COLONIAL HERITAGE AND IDEOLOGICAL TENSION: THE COLONIAL LEGACY IN THE URBAN LANDSCAPE OF THE CITY OF PORTO

Herança Colonial e Tensão Ideológica: O Legado Colonial na Paisagem Urbana da Cidade do Porto

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Abstract

This article critically examines the enduring presence of colonial monuments in contemporary urban spaces, focusing on the Monument to the Portuguese Colonial Effort in Porto. Originally erected as part of the 1934 First Colonial Exhibition, the sculpture served as a material expression of imperial ideology and Estado Novo propaganda. Today, it remains a highly visible yet largely uncontextualised artefact within the city's public space and tourist itineraries. The paper interrogates the monument's symbolic afterlife, arguing that its continued presence without interpretive framing perpetuates forms of cultural and historical violence, reinforcing hegemonic narratives while silencing alternative voices. Drawing on postcolonial theory, memory studies, and heritage debates, this study explores the potential of re-signification as a strategy for engaging critically with controversial monuments. Rather than advocating for removal or destruction, it supports contextualisation and dialogue as tools for fostering historical accountability. In this light, the article considers the role of tourism as both a risk and an opportunity in the mediation of colonial memory. It argues that tourism, if critically curated, can function as a pedagogical instrument capable of transforming passive spectatorship into active engagement. In this sense, monuments such as the Monument to the Portuguese Colonial Effort offer not only insight into Portugal's imperial past, but also a platform through which the country's postcolonial identity can be negotiated, challenged, and reimagined in the public sphere.

Keywords

Portuguese colonial heritage, Contested heritage, Public memory, Re-signification, Critical tourism

1. Introduction [1]

The legacies of imperialism have left a profound imprint on the formation of European national identities, becoming deeply embedded in their collective histories and memories. In the Portuguese context, the colonial project played a central role in shaping the nation's self-image throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth.

As Peralta (2017) reminds us, "empires never entirely die. As structures of power and influence spanning vast geographical areas, empires may come to a formal end, but they continue to have an afterlife, manifesting through a wide range of practices, subjectivities, and discourses" (p. 15). In this regard, monuments often serve to honor a specific interpretation of history and its key figures, while invoking a collective identity or a 'heritage' believed to be shared by a community (Tsuchiya, 2025). As Stuart Hall (2023) has argued, heritage is bound up with the meaning of the nation, as a "discursive practice […] one of the ways in which the nation slowly constructs for itself a sort of collective social memory" (p. 15).

Against this backdrop, it is worth remembering that Europe has inherited both a material and immaterial legacy from its colonial past, one that continues to provoke urgent questions regarding how such inheritances should be addressed: what, in the present day, should be done with monuments historically conceived as tributes to a collective identity grounded in the imperial endeavour?

Such questions have sparked vigorous debate and controversy, drawing in a diverse array of stakeholders – academics and historians, human rights activists, Afro-descendant communities, political actors, and civil society more broadly (Caiado, 2020). At the core of this debate lies the broader issue of how contemporary societies should confront, interpret, and engage with their colonial pasts.

This article seeks to contribute to that ongoing discussion by focusing on a monument of Portuguese colonial heritage: the *Monumento ao Esforço Colonial Português* [Monument to the Portuguese Colonial Effort]. It was originally part of the First Colonial Exhibition, held in 1934 at Porto's Palácio de Cristal, and functioned as a physical manifestation of colonial grandeur and political authority, an ideological instrument of Estado Novo propaganda. As Silva (2024) underlines, in the Portuguese case the codification of cultural heritage was a central piece in the symbolic legitimisation of the Estado Novo, silencing dissenting voices and imposing a univocal identity canon: "No pluralism, no controversy and no dissent could be admissible in that very symbolic field" (p. 10). However, the meaning of memory sites is always open to change and debate by future generations: accepted versions of collective memory, reflected in public spaces, monuments or place names, can change with shifting historical and political contexts. Public spaces that once upheld a single memory can become places of resistance, sparking new political discussions and altering how communities view their past (Tsuchiya, 2025).

[1] All English translations of the cited works are author's responsibility.

Today, the Monument is located in Porto's Foz district, one of the city's most visited tourist areas, where it continues to stand as a visible marker of colonial heritage in the urban landscape. This legacy makes the contemporary questioning of colonial monuments all the more urgent, raising several questions: What narratives and representations does the Monument convey? Is it inherently controversial in light of contemporary debates on Portugal's colonial legacy? Does it serve as a catalyst for public engagement and critical reflection? Can it accommodate plural perspectives and promote historiographical debate? And what role does tourism play, or potentially can play, not only as a vector of memory consumption but as a potential space for public re-signification? Given that the monument is actively promoted in official city guides, the tourist gaze emerges as a site where competing narratives may be contested or reinforced.

