My essay will examine the relationship among conceptions of modernity, national identity and colonial conquest in Italy. Since the country’s unification in 1870, Italy’s position as a bridge between northern Europe and the Mediterranean has stimulated insecurities and utopian thinking in equal measure. Was modernity, and geopolitical significance, always just out of reach, in the hands of what Mussolini would later call the ‘plutocratic countries’, or could modernity, and the hegemonic West which spawned it, be reconfigured in ways that made Italy not only relevant but essential? Following upon this core question, my essay will consider the centrality of empire to the construction of both Italian modernities and Italian national identities. I argue that Italian preoccupations with its status vis-à-vis other European countries shaped Italian colonial discourse as much as local colonial realities: ‘over there’ – the mythical locus of modernity – referred as much to l’oltremare (overseas, but used to refer to the Italian colonies) as to l’estero (outside national borders, but shorthand for Europe). My essay illustrates these points with a discussion of the colonial film Il grande appello (‘The great call’, Mario Camerini, 1936). I also discuss wartime geopolitical projects for ‘Eurafrica’ within which Italy would become the central conduit, via the Mediterranean, between Europe and Africa. I end with a few reflections on how the absence of a decolonization process in Italy and a pervasive politics of nostalgia for the Italian colonies might influence
contemporary attitudes towards African immigrants to Italy. I conclude that
these men and women represent an ‘over there’ that evokes uneasiness because it
can no longer be incorporated through conquest into the national body.

What is this Europe in dissolution that wants to drag us into the abyss as well?
Should we Italians become more European, or should Europe become more
Italian? ... Are we merely an eccentric peninsula on the continent, or are we ever
and always the garden of the Empire? (Poggioli 1934)¹

These questions, posed by Renato Poggioli in the 1934 issue of the review
Pan, reflect long-standing concerns about Italy’s modernity, national
identity, and status within Europe which grew more pressing in the interwar
years. Since the late nineteenth century, following a central paradox of
modernity, technological advance and the conquest of space and time had
heightened fears of regression: colonial expansion and the cinema had
brought a greater awareness of non-European peoples but also increased
anxieties about degeneration and the preservation of national identities. The
carnage and crises of authority caused by the First World War further shook
confidence in liberal democratic narratives of history as progress. In Russia,
as in Italy and later in Germany, the state was seen as a laboratory for the
creation of a new man and woman. The nation was rethought through the
lens of recent imperial experiences, and territorial aggrandizements against
ethnic minorities and sovereign states within Europe were framed as
exportations of superior visions of civilization (Aly and Heim 2003; Ben-

For many Italian fascists, the perceived European crisis appeared as a
golden opportunity to refashion a Europe that had long marginalized Italy.
Since unification, Italians of all political stripes had chafed at the subaltern
status conferred upon them by reasons of geography. Italy’s position as
Europe’s boot, rather than its heart or its head, translated into a position ‘at
the end of the line, or in the second-class seats’ (De Sanctis 1960 [1870–1]:
2/463) and brought clear disadvantages in competitions for continental
resources and choice colonial territories (Bosworth 1980; Fuller forthcoming).
Geography, though, was not the only issue: Italy’s backwardness,
for many Italians, was temporal as well. Modernity remained just out of
reach, forever beyond Italy’s borders, and Italians could only ‘look on and
sigh with jealousy, from outside, with badly concealed rancor, like the
poorest children who press their little red noses against holiday windows’
(Sarfatti 1933: 11). Some blamed the Italian south’s intractable and atavistic
culture for Italy’s liminal position on the continent (Dickie 1999; Moe
2002). Others faulted Italians’ attachment to their regional traditions, and
still others claimed that Italians’ self-hating streak led them to devalue their

¹ Translations from
the Italian sources
are my own unless
otherwise indicated.
own potential to be ‘original and modern’ (Labroca 1933; Pagano 1930). These factors had also hindered Italy from developing that national identity and culture which in other countries had facilitated and shaped processes of modernization. Fifty years after unification, one writer complained, ‘tradition’ and ‘abroad’ remained the reigning cultural categories. Without a cohesive national identity, Italian modernity was destined to remain little more than an ill-defined default zone (Ricci 1932).

