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From Discourse to Praxis: Decoloniality, Knowledge Production, and Everyday Resistance in the European South

Mikal Woldu

King's College London

Yodit Estifanos Afewerki

Associazione Tezeta

Ariam Tekle

Blackcoffee ETS

ABSTRACT

Decoloniality remains a central yet contested project: despite intellectual traction, the voices and lived experiences of the descendants of formerly colonised peoples are too often marginalised in both scholarly and public spheres. This paper, co-authored by three Black-Italian women working across academia, activism, community organising and cultural curation asks: how do we move beyond elite discourse to praxis that grounds decoloniality and anti-racist commitment in everyday resistance and solidarity? What role can—and should—academia play in building equitable collaborations which acknowledge and redress existing power inequalities in knowledge production? Drawing on our work and positionalities as descendants of formerly colonised people living in Europe, we consider multiple ways of engaging—through academic, activist, cultural, and curatorial practices. We examine how the tools we use such as oral history, podcasting alongside institutional and discursive practices determine who has access to knowledge, whose voices are amplified, and who is centred or marginalised. We further explore what ethical partnerships look like, how leadership, authority, and agency are distributed in collaborative work, and how decolonial practices can reach beyond academia into everyday praxis. Ultimately, this paper aims both to celebrate achievements in postcolonial and decolonial scholarship over the past decade and proposes forward-looking strategies for sustaining its relevance and impact. At times of heightened global crises, rising far-right white-supremacist narratives, and persistent colonial legacies, we argue for a decolonial praxis rooted in solidarity, everyday resistance and redistribution of authority and knowledge-making.

Keywords

Decolonial praxis, everyday resistance, ethical collaboration, anti-racism

Introduction

Over the past decade, decoloniality has gained increasing visibility across academic, cultural, and activist spaces in Europe. Concepts such as decolonial praxis (Mignolo and Walsh 2018), epistemic justice (Fricker 2007, de Sousa 2015), and positionality (Haraway 1988, Collins 2000) have become central to critiques of Eurocentric knowledge production and colonial legacies. Yet, despite this growing attention, the voices and practices of descendants of formerly colonised peoples—particularly those located in the European South—remain marginal within dominant sites of knowledge production. Too often, decoloniality circulates as an abstract, theory-driven discourse embedded within elite academic spaces, while the everyday practices through which racialised communities contest power, generate knowledge, and enact solidarity are rendered secondary or invisible (Bhambra 2014, Tuck and Yang 2012).

The paper intervenes in this gap by foregrounding decolonial praxis as lived, situated, and relational and by centring practice-led reflections grounded in concrete experiences. It brings together the perspectives of three Black Italian women who engage in decolonial work through distinct yet interconnected approaches— academic research, community-based activism, and cultural production. Our work emerges in response to the specific social, political, and institutional contexts we navigate, shaped by Italy's colonial histories (Del Boca 2005), contemporary racialised exclusions (Hawthorne 2022), and persistent inequalities in who produces knowledge, who is recognised as an expert, and who is positioned as the intended audience (Bhambra 2014).

The paper developed out of a series of conversations among the authors, during which we identified both shared concerns and divergent challenges across our respective fields. Central to these discussions are questions of power and access: who speaks and who is heard, whose knowledge is legitimised, and how the tools, spaces, and outputs we employ shape the reach and impact of decolonial work (Smith 2021). We therefore ask a set of guiding questions, addressed through our respective positionality and practice: what context shapes our work? Who is our target audience, and what approaches do we use to engage them? What have we learned through this work? And why does this work matter in terms of impact and social transformation?