By focusing on the afterlives of these monuments in the contemporary cityscape, this article interrogates how urban space perpetuates subtle forms of symbolic and structural violence and how public space mediates the tension between historical continuity and the imperative for critical memory.

2. Re-signifying Colonial Monuments: Confronting Silence and Cultural Violence

We aim to situate this text within a broader, global discussion regarding the fate of monuments "whose anachronistic nature […] generates intense social tensions and may ultimately turn against them" (Ferrándiz, 2011, p. 485). In this context, the concept of difficult heritage comes into play, referring to "histories inscribed and commemorated throughout urban spaces, recognised as meaningful to a nation yet also problematic and contested" (Nunes, 2025, p. 2). This notion of difficult heritage aligns with Sharon Macdonald's (2009) definition, where elements of national heritage simultaneously evoke pride and contestation, reflecting unresolved pasts tied to contemporary collective identity.

These tensions have gained even more prominence in recent years, as global movements have increasingly challenged the presence of colonial symbols in public spaces. This includes the iconoclastic acts associated with the Black Lives Matter movement – an identity-based protest against violence directed at Black individuals and Black culture by police authorities – which emerged in the United States in 2013 and gained international attention during global protests in 2020 following the murder of George Floyd. Consequently, a wave of statue removals and acts of destruction swept across public spaces in both the United States and Europe, particularly targeting monuments associated with colonialism and slavery.[2]

However, the legacy of European colonialism remains "present in our world in many ways, some conspicuous, some unnoticed" (L'Estoile, 2008, p. 267). In both Europe and formerly colonised countries, this legacy is embodied not only in material culture, such

[2] In Portugal, one case in particular attracted significant media attention: the vandalism of the statue of Padre António Vieira, in Lisbon, in June 2020. The priest's mouth, hands, and cassock were painted red, while red hearts were painted on the chests of the Indigenous children depicted at his feet. At the base of the statue, the word *Descoloniza* [*decolonise]* was inscribed in red.

as architecture, libraries, archives, and museum collections, but also in the very monuments that are now being questioned and dismantled. In this sense, monuments function as daily reminders of the historical decisions that have shaped our present, and with which we continue to coexist.

In the current climate, these monuments are often sites of intense contestation, where reinterpretations are driven by the need to challenge and subvert dominant narratives. They become battlegrounds for contemporary struggles, as different groups seek to legitimise their claims and needs. This can be seen as "a multifaceted and constantly changing process of constructing meaning" (Rose, 2021, p. 24), in which monuments are not merely symbols of the past, but active participants in ongoing social and political resistance.

This dynamic engagement with the past goes beyond mere contestation or destruction, requiring a critical re-evaluation of the very function of monuments in contemporary society. As Dickmans (2022) argues, "rather than constructing new sites of memorialisation and crafting new symbols, it is urgent to clarify the meanings of those that already exist" (n.p.). Building on this critical engagement with the past, artistic interventions have been used to actively challenged traditional interpretations of historical monuments. A prime example is the exhibition *Monuments* (MOCA Los Angeles and The Brick), centred on decommissioned Confederate statues and contemporary artistic responses, which juxtaposed toppled Confederate statues with contemporary artistic interventions. The project originated with Hamza Walker's acquisition of Charlottesville's Stonewall Jackson monument, later offered as raw material to artist Kara Walker. In her radical reworking, *Unmanned Drone*, Walker deconstructed the equestrian statue into a grotesque, fragmented form, exposing the myths of the 'Lost Cause', provoking estrangement and dialogue (Mitter, 2025). Such artistic transformations exemplify what Augusto Santos Silva (2024) calls the "de-ideologizing of heritage", where an "aggressive authoritarian arrest of history" (p. 12) is replaced by plural, contested readings.

Within this framework, Spanish researcher Marisa González de Oleaga (2024) proposes another option: the re-signification of controversial sites and statues, preserved in their original form, by contextualising "in a way that preserves them while simultaneously historicising them" (p. 69). In this sense, re-signifying offers a more nuanced and comprehensive engagement with the past. This method enables a critical examination of history without attempting to supplant existing narratives. At its core, re-signification does not replace one narrative with another, but rather activates these spaces as arenas for encounter and dialogue, where contemporary concerns are examined against the backdrop of historical legacies.

Such an approach is particularly relevant to Portugal, where, as Silva (2024) reminds us, authoritarian memory politics codified monuments and traditions into a rigid national canon, silencing dissent. Resignification thus represents an opportunity to disrupt that continuity by reactivating monuments as arenas for dialogue rather than instruments of nostalgia.