As I have written elsewhere, fascism appealed to many Italians in this climate as a new model of modernity that promised to unify and regenerate the nation, preparing it for a leadership role in a reinvented Europe. Mussolini intended not only to ‘make Italians’, putting to rest decades of discussion about Italy’s weak national identity, but also to remake Italians in ways that facilitated his projects of conquest and colonization (Ben-Ghiat 2001; Gentile 1994, 1995; Horn 1994). The concept of bonifica, or reclamation, was central to this project of collective transformation, which foresaw the purification of Italy and Italians of 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 valorize neglected patrimonies, above all that of imperial Rome. The fascist answer to Poggioli’s question was thus clear: Europe should certainly become more Italian, because only Italy had a plan for the salvation of the continent, one that hinged on the recreation of an empire that would restore Italian authority and relevance within Europe and beyond.

In this essay I argue that the idea of empire was central to the fascist vision of modernity and to the resolution of nagging concerns about Italian national identity. Italy had gained most of its colonies during the liberal era (Eritrea, Libya, Somalia) and imperial conquest had been central to many liberal-era visions of Italianness. Yet for the fascists, the expansion of the Italian nation on imperial lines went hand in hand with larger geopolitical schemes to reinvent Europe. Moreover, imperial thinking was built into fascist ideology and underwrote the numerous proposals for Italian ‘spiritual domination’ abroad through exportation of its culture as well as through armed conquest. Especially after the occupation of Ethiopia in 1935–6, ‘over there’ – the mythical locus of modernity referenced in my title – referred as much to l’oltremare (literally, overseas, but used as shorthand for the colonies) as to l’estero (literally, outside national borders, but used as shorthand for Europe). The colonies would further projects of bonifica umana (human reclamation) by producing a ‘new type of human being’, disciplined and full of national feeling, quite unlike the degenerate cosmopolitans fashioned by the French empire (Orestano 1939: 49; Preti
Although this *bonifica umana* was little realized in practice, Italy’s colonies, like Germany’s, served as testing grounds for strategies of mass repression and practices of governance that would be utilized in Italian occupied territories during the Second World War. The mass deportations and concentration camps that marked Italy’s policies in Africa were transferred to the Balkans, as were educational policies that aimed to fascistize Italy’s subjects in its Aegean territories (Madley 2005; Rodogno 2003: 88–91, 314–29). New work on Italian colonialism has clarified the colonies’ impact on the development of metropolitan conceptions of race, national identity and geopolitical imaginaries (Andall *et al.* 2003a, 2003b; Ben-Ghiat and Fuller 2005; Labanca 2002; Palumbo 2003). Yet other ‘tensions of empire’ still await exploration, such as Italy’s role in commercial and other exchanges among European colonies and within regional and inter-regional economies (Stoler and Cooper 1997; see also Blumi 2005; Taddia 2002).

The study of Italian colonialism from a postcolonial perspective also throws into relief the distinctive characteristics of Italian national development, such as the emergence of large national communities in three continents following decades of mass emigration. This diasporic quality of the Italian nation begs treatments of Italian national identity and Italian colonialism that look beyond linear exchanges between colony and metropole. Until the early 1930s, for example, more Italians lived under French than Italian imperial rule, and many emigrants retained close relations with Italy (reverse migrations were not uncommon) and with Italian emigrants in other lands (Bosworth 1996; Choate 2003; Gabaccia 2000; Ipsen 1996). This diaspora has in the past been treated as an issue of migration history. Yet it indubitably shaped the development of Italian colonialism and the relationship between Italian colonial and national identities. It cautions us against reflexively relying on theories elaborated with reference to British and French imperialism, and reminds us of the limitations of national paradigms in general for grasping the complexities of colonial histories (Burton 2003, in particular Wilder).

