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Ghosts [Crowds]

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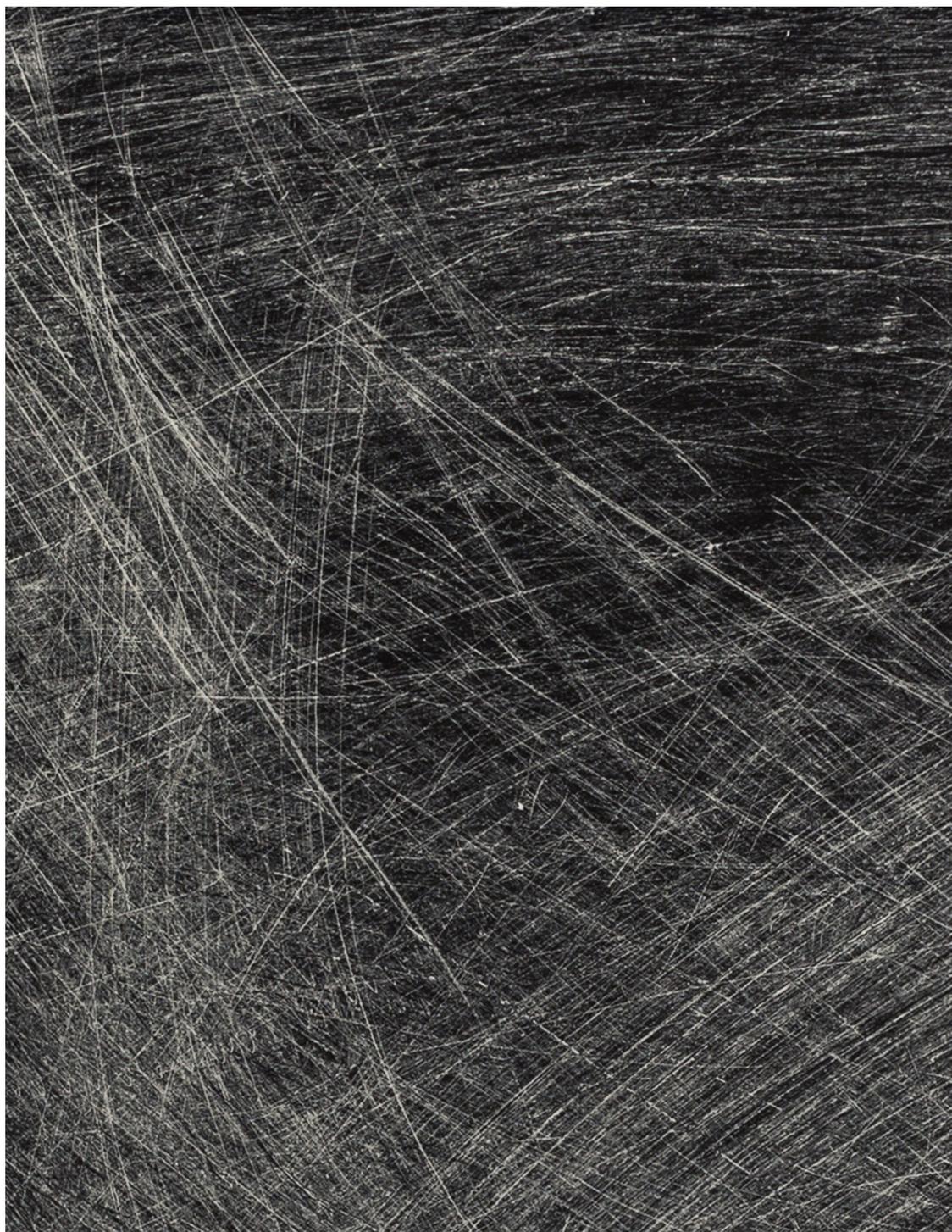
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Walking among the ghosts of colonialism

The haunting onomastic of Palermo

Giulia de Spuches

Speaking of cities is always speaking about ghosts because every current period is simultaneously linked with past and present. Ghosts, even when transformed into a conceptual metaphor, question the formation of knowledge, and invoke what has been silenced, excluded from the archive of History. They want to be a part of the political discourse to (re)imagine the present and the future. The aim of this contribution is to use some aspects of these ghosts, such as their liminal position between visibility and invisibility, between life and death, and between materiality and immateriality, to take a stand in the social, ethical, and political issues of the postcolonial today in a western city. Finally, as Vanolo¹ wrote, the metaphor of the ghost is ambiguous, located in an in-between space characterized by the oscillation between memory and fragmentation.

