

Re-Interpreting and Re-Assessing Difficult Heritage

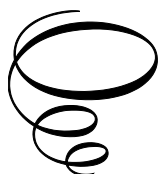
Re-Interpreting and Re-Assessing Difficult Heritage:

A Study of Dissonances

Edited by

Francesca Leonardi, Ginevra Ludovici
and Linda Bertelli

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To all the oppressed people fighting for their land, their futures,
and their existence.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Pictures.....	ix
Acknowledgements	xii
Introduction	xiv
Francesca Leonardi, Ginevra Ludovici, Linda Bertelli	
Section 1: Debating Politics of Memory and Monumental Discourses	
Fascist Architecture in Italian Post-WW2 Nonfiction Cinema: White Cities, Black Memories.....	2
Paolo Villa	
Dissonances in the Musealisation of Memory: Reflections from the Founding and Making of the Museum of Secret Surveillance ‘House of Leaves’	19
Giulia Avanza	
Dividing Monuments, Monumentalizing Division: Towards Difficult Border-Legacies?.....	43
Andrea Masala	
Dura-Europos and Heritage Narratives in Assad’s Syria: The Politics of Invisibility	64
Rami Issa	
Section 2: Decolonizing Practices and Strategies	
Toward an Entity of Decolonization.....	82
Alessandro Petti	
Decolonial Practices in Italy: Activism, Education and the Public Space	99
Mariana E. Califano	

The Photograph as Palimpsest of Unruly Temporalities: Sammy Baloji's Radical Excavations in the Colonial Archive	112
Giorgia Ravaioli	

Section: Reinterpreting Colonial Legacies in Museums Collections

Tracing Colonial Violence: The Accumulation of Ethiopian Materials in Rome's Colonial Museum	134
Silvia Iannelli	

Ethnographic Collections as Commodities: The Case of the Royal Armory in Turin	156
Marco Foravalle	

Reframing Narratives Through Contemporary Art at the Museo Egizio in Turin	170
Alessandro Masetti	

Staying with the Trouble: Reinterpreting the Coloniality of the Gallen- Kallela Museum's "Africa Collection"	192
Mari Viita-aho, Johanna Turunen	

Contributors	213
--------------------	-----

Editors	218
---------------	-----

Pictures	220
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LIST OF PICTURES

Dissonances in the Musealisation of Memory: Reflections from the Founding and Making of the Museum of Secret Surveillance ‘House of Leaves’

Fig. 1-1: Entrance of the Museum of Secret Surveillance "House of Leaves", with dedication. Photo by the author.

Fig. 1-2: Objects displayed in one of the rooms. Photo by the author.

Fig. 1-3: The reconstructed living room. Photo by the author.

Fig. 1-4: Room of remembrance. Photo by the author.

Fig. 1-5: The writing in front of the garden exit. Photo by the author.

Dividing Monuments, Monumentalizing Division: Towards Difficult Border-Legacies?

Fig. 1-6: Marcos Ramires ERRE, David Taylor, DeLIMITations, Freemont Pass, Colorado, 2014 [Courtesy of Marcos Ramírez ERRE and David Taylor].

Fig. 1-7: Guillermo Arias, Border Wall Prototypes, 2017 [Courtesy of the author. Photo Credit: Guillermo Arias].

Fig. 1-8: Mimmo Paladino, La Porta d'Europa, 2008 [Photo by Amemainda, Creative common licence].

Fig. 1-9: Richard Alexander Lou, The Border Door, 1988 [Photo Credit: James Elliott].