Indeed, a full consideration of these questions requires the bridging of entrenched conceptual and historiographical gaps between Italian ‘colonial history’ and Italian ‘national history’ and the submission of both bodies of work to a postcolonial critique. Such a perspective has so far found more application to the rethinking of the history of the Italian south – Italy’s internal colony, as famously theorized by Antonio Gramsci – than to Italy’s overseas territories (Lumley and Morris 1997; Schneider 1998; Verdicchio 1997). Past resistances within the Italian academy to Anglo-American theory contributed to this situation, as did the difficulty of pursuing colonial history in Italy. Severe restrictions on the consultation of colonial archives were a symptom of the official support for a culture of ‘myths, suppressions [and]
denials’ with respect to colonialism and its atrocities (Del Boca 2003). The
shame-inducing circumstances of Italian colonialism’s demise – in a context
of military defeat and diplomatic fiat – as well as the absence of the kind of
public debates that accompanied decolonization in France, also determined a
compartmentalization of Italian colonial history. By the early 1970s, when a
new generation of Italians began to investigate their parents’ complicity with
fascism and its crimes, ‘over there’ had become ‘over where?’ – a history,
that is, hardly mentioned in schoolbooks and treated in the academy as an
obscure offshoot of military history (Labanca 2002; von Henneberg 2004).

In the following pages I will highlight several moments culled from the
larger history of fascist intellectuals’ engagement with ideologies of empire.
All of the texts I discuss critique notions of Western modernity and view
empire as a means of consolidating Italy’s leadership in the construction of
an alternative civilization. They display the tensions between nationalism
and internationalism that mark all imperialisms and were particularly
prominent in fascist Italy, which was itself a hyper-nationalist regime with
supranational ambitions.

‘Europe no longer rules in the world …’ the Spanish philosopher José
Ortega y Gasset mused anxiously in 1930. ‘But is it so certain that anyone is
going to succeed her? And if no one, what then is going to happen?’ (Ortega
y Gasset 1957 [1930]: 129). This perception of living through a protracted
period of transition due to Europe’s decline spawned many utopian projects
between the two world wars. Fascism was one such project: its fetish of
order and hierarchy and its claim to be the direct inheritor of an imperial
Roman civilization offered comfort in a period when all values and
certainties seemed to have been called into question (Nacci 1982, 1985;
Stirk 1989; Wilkinson 1981). Mussolini intervened often on the subject of
the European crisis, marketing fascism’s demographic and other policies to
Italians and foreigners as timely responses to a state of emergency that had
global implications. As he warned, ‘the entire white race, the Western race,
could be submerged by races of color that multiply with a rhythm unknown
to our own’, ushering in an historical epoch marked by ‘senseless disorder
and unfathomable despair’ (Mussolini 1928: 10; Mussolini 1932). This
global context of the European crisis, so often mentioned by the fascists, has
been somewhat obscured in post-war studies of the dictatorship. Yet it seems
important to emphasize this dimension of fascist rhetoric and ideology to
better integrate fascist colonialism into larger narratives about the dictator-
ship and to recognize in particular the great diffusion of imperial thinking
within fascist high culture. ‘Over there’ is everywhere, once you begin to
look for it.