This critical engagement with memory resonates with Ferrándiz's (2011) notion that the "dialogical quality of memory spaces refers […] to the public's awareness of the historical processes from which they have emerged" (p. 485). The dialogue between monuments and their viewers is not static; it evolves with society's shifting relationship to its own historical consciousness. Monuments, therefore, are not passive relics of the past, but active sites in the construction of collective memory, where the past is continually renegotiated and reinterpreted in light of present-day struggles.

In this context, the Monument to the Portuguese Colonial Effort, erected for the Colonial Exhibition of 1934 and still prominently located in Porto, exemplifies the challenge of re-engaging with Portugal's colonial legacy. Although often promoted as a tourist attraction, the monument's historical significance is frequently overlooked or presented uncritically, lacking the necessary contextualization that would enable a broader public understanding of its complex legacy. This is where the principles of re-signification become particularly relevant. Re-signification, in this sense, resonates with the plural approaches to heritage outlined by Silva (2024), who refers to the "re-codification of cultural heritage" (p. 11) in Portugal, in the late 1970s and early 1980s through three democratic ruptures: the questioning of the authoritarian framework of national history and heritage, the plural redefinition of identity and memory, and the de-ideologisation of heritage. Yet this process also highlights the tension between those democratic ruptures of the post-revolutionary period and the ongoing silence about the colonial past. There remains a significant gap between scholarly critiques and historiographical debates on colonialism, on the one hand, and public discourse, on the other. These academic interventions have yet to permeate broader public consciousness, and their potential to influence institutional action has often been limited. In this sense, silence in the public sphere can be read as a reflection of a latent resistance to confronting the uncomfortable aspects of colonial history. Through the re-signification of monuments such as the *Monumento ao Esforço Colonial Português*, however, it becomes possible to create spaces for critical engagement, offering new readings that acknowledge the diverse and often contradictory memories of the colonial era. This process, much like the broader democratisation of memory in Portugal, seeks to provide a more inclusive and reflective understanding of the nation's history, inviting both uncomfortable truths and new dialogues about the enduring impact of colonialism.

Given these considerations, the concept of cultural violence, as defined by sociologist Johan Galtung, is particularly relevant. He describes cultural violence as "those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence – exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art […] – that can be used to justify or legitimise direct or structural violence" (Galtung, 1990, p. 27). This notion highlights the ways in which dominant narratives can be inscribed into cultural heritage, shaping "what is feasible, sayable, and imaginable for one group", while relegating minority groups to "a domain of the unsayable, where their memories, attitudes and values cannot be heard because they do not align with the dominant collective narrative" (Rose, 2021, p. 14). Thus, without a critical re-evaluation of monuments such as those from the Colonial Exhibition, their

historical meanings risk remaining distorted, perpetuating a form of cultural violence that obstructs inclusive dialogue about the past.

With these dynamics in mind, attention now turns to the Portuguese context, and specifically to the legacy of the Colonial Exhibition held in Porto in 1934.

3. The Empire on Display: Visual Culture, Propaganda, and the Colonial Exhibition of Porto

The Colonial Act (1930) and the Colonial Administrative Charter (1933) represent the foundational documents underpinning both the ideological framework and institutional architecture of Portuguese colonial policy during the early decades of the Estado Novo regime. Far from being merely legislative instruments, these texts symbolised a broader political project rooted in imperial ambition, authoritarian nationalism, and centralised control. They codified a vision of empire that sought to reaffirm Portugal's self-image as a global colonial power during a period of increasing international instability.

The 1930s proved particularly volatile for Portugal's overseas territories. The shifting global order – driven by the rearmament of Nazi Germany and the expansionist agendas of Fascist Italy and Imperial Japan – heightened anxieties regarding the security of colonial possessions. Growing pressure from other European powers, notably Italy, for a renewed partition of the African continent coincided with mounting hegemonic claims by the Union of South Africa over Mozambique and by Germany over Angola (Alexandre, 1993; Gonçalves, 2021). In this context, the perceived vulnerability of the Portuguese Empire became a matter of national urgency. Political tensions were exacerbated by widespread "rumours involving an upcoming sale or lease of one or more Portuguese colonies", reported "in European, American and South African newspapers" (Gonçalves, 2021, p. 2). The Estado Novo responded with official denials, acutely aware that the integrity of the empire had become closely entwined with the regime's legitimacy.

This existential threat to imperial sovereignty reinforced the Estado Novo's ideological stance: the defence of the colonies was equated with the defence of the nation itself (Rosas, 1995). Within this framework, the empire was not only a geopolitical asset but also a symbolic bulwark against external pressures and internal fragmentation.

