reproduced in a different guise the former imperial twin space of Rome and Africa.

Through a post-imperial skyline traced by the nexus of the 9/11 memorial and FAO base, a new visual paradigm has been established which plays a multifunctional role: while serving the construction of a post-colonial Italian identity and the representation of ‘otherness’, the post-imperial geography of Piazza di Porta Capena has become the symbol of a historical transition of power. The former icons of fascist colonial power have indeed vanished, giving way to new symbols.
representing the transnational civilian and military technology of counterinsurgency in the ex-colonial world.

Following the departure of the obelisk, Piazza di Porta Capena demonstrates how the politics of space and the politics of identity intertwine vigorously. Moreover, it shows how history and geography are architecturally contained within the cityscape of Rome and how the imperialist past and post-colonial contingencies can be simultaneously constitutive of a post-colonial architectural present.

Vivienne Jabri claims that in European modern history ‘others’ emerge in history “when called forth or recognized by the European subject” (Jabri, 2013: 63). In a nutshell, this explains precisely the function of two distant but complementary palimpsests, present at different times in Piazza di Porta Capena, related to the creation of ‘otherness’. The stories of the obelisk and its square demonstrate how the identities of both the colonisers and the colonised depended on processes of spatialisation, which across time have connected and separated centre and periphery interchangeably.

In Piazza di Porta Capena new forms of spatialisation have occurred cyclically, although the prism of colonial architecture has persisted, and the image of the colonial subject – while undergoing cyclical mutations and representations – keeps on being exoticised or essentialised as a subject/object of control and governmentality.
Chapter Six

Italy’s Paleontological Present

This is Ben. He’s an old Joe that lived around here for a long time, and I do mean a long damn time. Old Ben here took care of my daddy and my daddy’s daddy. Till he up and keeled over one day, old Ben took care of me. Growin’ up the son of a huge plantation owner in Mississippi puts a white man in contact with a whole lotta black faces. I spent my whole life here, right here in Candieland, surrounded by black faces. Now seein’ ‘em every day, day in and day out, I only had one question: why don’t they kill us? Now right out there on that porch, three times a week for fifty years, old Ben here would shave my daddy with a straight razor. Now, if I was old Ben, I would cut my daddy’s goddamn throat, an’ it wouldn’t taken me no fifty years of doin’ neither. But he never did. Why not? See, the science of phrenology is crucial to understandin’ the separation of our two species. And the skull of the African here? The area associated with submissiveness is larger than any human or any other sub-human species on planet Earth. If you examine this piece of skull here you’ll notice three distinct dimples. Here, here and here. Now, if I was holdin’ the skull of an Isaac Newton or a Galileo, these three dimples would be found in the area of the skull most associated with creativity. But this is the skull of old Ben. And in the skull of old Ben, unburdened by genius, these three dimples exist in the area of the skull most associated with servility.

Leonardo di Caprio aka Monsieur Calvin Candie, Django Unchained, 2012

Tony Bennett, while commenting on the relations between Darwinism, evolutionary museums and education in late 19th century Britain, mentions the testimony of Henry Fowler, Director of the British Natural History Museum in 1884, regarding the pedagogic value of the “exhibition of evolutionary connections between extinct and continuing forms of life”. As an institutional representative of ‘State-Darwinism’, which made evolutionism popular, Fowler describes the transformation of the museum into a place where “little children run in and out, and without the knowledge or desire of their parents or guardians, grow up Evolutionists” (Bennett T., 2004: 73).

During my fieldwork I visited the most important Italian anthropology, anatomy and ethnography museums in Rome and Florence in order to map the Italian colonial legacy in former evolutionary museums. Fowler’s thought-provoking words inspired me to adopt a more critical and analytical approach. This was especially so on the occasion of my visit to the Luigi Pigorini National Museum of Prehistory and Ethnography in Rome, when the director of the museum kindly offered me the
opportunity to join one of the many guided tours that the museum usually organises for primary school pupils. I saw the children being welcomed and then provided with a measuring tape, a magnifier and a map, so that the educational path could start as a game, as a treasure hunt in the museum. The emulation of the figure of the explorer becomes clear when, in the eyes of the children, the rooms of the museum turn into ‘hunting grounds’. Their minds, curiosity and fantasies are dragged into an exotic realm made up of African osteologic material, ancient animals and human bones mixed with tribal weapons and masks, and ivory hunting horns, which project them into a distant, timeless, wild and dangerous natural world. In this scenario the dream of adventure is offered as the principle for the learning path, where curiosity about the unknown is the inspiration for travelling, resembling more and more a modern Italian version of Conrad’s Heart of Darkness.

The inquiry around what has been left of colonial exploration, looting and purchase in Italian museums means for the most part investigating the subtext of the material dimension of colonialism itself. The feeling of a persistent presence/absence of the colonial subject brings the analysis, not only to examine the material roots of colonial domination, but also to reflect upon those visual cues that Carlo Ginzburg refers to as the techniques of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes in solving the crime through the collection of fragments (Ginzburg, 1980). Among a vast assortment of specimens and artefacts – either collected or produced as anthropological devices during the expeditions in the colonies – the most controversial paradigm of Italian colonial material legacies is there represented by human remains and anthropometric devices to study human diversity through morphological and morphometric data.

Serving as surrogates of the native’s body for museum discourses, skeletal remains and anthropometric gypsum casts, while representing the ultimate ontological and epistemological limbo of humanity in suspension between subjectivity and materiality, do not exclusively embody the total loss and absence of the body. Instead, their presence in the anthropology, ethnology and ethnography sections of Italian natural history museums drives the viewer to identify the conflation between bodies and materiality, whereby the body as the object replaces the body as the subject (Feldman, 2006: 248).

This chapter intends to take into consideration the challenge given by the most complex of all objects: the human body and the process of forced ‘anonymisation’ of
natives’ bodies and their transformation into nameless entities. As both testimony to
and representation of the bodily and corporeal essence of colonial power, human
bones and anthropological relics represent living examples of colonial materialities
which, in the context of a rising debate around the illicit trafficking of cultural
properties at the time of colonialism, have seen their circular motion across time and
space – through trade, colonial and scientific expeditions – ending behind glass, on
the shelf of a museum.

The visual experience of such exhibits was inspirational to this chapter’s wider
reflection on the evolution of technologies, mechanisms and techniques of
government and the domestication of otherness from colonialism up to the post-
colonial present. In order to describe this relation between past and present
apparatuses I decided to borrow the term ‘anonymisation’, although it is quite
unusual in cultural and postcolonial lexicon and discourses.

‘Anonymisation’ usually belongs to media and computer science terminology
where it is applied with regard to privacy and security concerns to contexts where
personal identifying elements, information and data are removed from databases and
media storage. ‘Anonymisation’ techniques perform the complete removal of
personal identifiers from data and disassociate them permanently from the
individual. ‘Anonymisation’ is therefore the process of destroying tracks and, in the
case of legal actions, is the recovery of such trails that mark the main target of
forensic experts for the solution of a crime. In other words, ‘anonymisation’ and ‘de-
de-identification’ define the long process of the cancellation of nuances and details from
the individual history and records of a given subject. The outcome is an artificial
estrangement of the ‘subject’ from the ‘individual’.

Thinking of such a manufactured dichotomy I recognised within the museum
space the early stage of a material process that began through anthropological
techniques of describing otherness at the time of the colonies. There, skeletal remains
and anthropometric artefacts augment the separation between ‘the subject’ and ‘the
individual’ bringing it to a further and ultimate step: the deterioration of the subject
into in-animated materiality.

Starting with the experience of natural history museums, this chapter intends
to offer a deeper reflection on those techniques of representation and creation of
otherness that across history have marked a temporal and material continuity
between colonialism and the post-colonial present. Accordingly, it is the interest of
this study to build a bridge between the techniques of representation of and government over colonial others as they were applied since the earliest colonial exploration of Africa under the influence of colonial anthropology, and those more contemporary practices of ‘anonymisation’, which since decolonisation have affected the lives of the people from the Global South in their attempts to move freely and migrate.

Therefore, this chapter argues that today’s ‘anonymised’ and ‘de-identified’ others are constantly present within the contemporary postcolonial discourse as undocumented migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. As the intertwining of technologies of surveillance and migration has set new parameters of ‘mobility’, this chapter, whilst demonstrating the dramatic impact on the life of migrants and refugees that this intersection entails, intends to expand the analysis on the legacy of modes of representation and classification of ‘otherness’ inherited from the discourse on colonial anthropology to the government of migration.

But what is the link between colonial and post-colonial technologies of creation of otherness? This chapter intends to demonstrate how such a conflation materialises through the experience of ‘death’, its aftermath and what remains of the human body. Starting from colonial anthropometric artefacts and unidentified African skeletal remains preserved on the shelves of natural history museums, this chapter widens the focus on the epistemological value of anonymous bodies of undocumented migrants retrieved at Italy’s sea border. In so doing, this chapter attempts to draw a path of continuity between colonial and post-colonial technologies of representation and domestication of otherness. Furthermore, it also investigates how these practices function by anticipating, engendering and treating ‘death’ as the ultimate stage of the ‘anonymisation’ of human bodies.

**Entangled practices of ‘anonymisation’**

In the previous chapters, the “government of things” and the issues of “circularity” and “circulation” reflected how “government arranges things for an end, for a right disposition of things in complex relation and involvements with men” (Foucault, 2007: 96). As Etienne Balibar claims, with the crumbling of empires and decolonisation, people felt for the first time the potential to circulate globally.
Therefore, the movement of people and material goods was converted according to the logic of a global milieu, where an organised circular motion – of migrants, workers, refugees, food production and capital – struggles to eliminate dangerous elements. In this strict Foucauldian sense, a new debate around the politics of reparation and repatriation after the past colonial injustice has developed on the axis of the circulation between the postcolony and Europe.