Dura-Europos and Heritage Narratives in Assad's Syria: The Politics of Invisibility

Fig. 1-10: Silk Road, according to the 7-grade history book in Syria

Fig. 1-11: Ancient sites covered by the 7-grade history book

Fig. 1-12: Banknotes issued in 1958, source: the Central Bank of Syria

Fig. 1-13: Banknotes issued in 1977, left: Zenobia and Palmyra, right: Saladin with Crac des Chevaliers, source: the Central Bank of Syria

Fig. 1-14: Banknotes issued in 1997, source: the Central Bank of Syria

Fig. 1-15: Banknotes issued in 2009 to (left) and 2013 (right), source: the Central Bank of Syria

Fig. 1-16: Banknotes issued in 2019 (left) and 2021 (right), source: the Central Bank of Syria

Toward an Entity of Decolonization

Fig. 2-1: Ente di Colonizzazione del Latifondo Siciliano, Photo Luca Capuano 2020

Fig. 2-2: Difficult Heritage Summer School, Sicily 2022, Photo Laura Fiorio

Fig. 2-3: DAAR, Oush Grab, Betlemme 2009

Fig. 2-4: DAAR, Italian Ghost, Biennale Architettura, Venezia 2014

Fig. 2-5: DAAS, Protesi Casa del Mutilato, Manifesta 12, Palermo 2014

Fig. 2-6: DAAR, Ente di Decolonizzazione – Borgo Rizza, Biennale Architettura, Venezia 2023

The Photograph as Palimpsest of Unruly Temporalities: Sammy Baloji's Radical Excavations in the Colonial Archive

Fig. 2-7: Sammy Baloji, Untitled 6, 2006. Series: Mémoire. Archival digital photograph on satin matte paper (60 x 170 cm). Edition: 10 + 1 AP. Courtesy of the artist and Imane Farès Gallery, Paris

Fig. 2-8: Sammy Baloji, Untitled 25, 2006. Series: Mémoire. Archival digital photograph on satin matte paper (60 x 134.5 cm). Edition: 10 + 1 AP. Courtesy of the artist and Imane Farès Gallery, Paris

Fig. 2-9: Sammy Baloji, Kyubo, 1898. Geodetic marker at the Kyubo Falls. François Michel. Lupiri Lua Baluba, 2010. Remnants of a geodetic marker. In this image: Mwenze Augustin, (chief Mpanga's grandson) and Seya Faustin. (left: 80 x 105 cm; right: 80 x 80 cm). Archival digital photograph on Hahnemühle Paper. Courtesy of the artist and Imane Farès Gallery, Paris

Fig. 2-10: Sammy Baloji, The Album, 2015 (Pauwel's Album, p.12a installation detail). Installation of 20 digital photographs on Hahnemüle PhotoRag (40 x 55 cm /16" x 22"). Courtesy of the artist and Imane Farès Gallery, Paris

Fig. 2-11: Sammy Baloji, The Album, 2015 (Pauwel's Album, p.24 installation detail). Installation of 20 digital photographs on Hahnemüle PhotoRag (40 x 55 cm /16" x 22"). Edition: 5 + 2 AP. Courtesy of the artist and Imane Farès Gallery, Paris

Reframing Narratives Through Contemporary Art at the Museo Egizio in Turin

Fig. 3-1: Ali Cherri, *Returning the Gaze*, 2024. Installation view. Museo Egizio, Turin. Ph: Alessandro Masetti

Fig. 3-2: Ali Cherri, *Returning the Gaze (Anthropoid Coffin of Puia)*, 2024. Museo Egizio, Turin. Ph: Alessandro Masetti.

Fig. 3-3: Sara Sallam, *Shifting Sands, Carving Scars*, 2024. Installation view. Museo Egizio, Turin. Ph: Alessandro Masetti

Fig. 3-4: Sara Sallam, *Prayer Beads*, 2024. Detail. Museo Egizio, Turin. Ph: Alessandro Masetti

Fig. 3-5: Sara Sallam, *A Broken Circle of Sisters*, 2024. Installation view. Museo Egizio, Turin. Ph. Alessandro Masetti

Staying with the Trouble: Reinterpreting the coloniality of the Gallen-Kallela Museum's "Africa collection"

Fig. 3-6: Scenery from the Safari exhibition, 1972. Gallen-Kallela Museum Archives

Fig. 3-7: At the opening of the *Light of the Tropics*, 1987. Gallen-Kallela Museum Archives

Fig. 3-8: Akseli Gallen-Kallela, *Sunset at the Desert*, 1909. The Finnish National Gallery.