An interesting ambiguity marks many pronouncements by Mussolini and
his followers about Italy’s role in defeating the crisis, one that reflects Italy’s
liminal position as part of Europe but also on its fringes: was fascism meant
to save and take over leadership of the West, or rather was it meant to introduce an alternative civilization? For the propagandists connected with the universal fascist movement, which enjoyed official support in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the latter was the only possible answer. Although the universal fascists formally denounced nationalism in their quest to realize fascism’s transnational and imperial potential, they made it clear that Italian values and culture, once purified by fascism of all contagion by a diseased ‘old Europe’, would guide the construction of a new civilization. Indeed, the reclamation of the glory of Rome through imperial conquest, and the ‘perpetuation and expansion of Italianness [in the world]’ through a parallel work of ‘spiritual penetration’, lay at the center of this ideology (Maraviglia 1929: 14; see also Ledeen 1973; Salvatorelli and Mira 1969: 2/163). Moreover, while universal fascism was blatantly ‘anti-Europa’, to quote the name of one of its leading journals, in practice it created an alternative European identity, forging networks of Rightists in Spain, Romania, Belgium, Norway, France and elsewhere.

The young intellectuals of the review L’Universale (1931–5) can be located within the universal fascist movement, but their proposal for the reinvention of the continent reflected a more radical mindset. Finding the root cause of the European crisis in the decadence of the fundamental European ideologies of capitalism, nationalism, and Christianity, they put forth a vision of a fascist modernity marked by corporatism, universalism and a moral code that privileged personhood, ‘a Mediterranean principle anterior to any Christianity’. Fascism was no savior of Western civilization: it had arisen to put Western civilization to death. Imperial conquest was for them the very motor of the fascist revolution, since the new civilization to come would be ‘universal, rather than expressive of a single continent or family of peoples’ (L’Universale 1933: 1). Finally, L’Universale’s vision of modernity also offered Italians a means of containing the current threat to white European hegemony. As Berto Ricci wrote in a 1931 book that rehearsed the ideas of the journal, realizing an imperial ‘union of peoples’ would give the fascists a chance to control the cultural and genetic fallout that would come from the erosion of national and racial boundaries. Fascism would realize a ‘cosmopolitanism of the Italian type’, instituting hierarchies and controls to avoid a descent into anarchy (Ricci 1931: 20–1). Empire, in this scheme, was ‘an act of love towards the world’ (L’Universale 1933).

For many other Italian intellectuals, such approaches to the achievement of international hegemony were simply naive. Just a few years after the March on Rome, the writer Massimo Bontempelli foresaw Italian leadership of a ‘Mediterranean revival’, but only if Italians became ‘rapidly and conscientiously acquainted with all of the developments that the rest of Europe has achieved on its own’ (Bontempelli 1938 [1925]: 124). We are
back to the ambiguity about Italy’s identity and position – European or Mediterranean? – but this time the agenda is for Italy to beat Europe at its own game. By appropriating all that was best within Europe, Italy would be in a position to lead the continent and export this superior culture to the Mediterranean and beyond. As a writer in the fascist avant-garde review *I lupi* challenged his peers a few years later,

Do we want to make this empire? Then we must leave our beautiful little towns and go out into the world to get to know those whom we intend to dominate. We need to rid ourselves of all that suits us alone, and highlight the things we possess that are suitable for others as well. We must ruthlessly take the good wherever we find it and make it ours, Italian, and serve ourselves of it for our own ends. (Santangelo 1928: 1)

Although the article defined empire as ‘unlimited domination’, this line of imperial thought shows up Italian insecurities. It is difficult to imagine a French imperial propagandist recommending that the French cast off their cultural specificities as preparation for rule. But the target of imperial desire here is Europe itself, not Africa, and the immediate goal is escape from Italy’s subordinate position on the continent. Of course, Africa was the ultimate destination, and increasing Italy’s status within Europe was meant to ease Italy’s path as it expanded its empire. What Charles Burdett has called ‘the utopia of the past’ – the Roman empire – was important here as a means of differentiating Italy as it assimilated the best features of the ‘utopias of the present’, i.e., the models of modernity developing in eastern and western Europe. The endlessly useful construct of Rome grounded Italian modernity and identity in a past that had nothing to do with petty regional traditions and differentiated Italy’s imperial vision from that of other contemporary powers (Burdett 2003; Stone 1999). As Bontempelli clarified, ‘we thirst for the universal, and we mistrust the international. For this reason, even as we try to be Europeans, we feel hopelessly Roman’ (Bontempelli 1974 [1926]: 12).

