

## **Ignoring and Preserving the European Identity: An Ethnography of Rome**

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### **Part I: Introduction**

Known as the eternal city, Rome has been memorialized as a destination of magnificence and European power. From the Fori Imperiali to Vatican City, people from across the globe journey to Rome in order to experience its culture, food, and rich history. While ancient structures remain strong and unwavering amidst a modern metropolis, visitors and Italians alike do little to question the role of the past in shaping the political present and future. With the architecture, memorials, and public spaces appearing to contribute to the city's overall aesthetic, they concurrently validate past oppressions that are inherently paralleled with the mistreatment of black people.

Incorporating ethnographic standards, an expedition through Rome in terms of its memorials and public spaces bares truths about themes of pride and racism in Italy. Upon analysis, it is argued that the locations spanning Rome reveal the European image as one that utilizes ignorance as an excuse to erase black identities and uphold systems of abuse. Through the act of public forgetting, the roots of the European image and identity are seldom scrutinized over, conserving the values of colonialism, Fascism, and capitalism.

### **Part II: Methodology**

The study is restricted to Rome, Italy. As an American student temporarily living in the city, the selected locations are based off of personal experiences. This perspective enabled me to be both an outsider and insider; I had to adjust to new norms and mores without previous exposure to European culture, while becoming more

comfortable and aware of life in Rome as a short-term resident. I chose to identify patterns at each location of the ethnography by being a passive participant, with the exception of one instance, to not skew the outcome of observations.

Though my travels were across the entirety of Rome, I selected four distinct locations for the ethnography that were inspired by Krystyna Von Henneberg's "Monuments, Public Space, and the Memory of Empire in Modern Italy." The locations are discussed in the order in which they were traveled to: the Colosseo, the Monumento ai Caduti di Dogali, the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, and the Quartiere Africano. Each location will be detailed and culturally interpreted through a presentation of its historical and aesthetic significance, the collected ethnographic data, analysis and scholarship, and reflection.

### **Part III: Il Colosseo**

Since the construction of the amphitheater is a uniquely Roman installation, the Colosseo and its aesthetics are enshrined with entertainment standards, the imperial image, and Flavian ideology. With the inaugural games held in AD 80, the large-scale entertainment complex, as the largest amphitheater in the world, is located in the center of Rome. Constructed of concrete and turf with the capacity to fit more than 50,000 spectators, Italians ventured to the Colosseo to watch executions, battle reenactments, and other gladiatorial events. Garnered in images and other attributes to the gods and emperors, the site was the vision of Augustus and financed by the Jewish War (Elkins, 2014, p.p. 73-75). Today, the Colosseo prevails as a major tourist attraction.

Waiting to enter the Colosseo, with its unmistakably imperial design, the amphitheater was surrounded by hundreds of tourists from around the world and

solicitors attempting to sell them professedly discounted tickets. Overwhelmed by the masses of people and dozens of tour groups, I shoved my way around the Colosseo, trying to gaze at the inside of the arena. Though a significant portion of the structure was equipped with scaffolding for renovations in the seating areas and base, tourists still crammed their way to take photographs. I overheard several people recording videos, quoting renowned films, such as *Gladiator*. Compared to other tourist locations and spaces of historical importance, the Colosseo did not contain many placards with contextual information for visitors to read, adding to the removal of critical thinking about the original purpose of the location and its imperial past.

Such a massive appeal for the Colosseo is an effect of dark tourism, in which tourists are drawn to locations based on a need to visualize the dangers, and their inevitable consequences, that once took

place there. Rather than pondering the genuine roots of the history of a particular location, there is an obsession with atrocity, evil, and the mortality of the individual self and others. With ideas of modernity and development offered as explanations for the endurance of the Colosseo, historical accuracy is abandoned to instead provide a selective interpretation of the past (Hartmann et al, 2018, p.p. 270-272). With modernity affixed to the imperial image, the exploitation of human slavery, especially of minorities, is hidden to better eradicate the black identity and honor the fortitude of Anglo-European narratives. Additionally, this compels tourists to associate the oppressions that occurred in the Colosseo with glory and heroism rather than maltreatment and enslavement.

With the abuses of the Colosseo previously watched as a spectator sport, the notion of good versus evil has been disseminated through media portrayals.

Oftentimes, gladiators were tasked with fighting ferocious animals, as popular depictions of events in the Colosseo characterize the Roman gladiators as good and the animals they were matched with as evil. This can be juxtaposed with racist perceptions of black bodies being animalistic and against a natural order. Just as this propagates present attitudes of racism, colonial and imperial actions are justified, with Italians labeling themselves as the inheritors of their African conquests. Furthermore, this removes the existence of the black identity in European, since a comparison to animals renders black humans as faceless and undeserving of respect. As tourists fawn over the glory that accompanies images of gladiators in the Colosseo, they endorse the superiority of white Europeans and a national amnesia of the colonial past. With imperial images preserved by the cult-like interest of the Colosseo and false dichotomies between

religion and politics linking emperors and religious figures to the nation-state, white superiority and the illusion of secularism subsist (Elkins, 2014, p.p. 76-78). Because of this, religion is used to incorrectly politicize the presence of black migrants in Europe and Italy, as the customs of traditional Western Christian values are employed as rhetorical devices by both Italian religious figures and politicians to distinguish categories of an acceptance of the white and a rejection of all others.