Fig. 3-9: Sasha Huber, *Trophy II*, 2013, Metal staples on birch wood, Photography by Johannes Romppanen.

Fig. 3-10: Akseli Gallen-Kallela, "My third rhinoceros fell after a difficult battle...", 1910. Photographic print. Akseli Gallen-Kallela photographic collection, Gallen-Kallela Museum Archives

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We are equally indebted to the roundtable speakers, whose presentations gave depth to the school's focus on engaged practices at the intersection of art, activism, and heritage: Luca Cinquemani and Fabio Aranzulla (Aterratterra), Jadel Andreetto and Mariana E. Califano (Resistenze in Cirenaica), Chiara Damiani (AMIR project), Giulia Riva (Libreria Griot), and Justin Randolph Thompson (Black History Month Florence), whom we also thank for generously sharing his video works with the participants.

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INTRODUCTION

FRANCESCA LEONARDI,
GINEVRA LUDOVICI,
LINDA BERTELLI

The concept of heritage and difficult heritage is currently expanding toward the inclusion of new social challenges (i.e. climate change, AI, colonial wars, the rise of new forms of nationalism) which are questioning contemporary notions of the commons, public values, civic rights, and creativity. Indeed, within the horizon of the Anthropocene, new political values, paradigm shifts, and disruptive technology are impacting the identification of what is valued as cultural heritage, going well beyond a focus on materiality and territorial boundaries. For example, the incursions of climate activists in globally known museums directly address this issue: can we continue ignoring our responsibilities in climate change, or shall we start addressing climate as a common heritage to be preserved? In this expanding field, difficult heritage arises when dissonant values conflict with each other, generating an uneasiness to deal with a certain past, which always entails a present-future orientation.

However, in general, but specifically in Italy, it seems that difficult heritage is not perceived as unsettling anymore (Macdonald, 2015). Colonial and fascist legacies are hidden in plain sight in every city of the national territory, as well as in museums' collections. For this reason, confronting the difficult heritage of Italy's colonial and fascist legacies, both in terms of material heritage and academic discourse, has become an increasingly urgent issue (Albanese, Ceci, 2022; Lucaroni, 2022; Guermandi, 2021; Grechi, 2021; Cippitelli, Frangi, 2021; Christillin, Greco, 2021; Montanari, 2024; Jones, Pilat, 2020; Leonardi, 2025, Ludovici, 2023). Following global social movements such as Black Lives Matter, Rhodes Must Fall, and the many decolonising movements, also in Italy, the debate around the preservation of fascist heritage, the colonial collections of museums, colonial legacies in cities and Euro-centric knowledge production is finally taking ground. So, acknowledging the changing and expanding concept of

difficult heritage, this publication investigates its very grounding in cultural heritage, museum collections, curatorial and artistic practices, and cities, including case studies covering many geographical areas and institutional actors.

The volume critically addresses two main concepts and intertwined research areas: difficult heritage and decolonisation of cultural heritage.

Traditionally, the notion of difficult heritage (Macdonald 2009) is used to describe a past that sits uncomfortably alongside society's present values, including the material and immaterial heritage of totalitarian regimes, wars, genocides, and tragic events. As said, difficult heritage generates dissonances in the people inhabiting, using, or passing by it. Indeed, the term dissonance was taken from psychology to address a cultural heritage that, for different motives (political, social, economic), contains opposite and conflicting values. Dissonant heritage (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996) also includes marketing and communicating heritage through touristisation of locations and sites, broadening the concept of difficult heritage from a strictly material aspect to the inclusion of immaterial, imaginative, and economic dimensions. At its core, "difficult heritage" denotes sites, objects or narratives that embody painful, contested or undesirable histories that communities may prefer to ignore or reinterpret. Retaining such histories does not necessarily imply critique: it can support critical re-narration and responsibility, but it can also organise memory around commemorative practices that risk to reaffirm oppressive ideological frameworks. The challenge, then, is to navigate the tension between preservation and critique: deciding which relics to safeguard, determining how – and for whom – to interpret them, and ensuring that encounters with the past provoke reflection rather than passive spectacle.