The regime was thus compelled to assert the purported uniqueness and moral superiority of Portuguese colonialism. Such claims were, in part, a response to growing international scrutiny. Reports had long denounced the widespread use of forced labour in Portuguese colonies, undermining the regime's civilising rhetoric[3]. These external critiques coincided with what the regime perceived as a domestic crisis of colonial conscience, particularly among youth and social classes traditionally disengaged from the imperial project – rural populations, and the urban working class (Ribeiro, 2024).

[3] William Cadbury's report, *Os serviçais de São Tomé*, denounced the harsh conditions under which contract labourers from the Portuguese colonies worked on the plantations of São Tomé. The *Relatório sobre o trabalho indígena na África Portuguesa*, authored by the American sociologist Edward Alsworth Ross, presented at the League of Nations and later published by the National Press in Luanda in 1925, accused the Portuguese authorities of practices of forced labour, akin to slavery, in Angola and Mozambique, and had significant international repercussions (Alexandre, 1993).

In this context, the First Colonial Exhibition, held in Porto in 1934, emerged as a pivotal moment in the visual and ideological consolidation of the Estado Novo's colonial narrative. More than a celebratory display, the exhibition served as a strategic intervention designed to cultivate imperial pride and a sense of historical continuity. It aimed to "forge a national consciousness of the historical importance and political-economic value of the empire" (João, 2002, p. 99), thereby securing popular alignment with the regime's colonial agenda. Simultaneously, it functioned "as irrefutable evidence of the occupation of overseas dominions [...], while also demonstrating the nation's commitment to the exploitation of those territories' resources and its professed concern for their populations" (Marroni, 2013, p. 65).

This campaign relied not only on political rhetoric but also on the strategic deployment of visual culture. Visual media became central to the construction of a collective imperial imaginary. Through photographs, prints, films, and sculptural installations, the exhibition shaped public perception – particularly among populations with low literacy levels and limited access to written propaganda. As Fernando Rosas (1995) notes, this formed part of a broader "offensive of imposed socialisation into the new colonial values" (p. 28), aimed at instilling imperial loyalty among rural and working-class audiences.

The Colonial Exhibition must therefore be understood not merely as an event, but as a symbolic apparatus through which the Estado Novo sought to negotiate its place within both a global colonial order and the national psyche. By blending spectacle, ideology, and affect, the regime sought to silence criticism, assert its sovereignty, and reinforce a monolithic vision of Portugal's colonial mission – one which, as it is argued in this article, remains inscribed in public space and collective memory.

The exhibition, which ran from 16 June to 30 September 1934, functioned as a pedagogical exercise in nationalism. In the words of its technical director, Henrique Galvão (1934), "one cannot love the colonies without knowing them [...]. Since it is impossible to take all Portuguese people to the colonies, we have sought to offer the lesson by bringing from the colonies that which can […] contribute to an accurate and conscious understanding of them" (p. 233).[4] The exhibition was thus conceived as both an educational and ideological apparatus, designed to familiarise the Portuguese public with the imperial project and to instil a sense of national pride rooted in colonial expansion.

This didactic purpose was operationalised through a symbolic journey into the imperial world. This journey unfolded across the exhibition grounds, beginning within the covered venue – the Palácio de Cristal, renamed for the occasion as the Palácio das Colónias – and extending into the surrounding gardens, where streets and avenues were renamed after regions of the Portuguese Empire. These spatial transformations were carefully

[4] Captain Henrique Galvão was one of the most knowledgeable figures on the Portuguese colonial territories, with a personal and political trajectory deeply marked by colonial affairs. He served as governor of the province of Huíla, in Angola, in 1929; as Portugal's representative at the Colonial Congress in Paris, in 1931; and as director of the colonial trade fairs held in Luanda and Lourenço Marques in 1932. In 1934, he was elected to the National Assembly representing Angola and subsequently held a position within the Ministry of the Colonies, ultimately becoming senior inspector of Colonial Administration (Mota, 2011).

choreographed to simulate a tangible and affective encounter with the colonial world, thereby reinforcing the regime's narrative of a civilising and unifying mission.

Inside the Palácio das Colónias, two main zones structured the visitor experience: one dedicated to private enterprise and the official section, which occupied the central body of the building. The latter constituted the ideological core of the event. Visitors followed a curated path beginning with a pavilion of historical documents legitimising Portuguese expansion since 1415, and continuing with displays of twentieth-century colonial progress, highlighting urban planning, agriculture, education, and spiritual infrastructure.