The first author examines how power hierarchies in knowledge production can be disrupted through ethical co-production and audience-centred outputs in academia. Drawing on initiatives such as *Eriwellbeing*, an online platform addressing mental health within the Eritrean diaspora, and collaboration with *Da'aro Youth Project*, a London-based grassroots organisation supporting young asylum seekers and refugees from the Horn of Africa, highlighting alternatives to academic elitism. The second author focuses on her work with *Tezeta*, an interdisciplinary youth association she co-founded, engaged in research, cultural dissemination, and education on Italian colonialism and contemporary migration. Specifically,

the author reflects on the importance of reversing dominant narratives on Italian colonial histories by centring colonised peoples' voice, agency and resistance (Fanon 1963, Quijano 2000). Finally, the third author examines social justice work on the ground through *Blackn[è]ss Fest*, a cultural space of epistemic disobedience (Mignolo 2009) and cultural resistance that centres Black and racialised voices at the margins of Italian society. The author critically interrogates what it means to co-create spaces that are truly inclusive vis-à-vis a cultural landscape that privileges performative and watered-down forms of resistance.

By bringing these practices into dialogue, this paper contributes to decolonial scholarship by demonstrating how practice-led, collaborative, and reflexive approaches can challenge epistemic hierarchies and reorient decoloniality towards meaningful, accessible, and transformative praxis.

Academic Knowledge Production, Positionality, and Decolonial Praxis from the European South (Mikal Woldu)

My contribution to this paper examines academia as a central yet deeply contradictory site of decolonial engagement. While decolonial and anti-racist frameworks have gained increasing visibility within European scholarly discourse, academic institutions remain structured by entrenched inequalities in access to resources, mobility, authorship, and recognition. These inequalities shape not only who is able to enter and remain within academia, but also whose knowledge is legitimised, circulated, and valorised. As such, academia functions simultaneously as a space of critique and as an elitist institution that reproduces colonial and racialised hierarchies.

Engaging in decolonial praxis within academia, therefore, requires navigating the tensions between institutional belonging and structural exclusion. As a Black Italian woman, born and raised in Italy and trained within British academia, my scholarly trajectory has unfolded across intersecting axes of marginalisation and privilege. This positionality, situated between racialised exclusion, institutional accreditation, and Global North affiliation, shapes both my access to academic spaces and the ethical responsibilities that accompany this access. These responsibilities become particularly acute when conducting research within one's own community, where the boundaries between researcher and researched are blurred and the risk of reproducing extractive practices is heightened.

Context: extractive knowledge production and positional responsibility

> The email arrives with familiar language: urgent timelines, a request for 'Sudanese voices', promises to 'contribute to the evidence base.' What's missing? Any mention of Sudanese researchers designing questions, analysing data, or holding authorship." (Ahmed 2025)

The structural conditions shaping my work are well captured in Bashair Ahmed's (2025) reflection on research practices in academic and humanitarian contexts. As Ahmed notes, research is frequently commissioned under the guise of inclusion, seeking "voices" from marginalised communities while excluding those same communities from research design, analysis, and authorship. Expertise grounded in lived experience is thus rendered instrumental rather than epistemically authoritative, reinforcing hierarchical distinctions between those who "produce" knowledge and those who merely supply data.

For scholars who come from communities that are routinely positioned as the objects of research, this dynamic raises critical ethical questions. How does one engage in research without reproducing the very extractive logics embedded within academic institutions? How can scholars remain accountable to their communities while operating within systems that reward individual authorship, institutional prestige, and disciplinary conformity?

My doctoral research on Eritrean diasporic communities in London and Milan confronted these tensions directly (Woldu 2021). Conducting ethnographic research within my own community required sustained reflexivity around power, representation, and responsibility. While shared cultural and linguistic reference points facilitated trust and access, they also placed heightened expectations on how knowledge would be used, circulated, and returned. This necessitated a continual negotiation of my position as both an insider and an institutionalised researcher (Dwyer and Buckle 2009), benefitting from academic legitimacy while remaining accountable to the communities whose experiences shaped the research.

Who is the target audience and how do we engage them

A central commitment shaping my work has been the refusal to treat academic peers as the sole or even primary audience of research. From the outset of my doctoral project, I approached academia as a platform through which to better understand my own communities and to produce knowledge that could be meaningful beyond academic publication. This orientation informed both the methods I employed and the forms of engagement I prioritised.