Stories of materialities such as that of the Libyan motorway and the Ethiopian obelisk that I described in the previous chapters have shed some light on the parallel but intrinsic circulation of goods and people around “seas, rivers, bridges, roads, public squares major routes and other public places”, which Foucault calls “the space of circulation” as a “privileged object of policing” (Foucault, 2007: 325).

The circulation of “living” bodies has indeed continued to challenge the fixity of boundaries and borders, when cultural, religious, scientific and individual – hopeful or dramatic – spheres are constantly involved around the complex movement of men and things. But the circulation of bodies across time and space cannot be taken as exclusive and peculiar to the “living”. The irruption of death in the post-colonial present seems to embody a violent interruption of such circularity.

Let us consider, for instance, the case of dead bodies and human remains of unidentified African migrants from the Maghreb, Sub-Sahara and the Horn of Africa, who drowned in the Mediterranean en route to Europe. The number of migrants who died on the marine frontiers because of shipwrecks, severe weather conditions or asphyxiation is high but remains “unknown, as are the identities of many – perhaps most – of those who have died” (Grant, 2011: 136). Most of the retrieved bodies remain anonymous, unless possible survivors or relatives are willing or able to participate in the identification process. In the Italian island of Lampedusa, the rescue of dead migrants from the waters is commonly followed by investigations pursued by legal and forensic analysts, prosecutors, scientists, anthropologists and relief-operators, and by the active participation of campaigners and activists, who through their expertise or simply their commitment, collect testimonies from survivors in an attempt to establish the identities of the victims. Loss of identity is the most common peculiarity of irregular travel, where small boats used by smugglers have no passenger lists and migrants move without identity documents.
because of the threat of immediate forced repatriation to their country of origin. \(^{56}\)

Since one frequent consequence of irregular migration is the loss of personal identity – name, nationality, religion, home country and family – establishing the identities and then marking the graves of these people are extremely difficult operations, due to the complications caused by the same process of denying entry into Italy in the first place.

Requests for asylum or the ordinary identification of disembarked migrants generally involves establishing their identity – their name, country of origin, gender and date of birth. But in spite of Humanitarian International Law and International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) guidelines regarding the right of the dead to be identified, individually buried or returned to their family if possible, the bodies of migrants from the boats or waters still belong to a realm of anonymity and to an indistinct and undefined place and time, devoid of name, origin and state. Apart from the survivors, as a matter of routine, those who undergo a definitive loss of identity are those who vanish in blue water and those whose dead bodies are dragged by tidal currents and washed up onto the shores. After forensic analysis (photography and the possible collection of DNA samples), to understand the causes of death, the bodies are stored with catalogued numbers that hold all of the collected information for future identification. \(^{57}\) The burial procedures then commonly take place in Lampedusa and in villages on the Sicilian coast that are willing to host unidentified dead migrants within their cemeteries. \(^{58}\) These anonymous and unidentified persons, together with those who have disappeared in the Mediterranean, are just the last phase of a lasting process of identity-loss which sees its inception in the modern

\(^{56}\) For information regarding the collection, identification, disposal and burial of the dead, see the ICRC’s Principles/Model Law on the Missing, principles for legislating the situation of persons missing as a result of armed conflict or internal violence: measures to prevent persons from going missing and to protect the rights and interests of the missing and their families, ICRC, 2009.

\(^{57}\) A recent UN Human Rights Council resolution decided to make use of forensic genetics for identification. According to this principle humanitarian law exists on the ‘management’ of the dead and identification of their remains in order to let family members access information and access the gravesites, as well as for the sake of “the opportunity to erect memorials”. See in this regard Protecting Persons Affected by Natural Disasters, IASC Operational Guidelines on Human Rights and Natural Disasters, June 2006, guidelines D.3.4–D.3.9. (IASC, 2006).

\(^{58}\) In 2008 a memorial was erected on the island of Lampedusa. It commemorates the thousands of dead and missing migrants who vanished in the blue waters trying to reach the Italian coasts. “[…] it is in the shape of a door facing the sea, and represents the gateway to Europe. It commemorates the women, men and children who lost their lives ‘in search of a better life’. The memorial does not, because it cannot, list the names, or even the nationalities, of those who died” (Grant, 2011: 147).
timeless and space-less relation to the ‘black body’ deprived of history, which Italian colonialism built for the government of alterity and otherness.

This chapter investigates the forced anonymity of African others in their condition of circular mobility across the Mediterranean, tying together different temporalities, such as colonialism and the post-colonial present, under the same common denominator - the timeless condition of the colonial subject and his descendants being cyclically subject to violent and artificial ‘anonymisation’. Hence, the proliferation of nameless and faceless border deaths on the Mediterranean frontiers separating Italy (and Europe) from the Global South, and the traces of an anonymous legacy (collective memorials and anonymous graves filled with unidentified skulls) left on the Italian coasts seem to echo earlier colonial practices when the colonial African body was treated by scientists and anthropologists as if it were a human fossil that could be used to explain human diversity, legitimise racial taxonomies, and exclude African natives from historical narratives.

The experiences of death have constituted over time the culmination of processes of ‘anonymisation’, which have involved human bodies in different historical and political phases. The temporal continuity tying together different eras such as colonialism and post-colonialism is manifested under such processes through the deployment and cyclical improvement of technologies of control, ranging from early colonial anthropometric techniques to the contemporary governance of migration flows: in both cases the object of concern is the human body, even if embodied in two different temporal moments. These moments revolve around death and mobility.

On the one hand colonial anthropology necessarily dealt with the ‘immobile’ body (living or dead) that materialised through the production of early anthropometric plaster masks replicating the faces of the colonial subjects, and the plundering of human remains. Those remains became objects of circular movement as part of the colonial economy, taxonomy and trade for scientific inquiry. Often, across history, these objects became the ultimate proof of an unconditional state of oblivion, due to the loss of any trace of identity of the colonial subject.

On the other hand, in the post-colonial period, practices of ‘anonymisation’ stem from migration control technologies, which invert the death/mobility equation.
In fact, anonymisation starts at the moment of movement. At the inception of his/her travel, the migrant is forced to abandon his/her identity, due to the restrictions on his/her movement and the fear of repatriation. At a later stage, in the all too frequent encounter with death, the body of the migrant ends his/her circulation in a state of immobility. Since colonial times anthropometric studies have raised the mute objectiveness of anonymous dead bodies as part of the same complex historical experience which ties together the colonial epoch to our contemporary post-colonial world. But whilst in colonial times the static relics of human bodies could be the objects of trade and smuggling, in the post-colonial world opposite contrasting phenomenon emerges: upon experiencing death, travelling bodies are doomed to be immobile.

**The anthropology of colonialism**

Italian colonial anthropology was particularly concerned with African human skulls and physiognomy and this was often manifested (like in many other European colonial countries) through colonial plunders of African bones and anthropometric experiments on the living bodies of African natives (producing casts in plaster to immortalise African faces). Most of these specimens and artefacts, which were labelled as ‘primitive’ traces at the time of colonial expropriation and lootings, are now held within Italian anthropology museums.

The case of African skulls purloined at the time of colonial occupation and their persistence on the dusty shelves of Italian anthropology museums demonstrates how the process of ‘fossilising’ natives points to 19th century European anthropology’s creation of the dogma of native timelessness. African people were forced out of history and chained to an out of time natural/mineral world. The legacy of Italian colonialism and the effects of decolonisation illustrate how the present immobility (either in museums, cemeteries or mass graves) of colonial and post-colonial bones breaks the dynamism within the milieu. Therefore migrations, struggles and aspirations coming from the ex-colonial world de facto must face a ‘paleontological present’ – associating contemporary bones with ancient ones under the common denominator of a-temporal practices of ‘anonymisation’ – which leads African human remains to be either stored within museums or left dormant in some
anonymous grave after a shipwreck. How then is anonymity deliberately constructed? Since early colonial anthropology practices it passes through the management/classification of the body (dead or alive) across alternating phases of movement and immobility. Up to the moment of the body’s death, the deterioration of the flesh into skeletal remains, whose fragments were treated as if they were simply pieces of rock, represents a withdrawal from human subjectivity in order to enter, as mineral entities, the endlessness of the natural world – a-temporal, objective and embodied in scientific authority. The final stage of this process is then represented by the management of bodily death, namely identification procedures, the burial of nameless migrants and museum showcases for colonial plunder and exotic artefacts. Through the perpetuation of contemporary processes of ‘anonymisation’ arising from migration control policies and technologies it is indeed possible to feel the echoes of the past when preliminary forms of identity-destruction of African natives became operative. Revolving around death, either as pre-mortem or post-mortem practices – the production of plaster masks on living bodies or the studies of dead human crania – colonial anthropometric measurements were able to realise ‘immobility’ on human faces, and hence immortalise natives’ absence from history and celebrate it on the shelves of colonial anthropology museums.

After Pierre Broca in 1866 introduced anthropology as a positive science inquiring into the classification of human groups, the scientific reconstruction of human life focused more on the material dimension of diversity, and the human face – and to a lesser degree the human skull – became a paradigmatic anthropological object able to set fixed indices for racial taxonomies.

Furthermore, the importance of craniometry among anthropological and ethnological practices highlights the role of mathematics, geometry and metrics in detecting racial purity. Practices such as physiognomy and phrenology, which were very popular and influential at least until the end of 19th century, also contributed to the development of eugenics through the use of facial templates to discern criminal facial types: entanglements of pathology and medicine, and racial and class differences. Nelia Dias and Martine Segalen point out that the success of Broca’s anthropometric classifications relied on the fact that the new European science materialised itself as a practice in and of reproduction, based on fixed standards, parameters and indices (Dias, 1998; Segalen, 2001).
Anthropologically and ethnographically, museums represented the stage where colonial subjects, being removed both temporarily and spatially, could experience an ultimate degree of reification, turning into objects under the privileged observation of the scientist. The positivist epistemological apparatus expressed by colonial ethnographic museums, indeed succeeded in marking the virtual boundaries between a world of “culture” and a world of “nature”, since “one of the conceits of anthropology lies in its positivist dream of a neutralized language that strips off all its singularity to become nature’s exact copy” (Minha, 1989: 53).