A particularly salient feature of this section was the emphasis placed on Portuguese policy towards indigenous populations. The regime framed this policy as unique among European colonial powers: more humane, integrative, and morally justified. This discourse was further developed in the pavilion dedicated to ethnic and cultural diversity, which exhibited indigenous art and ethnographic displays. These spaces sought to familiarise metropolitan audiences with the colonies' racial and cultural plurality, while simultaneously framing this diversity as an object of admiration, classification, and control (Ribeiro, 2014).

Taken as a whole, the official section of the exhibition materialised the regime's colonial ideology. It offered a panoramic representation of the alleged benefits of Portuguese colonisation, portraying it as ancient, exceptional, and morally sanctioned. Through this narrative, the exhibition aimed to naturalise imperial domination and legitimise Portugal's continued presence in its overseas territories.

Beyond the Palácio, the gardens of the exhibition grounds were transformed into a miniature representation of the Portuguese Colonial Empire. These outdoor spaces were designed to offer visitors an immersive and multisensory experience, where could encountered stylised recreations of colonial villages, inhabited by individuals brought from the colonies to perform idealised scenes of daily life. These performances, scripted according to colonial stereotypes, offered a spectacle of exoticised imagery. For many visitors, this constituted their first and only direct encounter with the empire.

This appeal to the 'exotic' was central to the exhibition's popular success. Contemporary press coverage noted: "Without Black men and Black women, the Exhibition would have attracted very few people [since] everything extravagant, peculiar, exotic – that is what draws the crowd's attention" (Rocha, 1934, pp. 2-3). This underscores the exhibition's reliance on racialised spectacle, which objectified colonised individuals and commodified cultural difference as entertainment. In this sense, the exhibition exemplified what Rosas (1995) has termed "popular imperialism" (p. 21): a form of mass pedagogy employing emotionally charged and easily accessible representations.

Rather than reflecting the complexities of colonial societies, the event constructed a fictionalised image of empire. As Patrícia Matos (2012) argues, this fabrication of a "fictitious empire," in which "exoticism, picturesque imagery, and otherness were exaggerated" (pp. 246-247), sought to amplify the colonial message by appealing to visual fascination and affective response. These choreographed representations helped

shape enduring perceptions of empire and legitimised its place in the national imagination.

Additional features included a missionary exhibit, a zoo with exotic animals, theatres, bookshops, a conference hall, and a miniature train and cable car. Replicas of historical monuments, such as the Arch of the Viceroys of India and the Guia Lighthouse in Macau, reinforced the theme of historical continuity (Marroni, 2013).

The exhibition attracted around 1.5 million visitors, including thousands of students, workers, and military personnel. This success was enabled by an extensive campaign of propaganda and logistics: trains, buses, and group visits were organised nationwide. The presence of distinguished international visitors further added symbolic weight to the event (Oliveira, 2000).

The Monument to the Portuguese Colonial Effort, perhaps the most emblematic example of this monumental rhetoric, is be the focus of the next section, where its symbolic and political significance will be critically assessed.

4. From Amnesia to Contestation: The Case of the Monument to the Portuguese Colonial Effort

The notion of cultural amnesia proves a useful lens through which to interrogate the presence of colonial legacies in contemporary Porto. In 2021, three independent cultural spaces based in the city – Atelier Instituto, the collective InterStruc, and the association Rampa – convened a series of debates under the title *Post-Amnesia: Dismantling Colonial Manifestations*. Their objective was to prompt a critical reassessment of the city's colonial past and its ongoing inscription within the urban landscape. The inaugural debate, focusing on "Monuments and Memorials," took as a point of departure the Monument to the Portuguese Colonial Effort, an object of both historical and ideological significance (Salema, 2021).

The monument in question was originally conceived as the entrance marker for the 1934 Colonial Exhibition, presented in the previous section, and was prominently situated in what was then known as Praça do Império. The work, created by the sculptor José Sousa Caldas, then director of the Soares dos Reis School of Decorative Arts, together with Alberto Ponce de Castro, was executed in the Art Deco style.[5] The sculpture's composition, notably vertical in design, employed a sequence of rectangular blocks surmounted at the centre by the national coat of arms. Surrounding its base were six allegorical figures representing key agents of colonial expansion. These figures, depicted in uniform posture and expression, were unified by the physical gesture of touching closed fists, while distinguished by carved attributes on their chests: the Woman by her breasts, the Soldier by a sword, the Missionary by a cross, the Merchant by a caduceus,

[5] Alberto Ponce de Castro was not a professional sculptor, but rather a cavalry lieutenant who, in 1936, was appointed by the Minister of the Interior to serve on the Censorship Commission in the Porto District. His name is associated with the conception of monuments celebrating nationalist and patriotic ideals, including the *Monumento aos Mortos da Colonização Portuguesa*, the *Arrancada do 28 de Maio* – once installed in Porto and later destroyed by a storm in 1941 – and the *Monumento aos Mortos da Grande Guerra,* in Tavira, inaugurated in 1933 (Abreu, 2010).

the Farmer by a wheat stalk and sickle, and the Doctor by the Rod of Asclepius (Alves, 2021; Gonçalves, 2018). A list of notable male figures associated with the Portuguese colonial enterprise was inscribed on the pillar, accompanied by a dedicatory text commemorating the nation's colonial effort (Alves, 2021).