According to Iain Chambers “to think of the modern city (...) is to experience a perpetual translating machine (...) the archive that the city proposes represents an altogether deeper sedimentation of time and place.”² From this point of view, the city is a translating and translated space in becoming. However, innumerable events and daily acts reify both the becoming and the continuous act of translation by creating a system of representations of selective social processes. The silence caused by these selective processes, in addition to causing a memory loss, activates spectral visions. The image of the ghost allows us to analyse the visible and the invisible elements of past and present.

Starting from this perspective, this contribution aims to bring to light the silent ghosts of a part of the city of Palermo that are evoked through the act of walking. A path of *apprehension* capable of creating, metaphorically, a feeling of fear but, at the same time, of knowledge.³ Our methodology uses the ambiguity of *apprehension* to reveal the stories behind the names of the toponymy and the present or absent signs and symbols scattered around the city of Palermo. I would like to take the first *Grande Rituale Ambulante*⁴ against Colonialism, conceived by Wu Ming² and the Fare Ala collective, to show how, through the political understanding of the ghost, an ethical and critical reasoning through the creativity of performances is possible. For this reason, the postcolonial walk,⁵ carried out during *Manifesta 12* (2018), showed an action of re-signification of the places encountered, it produced counter-narratives that can form a counter-archive capable of bringing to the surface the hidden memories of a colonial Italy unwilling to deal with the past.

The experience proposed by the organisers seemed to me very close to what I read as a path of *apprehension* in the book *Roma negata. Percorsi postcoloniali nella città* (2014), by Igiaba Scego, with Rino Bianchi's photographs. This book's incipit is: “I walk ... I have a goal today and I want to reach it as soon as possible, before my courage gives up. My foot trembles” (2014, 13-14). In my opinion, the tremor of the foot and the precarious courage narrate the path of apprehension between the fear of a past that comes back to memory as a material ghost (a statue, a cinema or a street) and the difficulty

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of making a hidden, deliberately forgotten knowledge, visible. David Le Breton (2000) taught us how walking is opening us up to the world, a practice that reinvents the coordinates of time and space, and, finally, an image of existence and resistance. From my point of view, Le Breton's walking is a form of transformation of the self, but it is also the ability to describe and modify (urban) landscapes.

The Palermo walk was stage after stage, a succession of places marked by a colonial heritage intertwined with spaces inhabited by migrants, between racist scars and hospitable communities, between imperial ghosts and imperialist presences.⁶ Thus, the postcolonial walk becomes a manifesto of spectrality.⁷ The tools used in the stages along the 18 km journey through the city of Palermo were

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the notes, glosses, (ana)baptisms, epiphanies, metamorphoses, necromancies, rebirths, emblems, testimonies, litanies, sermons and iconoclasm. In the next section, I will focus on a couple of examples to

show how Palermo has appeared haunted by the ghosts of past and present.

Some (post)colonial stages

I would like to begin with the stages that have involved *onomastic guerrilla*: performances that rename urban streets from below, contesting the historical traces that populate them. These actions seek to make public memory resurface. Toponymy is significant because it reconstructs the conception of the past in the public sphere. Indeed, the purpose of the spatial construction of social memory, together with cultural recognition, tells us much more about the authors than about the characters or events "hanging on our walls". When we walk in a city, toponymy is what helps us with orientation, and yet we rarely reflect on the intertwining between history and the geographic fabric of daily life. One of the actions promoted by the organisers was to reveal the characters (e.g. Vittorio Bottego, Orazio Antinori, Vincenzo Magliocco, and others) that silently populate the streets of Palermo and their brutal colonialist operations. The authors have produced QR-codes linked to the project *Le vie della memoria* run by the Municipality of Palermo.⁸ If onomastics operates through a representational system, what happens when a city conceived and determined according to the axes of an ideology is remodelled and rethought? Onomastics becomes a memento capable of recalling the Italian colonial past repressed. In this way, it is possible to highlight the violated rights of a part of humankind.