Colonial domination became effective also thanks to those ethnographers who presented a sort of “ground zero” or “prehistory” when documenting the state of native peoples before they entered history, when human differences could be regarded as natural rather than historically constructed.

Accordingly, thinking of constructed ‘immobility’ leads us to anthropologist Johannes Fabian’s understanding of colonialism, which he investigates through the conflation of time and space in terms of chronopolitics. Fabian claims that instead of its seemingly incorporative standards – planning metropolitan territorial continuity between the homeland and the overseas, plus progressive civilisational programmes for the natives – colonial power relies on an ontological separation and distance between the Western subject and its other, based on the following assumption “what makes the savage significant […] is that he lives in another time” (Fabian, 2002: 27). According to that, the archetypal construction of otherness in modern times expresses the spatialisation of time, as the real premise for the distribution of humanity in the geographical space, where the discourse on civilisation, evolution and development starts with classification through spatialised temporal slopes. Hence, the modernist denial of the historicity of others generated an elaboration on the idea of otherness that states that savages’ agency does not derive from any concrete historical experience, but defines their context as natural as opposed to historical. Anthropometric technology and expertise gave the anthropologist the possibility to create a representation of such temporal and spatial ‘immobility’ through the making of plaster masks.\(^{59}\)

\(^{59}\) For a detailed explanation of the use of plaster mask techniques at the end of 19th century in Europe see Otto Finsch, (1888). *Masks of Faces of Races of Men from the South Sea Islands and Malay Archipelago.*
Plaster masks and Italy’s anthropology of race

Lidio Cipriani is considered to be the Italian anthropologist whose work relied the most on the production and use of plaster masks to analyse human diversity. Cipriani travelled extensively in Africa during the 1920s and 1930s and was the leading figure of Italian anthropology at the time of fascism (Cipriani, 1932).

Under fascism, Cipriani was actively involved in the creation of the “anthropology of race” and his trips around Africa are a clear example of an anthropology totally embedded in the needs of the fascist regime, which was obsessed with obtaining scientific legitimisation for its colonial and racial policies (Chiozzi, 1994: 91-94; Sorgoni, 2002). He believed that human psychical functions and cultural behaviours depended on the morphology of skulls and brains. According to this, racial inferiority was due to underdeveloped brain sections, such as the parietal and the frontal lobes (Cipriani, 1932: 589). Hence, human groups were classified by calculating and comparing their proportions across evolutionary cycles, and individual development, maturity and decline were seen as being merely due to biological reasons (Dore, 1981). The justification of fascist racism was always at the centre of Cipriani’s production of plaster masks.

In 1933 - before the creation of the empire (1936) and the implementation of the racial laws in 1938 - Mussolini’s regime had already attempted to combat miscegenation and sexual promiscuity between native women and Italian colonists, by means of the institutionalisation of the prova della razza or “test of race”. The prova della razza basically consisted of the analysis of somatic traits, depending on the morphology of the skull, its form and volume (Cucinotta, 1934). Cipriani’s studies on Abyssinians aimed at proving the anthropological distance between Italians and Ethiopians, and the irreducible biological and mental inferiority of the latter so as to legitimise the forthcoming invasion of Ethiopia (Cipriani, 1936: 233).

From his extensive travels across Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia Cipriani brought back hundreds of masks. The most important collections of these are still held today at the Museum of Natural History within the section of Anthropology and Ethnology in Florence – founded by scientist Paolo Mantegazza in 1862 – and the Giuseppe Sergi Museum of Anthropology at La Sapienza University in Rome.

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60 This was institutionalised by a Royal Decree in 1933 (Italian Royal Decree, Law 6.7.1933, n.999).
61 For a comprehensive insight into the figures, works and museums of Paolo Mantegazza and Giuseppe Sergi see Paolo Mantegazza (1890). Physiognomy and Expression. See also Nicola Labanca
The practice and techniques used by Cipriani to produce plaster masks from natives’ faces perfectly represent the bodily relation under which anthropology and colonialism generated a colonial corporeality as a premise for racial distinction and the manufacture of natives’ anonymity. In order to improve on the inaccuracies and the distortions brought about by photography, European colonial anthropology and anthropometry introduced the technique of making facial casts with gypsum as an alternative documentary method for studying human variability. Anecdotes from Cipriani’s diaries and archival photos show that from a technical point of view taking a facial cast was a rather simple task (Cipriani, 1932: 21). The native was lain down on the ground, tied and liquid gypsum was poured onto his or her face. In this manner a matrix was produced and the negative cast could be used to produce an infinite number of copies.

As historian Andrew Zimmerman explains, “making a plaster cast of a face took about forty minutes, during which time even pure gypsum plaster often began to irritate the skin. If the plaster was adulterated with lime […] the process could cause serious burns”. But in this way “plaster casts gave anthropologists a virtual human body, which, once taken, could be studied without having to deal with a resistant subject” (Zimmerman, 2003: 165).

The manufacture of plaster masks was not an Italian novelty; rather, it had been a long and lasting tradition all over Europe. This craft was in common use but merely as a post-mortem practice: death masks became popular in the 19th century (beyond the European aristocratic custom of preserving the image of prestigious death) among criminologists to classify and study physiognomic deviance. Dead criminals and prostitutes served as models for wax masks, which then had eyes and hair added to them, and were exhibited at academic demonstrations.

Cesare Lombroso’s criminal anthropology defined “the born criminal” as an individual in whom is preserved a “partly pathological and partly atavistic”
(D’Agostino, 2002: 322) trait of savagery, inherited from earlier stages of human development. Lombroso’s work aimed at exhibiting the “Negro race” as proof of the entanglements of the analyses of human facial expressions and skull shapes with the interpretation of somatic traits to detect moral degeneration. Furthermore, by claiming that “like savages, criminals display great insensibility to pain, which explains their longevity, their ability to bear wounds” (Lombroso, 1895: 38), Lombroso implicitly legitimised and explained the necessity of violent practices such as taking plaster casts from living bodies for scientific purposes. Therefore, the difficulty of convincing people to submit to the lengthy and often uncomfortable procedures associated with anthropometric investigations, convinced anthropologists that good measurements could only be obtained from colonial subjects, who had no choice in front of anthropologists and ethnographers escorted by military corps but to comply with the risks and the pain caused by the measurements, sometimes in exchange for some sort of recompense to their family or clan (Cipriani, 1932: 165).

When walking through the rooms at the museums in Florence and Rome the visitor will notice how Cipriani’s collections today serve mainly to illustrate anthropology’s history of racism (Zavattaro, Roselli, Valente, Bedini, 2011). Nevertheless, what strikes the visitor most is the feeling that the exhibition still preserves an aura of forced anonymity around the representation of African identity constructed by the Italian anthropologist between the 1920s and the 1930s. In this sense a total lack of identity mixed with the feeling of a persistent presence/absence of the natives’ flesh embodied by the manufactured masks, opens up this analysis to the material dimension of colonial domination, offering the viewer the chance to interrogate a subtext of colonial material production where the museum object describes only the last stage of the productive chains under colonial mastery: the museum does not exclusively embody the final loss of the body, but also drives the viewer to recognise the moment of separation between bodies and things, focusing on the process whereby the thing as an object replaces the body as the subject, and the last traces of subjectivity (grimaces of pain, facial muscular reaction to the anthropometric experiment eternalised by the cast) melt into an eternal state of anonymity.

The casts represent the trace, the embodiment of the absence of the subject’s flesh and whole body, and reveal a subtext that discloses the preliminary steps of modern physical anthropology in constructing natives’ identity, pushing the colonial
subject towards an eternal and a-historical anonymity.

Furthermore, following Michael Taussig’s studies on mimesis, facial casts resemble a sort of organised control of mimesis, where the mimetic faculty stands for “the two layered notion of mimesis that is involved – a copying or imitation, and a palpable, sensuous, connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived” (Taussig, 1993: 21). The moment of the cast’s production, through the pouring of the gypsum, discloses one of the preliminary forms of contact between the manufacturer/anthropologist and the native subject in the colonial context. The mask embodies an instantaneous contact, a material encounter that realises “the magic of mimesis wherein the replication, the copy, acquires the power of the represented” (Taussig, 1993: 26), legitimising the expectations of the scientist.

In a context where mimesis entails dramatic contact, the coloniser discovers the corporeal dimension of knowledge. Therefore, like Taussig’s sorcerers who make a copy of what they want to affect by acquiring the properties of the original, the plaster masks of the natives’ faces imply the colonisers’ mastery and power over the object. In this sense the organised control of mimesis aimed at representing racial types de facto leads to the deliberate demolition of any trace of subjectivity and individuality.

But despite the forced de-personalisation of the subject, the plaster mask, which sometimes caused the asphyxiation of the subject during the act of pouring the gypsum, provides the last living facial testimony of the colonial subjects in the instant that separates humanity from anthropological evidence divested of subjectivity.

In relation to this it is interesting to note that Taussig’s look at dialectical images suggests that we interrogate the mask in terms of facies hippocratica, namely a fanciful image of the human face contorted and fixed at the moment of death. The face is then “dead and alive at the same time […], life dies but in dying lives on in this etched agony” (Taussig, 2004: 252), preserving a tenuous last trace of human subjectivity.

Even if presumably anticipating future technologies of facial recognition, plaster masks applied to colonial subjects were instrumental to investigating racial types and cultural identities, but not individual characters. Although the face acts as an index of identity, the plaster mask technology embodies the inception of a sort of bureaucratisation of identity through the production and multiplication of facial
templates undergoing intensive comparative practices: the accumulation of facial images and types at the core of a stored knowledge in archives sets new parameters to classify social and biological differences, introducing de facto the pioneering idea that any act of recognition passes through comparative standards, whereby knowledge does not rely on single images but on cross-indexed systems of classification.