The Ethiopian war of 1935–6 gave a new urgency to these calls for Italian expansion. The widespread use of gas – in defiance of the 1925 Geneva Protocol bans on chemical warfare – and relentless aerial bombings allowed for the proclamation of victory and empire after seven months, although this ‘conquest’ was always incomplete due to entrenched Ethiopian resistance that continued throughout the occupation (Rochat 2005). Although the takeover of Ethiopia marked the apex of the fascist myth of national regeneration and the peak of fascism’s popularity, it also fueled fascist myths of national victimhood and exacerbated anxieties about Italian subalternity. After the League of Nations decreed sanctions against Italy in November 1935 (Ethiopia was a member nation), Mussolini claimed that Italy had been
blatantly disrespected and held to a different standard than other European imperial powers:

What is the crime that Italy supposedly perpetrated? None, unless it is a crime to bring civilization to backward lands, to build roads and schools, diffuse the hygiene and progress of our time ... what we find disgusting in the sanctions is their moral character. It is having Ethiopia put on the same level as Italy ... the People who have given so many contributions to world civilization. (Mussolini 1935: 13–14)

This very public blow to Italian prestige translated at home to unprecedented popular support for the regime, as it seemed to confirm fascist claims that only by transforming Italy could the country escape maltreatment by the same ‘plutocrats’ who had earlier ‘mutilated’ Italy’s First World War victory (Burgwyn 1993). Italy’s fragile position with respect to international opinion and control of its new colony lent urgency to fascist imperatives of modernizing Italians. For Mussolini, the Ethiopian invasion had marked the start of ‘a gigantic work ... of human reclamation’ (cited in Preti 1968: 68); Italians, as much as Africans, were the target of efforts to make the colonies perform as laboratories for the revamping of mentalities and behaviors (Ben-Ghiat 2001; Fuller 1992: 214; Fuller forthcoming). These refashioned Italians would also ensure that Italian colonial culture differed markedly from that of other imperial powers, especially France, where assimilationist policies had produced a degenerate cosmopolitanism among both rulers and ruled.

The film Il grande appello (‘The great call’, Mario Camerini, 1936), which was made at the close of the Ethiopian war with the support of the fascist Ministries of Press and Propaganda, of Colonies, of Aeronautics and of War, suggests colonialism’s utility in differentiating fascist Italy from a decadent Europe and in furthering official goals of nationalization and modernization. The brainchild of the film official Luigi Freddi, with a script by Camerini and the writer Mario Soldati, the movie also clarifies how the colonial sphere became a new venue for the expression of existing fears about modernity’s threats to national and racial hierarchies. Directed as much to Italians abroad as to a domestic audience, Il grande appello models a path of moral and political redemption through a tale of the return of a dissolute expatriate, Giovanni, to the national community. The proprietor of the seedy Hotel Orient, located in the French colonial city of Djibouti, Giovanni embodies the uncertain nationality and low status which was the destiny of the diasporic Italian before fascism. He was a barber and a shoeshine boy in New York, and a miner in Australia, Brazil and Shanghai. In his hotel, which serves as a meeting place for individuals from many nations and races, he speaks English, German, Spanish, French, German and Amharic — everything, seemingly, but Italian, a language he has hardly spoken since settling
in Djibouti eighteen years ago. With its walls emblazoned with advertisements for Schweppes beverages and Texaco motor oil, and its tables filled with mixed-race couples, the Hotel Orient is a colonial version of that site of dehumanizing metropolitan consumerism—the Milan Trade Fair, which Camerini and Soldati had critiqued in their 1932 film Gli uomini, che mascalzoni! (Ben-Ghiat 2001).