In practical terms, this meant developing outputs and public engagement activities that were accessible, community-facing, and responsive to expressed needs. Rather than assuming that knowledge should flow unidirectionally from researcher to community, I sought to remain in dialogue with participants throughout the research process. This included facilitating talks, workshops, and community-based discussions, as well as remaining attentive to issues emerging from the field that demanded response beyond the scope of the original research design.

One such issue was the growing mental health crisis affecting Eritrean diasporic communities across Europe and beyond, particularly during the COVID-19 period. While this was not unique to Eritrean communities, it was a pressing concern within the specific contexts

in which I was conducting research. In response, I co-founded *Eriwellbeing*, an online platform aimed at dismantling the stigma around mental health within the Eritrean diaspora. Importantly, the platform was not conceived as a vehicle for disseminating expert knowledge from the outside, but as a space for conversation, stigma reduction, and collective reflection. By inviting mental health practitioners and experts from within the community, *Eriwellbeing* sought to situate mental health within culturally and historically grounded frameworks, foregrounding trauma-informed and context-sensitive approaches.

This example illustrates a broader commitment in my work: positioning research participants and community members not as peripheral stakeholders, but as central actors in shaping both process and outcomes. Knowledge production, in this sense, becomes a relational and co-produced endeavour, rather than a detached academic exercise.

Building ethical partnerships beyond research agendas

My engagement with *Da'aro Youth Project*, further exemplifies this approach. This relationship did not originate from a predefined research agenda, but from a recognition of need and a willingness to contribute skills where they were deemed useful. I initially engaged through volunteering, seeking to understand the organisation's work and the challenges faced by the young people it supports. Over time, this evolved into a trusting, long-term relationship, enabling deeper collaboration, including the co-design of research and impact projects.

Crucially, this work was not driven by academic timelines or output requirements. Entering the space without a predetermined agenda allowed the priorities, knowledge, and leadership of the organisation to guide the collaboration. This approach required time, humility, and care, resources that are often undervalued or unsupported within academic funding structures. Co-production, when taken seriously, is both time-intensive and resource-demanding, and it frequently sits in tension with the metrics-driven logic of academic research.

Navigating this tension requires continual negotiation. For me, the guiding principle has been a commitment to why this work matters, rather than how efficiently it can be translated into academic outputs. Academic expertise, in these collaborations, is positioned as one form of knowledge among many, rather than as an overarching authority.

Lessons learned and why this work matters

One of the most significant lessons emerging from this work is the recognition that community spaces are sites of deep, situated expertise that often exceed the explanatory power of abstract theoretical frameworks. This is not to dismiss the value of academic theory, but to challenge its assumed primacy. When research fails to engage ethically and reciprocally with communities, not only does it reproduce harm, but it also forecloses opportunities for richer, more grounded forms of knowledge production.

Despite increasing institutional emphasis on "impact" and "participation," these elements are frequently treated as add-ons rather than as foundational principles. Ethical collaboration cannot be retrofitted onto extractive research designs; it must be embedded from the outset in how relationships are formed, maintained, and valued. Reciprocity, trust, and accountability are not methodological extras, they are central to decolonial praxis.

This work matters because academia continues to play a powerful role in shaping public discourse, policy, and collective understanding. Yet, there is a long-standing disconnect between academic knowledge production and the everyday realities of marginalised communities. When scholars extract knowledge without accountability, retreating into institutional spaces that remain inaccessible to those they study, academia risks further eroding its social relevance.

Decolonial praxis offers an opportunity to reimagine how academia interfaces with other sites of knowledge production, including activism, community organising, and cultural work. Interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral approaches are not merely desirable, they are necessary if academic work is to contribute meaningfully to social transformation.

This paper itself emerges from such an ethos. By bringing together three authors who engage in decolonial praxis across different fields, the paper does not seek to offer a singular model or prescriptive solution. Instead, it aims to illustrate the multiplicity of ways in which decolonial commitments can be enacted across contexts and capacities. Writing collaboratively becomes, in this sense, both a methodological and political act, an opportunity to reflect, learn, and amplify each other's work while challenging dominant hierarchies of expertise.