The ideological function of the monument was unambiguous. For a predominantly illiterate public, it served as a material condensation of imperial identity, intended to render the abstract notion of empire tangible and legible. Initially constructed in wood and plaster, the monument was later commissioned in granite, an act that signalled its intended permanence (Abreu, 2010). By December 1935, a granite version of the sculpture by Sousa Caldas had been erected, now lacking the original list of names but bearing an inscription explicitly referencing its commemorative context: *In commemoration of the Portuguese Colonial Exhibition in Porto from 16 June to 30 September 1934* (Abreu, 2010; Alves, 2021).

However, this permanence proved to be compromised. In 1943, the Porto City Council deemed the monument incongruous with the landscaped setting of the palace gardens and proposed its relocation. This required the displacement of another sculpture, which never occurred. As a result, the monument was dismantled in the early 1950s and relocated to a secluded section of the gardens, where it remained out of public view (Abreu, 2010; Gonçalves, 2018). Its ensuing invisibility – both physical and symbolic – can be understood as a reflection of the lack of recognition for its aesthetic and sculptural value, playing a decisive role in preventing any initiatives toward its restoration or reintegration into the public sphere in the decades that followed (Abreu, 2010).

It was only in 1984, half a century after the original Colonial Exhibition, that the Monument to the Portuguese Colonial Effort was reinstalled, now in a post-revolutionary and democratic context. Under the presidency of Paulo Vallada, the Porto City Council re-erected the sculpture in a different location, also named Praça do Império, this time situated in Foz do Porto, where it remains to this day (Gonçalves, 2018).

Yet this act of reinstatement is fraught with symbolic complexity. As Pinheiro (2008) argues, the monument's relocation, far from being a neutral gesture of historical preservation, revives its role as a site of memory, raising critical questions about which pasts are commemorated and whose narratives are privileged in public space. This ambiguity is further underscored by the spatial and symbolic context into which the monument was reinserted. Indeed, the monument carried with it not only its material form but also the ideological weight of imperial memory. The name of the square that now hosts it, Praça do Império, serves as an explicit reminder of this symbolic continuity. More telling still is the surrounding toponymic landscape, which reinforces this commemorative logic. Praça do Império connects to Avenida Marechal Gomes da Costa, named after the general who led the military coup that ushered in the Estado Novo regime. The nearby Rua D. Nuno Álvares Pereira invokes the affirmation of Portuguese sovereignty in opposition to Castilian dominance, another pillar of national identity mobilised during the authoritarian period. Additionally, streets named after historical navigators and imperial figures – Bartolomeu Velho, Diogo Botelho, João de Barros, Gil

Eanes, Rua de Diu, and Avenida do Brasil – anchor the monument within the mythos of the Portuguese Discoveries. Together, "this dense commemorative network constructs a semiotic environment that mirrors the ideological framework of the 1934 Exhibition" (Pinheiro, 2008, p. 305).

Within this context, the monument continues to evoke the Colonial Empire as a foundational narrative of national identity, entwined with the Discoveries, national iconography, and assertions of Portuguese supremacy (Pinheiro, 2008). Rather than representing a rupture with the past, its reinstatement appears to reinscribe colonial memory into the democratic urban fabric, albeit in ways that remain largely unexamined.

In this new context, the monument exists in a paradoxical state of visibility. Alves (2021) notes that, since its relocation, it has been generally ignored, its presence subdued by the residential character of its surroundings. Public discourse around the sculpture began to surface in 2009, during works related to the expansion of the city's metro system, when its removal was contemplated. Still, it was not until more recently that the monument's contested status truly emerged.

In 2019, the site became the focal point for a gathering by the far-right National Renovator Party, which chose to commemorate the 1st of December – an important public holiday that commemorates restoration of Portugal's independence from Spain, in 1640, after 60 years of Spanish rule under the Iberian Union (1580-1640) – by framing the sculpture as a tribute to the "heroes of our history" (Alvarez, 2019, n.p.). This reappropriation of the monument by nationalist forces reaffirms its potency as an ideological symbol, while simultaneously revealing the unresolved tensions surrounding Portugal's colonial past.