Capitalizing on the patriotic feelings incurred by the Ethiopian war, the script posits Giovanni as a traitor who is arming the Ethiopians even though his son, Enrico, is fighting for the Italian cause. When Giovanni journeys to Ethiopia to see the wounded Enrico, he is stupefied by the feelings aroused in him by contact with his native culture. In the company of Italian soldiers and laborers he exchanges French champagne for Chianti and sings long-forgotten Italian songs. Touched and tantalized by the prospect of belonging to a genuine community, Giovanni repents and blows up a shipment of arms meant for the Ethiopians, fatally injuring himself. A note to his son and his dying word ‘Italia!’ let viewers know that his rehabilitation has been complete. Italian modernity, in this film, is signaled by the abundant scenes that display fascist military technology, and by the nationalization of Italians through the experience of war. The ethnic and regional, signaled by exaggerated accents among the soldiers, is here given a national value, and the iconic accordion and straw-covered Chianti bottle, often ridiculed by Italians as symbols of a weak Italietta, are presented as sources of national strength. These safe and backward-looking objects are contrasted to the hybrid culture of Djibouti, which stands in for the unhealthy cosmopolitanism that awaits all of Europe should it not adopt the fascist alternative.

We have seen how colonialism was embraced by many Italian intellectuals as a means of strengthening Italian national identity and advertising Italian modernity. Yet colonialism also seemed to offer a solution to Italy's geographical liabilities. The consolidation of the country’s power-bases in the Adriatic, Mediterranean, and Red Seas would allow it to emerge from marginality by positioning it as the crucial bridge between Europe and Africa. The Italian south, in particular, would be rehabilitated, becoming a national asset rather than a site of backwardness and foreign scorn. As Mussolini pitched the plan in Palermo in 1937, the new empire would allow Sicily to emerge as ‘the geographic center of the Empire and a bridgehead that will link the metropolis to the penetration of Africa’ (Critica fascista 1937: 353). Sicily would host many institutions dedicated to the study of colonial life, from tropical medicine to ethnography. From a position of near-irrelevance, the south would acquire the status of a vital conduit for imperial ‘penetration’ through ‘two peaceful but very potent arms: culture and commerce’. According to Critica fascista, which lauded the Duce’s vision, this ‘new Italian geography’ gave local issues a national value
while avoiding the rigid centralization characteristic of the French imperial state. Palermo might well acquire the importance of Paris if Europe’s center was shifted to the south (ibid.). Ironically, Mussolini soon imitated French imperial practice by making Libya, already known as Italy’s ‘fourth shore’, the nineteenth region of the Italian state.

That same year, Italy signed the ‘Pact of Steel’ with Nazi Germany which expanded the two dictatorships’ three-year-old alliance. Certainly, some Italians mused that this might mean renewed subordination for Italy, this time within a German-dominated New Europe (Ben-Ghiat 2002). But many others believed through the early years of the Second World War that the alliance would bring Italy huge geopolitical advantages. They saw the Axis as facilitating a partition of the continent and beyond on north–south lines: Hitler would take eastern and northern Europe, including Britain (although Italy, for ‘historic’ reasons, had occupied part of south-eastern France), while Italy would control south-eastern Europe and the Mediterranean basin. In this view, Italy, not Germany, held the keys to becoming a global power, since it alone stood as a gateway to a new pan-region, Eurafrica, to be created by the Axis. While the idea of Eurafrica derived from German Geopolitik studies, as developed by Italian theorists it entirely served Italy’s particular imperialist ambitions. It presented an Italian-controlled Mediterranean as ‘the soldering zone between two continents’. The notion of Eurafrica, in turn, spawned an ambitious plan for a ‘trans-African railway’ that would be the concrete carrier of European influence into Africa. Naturally, Italian Tripoli was posited as the lone departure point from North Africa for points east, west and south (Atkinson 2000). Although much could be said about these projects’ fantasy components, it is most salient here to locate them as the end of a history of fascist reconfigurations of Europe that aimed to alter Italy’s continental status and function.