Italian colonial history through the voices of the Eritrean diasporas (Yodit Estifanos Afewerki)

> I never imagined that Italians, or Italian history, had done such a thing in Eritrea, yet they really left behind a reality, a history that I can only describe as a dark one. But only we know about it, because unfortunately Italians either don't want to know about it or simply don't know. They don't know and they don't want to know. And I am sorry, because whether you like it or not, Italy also belongs to me. I am Eritrean, but I am also Italian. (Narrator from *passeggiate narrative*)

For *Tezeta* and for the Eritrean communities with whom we collaborate, decolonising Italian history means recounting it from the perspectives of the Eritrean diasporas— those who have inherited, lived, and negotiated the legacies of Italian colonialism across generations.

This work is necessary precisely because, in Italy, colonialism remains marginal in public discourse. School textbooks often devote less than a paragraph to Italian expansion in the Horn of Africa and Libya, and collective memory is shaped more by mythologies of "*Italiani brava gente*" than by historical accountability (Del Boca 2011). For Eritrean descendants raised

in Italy or arriving later in life, this erasure has produced a profound need to reclaim and reconstruct knowledge.

Tezeta (ተዘክሮ) which translates as nostalgia and memory, is an interdisciplinary youth association engaged in research, cultural dissemination and educational work on Italian colonialism and contemporary migration. The association's first project, *Harnet Streets* ("streets of liberation") evokes Asmara's Harnet Avenue (Tezeta 2026), whose renaming reveal layered colonial and postcolonial histories (Tzeggay 2011). The project highlights urban plurality and seeks to reinsert the historical ties between Italy and Eritrea into collective memory.

The project pursues a dual objective. Firstly, it seeks to bring to the fore the historical and political relationship between Italy and Eritrea, a relationship that has been systematically marginalized in public discourse. Secondly, it challenges dominant school curricula that continue to be shaped by Eurocentric language and perspectives. Active since February 2021, the initiative continues to grow, with plans for autobiographical workshops, collaborations with schools and the development of new urban routes in other areas of Rome.

Our Approach

The project unfolded through two interconnected methodological phases. The first phase, centred on participatory counter-mapping, aimed to collect, archive, and reinterpret the memories of Eritrean diasporic communities living in Rome. At the heart of this phase were *passeggiate narrative*, individual or small-group narrative walks in which colonial street names served as prompts, activating recollections of Asmara, childhood experiences, linguistic memories, migration trajectories, or significant political events. Approximately twenty narrators—differing in age, migration histories, and regions of origin—contributed testimonies that often moved beyond individual accounts to become collective conversations. Walks were recorded *in situ*, allowing the ambient sounds of the so-called *Quartiere Africano* to enter the archive and situate the narratives within an urban space still marked by colonial toponymy. The collected material was subsequently organized thematically—around education, language, colonialism, travel, experiences in Rome, and memories of Asmara— creating a layered corpus through which shared and divergent histories could emerge.

Many community members expressed the need for safe spaces to reflect on their migratory journeys, tools to preserve oral histories, and opportunities to connect personal memories with broader Eritrean and Italian historical narratives. The counter-mapping approach directly responds to these needs, allowing narrators to anchor memories in the urban environment and transform colonial odonymy into a shared archive of experience.

The second phase, termed *Restitu-Azione*, focused on public dissemination through the *Trekking UrbAfricani*, guided urban walks shaped by the counter-maps developed in the

previous phase. The treks, roughly three kilometres long with seven to eight principal stops—such as Piazza Annibaliano, Via Asmara, Via Senafè, Via Assab, Via Cheren, Villa Leopardi, and Piazza Gimma—integrate panels, maps, sound recordings, and narrative excerpts, enabling participants to encounter the city through alternative frames of meaning. In this way, the walks re-signify the urban landscape, making visible stories long overshadowed or erased within Rome's public space.

The project intentionally addresses three diverse audiences. For the Eritrean community in Rome, the project offers a safe space to reflect on personal and collective histories. Students and young people are offered a chance to engage with Italy's colonial past and its links to contemporary migration and citizenship debates, beyond the silences and omissions of school textbooks. Residents and the broader public are invited to confront the city's colonial legacies, with reactions revealing the persistence of hegemonic narratives that continue to sanitize or marginalize Italy's colonial past.