Conversely, the site has also attracted acts of protest. In 2018, the sculpture was defaced with red paint on the hands of its figures, accompanied by inscriptions at the base, including the word *Opressor* [Oppressor] and the phrase *Tirem esta merda daqui* [Get this shit out of here]. These interventions articulate a direct challenge to the monument's legitimacy in the public realm. The municipal response was to clean the monument and issue statements calling for the respect of city heritage, "regardless of the value judgment that one may make about the historical context in which political or other acts occurred" (PORTO., 2018, n.p.). Such incidents are not unique to Porto. In June 2019, the statue of Pedro Álvares Cabral in Santarém was graffitied with three words spray-painted in green onto its pedestal: *COLONIALISMO É FASCISMO* [Colonialism is fascism]. Here to, the municipal authorities reacted by denouncing the act as vandalism and calling upon the public to respect the city's heritage (Nunes, 2025).

Together, these episodes illustrate how colonial monuments across Portugal can become focal points of contestation, exposing the unresolved tensions surrounding the country's imperial past. These tensions reveal that what is at stake goes beyond isolated acts of vandalism or protest; they point to deeper struggles over how colonial history and memory is remembered, represented, and re-inscribed into public space**.** The Monument to the Portuguese Colonial Effort thus functions not only as an artefact of the past but as

a site through which the politics of memory, and the persistence of colonial imaginaries, are actively negotiated in the present.

5. Understanding the Role of Tourism

Tourism plays an increasingly prominent role in shaping how colonial heritage is reframed and engaged with in contemporary urban contexts. In cities like Porto, the inclusion of monuments such as the Monument to the Portuguese Colonial Effort in official or informal tourist itineraries arguably enhances their visibility, not merely as historical landmarks but as sites of potential contestation. Rather than functioning as neutral points of interest, they may serve as conduits through which competing historical narratives surface, offering opportunities to confront, rather than obscure, the complexities of the colonial past.

In this sense, tourism becomes not only an economic driver but also a cultural and political practice, one that actively participates in the construction of identities, the selection of collective memories, and the production of meaning in urban space. Its role in relation to difficult heritage is inherently ambivalent. On the one hand, tourism can easily reproduce sanitised, depoliticised, or commodified versions of history, or reinforce hegemonic national narratives, reducing historically complex sites to aesthetic spectacles. On the other, it can be strategically mobilised to foster critical engagement, encourage reflexivity, and contribute to broader efforts of memory work.

As scholars such as Sharon Macdonald (2009) and Laurajane Smith (2006) argue, heritage is not a neutral or fixed entity but a process of negotiation, in which certain narratives of the past are authorised while others are marginalised or erased. Tourism, in this sense, operates as a mediating force, actively shaping how the past is curated and consumed in the present.

Examples from other contexts demonstrate the potential of tourism to engage critically with difficult heritage. In Berlin, walking tours dedicated to the city's Nazi past have become powerful tools of public pedagogy, promoting historical accountability through experiential learning. In Cape Town, the District Six Museum and associated heritage trails address the legacy of apartheid through community-based storytelling, encouraging visitors to grapple with histories of displacement and racial injustice. In Belgium, recent efforts to address the country's colonial legacy have included the recontextualisation of monuments to King Leopold II. Rather than removing statues, some cities have opted for critical reinterpretation, adding interpretive panels or establishing decolonization interpretation centers that openly acknowledge the violence of colonial rule in the Congo. These changes were prompted not only by public debate but also by the reimagining of heritage through tourist and educational frameworks. These initiatives show that tourism can go beyond merely reproducing hegemonic memory; it can be reimagined as a space for confrontation, dialogue, and social repair. When thoughtfully designed, it becomes more than a tool for economic development or cultural promotion: it can serve as a platform for historical justice, civic education, and social dialogue. However, such

approaches require political will, institutional support, and the inclusion of historically silenced voices in the creation and delivery of heritage experiences.

Applying similar approaches in Porto would require a fundamental rethinking of how sites like the Monument to the Portuguese Colonial Effort are presented, interpreted, and experienced by visitors. Simply including them in tourist circuits is insufficient, as the monument remains devoid of interpretative context. What is needed is critical curatorship, potentially in collaboration with local communities, artists, historians, and educators, to expose the ideologies embedded in such monuments and to invite alternative readings. This could involve on-site interpretive materials, counter-monuments, guided tours with critical commentary, or digital interventions that contextualise the site within Portugal's broader colonial and postcolonial history.

Ultimately, the way tourism engages with colonial heritage in Porto will depend on broader societal and institutional decisions about how history is remembered and mediated in public space. As the Monument to the Portuguese Colonial Effort makes clear, the persistence of imperial symbols is never merely a matter of aesthetics or nostalgia; it reflects ongoing struggles over identity, belonging, and the meanings ascribed to national history.