Decolonisation, as framed by Walter Dignolo and Catherine Walsh (2018), offers a vital lens for this work. Far from merely securing political independence, decolonisation is an epistemic and ontological project of "delinking" from Western hegemonic frameworks. It requires epistemic disobedience – the active refusal to accept Euro-centric categories, narratives and hierarchies as universal truths – alongside a commitment to pluriversality, or the coexistence of multiple knowledge systems, and border thinking, which centres perspectives from the subaltern rather than the imperial core. In heritage practice, these imperatives translate into approaches that foreground community agency, intangible practices and alternative memorial forms – often in direct dialogue or tension with institutional authority. In practical terms, this means reconfiguring not only

what is displayed or preserved, but also the relational settings through which meanings are negotiated – settings that are pedagogical insofar as they reshape how knowledge and authority are produced and shared. Here, two principles matter in particular. First, horizontality, drawing on Paulo Freire’s dialogic model, insists on egalitarian relationships between scholars, practitioners and community members: everyone learns and teaches, co-creating narratives and interpretive frameworks (Freire, 1970). Second, addressing the coloniality of knowledge (de Sousa Santos, 2014) demands that we interrogate the taxonomies and methodologies inherited from Western modernity – categories such as “art” versus “artefact,” or the privileging of written archives – and instead embrace methodological pluralism. This means integrating oral history, performance, digital storytelling and other embodied forms of evidence, recognising academic discourse as only one among many languages of memory.

Together, these intertwined frameworks – difficult heritage, decolonial praxis and decolonial pedagogy – recast heritage sites and collections as dynamic spaces of negotiation, learning and transformation. They compel us to attend not only to what we preserve, but how we engage with it, and whom we empower to speak in the ongoing conversation about the past – a past that is still very much present.

As Italian scholars engaged with these debates, we saw the need for a focused forum where interdisciplinary perspectives and methods could be discussed together; in July 2023, we organised a summer school on these themes at IMT School for Advanced Studies Lucca, integrating decolonial approaches in the structure of the educational program, and inviting different actors from the activist and artistic spheres as well as from academia. In the effort to offer a different learning methodology based on co-learning and horizontality, attempting to embody decolonising instances, the seasonal school was organised with keynote speeches and discussion circles, where scholars could present and discuss their research in small groups thematically focused. In addition, a roundtable was organised with activists, professionals, and artists working on decolonisation instances and difficult heritage, as described by Mariana Califano in Section 2. Finally, the school also organised a decolonising trekking in Lucca, together with *Resistenze in Cirenaica* (see Section 2), to learn about the colonial legacies of the city and address the debated issues also from an affective perspective. The initiative resonated with the school’s broader thematic focus, which encompassed critical, post-colonial, and decolonial approaches to cultural heritage – museums, archives, and archaeological sites – both in Italy and internationally. It also addressed the reuse and reinterpretation of public

space, including toponymic and monumental interventions, as well as the role of artistic and curatorial practices in community-making and education around contested or difficult heritage.

Indeed, the school aimed to bring together actors working through different languages (artistic, activist, academic, professional) in order to reflect on the different knowledge(s) produced and possible interrelations. Rather than opposing “academic” rationality to “artistic” affect, the school approached these languages as heterogeneous practices that distribute visibility, authority, and participation in different ways. Artistic and activist interventions often matter here because they can displace the default conditions under which colonial legacies are recognised: they can change the scale of address, reconfigure the position of the spectator, and activate forms of witnessing and public engagement that are difficult to obtain through academic genres alone. Within this framework, “affect” names not a generic emotional register but a collective capacity to organise attachments and antagonisms (Mouffe, 2018), enabling critique to operate not only at the level of concepts but also at the level of perception, habit, and public attention.

This kind of knowledge and approach is fundamental in dealing with problematic instances, and in conjunction, these different approaches and knowledge can effectively operate a decolonisation process.