In order to make the ghosts of postcolonialism emerge, in the Palermo walk, Wu Ming 2 and the Fare Ala collective use acts of *onomastic guerrilla*, an (ana)baptism, and recent postcolonial history. The case of the officer Vittorio Bottego is meaningful as it links all three of these. As a soldier he participated in the occupation of Keren and Asmara, as an explorer and geographer he described the coastal route between Massua and Assab. In particular, he carried out an expedition on behalf of the *Società Geografica Italiana* along the Omo River basin. He died, on the way back from this expedition, in a clash at Daga Roba (Ethiopia).

An inscription of onomastic guerrilla, as a performance of Palermo walk, appeared on the plaque of the square dedicated to Bottego: 'Multi-murderer Explorer'. Since the use of memorial names in the urban landscape is instrumental in transforming the city into a political context, the Fare Ala collective unveiled Bottego's colonialist spectre. Subsequently, the gardens of the square were baptised as Giardini Lorenzo Tazaz (1900-1947), a protagonist of the resistance against Italian fascism in Ethiopia.

To understand how Bottego's story became a postcolonial history, we must follow the threads that originate from the roots of liberal Italy, perpetuate during the fascist period, and come down to us. The example chosen by the Palermo walk organisers is the Nuova Pretura (or Nuovo Palazzo di Giustizia) of Palermo. This was designed by the architect Sebastiano Monaco and his design team and

built by the Italian company Salini-Impregilo (rebranded to Webuild Group in 2020). This is the company that has major interests in Ethiopia for the construction of the Gibe dams, which exploit the waters of Bottego's same Omo River basin. The operation of the Gibe III dam has been strongly contested by Survival International,⁹ which has submitted a complaint to the OECD. In fact, the completion of the dam had forced many tribes off their land to make way for vast commercial plantations. What is significant here is how the Italian power acquired during the colonialist period reappeared as a ghost, which once again chased after the local population for their own interests.

These examples, in my opinion, aim at understanding how to develop a pathway of *apprehension*. As in Scego's walk, we have experienced living between a will to know and a fear of facing the unveiling ghosts of our past. Therefore, it is important to support political struggles capable of preventing the ghosts from prevailing in public space.

Conclusion

By naming the ghosts of the past, the mute names on our street plaques suddenly begin to speak, revealing the spectral conditions of their emergence that still linger on the public spaces they name. They seem to descend from the walls where they hang, evoking the old eighteenth-century practice of phantasmagoria as a frightening but, at the same time, fascinating spectacle. My interpretation of the city through walking among the spectres of the colonial past and neo-colonial present is meant to teach the necessary character of *apprehension* as an inevitable practice of critical knowledge.

In conclusion, we can only hope that the unveiling of the colonial and the neo-colonial ghosts will produce more and more acts of resistance. As we have said, the act of naming is imbued with power. Reclaiming forgotten points of view, even with a creative performance, is a pedagogy of awareness. Finally, using the words of Lefebvre, we can only hope that "a social transformation, to be truly revolutionary in character, must manifest a creative capacity in its effects on daily life, on language and on the space – though its impact need not occur at the same rate, or with equal force, in each of these areas".¹⁰

Endnotes

1 Alberto Vanolo (2017) Ghostly cities. Some notes on urban branding and the imagining of places, in: Ulrich Ermann and Klaus-Jürgen Hermanik (Eds.) *Branding Nation, the Place, the Product*, pp. 53-66. London: Routledge.

2 Iain Chambers (2018) *Location, Borders and Beyond. Thinking with Postcolonial Art*. Wrocław: Worlding the Word, p. 32.

3 Francesco Careri (2006) *Walkscapes. Camminare come pratica estetica*. Torino: Einaudi. Careri uses *apprehension* with a double etymological meaning of the word.

4 This can be translated as "Great Walking Ritual".

5 Unlike the organisers, I prefer to speak of a postcolonial walk rather than a Great Walking Ritual.

6 http://m12.manifesta.org/wu-ming-2/index_lang=it.html

7 Here I use the concept of ghosts and spectres as synonym.

8 <https://www.comune.palermo.it/palermo-informa-dettaglio.php?id=14202&tipo=1>

9 <https://www.survivalinternational.org/tribes/omovalley>

10 Author's translation of Henri Lefebvre (1974) *La production de l'espace*. Paris: Anthropos, p. 63.