Accordingly, “Classes of human identities became unmoored from their bodily existence” (Gates, 2011: 12). As testified by Frederic Meyers of the British Society for Psychical Research in the late 19th century, the proliferation of humanoid replicas marked what he called the “phantasms of the living”. In this sense identity was intended to be “not a fixed stable object but a production, which is never complete always in progress and always constituted within representation” (Peters, 1999: 40-1).

Therefore these practices seem to summarise what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari refer to in terms of a ‘facialisation process’, namely the ‘abstract machine of faciality’, whereby the bodily dimension of humanity is denied via the reduction of the whole body to facial singularity, hence shaping an inhuman face (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 172).

The visual power and epistemological burden expressed by the masks exhibited at the museums Mantegazza and Sergi inspire us to make a difficult, dual assumption: if on the one hand, the mask, as if it were a proper snapshot marking the instant in which the colonial subject undergoes the passage between life and death as a last testimony to the native’s subjectivity, embodies the biopolitical aesthetics of colonial domination, on the other hand, its material production corresponds to and symbolises the abandonment and departure from individuality and identity that the colonial subject is forced to undergo. In this sense the epithet “phantasm” cited above perfectly describes the corporeal volatility of the subject under colonial manipulation and reification. This process eventually achieves the aims of colonial anthropology: in modern times the study of human diversity relies on the

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62 In chapter seven of A Thousand Plateaus, Deleuze and Guattari introduce significance (“signifier-ness”) and subjectification as intertwined in the definition of “faciality”. They argue: “Facialisation operates not by resemblance but by an order of reasons. It is a much more unconscious and machinic operation that draws the entire body across the holey surface, and in which the role of the face is not as a model or image, but as an overcoding of all of the decoded parts” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 189).
construction of otherness through practices of de-personalisation, ‘anonymisation’ and negation.

Power of the bones

Human remains, unlike the “phantasms” created by plaster masks, are instead a more complex and special category of museums’ holdings. Ontological and epistemological issues concerning the identity of bones and skulls question the immobility they are forced into. Debates about human remains can give rise to disputes, demands and conflicts that might lead to breaking the immobility. Circularity, which saw its end with the arrival of colonial plunder on the shelves of the anthropology museum, can unexpectedly be reinstated.

Take for instance the recent case of Germany in 2011, when a collection of Namibian skulls became the object of public interest. Originally looted at the beginning of the 20th century during the genocide of the Herero and Nama populations in German West Africa, the skulls were unexpectedly brought back into the spotlight from their relative obscurity in the archives of the anatomy museum at the Charité Hospital in Berlin. After Namibian pressure to revisit the dark chapters of its colonial history, Germany eventually agreed to return twenty of those skulls belonging to victims of the genocide a century ago, as a symbol of posthumous justice. After the hard work of researchers and intense forensic analysis on the skulls, it was possible to determine the region from which the crania came as well as the sex and age of the victims, although without hope of learning their full identity.63

Although the parallel between what happened in Africa in the early 20th century and

63 Among the victims in question, nine were Herero (one woman, eight men), eleven were Nama (three women, seven men, one male child of about four years). Most of them were between 20 and 40 years of age. All of them had lost their lives during the atrocious colonial war of 1904-1908. For 18 of those skulls, the analysts knew that they all belonged to individuals who had died at the prison camp on Shark Island between 1905 and 1907. The deceased were dissected by German colonial doctors and their heads then removed and conserved in formalin. The heads were then sent to Berlin for preliminary research on the facial muscles. Afterwards, probably around 1913, the soft tissues were removed and the dry skulls were incorporated into the anthropological collection of the Institute of Anatomy of Berlin University. As reported by Dr. Andreas Winklemann, co-leader of the forensic team for the Charité Human Remains Project, “in six cases (three Nama, three Herero), we found traces of scurvy, a disease caused by vitamin C deficiency, i.e. by malnutrition. Historical sources confirm that scurvy was prevalent on Shark Island. This disease was of course a consequence of the horrible conditions in the prison camp. Other possible consequences like starvation or emaciation can be neither confirmed nor excluded by an investigation of skulls. The skulls do not show traces of physical violence, but this does not exclude a violent death” (Charité Hospital).
what happened forty years later in Europe to Jews is marked, German Deputy Foreign minister Cornelia Pieper confirmed Germany’s refusal to commit to war reparations saying that Germany’s €600 million in development aid (transport, economic development, and management of natural resources) since Namibia’s independence in 1990 was “for the benefit of all Namibians”.

The Namibian skulls affair indeed re-established some sort of circularity, reconnecting former empires to the ex-colonial world: retrieved routes and backward trajectories of colonial objects disclose entangled political struggles around cultural heritage and reparations, calls for political subjectivity and autonomy, and the role of development aid which camouflages responsibility for war reparations.

In the present day the victims of past abuses, formerly turned into artefacts and objects under colonial manipulation, desecration and theft, experience a return travel along the same routes that took them away as a result of colonial violence. Formerly abstracted from their conflict-ridden contexts and thereby undergoing the neutralisation of any emotional and political allegations, the bones can eventually abandon their instrumental role of “narrative device” which they were forced into by modern anthropology and medicine, either to describe evolutionary chains or to justify biological racism. Trying to break the chains of forced ‘anonymisation’, the bones, marking their return to Africa, tread the same path that in the early 20th century saw their violent exile and, while having an influence on the political present, shed more light on the role of human remains in the anthropological discourse of the 19th century.

Since the 19th century the exhibition of human remains has been used as evidence for the ‘objective’ scientific demonstration of racial difference. Bernard MacGrane suggests that the emergence of anthropology and the proliferation of

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64 In 1978 an Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in Case of Unlawful Appropriation, was established by UNESCO. Its aim was to address thefts and removals of cultural property during colonisation and to seek “ways and means of facilitating bilateral negotiations for the restitution or return of cultural property to its countries of origin.” (Article 4, paragraph 1, of the statutes of the Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in Case of Unlawful Appropriation of November 28, 1978). The last twenty years have seen the eruption of the debate around bones and skulls as cultural heritage sought by their legitimate owners in the ex-colonial world. Although museums’ bone collections have been confirmed as valid subjects of scientific and documentary study, designated as “natural biological materials” still relevant for scientific inquiry, International Law, ruling on illicit trafficking of cultural good, states that human remains and religious and cultural objects stolen during operations of ethnic cleansing, or “as a result of colonial or foreign occupation or as a result of unlawful appropriation” must return to the relevant cultural communities (Cornu and Renold, 2010: 14).
evolutionary museums institutionalised the “necrology practiced on the living” (MacGrane, 1989: 111). African bones, skulls and corpses were ideal for displays in museums to support Darwinian genealogies, where the ‘ground zero’ of human development finally gained an alternative aesthetic representation. The proximity of contemporary African bones to ancient human specimens belonging to our prehistoric ancestors allowed for the presentation of a gradual paleontological continuity, which was essential to immortalising otherness behind the glass of a showcase.

Through the exhibition of linear sequences of skulls and skeletal remains, scientific speculation, entangled with colonial domination, created new relations of space and time and echoed new practices of government in the colonies. The museum space, as the result of the denial of the agency of colonial subjects, indeed became the best stage to give representation to this “frozen history” (Bennett T., 2004). The looting of the bones, while being functional to colonial rule for the domestication of human diversity, introduced a paleontological influence in the form of prevarication of the “material over textual evidence” (Ibid: 74). The crucial anthropological evidence offered by a “naked” skull, emptied of its flesh, “meant for anthropologists a human body without the subjective history of tissue”. In this way “the corpse was in many ways a perfection of anthropological evidence voided of subjectivity” (Zimmerman, 2001: 86). In a more sophisticated and complex way than plaster masks, the captive skull became the ultimate device for the negation of any trace of agency and subjectivity of African natives, indeed becoming the symbol of direct ownership of the subject populations.

Even if still speculative to scientific analysis, naked skulls devoid of history today present a problem for historical research. The lack of documents and histories attached to museum bones is too often the result of ahistorical narratives of colonial collections created by 19th century methods. The absence of descriptions about the colonial context – namely explorations, travels, political and economic demands, lootings, purchases and bargaining with locals – illustrates how ‘savage’ objects were indeed dismissed as self-sufficient and abstract entities belonging to a natural and out-of-time world. Anthropological paradigms inspired methods of collecting, which not only aimed at negating the historicity of natives’ subjectivity, but most of all denied the epistemological value of the colonial context per se, where colonial agents (officers, missionaries, explorers and anthropologists) were operating, moving
human bones from one place to another, establishing power relations, and producing knowledge and new routes for trade tying the homeland to the peripheral colonies.

