

## Contested memories and dark heritage:

The case of the mass rape in Ciociaria

CAMILLA GIANTOMASSO<sup>30</sup>

In order to fully understand the meaning of dark heritage, it is not enough to admit the existence of a difficult past that brought death and suffering (Macdonald, 2009) and which, therefore, continues to tear apart a community. Such past must be analyzed within its own heritage process. For this to happen, the affected community must have recognized this past as an integral part of its historical and social identity. This, of course, is not an easy task since the population is not always willing to relive a negative memory, which has caused pain and suffering. This is even more evident for the *contested memories*, those linked to controversial pasts, in which traumas of social and political nature have occurred, and for which there is still no collective work through grief (Gribaudo, 2020; Jedlowski, 1989). Grief becomes a sign of acceptance and reintegration of the wound in the social contest and, without it, such “pasts will not pass” (Rusconi, 1987) and the many memories that gravitate around them will remain homeless, confined to the abyss of oblivion.

Traces of these pasts, however, remain in the affected territories, through both storytelling and what the French historian Nora (1984) has defined as *lieux de mémoire*, i.e.

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<sup>30</sup> La Sapienza University, Rome (Italy)

tangible and intangible symbolic elements such as monuments and commemorations, which constitute the heritage of a community. These are social practices of memory that do not necessarily coincide with the institutionalized forms of heritage, instead they deal with unconventional practices and sites (Muzaini, Minca, 2018; Robertson, 2012) and can be in open contrast with official discourses and representations.

Therefore, to focus on the theme of traumas and their memory means to bring to light those alternative versions that official history overshadows and to study the stories of the victims and survivors. In the context of *Cultural Studies*, this can give room to the many cases of victimization that, especially in recent years, have gained public attention. A few examples are the victims of mafias or major anthropogenic disasters such as Chernobyl and Fukushima. Or, with reference to the Second World War, those episodes of violence (bombings, raids and rapes), committed by the Allied powers, the absolute winners of that "total war".

***The case study*** - What we want to examine here is the case of the *marocchinate*, a term used to indicate the mass rapes that took place in Southern Lazio in 1944, at the hands of French troops of the CEF (*Corp d'Expedition Française*), during the campaign of breaking through the Gustav Line (one of the fortification lines built by Nazi troops to stop the advance of the Allies).

This tragedy (which accounts for 20,000 victims, most of whom were women of all ages) has been enclosed in the basement of history as an inconvenient and hidden truth (Baris, 2004) for way too long now. The reasons for this are mainly two: partly because it blurred the image of the "winner" and partly because it was immediately labeled by the institutions themselves as a fatal outcome of the conflict. Consequently, that tragedy found no place in national rhetoric and remained enclosed in

individual, familiar or local memories, in a forced, albeit dignified, public silence.

Thus, the local community has endured a double injustice: not only the collective rape but also the subsequent oblivion and negligence, persisted over time, by national and local institutions.

What can be done today is to understand if the local community is willing to tackle this form of institutional abandonment and recover the dramatic memory while opening up to social and cultural projects.

***The research proposal*** - The need to recover this tragedy is strong and at the same time imposes the necessity to rethink the way it is told. What happened deserves to be brought back to collective attention, not only by conducting new research but also by thinking of new ways of "fruition". It is important, in this sense, to develop the territory in ways that can be translated into one or more project ideas, such as a website, a path of memory, or even an ecomuseum.

The aim of this research is to carry out semi-structured interviews and focus groups with the survivors or their closest relatives. Not only does this help to reconstruct their personal experiences, but it also shows whether or not it is appropriate to think about a participatory heritagization process, specifically aimed at preserving and passing on the memory of a mass rape as a warning for future generations, which is in line with some of the goals set in the well-known Agenda 2030.

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