#### **Part IV: Monumento ai Caduti di Dogali**

Unlike the majority of public spaces in Rome, the Monumento ai Caduti di Dogali honors a wartime defeat. With more than 500 soldiers killed during the Battle of Dogali, the monument is formulated to focus on the valiant effort of Italian soldiers in East Africa. The obelisk, recovered from ruins during the 1880s, stands on top of plaques with the names of the slain soldiers. Originally placed outside of Stazione

Termini, Italy's busiest railway station, in a square entitled Piazzale dei Cinquecento, or the Square of the Five Hundred, the monument was moved to its current location in the 1920s, no longer within the view of those traveling in and out of Rome (Von Henneberg, 2004, p.p. 44-45).

Now only a few meters away from Stazione Termini, the Monumento ai Caduti di Dogali is situated outside of its hustle and bustle. Though Rome has a slew of commemorative obelisks, I was struck by the monument's plainness and lack of apparent upkeep and grandeur. Compared to other obelisks, it seemed smaller in size, with the surrounding piazza covered in weeds and overgrown greenery, the infrastructure in the background decorated with graffiti and rickety benches. Whether or not individuals knew about the purpose of the monument, the off-putting scene detracted tourists and other passersby as well.

During my time in this public space, dozens of people walked by the monument and one man stopped to take a picture of the structure, whom I am assuming was a tourist unaware of the history of Rome's imperial presence in Africa. This contrasts greatly from how other obelisk monuments are appreciated and photographed across Rome. From what I have observed, obelisks are erected to signify a larger spot of public gathering, the centerpiece of action, such as Piazza Nevona or Piazza de Poppolo, which tourists flock to for shopping, dining, and other culturally immersive experiences.

It is important to consider the role of tourism in upholding the imperialist message. As a state member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), recent data suggests that Italy ranks in the bottom third of all OECD countries in labor market insecurity and long-term unemployment, with household net wealth falling to 18 percent

between 2010 and 2014. However, international tourism comprised 13 percent of Italy's GDP in 2017 and is predicted to increase over the next decade. Ranking third in terms of international tourist arrivals in Europe in the same year, the tourism industry is proving to be one of Italy's, and most notably Rome's, economic dependencies ("Italy Economic Forecast Summary," 2017). This shows a common thread between colonialism and the racialization of capitalism.

With a heightened reliance on international tourism, public consumption of imperialist monuments and spaces reinforces the colonial image. With spots in Rome, such as the Colosseo and Fori Imperiali, landing on blogs and lists as some of the world's most photographable places, further exacerbated by the presence of social media, tourists hold little responsibility in thinking critically about the history of what they see in Rome. There is a fixation on the

magnificence and honor that comes with Italy's past, leading tourists to aid in constructing the image of European identity as one of nobility and sophistication. In turn, this erases the black identity, as Monumento ai Caduti di Dogali is markedly overlooked and ignored. This relationship between tourism and the imperial image, and consequently capitalism, may lead Italians to justify their consistent dismissal of past oppressions, adding to a nationalist attitude and spurring pride for colonial accomplishments. Distinctions between which events are and are not worth commemorating also arise.

### **Part V: Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana**

The Esposizione Universale di Roma, or the E.U.R District, serves as an overarching emblem of the Italian Fascist regime, with a distinct architectural design. Within the central Piazza Guglielmo Marconi, the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, also known as the Square Colosseum, was

commissioned by Mussolini for the Universal Fair in Rome in 1942 with the intention of being a symbol of Fascism's power and fortitude (Ceccoli et al, 2011, p. 148). The building itself has seven above-the-ground floors, each with symmetrical concrete frames, cladding, and perfectly superimposed porches. As the building underwent repairable damages throughout World War II, there were plans to use the space as a museum (Ceccoli et al, 2011, p.p. 148-149). Today, the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana is home to the Fendi headquarters, the high-end fashion brand.

Upon my arrival to the E.U.R. District, the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana immediately stood out to me for its clean design and traditional Fascist architecture, which contrasts starkly from most public spaces I have seen throughout Rome. Though it was unsurprising that the E.U.R. is still widely regarded as a business hub, I was surprised to see Fendi's occupation of

the space in Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, as this disregards its creation as a Fascist symbol. I did not see any tourists viewing the building or roaming around the E.U.R. in general. Instead, I encountered impressively-dressed business people dining at posh cafes and walking to and from their places of work.

