

# Introduction

It was 2016. Surrounded by the perpetual noise and relentless coming and going of Termini Station in Rome, my friend Alazar and I were drinking coffee at our usual meeting point.

“My brother is saying that I should join him in Canada . . .,” Alazar said.

“How is that possible?” I answered, surprised.

“My brother said not to worry . . . that he will find a way for me,” Alazar replied quietly.

Alazar, whom I have known since he sought asylum in Italy in 2008, had finally found a job in a local restaurant and seemed to be feeling quite at home in Rome. After surviving a war when he was only eighteen, enduring a troublesome Mediterranean crossing, and spending a few years of unstable existence between Italy and the few countries in which he had sought asylum afterwards, Alazar had finally found some stability, I thought. He had a full international protection, a lot of friends and spoke some Italian. Apparently, however, he was not yet at his final destination as far as his relatives were concerned. Life was not easy for Alazar and many of the other Eritrean refugees I knew in the city. They often lived in poor housing and had few, irregular jobs. But I nonetheless had trouble understanding how Alazar’s brother could even think that moving to Canada, probably through an incredibly dangerous and expensive crossing of the Mexico-U.S. and then the U.S.-Canada borders, could be a good idea. Why gamble resources, time and energy again for an unsure outcome?

Such situations were not new to me. The restless search for a suitable final home in spite of all obstacles characterized the trajectories of most of the Eritreans I met during my research across Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Italy. The dream of fulfilling family expectations and finding not only a safe haven but some

degree of socioeconomic and existential stability at one's next destination was typical of the stories I collected. My Eritrean interlocutors felt that migration, no matter how risky, was their best option if they were to change their lives and those of their families. Their resources, time, and energy were all invested in this, the big gamble of the protagonists of this book, in which the stakes are incredibly high and the outcome extremely uncertain.

Through the hardships of the national service in Eritrea and the adversities of exile in refugee camps and peripheral neighborhoods in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Italy, *The Big Gamble* investigates migrants' and their families' fears, dreams and stratagems in navigating the opportunities and constraints produced by national migration policies and the international asylum regime. Besides describing their experience of deprivation and violence, I reconstruct the *choices* faced by my research participants at each stage of their migration. In each site, I account not only for the importance of socioeconomic resources for geographic mobility, but also for the role of shared moralities (that is to say, shared conceptions of what is moral and immoral), transnational expectations and imagination in the decision whether to stay put or move on. In each site, I illustrate the cumulative impact of previous emotional and material investments to reach the desired destination.

In a nutshell, *The Big Gamble* seeks to show the space of refugees' agency—to explore the paradox of choice for those who are defined by the lack of it. In so doing, I break with long-standing assumptions, criticized but never really overcome, that reduce the explanations of refugee movements to push factors and confine the debate about them to the paradigm of emergency and exceptionality. By considering the role of aspirations in the context of chronic crisis, the influence of families on refugees' decision-making long after they left home and the emic perception of risk in dangerous border-crossings, this book shows the relevance of concepts developed in broader migration studies for the theoretical interpretation of refugee movements. In particular, building on long-standing debates on imaginaries, culture of migration and transnational moral economies, the idea of cosmologies of destinations, explained below, is for me a way to understand the interplay of mobility and immobility by analyzing how shared moral norms, personal aspirations, and collective emotions shape refugees' choices for mobility and their directions.

After introducing the idea of cosmologies of destinations and placing it within the larger debate over mobility and immobility, this introduction briefly revisits the history of refugee and forced migration studies and shows the theoretical as well as political importance of blurring the boundaries between research on forced and voluntary migrations. Then, it explains the significance of the Eritrean case in today's scenario and provides a historical overview of the country. Finally, I present the main features of my multi-sited ethnography across four countries and a summary of the book chapters.

## MODERN COSMOLOGIES

Since starting to work with Eritreans in 2008, I have come to realize how the desired outcomes of their migration trajectories are patterned along a geographic hierarchy, with Canada, the United States, and the Scandinavian countries at the top and Eritrea at the bottom. In the middle, countries like Ethiopia, Sudan, and even Italy were perceived only as transit places, unsuitable for long-term settlement. Although individual preferences, family connections, rumors about recent policy changes, and other contingent circumstances could orient choices of a final destination—"Is it better to go to Sweden, Norway, or Switzerland?"—Eritrean refugees I encountered seemed to share common perceptions about the levels of safety, individual freedom, and labor market opportunities in different countries both among themselves and with their relatives around the globe. Far from being simply a configuration of geographic imaginaries, this hierarchy—which I define as a *cosmology of destinations*—also reflects a pathway of moral achievements and recognitions. Migrants' journeys are constructed as more or less successful, depending on the final country of settlement.

In anthropology, cosmologies are conventionally defined as widespread representations of the world as a hierarchically ordered whole.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally pertaining to the vocabulary of religion studies, cosmologies have progressively come to refer more generally to systems of classification and their related moral and emotional attitudes. Although for a time, this concept has been regarded as an outdated and ethnocentric notion, it is nevertheless an important heuristic tool for linking representations of reality with perceptions of morality and prescribed actions.<sup>2</sup> The concept of cosmologies has recently been used, for instance, to talk about social security conceptions in South Africa ("cosmologies of welfare"),<sup>3</sup> to refer to the capitalist system and its encompassing narrative,<sup>4</sup> and to denote the system of religious values underpinning the economic transactions involved in irregular migration from Fouzhou in China ("cosmologies of credit").<sup>5</sup> Cosmologies are crucial in Liisa Malkki's *Purity and Exile*, a founding text in refugee studies. Malkki illustrates how the *mythico-historical* reinterpretation of the Burundian genocide—a cosmology in its own right—shaped refugees' understanding of daily life in the camps and oriented their interactions with locals. Hutu refugees regarded intermarriage with locals and residence outside the camp, in particular, as threats to the purity of their identity.<sup>6</sup>

Whereas Malkki's *Purity and Exile* examines the cosmological beliefs of a limited number of refugees living in a confined camp, *The Big Gamble* aims to make sense of transnationally diffused worldviews among migrants in transit, their families back home, and their relatives and friends in the diaspora. Their views emerge not only from a national history of the Eritrean people as colonial subjects, war martyrs, and sacrificial migrants, but also from the wider effects of global cultural circulation on local cultures of migration, imaginaries and aspirations.