**African bones in Italy**

The case of the Giuseppe Sergi Museum of Anthropology at La Sapienza University in Rome is an illuminating example of the lack of the contextualisation of early plunders by the colonial authorities. Together with Cipriani’s collections of masks and important primate osteological traces located in linear proximity to human remains from different epochs and places (Italy, Africa, Asia), the Museum holds a large collection of unidentified human skulls, which are currently stored in the dark back rooms of the museum and serve scientific purposes for studying variability in human craniums. These human remains are mainly adult specimens that were collected and prepared at the beginning of the 20th century. Many of them originally came from Africa after colonial appropriation, but without relevant information about their status at the time of their taking. According to the testimony of Sergio Sergi (the son of the founder Giuseppe), in 1912 the human skeletal remains and the skulls held at the museum represented “the most beautiful collection of Abyssinian crania after the one exhibited at the Society of Anthropology in Berlin” (Sergi, 1900). The lack of precise labels has frequently prevented scientists and anthropologists from providing sufficient critical taxonomic information about the skulls. Rare direct testimonies of travellers were sometimes able to provide a little description about the colonial acquisitions: often retrieved and collected along

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65 The market for native skulls and bones from the colonies in the homeland was not obviously peculiar to the Germans or the Italians: as reported by Andrew Wagner, towards the end of the 19th century the British Empire smuggled to Britain several Indian skulls labelled as ‘Thuggees’, referring to the Indian organised group of professional murderers that was wiped out from India by British colonial troops. The skulls retrieved after the execution of the convict Thuggees were commonly sent back as imperial trophies to Britain to undergo phrenological examination: whilst providing evidence of the supposed innate ‘destructiveness’ of the Thuggees, the experiments acted as a “physical sign of the colonial state’s omnipotence” providing the “incontestable proof that the British were indeed bringing civilization to India and suppressing barbaric practices like ‘Thuggee’” (Wagner, 2010: 39). Similarly, in colonial Australia, amateur archaeologists or settlers were digging up Aboriginal gravesites or committing murder to possess a precious commodity to trade and make money. Skulls of Tasmanian Aboriginal people were worth much more as they were considered ‘the most primitive people on the planet’ and therefore were smuggled to Britain for medical and scientific purposes. Nevertheless, the trade in natives’ skulls was a colonial practice that was not a mere consequence of the spread of scientific racism at the end of the 19th century: the curiosity of European collectors and explorers was also at the base of the barbaric trade between New Zealand and France in the 18th century, when tattooed Toi Moko Maori warriors were decapitated and their marked heads were first mummified and then sent to France in order to meet a growing illicit demand for exotic oddities.
caravan routes at the time of European explorations and the colonisation of Africa, the bones were often the remains of Abyssinians, who, while migrating because of the drought affecting the Horn of Africa in 1894, succumbed to cholera spread during their exodus (Duchesne-Fournet, 1908).

Taken for ethnographic and scientific purposes, the skulls became circulating objects directed towards Italian museums, where the periphery could meet and enter the doors of the metropole on the tables of medical laboratories. In this regard, the museum in Rome retains a typical physical anthropological design: the founder Giuseppe Sergi designed a site where skulls and bones could be taken from the shelves and examined on the tables of the university.

Even if belonging to different epochs, the bones preserved at the Sergi museum are still laid out horizontally under the ‘accurate’ supervision of the scientist. Today, in spite of the absence of detailed records, even indeterminate crania are still considered by the research team of the museum to be a useful source of information about human variability and are employed in forensic anthropology to point to some major differences between human groups (Bruner and Manzi, 2004: 51-56). Epidemiological surveys, population biology, human palaeontology and forensic sciences still see these bones – plundered a century ago in Libya, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia – to be their main objects of inquiry in explaining evolutionary origins.

Despite their obscure identities, the ongoing care that the skulls have been able to garner across historical epochs seems to be due to the following reason: in spite of their different purposes across history – investigating human variability, imposing racial hierarchies, DNA extractions, returning denied identities for posthumous justice – the discourse around human remains, while revealing an epistemological and ontological potential, de facto introduces bones and skulls as traces of the past, which might be suitable for possible living testimonies.

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66 The relation between medical experiments and colonial violence is perfectly expressed by the case of what is considered the first organised genocide of the 20th century, namely the genocide of the Nama and Herero people of today’s Namibia, perpetrated by German colonialism between 1905 and 1908. It was exactly in the aftermath of this pioneering exercise of State genocide that Eugen Fischer, German professor of anthropology and eugenics, settled in German South-West Africa to research and study the so-called Rehobother Bastards concerning miscegenation and racial degeneration. His theories on human heredity and racial hygiene then gave scientific support and evidence to the Nuremberg laws, planting the seeds for the Nazis’ genocidal ideology.
In the present day the political dynamism arising from the Namibian skulls affair offers human remains a role that is not merely instrumental, but also hermeneutic, as much as “they shape the ways that people gain access to reality” (Domanska, 2006: 341). Any ontology and epistemology around the skulls can be rethought. For instance, the support of scientific and forensic expertise provided by a team at the Charité Hospital in Berlin, mirroring similar technical expertise formerly in use at the time of colonial experiments, now “gives things voices where there had been silence, and brings to sight that which was invisible” (Ihde, 2003). According to Ewa Domanska, interrogating the skull as a proper witness implies that “technologies should not be conceived solely as instruments to estrange people from themselves and their world, but also as the theme that mediates their existence and experiences” (Domanska, 2006: 342). In this sense an antithetical forensic intervention on the skulls brings back to the fore an immanent materiality, historical truth and identities waiting to become public and visible once more.

“Things are [not] always already on their way to becoming trash (where materiality is conceived as the dead other to life)” (Bennett J., 2004: 360) claims Jane Bennett, who, offering an alternative reading of materialism, critically reads Marx and Adorno’s historical and social materialism and challenges the idea that the material world depends exclusively on human subjectivity and agency. Instead, her “thing-power materialism” calls for life, resistance and a kind of agency within a context dominated by artefacts and materiality, and more generally by things.

In this perspective the dichotomy between the subject/object vanishes, while the mere materiality of the skull, in its present and its past, returns to the stage while preserving in its mineral layers the traces of multiple and various historicities (Bennett J., 2010). Hence, following Latour’s network theory, skulls as things are indeed able to create and shape a public sphere around them (Latour, 2004 and 2005).

However, as a matter of fact, the Italian context does not seem sensitive to any of the options presented above, as if unaware of its seemingly dormant colonial heritage. Due to the absence of relevant information (archival material and historical research) around the identity and the details of colonial collections (poor catalogues, empty archives, missing information around collectors and the missions which brought the specimens to Italy) kept at the Museum Sergi, the anonymous piles of African human skulls from ancient to more contemporary epochs de facto seem
doomed to be permanently excluded from a public sphere capable of questioning colonial ‘anonymisation’ practices.

On the contrary, the artificial a-temporal role to which the skulls are wed still nourishes a sort of timeless paleontological present where any knowledge about colonial practices of corporeal management has been absorbed within the discourse around early modern scientific progress. Moreover, the absence of any public sphere built around them can also be explained from the perspective of law, since the question of posthumous justice cannot easily be taken for granted. If on the one hand it is true that the status of skulls as stolen artefacts might introduce legal debates around the illicit trafficking and restitution of cultural property, on the other hand it is also difficult to speak in terms of restitution when there is no actual “request of return”.67 Addressing colonial looting as unlawful is problematic if the issue of unlawfulness does not arise, and if the dispossession was in compliance with the national and international laws in force at the time. Additionally, if we take into consideration the constructed anonymity of the skulls, the lack of demands for restitution and justice from the ex-colonial world can be seen as heavy with consequences. In this sense it marks the impossibility of thinking of a renewed circularity of the bones, i.e. taking them back to Africa.

Unlike the German/Namibian case, the ‘immobility’ of the bones at the Sergi Museum still marks the same spatialisation and temporalisation of bodies that was constructed a century ago. In so doing, they echo Frantz Fanon’s words on colonialism, as the event that “turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts it, disfigures and destroys it” (Fanon, 2007).

67 Even in case of such requests, disputes are constantly proliferating between Western institutions and governments from the ex colonial world with differing results and ends: in the dispute between the Aboriginal community of Tasmania and the British Natural History Museum concerning human remains claimed by the former, the Museum had intended to conserve the remains in order to take DNA samples as material of scientific interest for future use. Similarly, the skull of Hintsa, the macabrely preserved Khoisan heads which were taken from the Cape Colony (South Africa) by the British in the early-mid 19th century are still the object of disagreement. On the contrary the famous Hottentot Venus, Saartjie Baartman, who was taken from South Africa around 1810 and died in France in 1816, and whose skeleton was displayed in the Musée de l’Homme until 1976, was returned to South Africa after the South African Ambassador made an official request to France on 26 October 2000 (Cornu and Renold, 2010: 10). Similarly, the City of Rouen (France) took steps to return the Maori head to New Zealand, and eventually completed the restitution in January 2012. Other similar cases have occurred in recent history, like the restitution in 1991 and 2000 from the University of Edinburgh to Australia of more than 300 Aboriginal skulls, in accordance with new policies of returning all human remains “when so requested, to appropriate representatives of cultures in which such remains had particular significance” (Fforde and Turnbull, 2002: 13).
Colonial and post-colonial human traces in Italy

The temporal and spatial ‘immobility’ experienced by the African human bones described above is, nevertheless, not exclusive to such a context. The presence in Italy of human traces of African natives from colonial times is a reality that cannot be historically confined to the showcases and archives of anthropology museums. Traces on the Italian ground of colonial human remains also come from the times of deportation of Libyans and Ethiopians who had been exiled to Italy, as part of the Italian strategy to break anticolonial resistance under both liberalism and fascism. Therefore, while some human remains have been found as such, gathered and then taken to Italy and placed behind glass, the colonial wars also presented Italy with an opportunity to collect “living” people, and force them into exile in Italian penal colonies erected on islands and little archipelagos in the Mediterranean.

Since the early stages of Italy’s liberal colonisation of Libya, before it was used to project Italian imperialist aspirations overseas – during the mass migration of Italian settlers who populated Libya in 1938 at the peak of fascist command – the Mediterranean has been the crossing place and privileged site for exercising control over and policing of the bodies of colonial subjects. Many of the exiled rebels died on these islands and were buried in mass graves, becoming de facto nameless victims of Italian deportation.