6. Final Considerations

The dilemmas facing postcolonial memory work in the present cannot be disentangled from the symbolic staging of empire in the past. In this light, the First Colonial Exhibition takes on renewed relevance, having once celebrated imperial grandeur by transforming the gardens of the Palácio into a stage for glorifying Portugal's so-called civilising mission. Yet today, the landscape bears no trace of this event. Though it has largely disappeared from view, echoes of this imperial project persist, not through transient exhibitions, but through the enduring material presence of monuments scattered throughout the city.

Among these, the Monument to the Portuguese Colonial Effort stands out as a key example, since it has outlasted the empire it was designed to exalt. Still occupying a prominent location in Porto's urban fabric and integrated into tourist circuits, its symbolic weight has not disappeared, rather, it has shifted. Its ongoing presence in public space challenges efforts to reinterpret national identity through a postcolonial lens. In this sense, it raises urgent questions about the responsibilities of democratic societies toward their symbolic landscapes, particularly in terms of how to engage with a past that remains materially present yet ideologically dissonant. As Silva (2024) asserts, "heritage is never only the presence of the past in the present. It is the changing result of the dialectics between that presence of the past in the present and the current reconstitution of the past" (p. 19). For this reason, it remains a privileged ground for disputes over memory and identity.

Monuments like the Monument to the Portuguese Colonial Effort embody what Ferrándiz (2011) describes as mnemonic anachronism: nostalgic for those sympathetic to

the Estado Novo, indifferent for the disengaged, and painful for those who see it as an apologia for dictatorship and a symbolic affront to formerly colonised communities. This spectrum of responses reflects deep societal fractures surrounding Portugal's imperial legacy.

This confrontation between colonial memory and postcolonial realities is part of a larger process of identity renegotiation. Collective memory, often institutionalised as national memory, is increasingly being challenged and reconfigured by new social actors seeking visibility within dominant historical narratives. As Benoît de L'Estoile (2008) reminds us, "the presence of the past is […] a field of contest" (p. 267).

Public monuments, as spaces of collective memory, become sites of contestation where we must ask: what do we choose to remember, commemorate, or consign to oblivion? As Sadowski, Rego & Carmo (2024) argue, such sites open the possibility for rethinking inherited narratives and creating a dialogue between past and present. This brings us to the dialectic of visibility, both discursive and spatial. As Peralta (2022) asks: "How can we counteract the invisibility of the negative legacies of Portuguese colonialism in public space?" (p. 123).

What future, then, should be envisioned for these monuments? Preserving colonial-era artefacts is important, not to honour them, but to preserve the urban traces of colonialism that make critical memory possible. What must be avoided is their uncritical celebration, which risks perpetuating the very imperial ideologies they were built to uphold. Only through active and critical engagement with these material remnants can democratic societies hope to move beyond inherited narratives and toward a more inclusive historical consciousness.

Following Lilia Schwarcz (2021), such monuments should be preserved in situ only alongside new interventions that interrogate and disrupt their celebratory tone. Re-signification should deactivate their original commemorative function and instead preserve them as historical artefacts – "as marks and records of a specific era" (González de Oleaga, 2024, p. 73) – while incorporating critical counter-narratives. Their preservation, therefore, must not be mistaken for passive continuity, but instead incorporated into a broader project of historical accountability.

This is not to say that historical memory is absent in contemporary Portugal. Rather, as Pinheiro (2008) argues, the lack of broad societal debate has hindered the democratic reformulation of the country's official memory. This lack of engagement demands urgent public debate about colonial legacies in Portuguese cities, Porto in particular.

In this evolving context, tourism assumes a pivotal role in the negotiation of colonial memory. Monuments such as the Monument to the Portuguese Colonial Effort, which are featured prominently in city guides and walking tours, offer a valuable framework through which the public can engage critically with the ways in which Portugal's colonial legacy is remembered, represented, and consumed in the present. Far from being mere relics of the past, these sites function as pedagogical tools, providing visitors with the opportunity to reflect on the complexities of colonial history and its ongoing implications in contemporary society. As cultural tourism increasingly intersects with historical

discourse, these monuments become sites of critical engagement, facilitating a dialogue between the legacies of empire and the postcolonial realities that continue to shape national identity. In this sense, tourism can be harnessed as a transformative force, enabling a more informed and reflective engagement with Portugal's colonial past, while challenging conventional narratives.

Ultimately, the future of these monuments lies not in their passive preservation, but in their active re-signification, becoming spaces for dialogue, reflection, and the ongoing negotiation of a more inclusive and accountable historical consciousness.

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