Participation in the narrative walks and in the treks is mobilized through a combination of grassroots and institutional channels, including social media outreach, word of mouth, collaborations with schools, and existing community networks built through long-standing relationships of trust with local associations and educators. Participants often express surprise at discovering the colonial origins of familiar street names. As one resident noted during a walk, "I've lived here for years and never wondered why these streets have Eritrean names." In other cases, participants reproduce widespread narratives portraying Italian colonialism as relatively benign, remarking, for instance, that "Italian colonialism was different from other European empires." Similar narratives sometimes also surface among Eritrean participants involved in the memory collection, where colonial experiences may be retrospectively softened through comparison with subsequent periods of political violence, producing statements such as "the Italians were not that bad, because something worse came after." Through these processes, the project functions simultaneously as a pedagogical tool, a community-building practice, and a critical intervention in the city's *memoryscape*, bridging personal and collective histories while fostering reflection, dialogue, and awareness.

Lessons from this work

The testimonies gathered throughout the project reveal a remarkable spectrum of emotional registers. Many contributors expressed nostalgia for the familiar sounds, foods and landscapes of their childhoods, while others recounted experiences marked by trauma, whether linked to war, displacement, identity formation or processes of racialisation in both Eritrea and Italy. The walks also generated moments of intergenerational discovery, as participants listened to and learned from one another's stories, illuminating connections and divergences across different migratory and historical trajectories.

Several methodological insights emerged from this process. Memories were often activated in unexpected ways by sensory cues encountered during the walks: the name of a street, the smell emanating from a shop, a particular building, or even the resonance of a familiar language overheard by chance. Although certain stops gradually became fixed points along the treks, each walk remained unique, shaped by the emotional states and narrative choices of the participants. Over time, it became clear that collective memory does not simply arise from the aggregation of individual accounts but is formed through dialogue, as testimonies intertwine and become shared reflections rather than isolated recollections.

These insights directly informed the development of the public treks in the second phase, guiding the selection of themes highlighted along the routes. Among these were the history of the neighbourhood itself, the dynamics of colonial agriculture, the revolts of Eritrean farmers, examples of linguistic contamination such as the term “Calamadera,” as well as broader reflections on migration, *madamato*[1] and the segregated urbanisation of Asmara. Through these thematic threads, the project sought to illuminate the entanglements between personal memory, colonial history and contemporary urban space, offering participants new ways to read and inhabit the city.

Reflections on impact and positionality: why is this work important to us?

Our work challenges traditional academic boundaries by centring Eritrean voices not only as subjects but as producers and interpreters of history. This approach stems from the recognition that conventional archives have long erased or marginalised colonised populations, that diasporic communities hold crucial and embodied knowledge, and that any attempt at historical accountability in Italy must confront the deep silences that continue to structure its public memory.

Engaging with these narratives has profoundly reshaped my own positionality. As a researcher of Eritrean descent, I find myself reclaiming stories that belong to my family and my communities, stories that have often circulated privately but rarely entered public discourse. As someone working and living in Italy, I navigate a context where colonial amnesia is structurally embedded and reverberates through contemporary political debates and policy decisions. And as a facilitator, I carry the ethical responsibility of creating spaces where painful memories can surface without being sensationalised or exploited.

Italian colonialism has left a deep imprint in Eritrea, and its consequences continue to shape both societies today. Addressing these legacies through personal narratives is therefore more than an exercise in remembrance, it becomes a tool for social justice and a catalyst for public transformation. Only by sharing these stories, across generations, communities, and public spaces, can we begin to recognise historical injustices, repair harms, and imagine more equitable futures.

Bringing these stories to light transforms private memory into public knowledge, contributing to the creation of a counter-archive in which voices long suppressed—as for instance Eritrean and Italian—can finally encounter one another. When these narratives are placed side by side, across diasporic, national and intergenerational lines, they form the pieces of a history that has never been fully assembled. Only by acknowledging this composite picture can Italy begin to see itself with greater clarity and move toward a more mature and accountable understanding of its past.