In the early 1990s, twenty years before the Friendship Pact with Italy put an end to Libya’s requests for colonial reparations, Colonel Gaddafi forwarded a request to the Italian authorities to allow a delegation of 200 Libyan citizens to enter the island of Ustica in Sicily, to visit a charnel house hosting the remains of 132 Libyans who were deported and then died on the Sicilian island in the years 1911 and 1912. After the 1911 battle of Shara Shatt in Libya, which saw Italian troops heavily challenged by Libyan resistance, the liberal government of Giovanni Giolitti started to deport suspected fighters and they were put onto boats heading towards Italy (Del Boca, 2006; Labanca, 2012). Many of them were piled in the sheep hold, and some died because of asphyxiation while crossing the Mediterranean. Many prisoners also died a short time after their disembarkation: 500 Libyans who arrived in October 1911 in the Tremiti archipelago did not survive their first month of captivity, and a mass grave was arranged on the small island of San Nicola. According to a rare testimony of an old inhabitant of the island “every day, 10 to 12 Libyans were dying.
Their remains are preserved in the most desolate part of the island⁶⁸ (L’Unità, 14 November 2011). In 1987, the acknowledgement of these unidentified Libyan bodies buried in the archipelago inspired Gaddafi to make the provocative request to the Italian government for the annexation of the atoll to Libya as fair reparation for past Italian atrocities.

Like Tremiti and Ustica, other Italian archipelagos and islands such as Favignana and Ponza, as well as the gulf of Gaeta, are also sites that are known for having been used – first under liberal colonialism and then under fascist imperialism – as penal colonies for Libyan rebels and other Ethiopian notables and freedom fighters. Many of the prisoners who were not repatriated died over the years because of the spread of tuberculosis, smallpox, typhus and other epidemics caused by the harsh conditions of imprisonment, life and hygiene on the islands.⁶⁹

According to the few reports retrieved from some municipal archives of Ustica’s town hall, the taxonomy of death made by Italian authorities was very superficial and approximate: the deceased were catalogued with numbers, and only vague indications were given regarding their age and origin. The causes of death were generally left blank. The bodies were then piled up and buried in a mass grave. Up to the present day the Favignana and Tremiti archipelagos also preserve the remains of Libyan prisoners who still lie anonymously in mass graves that were only recently converted into mausoleums.⁷⁰

Only after Gaddafi and the Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi signed their historical pact in 2009 in Benghazi, did the requests for exhumation, repatriation and compensation for Libyan deaths cease. As chapter three has shown, the agreement around colonial reparations between Italy and Libya emerged around important economic and political reciprocal exchanges: aside from new infrastructures on the Libyan soil (the new Litoranea) and important Libyan participation in private and state Italian trusts, Libya and Italy built a strong partnership over the fight against illegal immigration, on both sea and land.

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⁶⁸ The translation from Italian is mine.
⁷⁰ Research on the Ustica archives has been intensively carried out over the years by the Centro Studi e Documentazione Isola di Ustica, to keep the memories of the Libyan prisoners intact.
On the one hand the Mediterranean was appointed as a “sea border”, seeing “approximately 2000 km of Libyan coast patrolled by mixed crews on patrol boats provided by Italy” (Ronzitti, 2009). On the other hand Libyan land borders were to be controlled by a satellite detection system jointly financed by Italy and the European Union. The partnership with Libya, a non-state party to the 1951 Convention on refugees, generated the strongest human rights concerns with regard to the fate of the migrants who were pushed back into the sea or left in the desert. On the other hand, the Fezzan desert, as the southern Libyan land border, as it did at the time of Italian colonisation, played the role of a “natural buffer zone”. During colonialism the desert was functional for the Italian military to confine Libyan tribes and keep them distant from the coastline. Then in the present day, it has once again become instrumental as an externalised frontier to intercept migration and freeze movement.

However, unlike the Fezzan desert, the Mediterranean has regularly been a liquid border through which traders, capital, oil, gas and people (exiled Libyans, Italian settlers, migrants and refugees) have been able to continue to circulate between Italy, the Libyan Fourth Shore and the African continent. The recent militarisation of the Mediterranean and its transformation into an open space of policing, rather than discouraging the movement of people, has rendered these crossing trajectories more and more perilous, causing the death of at least 13,417 people at the maritime borders of the EU alone since the end of the 1980s. The Italian NGO Fortress Europe has calculated that about half of these (an estimated 6,226 victims, including 4,790 missing persons) died or disappeared in the Sicily Channel between 1994 and July 2011, (Fortress Europe, 2012). According to recent estimates by the UNHCR, in 2011 more than 1,800 migrants died in the Mediterranean at sea borders (UNHCR, 2012).

This chapter demonstrates how two distant historical temporalities - Italian colonialism and the post-colonial present - are encountered around the management of African human remains: on the one hand colonial exploration and occupation featured the circulation of human remains as objects of colonial plundering and trade, seeing the death of the native as the event which, rather than interrupting circularity, perpetuated it. But the colonial circularity could not vouch for permanent dynamism. The space of the museum has indeed provided the means for allocating human specimens or their replicas (masks) in sequences of endless and anonymous
‘immobility’. On the other hand, the post-colonial present interrupts the circulation of living travelling bodies at the moment of death, and its aftermath completes the process of ‘anonymisation’ – nameless bodies marking nameless graves in a new phase of ‘immobility’. Anonymous sea deaths relegate migrants’ agency and individuality to a limbo, which rejects them, throwing them into an indistinct and ahistorical temporality, completing the path of ‘anonymisation’ that they began at the moment of starting their journey, when they were forced to deprive themselves of their identity in order to avoid the risk of forced repatriation. The existence of unmarked graves on the island of Lampedusa and other islands off the southern coasts of Sicily, embodies the last stage of the destruction of their identity, leaving on the ground a visual and corporeal legacy which evokes the echoes of a not too distant past, a continuous and seemingly endless sense of obscurity which is built on the legacy of human traces preserved in Italy in multiple nameless contexts and forms across different temporalities: human specimens in anthropology museums, exiled Libyans buried in mass graves in former Italian penal colonies, and unidentified migrants in unmarked graves in Sicily.

The contact point between the human specimen, exiled freedom fighters and migrants is indeed defined around them being subject to being forced through artificial and cyclical ‘anonymisation’ phases where the ultimate stage is represented by the dissolution of human tissues into mineral traces whose only fragment of identity relies on the type of petrified human remains that early modern anthropology used as ultimate evidence to deny subjectivity.

Nevertheless, in spite of the constructed limbo that human remains seem forced to experience, the hermeneutics of bones and skulls relies on the assumption that skulls, as artefacts are considered to be the major trace of physical evidence. Indeed, it is the notion of this trace itself that brings back to the fore a lasting debate around the ontological status of the past and its influence on the present. In this sense the trace is used “as a complementary and alternative method to the idea of historical source” (Domanska, 2005a: 398), where traces re-vitalise the interrogation of the past through the symbiotic relation between knowledge and power. Accordingly, skeletal remains, while holding traces of inter-connected historicities (tying victims to perpetrators, the colonised to the coloniser, and shaping temporal continuities along the axis colonialism/decolonisation/post-colonialism), can possibly open up the possibility of unexpected individual or collective acts of mourning, post-colonial
demands for emancipation, and struggles ranging from questioning the illicit trafficking of cultural properties, shedding light on the possession of others’ cultural heritage, to the struggle for recognition for those who ‘vanish’ at sea borders.

Indeed, this parallelism is founded on a shared origin that is marked by the total loss of identity. Nevertheless, this same condition is to be the inception of a new circularity, designing a symbolic kinship between the bones – the ones kept on museum shelves, in mass graves and nameless burial chambers and unidentified remains after deaths at sea. In fact, in spite of different spatial arrangements, the bones are suitable for shared epistemic orderings. In forensic investigation artefactual evidence is used to reconstruct events or to connect an object or a person from one place to another. Hence, the analysis around the identification of age, sex and race, also investigates the presence of trauma on the remains, in order to identify the victims, whose remains might be returned to surviving relatives (as happened with the return of the skulls to Namibia, as much as the restitution of migrants’ bodies or remains after death at sea).

The revelation of the dead body or its remains, through its corporeal evidence, indeed serves a dual function, legal and memorial, namely “the function of the dead body as evidence of crime (serving the rhetoric of justice) and as the reference point for the work of mourning (serving the rhetoric of memory)” (Domanska, 2005a: 402). In this way, human remains, while operating as organic matter, serve the living to legitimate their existence, as both a legal and political subject, open to new power relations, social interactions and cultural narratives:

“The dead body is a witness (‘a witness from beyond the grave’) and evidence at the same time. It is also an alternative form of testimony. In this way it serves the living, becoming the space of conflict between different interests of power, knowledge, and the sacred. The body is politicized, it becomes an institution, and death itself turns out to be more of a political fact than an individual experience” (Domanska, 2005a: 402).

According to this framework, I argue that dormant skulls in search of identity can revolutionise early anthropological perspectives of bones as ideal samples devoid of subjectivity. Other historicities might occur to reflect upon bones’ ontology such as those that have recently been exposed in relation to post-genocide conflict
resolutions. In relation to this, Damir Arsenijevic from the *Grupa Spomenik* / Monument Group, a collective of artists, academics and activists, speaks against the racial ethnicisation in use in the labelling of human remains from mass graves in the Balkans. Within this debate, Arsenijevic introduces the option of “gendering the bones” as a practice that speaks “truth to power” in order to face the injustices of dominant ethno-nationalist ideologies. “Gendering the bones” equals “the gendering of politics — the art of thinking how to be otherwise in order to question the criteria of plausibility of the dominant and to shift the boundaries of possibility” (Arsenijevic, 2011: 196). Accordingly, as Giorgio Agamben suggests, “the creation of a new use is possible only by deactivating an old use, rendering it inoperative” (Agamben, 2006: 87).

As recently demonstrated by the Forensic Architecture research project, in a context such as the violation of human rights, forensics have become a leading practice instrumental for the International Criminal Court and tribunals for the investigation and recovery of human remains and the reconstruction of human activity around specific events (Forensic Architecture, 2014).

Through forensic investigation, science and law are complementary to each other in implementing the global discourse on human rights around collective and individual memory, representation techniques and compensation for crimes or looting. The encounter between skulls and forensics is not a deceptive theatre: the realisation of history via technological and scientific expertise, discloses how an old colonial practice – measurements and calculations on natives’ faces and crania – can be overcome when an old use can be de-activated. From the perspective of the law, the question of colonial skulls held by Italian museums and institutions, has been raised to the status of them being stolen artefacts which *de facto* enter the sphere of cultural heritage seeking return to their legitimate owners.