This book emerges from the shared experience of the summer school, reflecting a dual and mutual commitment: on the one hand, to integrate the voices and methodologies of cultural practitioners into academic settings; on the other, to encourage professionals from the arts and activist fields to engage critically with institutional and disciplinary discourses around heritage, memory, and decolonisation.

The volume is structured into three thematic sections, each addressing a distinct cluster of issues: the politics of memory and monumental discourse, decolonising strategies and practices, and the reinterpretation of museum collections with colonial legacies.

The first part focuses on the political use of heritage and the complex role monuments play in shaping collective memory across national contexts. Paolo Villa investigates how fascist monumental architecture in post-WWII Italy was reframed in non-fiction cinema, showing how newsreels and documentaries recontextualised fascist sites – such as EUR and Foro Italico in Rome – by associating them with new democratic narratives while preserving symbolic continuities with their authoritarian past. Giulia

Avanza explores the Museum of Secret Surveillance ‘House of Leaves’ in Tirana, Albania, examining how its museological strategies reflect and shape the country’s conflicted memory politics in the aftermath of dictatorship. Rami Issa examines the case of the archaeological site of Dura-Europos in Syria and its systematic absence from national narratives under the Assad regime. Andrea Masala analyses border monuments across different geographies – the US-Mexico border and the island of Lampedusa – arguing that these sites materialise political ideologies while raising ethical questions about the production of public memory and the nature of monumentality in post-national contexts.

The second section centres on strategies of decolonisation, with particular attention to artistic, curatorial, and activist practices. Alessandro Petti offers a theoretical reflection grounded in his long-standing engagement with decolonial pedagogy and spatial practices, advancing frameworks for unlearning colonial epistemologies through architecture and education. Mariana E. Califano presents a detailed account of a roundtable held during the summer school, which brought together activist groups, scholars, and artists committed to confronting Italy’s colonial legacy. Her chapter explores the methodologies of initiatives such as *Resistenze* in Cirenaica, *Griot*, *AMIR*, *Aterraterra*, and *The Recovery Plan*, examining how their practices – ranging from toponym guerrilla actions to art-based community engagement – intervene in public space, challenge dominant narratives, and generate situated knowledge. Giorgia Ravaioli examines the work of Congolese artist Sammy Baloji, analysing how his photo-collages, installations, and archival interventions reactivate colonial visual archives. She reads Baloji’s practice as a form of “epistemic disobedience,” producing layered counter-narratives that disrupt conventional historiographies and complicate linear temporality.

The third part investigates the challenges posed by colonial-era collections in European museums and the strategies these institutions adopt to confront their legacies. Silvia Iannelli reconstructs the history of the Ethiopian collections housed in the former Colonial Museum in Rome, now part of the Museo delle Civiltà, focusing on how these objects were violently appropriated and subsequently decontextualised through fascist museology. Marco Foravalle examines a little-known episode of object exchange between the Royal Armoury in Turin and the Pigorini Museum in Rome, using this case to critically assess the invisibilized colonial provenance of ethnographic artefacts and the ethics of their musealization. Alessandro Masetti analyses the Museo Egizio in Turin’s bicentenary initiatives and its recent embrace of contemporary art as a means of institutional remediation.

Focusing on the 2024 artist-in-residence programme featuring Ali Cherri and Sara Sallam, he shows how these artistic interventions challenge the museum's historical narratives, expose its colonial entanglements, and reframe its public engagement strategies. Finally, Mari Viita-aho and Johanna Turunen present a study of the Gallen-Kallela Museum in Espoo, Finland, examining how the institution has gradually acknowledged the colonial dimensions of its "Africa collection" and highlighting the importance of sustained, processual institutional reflexivity in the broader context of decolonizing the museum sector.

Altogether, the volume offers a transdisciplinary inquiry into how difficult and colonial heritage is produced, interpreted, and challenged across different contexts, from monuments and urban memory to museum collections and artistic practice. It aims to provide scholars, practitioners, and institutions with tools and reflections to engage critically with inherited narratives and to foster accountability in the ways cultural heritage is interpreted, displayed, and transmitted.

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