Practicing Refusal, Building Futures: Intersectional Grassroots Organising Through Blackn[è]ss Fest (Ariam Tekle)

> Resistance can't just be a reaction to a system that oppresses us, that doesn't recognize us, that wants us stuck. Resistance needs to be an alternative system. I don't want a seat at your table I've got my own table. And healing doesn't mean looking ahead for solutions we already have. Try to reconnect with your roots and recognize them for what they are not in their perfection, but in their humanity. Because if there's one thing the colonizer has still managed to convince us of, it's that we're not worthy of being defined by who we are. (Participant of *Blackn[è]ss Fest* 2024)

Working at the intersection of racial justice, cultural production, and community organising in Italy today means navigating a landscape marked by anti-Blackness, state violence, and the systematic marginalisation of racialised communities (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance 2024). Racial profiling remains a routine practice legitimised by law enforcement, while media narratives criminalise Black, Arab, and Muslim youth (Milazzo, Barretta and Faloppa 2025). Public institutions rarely reflect the realities of the country's diasporas, and cultural spaces continue to operate as elitist environments where access to resources, visibility, and influence is determined by proximity to whiteness and economic privilege.

Blackn[è]ss Fest was born precisely as a response to this landscape. Its roots lie in the work of *Blackcoffee_pdc*, a digital space and community that for years has created counter-narratives around Blackness in Italy by centring lived experience and refusing tokenisation. The festival also emerged through dialogues with *CambieRai* and the *Coordinamento Antirazzista Italiano*, two grassroot community networks that helped crystallise the political urgency of building autonomous spaces not simply by demanding inclusion but also by rewriting the terms of cultural and political participation altogether.

In the years leading up to the festival's creation, it became increasingly evident that many institutional and cultural entities were attempting to capitalise on the intellectual, artistic, and creative contributions of Afro-descendants. They offered "exclusive" platforms, visibility opportunities, and curated spaces that appeared progressive on the surface but were structurally extractive. Black and racialised people were invited to speak, perform, or "bring diversity" into spaces that remained controlled, shaped, and financially benefited by White

institutions. Participation came with conditions; often the expectation of gratitude, of moderation, of being inspirational without being political, or political only within the limits set by the institution.

Many of us began to recognise this dynamic for what it was: a colonial economy of legitimacy, where racialised creators gain access to visibility only through the approval of gatekeepers who hold institutional, cultural, and economic power. But this access is always precarious, revokable, and dependent on conformity. It reproduces the logic that Black and racialised people must be "chosen," "validated," or "included" rather than self-determined.

Blackn[è]ss Fest was created as an explicit refusal of this dynamic. It emerged from a collective consciousness that: (i) it was necessary to build our own independent spaces, with our own rules, aesthetics, economic sensibilities and political agenda; (ii) that our goal was transformation and not partaking in exclusionary systems that relied on anti-Blackness, division and cultural extraction. And finally, (iii) that a different cultural economy is possible, one where Black and racialised knowledge is not volunteered, exploited, or appropriated, but valued, compensated, and stewarded within community-defined frameworks.

Blackn[è]ss Fest situates itself within a long tradition of Black and diasporic organising that understands culture as a field of resistance, not as an entertainment industry, that sees refusal not as withdrawal but as construction, and that recognises that liberation cannot come from being accepted by the structures that oppress us. The festival reclaims space for racialised communities to create, learn, organise, and imagine collectively. It repositions anger, care, and resistance not as reactions to oppression, but as generative acts capable of producing new forms of knowledge, solidarity, and belonging.

Who we organise for: beyond the bubble

Although the festival speaks to a broad spectrum of racialised communities, its central focus is on those who are most affected by profiling, discrimination, and state violence, yet are least connected to formal activist spaces. Black and racialised youth, working-class diasporic communities, racialised artists and performers, and people navigating legal and economic precarity remain at the core of this work.

This focus is also rooted in my own positionality as the festival founder whose personal trajectory shaped by racialisation, economic precarity, and the experience of navigating elitist cultural and political environments made visible the structural barriers that regulate access to resources, language, and legitimacy.