Following cases of the discovery of skeletal remains and bodies after death at sea or anonymous burial procedures, are investigations into the causes of death, the right of identity, and the rights of the families to have the remains back located within the framework of the law? In all cases the struggle is for identity and return. In this sense the bones set the aesthetics of law: reparations and identity recognition. The aesthetics serve a dual purpose: collective mourning for the benefit of the memory of the dead, and then justice, while awarding compensation for a crime or loss. Hence, on the one hand, the retrieved identity of the skulls symbolises and leads
one to think of decolonising objects, towards the dismantling of an old-fashioned colonial matrix of power grounded on mechanisms of ‘anonymisation’. On the other hand, returning identity to the migrants’ bones, while breaking the chains of anonymity that migration techniques of control have forced travelling bodies into, reinstates a sort of circularity and circulation which was brutally interrupted at the moment of death.

**Post-colonial practices of ‘anonymisation’**

A transnational space for human rights is indeed forming around the entanglements between the colonial past and the effects of decolonisation, which ties together humans to materiality in a constant synchronic movement across colonial and post-colonial worlds. After a perfect synthesis, the encounter between human life and the material world gives to human skulls and bones the status of ‘living’ testimonies that are able to constitute a historical legacy that influences the present. Therefore, around skeletal remains, Italy sees the eruption of its responsibility for past colonial looting and crimes, but at the same time it must face its duties and obligations towards those deaths occurring at its sea borders. Just as in the Balkans, Rwanda and Darfur, where bones, as complementary sources to the oral testimony of survivors, have recently established a double memorial and legal space to deal with genocidal practices, the African skeletal remains being kept in Italy’s anthropology museums, colonial mass graves and in recent unidentified individual graves after deaths at sea, define an homogenous iconography tying together different temporalities and epochs, which made had the African body an instrument and telos of control at the same time. Nevertheless, in spite of the rise of a global human rights discourse around human remains, Italy’s relations with Libya also demonstrate how the politics of colonial reparations can be a deceptive formula.

Italy’s reparations to Libya have taken the form of Italian investments in infrastructure, defence and border control technology and, although only to a certain extent, other services such as scholarships. This engagement holds important economic prospects for Italian firms in charge of the projects in the ex-colony. In reality these forms of payment are not exclusive to the Italian case, but resemble practices that are very common among other former European empires: as was
explained earlier, this resolution seems to echo the German commitment towards Namibia with regard to infrastructures and services, where war compensation is often delivered in the form of development assistance and aid.\(^71\)

However, Italy’s “special initiatives” for “the benefit of the Libyan people” also included, as previously explained, a massive deployment of financial resources to tighten control on irregular migration at maritime and land borders. This post-colonial bargaining saw its realisation via ‘zero tolerance’ polices towards migrants, Italian training for Libyan police, the construction of reception camps for undocumented migrants and the provision of equipment for migration control for Libya, in conjunction with the politics of the “push-backs”. It was a joint agreement, which, in spite of Gaddafi’s fall in 2011, was re-negotiated by Italy and the new Libyan authorities.\(^72\) Italian governmental actions to control mobility indeed still deal on a daily base with those ‘unintended side effects’, namely migrant frontier deaths.

However, faced with increasing violence, which becomes more visible and intense when borders are retraced and border regimes are reinstated, the Italian state is required to follow up with human rights-based policies and guidelines “to document deaths, preserve evidence of identity, and assist families – wherever they may be – in their search for information about their missing relatives” (Grant, 2011: 155). Furthermore, another critical aspect is the stipulations about burial, where the dead should be searched for, collected and identified without distinction, treated with respect and dignity, and when identified, returned to their families or buried in individually marked graves.

States’ duties and obligations to prevent migrant deaths and loss are also in question.\(^73\) In fact, according to Navanethem Pillay, the UN High Commissioner for

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\(^71\) As object of legislation, this issue has currently raised an important debate within the British Parliament, where development “can be seen as a form of compensation or reparation for past wrongs (such as colonialism and slavery)” (The Future of UK Development Cooperation, 2013). This implementation of reparations relies on an idea which has been widely debated by scholars and defines ‘reparations’ towards the descendant community from the victims of colonial rule “as a means of transforming the current conditions of deprivation suffered by the groups in question, and is more frequently connected to broader projects of social transformation” (Torpey, 2001: 337).

\(^72\) Strengthening the privileged relationship in countering illegal immigration was at the top of the agenda of an Italian delegation to Libya led by Interior minister Anna Maria Cancellieri in 2012, to improve bilateral cooperation in the field of migration.

\(^73\) When a border death occurs, states are under a positive obligation to investigate what happened and to establish the victim’s identity. They must try to identify the person, using information about the region of origin of the victim, the testimony of their surviving fellow migrants, and if possible, finger prints, DNA and other tools of international policing.
Human Rights, International Humanitarian Law highlights the rights of individual migrants as a warning to states not to “reject... migrants and leave them to face hardship and peril, if not death, as though they were turning away ships laden with dangerous waste” (OHCHR, 2009).

But as shown before, the occurrence of death interrupting the travel of undocumented migrants is just the last moment of a forced ‘anonymisation’ process that starts much earlier; an event that does not strictly depend on death for its own realisation. In fact, according to Caroline Moorehead, who has collected some very compelling testimonies from the island of Lampedusa, for many smuggled migrants who have safely reached the Sicilian coasts, the loss of identity is a voluntary act in response to the fear of detection: their refusal to tell even the villagers who have welcomed and supported them who they are or where they have come from, seems to be a recurring scene which, beyond death, proves the liquidity of the mechanisms of production of anonymity (Moorehead, 2005: 70).

Nevertheless, the evidence of nameless graves on Italian soil emerges as a consequence of an increasing number of anonymous deaths at sea. While sometimes it is possible to detect the country of origin of the unknown migrant, in most cases this is a difficult task. In some cases, like for instance in the cemetery of Canicatti – Agrigento, Sicily - there are three graves that are marked with ‘Cittadino Liberiano’ [Citizen of Liberia], with a single letter of the alphabet to distinguish one from the others, because none of the survivors were able or willing to name the bodies. But in many other cases even this is an unrealistic expectation. At the cemetery of Scicli, 80 unidentified dead migrants are buried in unmarked graves. The bodies were retrieved from the waters near to the coastal boroughs of Donnalucata, Sampieri and Cava d’Aliga under the municipality of Scicli – Ragusa, Sicily – between 2004 and 2011. The rudimentary gravestones are made of thin marble plates that are covered by a wooden tablet and a leaf. On the paper is written Cadavere di persona sconosciuta or ‘cadaver of unknown person’ and Cadavere N. 5 or ‘cadaver number 5’, followed by Sbarco di clandestini or ‘disembarkation of illegal immigrants’, to explain the cause of death, after which is indicated the location and date of the body’s retrieval from the coast. It is indeed the illegal condition of being an irregular traveller that is the last mark of the identity of this dead individual. In this way the conditions that determined his/her loss of identity, namely a restricted regime of mobility, leave the last markers on the body – a body turned into ‘phantasm’.
As part of this complex process, Italy’s politics of reparations to Libya for its colonial crimes indeed seems to resemble the parallel improvement in strategies and techniques of containment to face the long-term effects of decolonisation – such as control over the movement of people who wish to leave their countries. Moreover, colonial compensations, while being the basis of the inception of new migration polices, are themselves dependent on the same side-effects that they produce.

Therefore, I wish to conclude by going back to the beginning, namely to Foucault’s definition of milieu as “an element in which a circular link is produced between effects and causes, since one effect from one point of view will be a cause from another” (Foucault, 2007: 21), where the politics of reparation tie Italy and Libya back together again in the present day. As a response to past colonial crimes the Friendship Pact leads to the sharpening of new mechanisms of control and mastery over these same populations who claim an entitlement to compensation.

As a “miasma” that inevitably produces more cadavers and erupts at the same time as the “cause and effect” preserving the circulation within the milieu, the experience of death is peculiar to the economy and ecology of post-colonial plans for compensation, whereas on the contrary colonial and post-colonial bones still lie dormant, fixed into an undetermined but controversial and topical realm of immobility.
Conclusion

During the summer of 2013 some of the events narrated throughout these chapters reached new phases or developed further. In particular, in August 2013, once the new Libyan state had stabilised after the regime change, the question of the motorway resurfaced as an important issue around which the new relations between Libya and Italy would revolve. The whole process of compensation was restored and a new successful bid was made. Eventually, the Italian firm Salini won the contract to build a 1,700 km motorway running across Libya from the Tunisian border to the Egyptian one. According to the new contract, the motorway will be funded by the Italian government within the scope of the Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation Agreement formerly signed by Silvio Berlusconi and Colonel Muammar Gaddafi on 30 August 2008 in Benghazi, which was temporarily suspended in 2011 (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2013).

Simultaneously, after two years of humanitarian assistance, the Choucha Refugee Camp located at the Ras Ajdir border between Libya and Tunisia, was closed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Since the Libyan revolts started in 2011, UN agencies have calculated that at least one million people have crossed the border with Tunisia; the Choucha camp hosting, at the peak of the refugee crisis, up to 18,000 people a day. Since then, relocation of the refugees has been carried out and programmes of resettlement have involved around 4,000 people (UNHCR, 2013). However, with the closure of the camp in the summer of 2013, the resettlements have been interrupted, although more than 600 refugees – mainly from Somalia, Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Chad – are still waiting for a solution, having seen their applications for asylum rejected. Although Tunisia does not have an asylum framework already in place, the UNHCR and the Tunisian authorities have decided to approve a temporary six-month residence permit in Tunisian urban areas (Zarzis, Ben Gardane, Medenine) for the refugees who have been left behind. As a first step the Tunisian government started fingerprinting the refugees, while the UNHCR financially supports those people who are willing to be part of the Tunisian integration programme (UNHCR, 2013; IRIN, 2013). But many of the refugees have refused this option, demanding the right to receive proper
asylum. On 30 June 2013, the official day of closure of the camp, many of the refugees stayed in the camp area as a sign of protest, despite the fact that all of the services (water and electricity) had been cut off and the entire structure was dismantled. The decision by the UNHCR to close the transit camp of Choucha without finding a stable solution has been highly criticised as the harbinger of further illegal and perilous crossings of the Mediterranean sea.