With the expansion of globalization, the connection between colonialism, Fascism, and capitalism grows clearer. Deprovincializing Italy to better conceptualize economic and cultural development in the modern context shows the power of constitutive colonial racism. In this social space, Italy proves to be stuck in its colonial past due to laden racist discourse, representation, and stereotypes. The racialization that came with colonialism was wiped from public memory in Italy's post-Fascist state, nurturing ambivalence through a supposed romanticized sanitization (Mellino, 2012, p.p. 90-91). With an elitist

refusal to debate and discuss prior transgressions, Italians are feeding into a European identity fixated on protecting a Fascist and colonial past and based in an ignorance of the post-colonial condition.

This is supported by the existence of the Fendi headquarters in the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana since 2015, as the history of the building is never openly acknowledged. Fendi representatives relay that the choice to station their headquarters in the Square Colosseum comes from the brand's commitment to "honor heritage while forging ahead into the future" ("Fendi Headquarters," 2015). This statement reflects the persistence of racist and classist ideals under the effects of global capitalism that are attached to racism. While the current use of the space in Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana adheres to the perpetuation of a national amnesia, the black identity is further erased. With ethnic minorities oppressed through capitalism and its

hindering of their ability to progress in socioeconomic standing, colonial abuses continue to be encouraged. Sold to the hegemony of colonialism, Fascism, and capitalism, the material effects of these systems go unnoticed without recognizing past racialization.

### **Part VI: Quartiere Africano**

The Quartiere Africano is deceptively named in that it is not meant as a place of public gathering and appreciation for the black community in Rome. Instead, each street name pays homage to a location in colonial Africa. Finished in the 1930s, the street names range from Viale Etiopia and Piazza Addis Abeba, as past colonial conquests (Von Henneberg, 2004, p. 41). Within relatively close proximity to better known, and typically tourist-centric sites, such as Villa Borghese and Villaggio Olimpico, the Quartiere Africano is plainly a neighborhood. Thus, conquests of Rome's imperial past are memorialized together



through a cohesive network of streets, without the construction of grandiose monuments but rather through small details.

During my time in the Quartiere Africano, I walked around the streets searching for some manifestation of black identity but was unable to trace one. Instead, the area is strictly residential with apartment buildings, restaurants, and stores mirroring most neighborhoods in Rome. The imperial street names are etched into the sides of buildings, with no other indication or explanation of their purpose. When I reached a sign for Via Massaua, aptly named after the city in colonized Eritrea, I asked a passerby about the origin of its title. It is worth mentioning that the passerby was a young person who instantly dismissed my question in confusion. I did not come across any public spaces within the Quartiere Africano that were attributed to the oppression of black bodies under imperial reign.

The placement of the imperial street names follows a strategy of upholding images of global authority by situating them in places far away from where the actual conquests and battles happened. Von Henneberg explains this ideological approach, positing that wars fought for Italy were commemorated in “distant territories that even the state could barely begin to call Italian or that were hard to see as intrinsically worth owning or dying for” (Von Hennenberg, 2004, p. 59). The design of the street names in the Africano Quartiere again permits Italians to excuse the colonial past, consistently and collectively dismissing the history behind the memorials and public spaces they see on a daily basis. Is an embarrassment of the past still felt today, or are most Roman too far removed from the events of colonialism? Nonetheless, this can be attributed to the livelihood of a national amnesia representative of the European identity in

which critical thinking about the past, especially about racialization, has never been endorsed.

Moreover, the national amnesia could equally relate to an absence of a language to discuss issues of race in Italy through the country's postcolonial expression. Still, this portrays European identity as one that is riddled with ignorance and the habit of making excuses for past racial transgressions, rendering the black identity to be invisible. At a time in which young people are engaging with the political process in unprecedented ways on a worldwide scale, they are not accepting their responsibility to reconstruct history through the questioning of public spaces in Rome. They then more easily subscribe to the hegemony of the nation-state, condemning themselves to repeat the past. Like the Monumento ai Caduti di Dogali, the street names in the Quartiere Africano may directly address the correlation between

Italy and Africa but only in ways that hold Italy in high-esteem, revering the mutuality of colonialism, Fascism, and capitalism.

### **Part VII: Conclusion**

Further research should include reflections on other prominent memorials and public spaces in Rome and the influence of tourism. With the entwinement of colonialism, Fascism, and capitalism as domineering systems of oppression, a denial of their influence in Rome's past strengthens their power for future abuses. Research, ethnography, and analysis of the Colosseo, the Monumento ai Caduti di Dogali, the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, and the Quartiere Africano unveil realities about the European identity as an image, in which ignorance and an unwillingness to think critically about public spaces nurtures the survival of racial abuses across Italy. Hence, the black identity is barred from its own full formation.

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