Many of the people the festival engages with carry profound political experiences—encounters with the police, school racism, labour exploitation, and border violence—yet often lack access to the conceptual tools and collective spaces needed to situate these experiences within broader systemic structures. This is not a lack of political consciousness, but a

consequence of systematic exclusion (Freire 2017): those most affected by oppression are routinely denied access to the academic, activist, and institutional spaces where shared frameworks for understanding oppression are produced and circulated. The festival functions as a site where this gap is addressed not by importing theory from above, but by creating conditions in which people can name their own experiences, recognise them as structural rather than individual, and begin to develop a collective framework from within their own realities. For this reason, accessibility is a political commitment: the festival is free of charge, and everyone involved—including speakers, organisers, and performers—is fairly compensated, explicitly refusing the normalised exploitation of racialised labour within cultural production.

By integrating cultural practices such as dance, food, storytelling, and fashion alongside political conversations, *Blackn[è]ss Fest* meets people where they are. Youth may arrive for the dance contest and remain for discussions on racial profiling, community members drawn in by performances often find themselves engaging with reflections on refusal/resistance, state violence, and diasporic self-determination. Intellectual and theoretical frameworks remain present as shared tools, but they are never ends in themselves: they are continuously refined through practice and translated into concrete actions that are tested, adjusted, and deepened year after year.

Lessons learned: challenges, breakdowns, breakthroughs

Grassroots racial justice organising in Italy is both necessary and deeply challenging. Sustainability remains a major concern. Racialised organisers navigate the same structures they are dismantling, often while living their own experiences of discrimination. Ensuring fair compensation for all roles is both a political priority and a constant logistical struggle, given the limited funding opportunities for explicitly political, anti-racist initiatives.

Another challenge lies in reaching those who have been historically excluded from movement-building. Many racialised youth in Italy internalise the idea that activism is not for them, or that their experiences are individual rather than structural. Breaking this isolation requires long-term trust-building, culturally resonant programming, and a refusal to sanitise or depoliticise conversations to make them institutionally “acceptable.”

At the same time, the festival has generated significant breakthroughs. The decision to centre refusal—drawing inspiration from the *Practicing Refusal Collective*—has transformed our organising approach. Refusal becomes a tool of protection, imagination, and political clarity. It allows participants to articulate boundaries, to reject narratives imposed on their identities, and to envision new communal practices rooted in care and autonomy.

Youth engagement has expanded far beyond initial expectations. Collaborations with groups like *Blacksheep Community* have created new grounds for intergenerational dialogue

and political consciousness. Workshops exploring food as a political act, communal self-narration, and ancestral knowledge have opened doors for participants to connect their lived realities with broader histories of resistance.

A significant breakthrough came through direct material support. For the first time, thanks to a successful crowdfunding campaign that exceeded the costs of the festival, *Blackn[è]ss Fest* was able to financially support people facing legal struggles resulting from police violence. This capacity to provide concrete solidarity, not just symbolic awareness, marks a critical evolution in our work.

Impact and positionality: why this work matters

The impact of *Blackn[è]ss Fest* is not only measured in attendance numbers or media visibility, but in the subtle, transformative shifts participants carry with them. Young people tell us they leave the festival being able to articulate experiences they previously carried in silence. Community members express feeling seen and understood in a country that rarely acknowledges their realities. Networks emerge between people facing legal vulnerability and organisers able to support them. Artists find audiences who value their work without tokenisation. Contributions shared during *Blackn[è]ss Fest* 2022 made visible how cultural and artistic spaces such as the ballroom emerge from layered experiences of discrimination, particularly at the intersections of race, sexuality, and community exclusion, and function as sites of collective care, safety, and self-expression.

The festival operates through a dual logic. Each edition functions as a maieutic moment, a structured encounter that helps participants surface and articulate what they already know from lived experience but have rarely had the space or tools to name collectively. Each festival is in this sense necessarily ephemeral, a catalytic event that opens something rather than delivering a finished product. At the same time, these moments are embedded within a longer-term, bottom-up process of trust-building and political formation that unfolds between editions through ongoing collaborations, returning participants, and the slow accumulation of shared references, frameworks, and commitments. The festival does not choose between these two logics, rather, it holds them together, treating the temporary as generative of the durable, and recognising that transformation requires both the spark of encounter and the patience of sustained practice.