In the meantime, after an intense summer of boats landing on the Italian southern shores in Lampedusa and all over Sicily, the Italian Interior minister, Angelino Alfano, announced that 8,932 migrants had arrived between 1 July and 10 August 2013. In this regard, while addressing the EU, the minister reiterated that, “the issue of immigration at Lampedusa cannot be considered a national issue” (Guardian, 3 October 2013).

With these latest developments it becomes possible to understand how the circulation of materialities between Italy and its ex-colonial periphery is an on-going process, and is far from reaching a definitive conclusion. Reparations for colonial crimes, enduring spatial transformations of former colonised lands and shores, and the increase of human circulation along the south/north axis which connects former colonial Africa to Italy as a gateway to Europe, are all intertwined elements which describe the post-colonial condition of Italy, as a fluctuating reality in constant evolution. Moreover, these latest events and considerations allow us to reflect again on the observations made throughout the thesis regarding the continuous overlapping of colonial legacies and the contingencies of a globalised post-colonial present. In this scenario, we saw in the opening chapter how compensation plans for colonial crimes, past and present, conflate and discourses on historical justice and memory meld together with a constant and urgent need to exercise control over the effects of decolonisation; where the closure of the historical past entails significant control over the present and calculations about the future.

Moreover, it becomes possible to see how in Italy the premises of the nation-state on which colonial ventures were justified and built, are progressively absorbed in the discourse of reparations. Such events illustrate how the nature of bilateral agreements does not simply concern the single interests of the two sides, but, on the contrary, present Italy as a post-colonial nation where the legacy of colonialism and the consequences of decolonisation gradually shape a post-national historical present. Through different and seemingly distant forms of spatialisation in the centre and at
the periphery, the discourse on reparations becomes instrumental in creating solid relations with the ex-colonial countries of Libya and Ethiopia as strategic allies in order to prevent global threats such as uncontrolled migration, famine and poverty, as dangerous conditions of failed states and terrorism. In this scenario, development and humanitarianism project Italy as part of an international framework and network, where the legacies of the past are absorbed by the emergencies of a complex operational present. Echoing the prism of the Foucauldian milieu, the Italian colonial past and post-colonial present seem indissolubly tied by a fluent circularity of events which, throughout history, have seen reparations for colonial crimes as justice for a past made up of abuses and atrocities. However, at the same time, this past is generating the conditions for the improvement of strategies and technologies of surveillance of global mobility – stemming from border control, through development up to humanitarianism.

Against this background the postcolonial question in Italy reaches a new stage. In relation to the considerations of the Italian Interior minister cited above “the issue of immigration cannot be considered a national issue”, the same happens with the post-colonial issue, as Italy’s politics of reparations dramatically intertwine with the politics of migration. In this way, the concerns around post-coloniality in Italy must also be read through the lens of a post-national present, where Italy is forced to re-discuss its past within the frame of a global network of state and non-state agents (institutions, agencies, corporations and migrants) through which the conflation between the ‘domestic’ and ‘foreign’ goes hand in hand with the gradual weakening of the premises of the nation state.

This thesis has brought to the fore three cases of ‘materiality in circulation’, which aimed at unveiling the transition of powers at the base of the new Italian debate on postcolonialism. However, as I mentioned before, the circular and cross-temporal motion of materialities between Italy and its former colonies narrates historical, cultural and political processes that are far from seeing a conclusion.

As this research project demonstrates, the ‘circulation’ of colonial materialities is also a variable phenomena: while the obelisk affair has been taken to its end, the construction of the Litoranea is again in progress, and skeletal remains still lie anonymously on the shelves of Italian anthropology museums and still embody an open issue in Italy’s post-colonial history and legacy.
However, the performative power of such materialities is not simply measured through their single “movement” across time and space, but through their capacity to trigger and inspire parallel, simultaneous movement of other materialities and humans. In this way, we can conceive ‘materialities in circulation’ as an alternative methodology of research through which, as Walter Benjamin might say, we can understand a new “dialectic of awakening” (Benjamin, 1999: 389). In this framework emerging materialities are windows on history that allow us to work simultaneously on the past and the present.

This thesis, through three different stories, has focused on Italy in its geopolitical context, where the analysis and studies of colonialism and postcolonialism reciprocally complete each other as historical events or processes. Through multi-disciplinary considerations and approaches - material culture, governmentality and migration - to the legacy of Italian colonialism, this thesis has explored the spatial and aesthetic elements that explain transitions and mutations of power from colonial forms and technologies of government to post-colonial ones. In so doing, this thesis has deliberately opted to question, through materialities in circulation, a larger debate about the dialectic between power and mobility.

In this way this thesis seeks to make a twofold contribution to the postcolonial discourse. Firstly it utilises the material world as a space and tool of analysis for a better understanding of the centre/periphery dialectic in both colonial and postcolonial contexts. Secondly, it offers an in-depth understanding of Italy as a postcolonial country: taking into consideration the colonial material other, the focus is on the construction of Italian colonial and post-colonial discourses and the way in which they reflect and justify the evolution of the colonial itself. Thereby this research has elaborated a conceptual model to re-think the postcolonial – practices of government, spatial arrangements, forging identities and representation of otherness - through mobile objects in circulation across time and space. In this sense the Italian context offers thought-provoking case studies that allow an elaboration on the postcolonial from a wider perspective and give visibility to those contact zones where encounters, coercion, inequality and conflict take place.

Moreover, through an object-oriented methodology this thesis has also brought to the fore the analogy between the subjective/objective dialectic and the centre/periphery one as they both embody the inside/outside relation. There, the convergence between the material and the peripheral gains deep epistemological
value and explains the simultaneity between the outside and the inside, the centre and the periphery. These interplays and intersections are the key elements around which the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial takes place, and also explain why we need to follow a path of inquiry that goes towards and through the material world. In this sense these materialities simultaneously constitute the instrument of analysis and the telos of this research.

What was left open and unexplored is the debate regarding those forms of counter-power and the formation of syncretic, anti-colonial identities, resistant or diasporic subjectivities that arise in border zones, at the frontier between the homeland and the periphery, which from colonial times up to the post-colonial present have resisted the technologies of control and governmentalities that are constantly evolving. As Gregory comments while thinking of Foucault, “power is productive, constitutively involved in the double process of assujetissement: subjection and subjectification” (Gregory, 1994: 191). Accordingly, power dynamics are performative in this double sense and are themselves inceptive of new “subjectification” that may lead to the elaboration and creation of new counter-powers or practices of resistance.

Through the story of the motorway and the case of the obelisk, this thesis has discussed various forms and techniques of domestication of otherness across time and space. However, only through the case of the de-identification and ‘anonymisation’ of human bodies and identities, explored in the last chapter, is the most complex and sophisticated aspect of the penetrative power of both colonial and post-colonial technologies of government found: through the reading of human remains and anthropometric replicas it was possible to unveil the ultimate stage of colonial subjection, namely the transformation of colonial subjects into real objects.

Here, while investigating different examples of colonial and post-colonial materialities, I have drawn a path which, from an analysis of the material and artefactual world, ultimately leads us to question the centrality of the postcolonial subject, even if only through its remains, bones and anthropometric replicas.

At this stage my argument ends and deliberately leaves open the issue of the capacity of the postcolonial subject to question structures of power and mechanisms of subjection, and so inverts Mbembe’s argument that the colonial space is the exclusive theatre for annihilation. As Vivienne Jabri rightly points out, in order to trace the postcolonial subject throughout multiple spaces of governmentality, we
should follow Partha Chatterje’s projection of an emerging political society in spaces of governmentality (Chatterje, 2004), which explores the possibility “that categories created by technologies of governmentality emerge as sites of agency wherein populations affected come to acquire a relationship with the modern state” (Jabri, 2013: 147). According to this consideration, we might then be able to reverse the analytical process that has been performed so far, and look for examples of mobility, not merely as an object of government but precisely as “what is needed to displace the arrangements of power” (Jacobs, 2013: 7; Minh ha, 1991). The complementary stories of ‘anonymised’ others such as those of the colonial human remains in evolutionary museums and the un-identified people who have died during border crossings, takes us exactly in this direction.

Against the same techniques which impose upon the subject a forced ‘anonymisation’ that is to reach a stage of inanimate materiality, it is the materiality itself of the human subject and its mineral tissues that allow us to trace the lost elements of human subjectivity. This currently happens around disputes of colonial reparations concerning skeletal remains and around the identification process of those anonymous people who have died at sea borders. In both cases, legal and civil battles carried out by descendants, relatives and families, activists, lawyers, academics and aid workers aim to reclaim these bodies and their identities, thus restarting the circulation that was interrupted when technologies of governmentality become operative and effective.

In relation to colonial practices of representation, Aimé Césaire, while describing colonialism not as a mere form of exploitation but as a real practice aiming at the dehumanisation and objectification of the colonial subject, has offered the equation “colonisation = thingification” (Césaire, 1972: 21) as a preliminary premise to understand the colonial logic of domination. While as we have seen, mechanisms of ‘thingification’ cannot be temporally and spatially confined to museum spaces, it is through this ultimate stage of human reification or ‘thingification’ that the colonial scheme of subjection can be reversed. With the support of science and forensics, it is specifically on the basis of the material and seemingly inanimate status of the postcolonial subject that new discourses on agency and resistance are ready to develop.
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