The collapse of the Italian empire, which began when the British temporarily gained control of Italian East Africa in 1941, put an end to these colonial projects of civil and social engineering, but not to Italian sentiments that their superior civilization entitled them to a better position within Europe and to the possession of imperial territories. After imbibing decades of anti-Anglo propaganda, the loss of the colonies to the most supercilious Great Power was ill digested. The reaction of the colonial official Massimo Borrusio, who was taken prisoner first by Ethiopian and then by British troops in 1941, was not uncommon among Italians who had believed that empire had brought Italy a new international standing: he confessed to his diary that he considered himself ‘the victim of a double betrayal: that of the blacks, which one could and should have predicted . . . and that of the whites, which was unforeseeable and unpardonable’ (Borrusio 1997 [1941]: 75–6). More generally, the loss of the colonies in a context of military defeat and of Italy’s own occupation by both Nazis
and Allies left many Italians feeling wronged rather than repentant, not only with regard to their African occupations but also those in France and in the Balkans (Henneberg 2004: 38–9). All too soon, yet another state system materialized – the Cold War order – within which Italy had more geopolitical relevance but less power than ever. As Alessandro Brogi has argued, the need to restore national self-esteem guided the articulation of ‘prestige policies’ which assumed the retention of colonies and recognition, by virtue of its location, of stewardship of part of the Mediterranean (Brogi 2002: 3). Instead, the Paris Peace Treaty of 1947 stripped the country of its colonies, exacerbating feelings of victimization that worked against any moral accounting of the many injustices caused by Italian colonialism in both its fascist and liberal-era iterations.

The lack of any public process of debate and reflection (which extended to the entire history of fascism itself) meant that colonialism has never been processed in Italy, either psychologically or legally (no trials resulted from Ethiopia’s war crimes charges). Thus have entrenched national myths of the innate goodness of the Italian colonist persisted into the present. While it is hazardous to equate official apologies and retributions with shifts in popular attitude and memory, it is also true that the complete absence of such gestures has contributed to a continuing climate of defensiveness and obtuseness in Italy about the legacies of its colonial occupations (von Henneberg 2004; Del Boca 2003). As in the past, Italian feelings of resentment toward more dominant countries in Europe shape its (now post)colonial profile; how Italy is seen by others seems to mediate its representations of how it treats ‘others’. Indeed, by the 1990s, Italians were realizing that ‘over there’ was, dismayingly, now over here: immigrants from Italy’s former colonies and elsewhere in Africa had settled in Italy in large numbers, jolting Italians whose concept of difference had often been limited to Italian regional variation. The coming to power of the National Alliance and the Northern League, both movements which purport to defend Italy from a modernity that is openly multiracial, was a comment on the unease produced by the breakdown of clear barriers between the nation and l’oltremare, especially when Italy was pursuing ‘Europe’ (in the form of status within the European Union) with particular zeal. The memory politics of the center-right governments, which has consisted in a denial or sidestepping of responsibility for the dictatorship’s crimes, must be seen in view of these ongoing national concerns about Italy’s status within Europe. Former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, in particular, has revived rhetorics of Italian victimhood with respect to larger European nations, and both he and the ‘post-fascist’ leader Gianfranco Fini have exploited cherished myths of national innocence even as their parties foster attitudes that result in hate crimes against immigrants. It is telling that Berlusconi felt it necessary, while in office as President of the Council of Europe, to assert that fascism had...
never been a violent regime: ‘Mussolini never murdered anyone’, he told a journalist in 2003 (cited in Ginsborg 2004: 154). I have argued that Italian colonialism was shaped by Italy’s vexed relationship with Europe – by Italians’ fears that being ‘down there’, disturbingly close to ‘over there’, accounted in part for their nation’s marginality. While Italy is certainly not alone in treating immigrants badly, the country’s undigested relationship with its colonial past, and its particular fixation on European opinion and prestige, has shaped its behavior as a postcolonial power.

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