Conclusion

Taken together, the three contributions in this paper advance a practice-led understanding of decolonial praxis that foregrounds situated knowledge, collective care, and ethical accountability across academic, cultural, and community-based spaces. Rather than offering decoloniality as an abstract framework, the authors demonstrate how it is enacted through

everyday struggles over voice, resources, and legitimacy within contexts shaped by Italy's unresolved colonial legacies and contemporary racial hierarchies.

The work carried out by *Tezeta* illustrates the value of participatory and community-based approaches to addressing colonial histories, particularly through practices that reverse dominant epistemic lenses and centre the agency of those historically silenced. At the same time, the experience highlights the fragility of such initiatives in the absence of stable funding and institutional support, underscoring the necessity of networking and coalition-building when working with fragmented communities and marginalised histories. When research is rooted in personal and situated experiences, it gains added ethical and epistemic value, strengthening participation, trust, and impact.

Similarly, *Blackn[è]ss Fest* affirms independent cultural organising as a form of political resistance, where racialised communities reclaim anger, trauma, and lived experience as sources of knowledge and self-determination. By centring refusal, free access, and fair compensation, the festival actively disrupts extractive cultural economies that normalise unpaid racialised labour and conditional inclusion within elitist systems. Artistic, embodied, and communal practices emerge as radical tools of politicisation, particularly for younger and working-class racialised people whose experiences are routinely depoliticised or erased.

The academic contribution complements these interventions by interrogating the institutional conditions under which knowledge is produced and circulated. Across all three cases, the paper reveals a shared tension between the transformative potential of decolonial praxis and the structural precarity that sustains it. Without long-term, non-instrumental funding and meaningful redistribution of resources and authority, the labour of resistance continues to fall disproportionately on those already most affected by systemic violence.

Note

[1] The term referred to a colonial quasi-marital arrangement in which Italian male settlers, soldiers, or officials cohabited with local African women, often treating them as temporary wives ("madame"). These unions were typically informal and unequal: the women had limited legal protection, and relationships could be ended at the discretion of the Italian partner.

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Mikal Woldu is a post-doctoral researcher based at King's College London. Trained as a social anthropologist, her work examines migration, racial inequalities, and wellbeing among Black and racially minoritised communities. She holds a PhD from SOAS, and during her recent UKRI-funded post-doctoral fellowship she explored second-generation Africans' identities and transnational ties across the UK, Ghana, Ethiopia and Kenya. Her work is

grounded in collaborative, community-engaged methods informed by experience in youth mental health services, co-produced projects, and partnerships with refugee and diaspora organisations. E-mail: mikal.woldu@googlemail.com

Yodit Estifar Afewerki is a project manager and researcher working at the intersection of migration governance, social inclusion, youth participation, and historical memory. She holds a BA in Language Mediation and Intercultural Communication and an MS in Migration, Mobility and Development. She is co-founder of *Rete Yekatit12–19febbraio*, dedicated to preserving and politicizing the memory of Italian colonial violence, and of *Tezeta*, an interdisciplinary association engaged in research, oral history, and public pedagogy on Italian colonialism and contemporary migration. E-mail: yoditestifanos@hotmail.com

Ariam Tekle is a producer, podcaster, emerging director and legal representative of *Blackcoffee ETS*. Her interests sit at the intersection of foreign policy, social justice and diaspora studies. She is the director of *Appuntamento ai Marinai*, a documentary on the Eritrean second generations in Milan, and the co-founder and producer of *Blackcoffee_pdc*, an archive centring the voices of Black communities in Italy. Ariam is also the founder of *Blackn[è]ss Fest*, a three-day festival exploring and celebrating the African diaspora in Italy. Ariam delivers decolonial and anticolonial training to organisations working across social impact, education, and inclusion. E-mail: ariam.tekle@gmail.com