These concepts have previously been examined in the context of voluntary labor migration, but rarely in that of refugee flows from areas of chronic crisis. However, as described by Alessandro Monsutti in the context of Azhara migration from Afghanistan, long-term violence and related disruption of livelihoods often lead communities to reorganize, not only practically, but also morally and symbolically, around geographic mobility as the only significant means to survive.<sup>7</sup> The social expectations related to migration can be no less widespread in communities that have experienced a long-term outflow of refugees than in those of labor migrants.

Concepts such as aspirations, cultures of migration, and imaginaries crucially relate to the idea of cosmologies of destinations. However, there are some differences among them. Aspirations have become an especially crucial concept in migration studies thanks to the work of Jørgen Carling, Hein de Haas, and Ellen Bal and Roos Willems, among others.<sup>8</sup> The analysis of migration aspirations generally defined as “the conviction that leaving would be better than staying” has contributed to overcoming the simplistic understanding of migration as economically driven. Specifically, as argued by Jørgen Carling and Francis Collins, “unlike alternative terms, such as ‘intention,’ ‘plan’ and ‘wish,’ ‘aspiration’ marks an intersection of personal, collective and normative dimensions.”<sup>9</sup> As such I consider aspirations as a crucial manifestation of the socially shared and individually incorporated set of images, norms, and symbols that I call “cosmology of destinations.”

A culture of migration designates a widespread societal orientation to geographic mobility.<sup>10</sup> The idea of a cosmology of destinations adds more specificity, implying that mobility desires can be differentially addressed to specific locations, historically, culturally, and economically linked to the contexts of departure. These locations are typically ordered along a hierarchy of preferences, which are by no means fixed. Their order continually shifts, owing to feedback mechanisms between individuals living in different countries as well as popular images, which are at the same time rooted in specific historical experiences. In this sense the concept of cosmologies of destinations resounds with one of the geographic imaginaries that, as several scholars notice, often tend to be hierarchically ordered according to a wide range of social, historical, and economic factors.<sup>11</sup>

However, if imaginaries are mostly representational systems, cosmologies are by definition symbolic, and moral constructions. They are not only sets of images, but include emotional attitudes and moral orientations, which encompass those who are on the move as well as those who stay put. More specifically, within a vision of a hierarchically ordered world, the desire to move to another location that is deemed safer and more conducive to socioeconomic—and existential—stability, also implies a specific moral understanding of what it means to remain stuck in one’s own place. Although moralities and emotions have certainly been touched upon by those studying migration imaginaries, they are not explicitly connected to the concept of imaginaries. The idea of cosmologies of destinations instead provides a frame in which the symbolic, emotional, and moral dimensions of migra-



tion can be systematically interpreted. This allows me to account for the role of community pressures and the moral obligations as well as the emotions involved in migrating no matter the cost.

While systematically linking images of the outside world—and different destinations within it—with the subjects' perception of their own position, the concept of cosmologies of destinations thus enables me to analyze different dimensions of mobility and immobility. Besides physical "stuckedness," I unfold the different meanings of mobility and immobility from my informants' point of view—that is, their protracted and reproduced *sense of being trapped* at different stages of their trajectories. Without reconstructing the worldview that defines Italy exclusively as a transit country, for instance, it would not have been possible for me to understand why Alazar was still perceived by his family as "being stuck" in Rome. This is only one of the many different instances of *being* and *feeling immobile* that I document throughout the book.

#### BEING MOBILE IN AN IMMOBILE WORLD

Immobility has in the past few years become central to the debate on migration.<sup>12</sup> While scholars usually consider sedentary populations as the norm and simply focus their attention on migrants, some have argued that immobility and its factors must also be analyzed. Individuals often aspire to migrate, but are prevented from doing so by restrictive immigration and emigration policies, the devastating effects of wars,<sup>13</sup> or the disempowering effects of poverty.<sup>14</sup> Limitations of mobility are reproduced along the complex trajectories of refugees and migrants, who may get stuck in transit, stranded at the edges of Europe, at the Mexico–U.S. border, or in between the European legal and jurisdictional boundaries of the asylum regime, trapped in locations from which is hard to move either ahead or back.<sup>15</sup> Protracted displacement—defined as the lack of prospects of return to the homeland, resettlement in third countries, and local integration for those who are in extended exile—has become the most typical and intractable issue of today's refugee scenario. Protracted displacement has become normalized for 78 percent of all refugees—15.9 million people—leading to decades spent in first countries of refuge.<sup>16</sup>

The analysis of such involuntary immobility is crucial in the study of what is normally defined as "forced migration." Refugees' access to mobility is not only stratified along socioeconomic, age, and gender lines—as discussed, for example, by Nicholas van Hear and S. C. Lubkemann<sup>17</sup>—but also depends on the availability of transnational kinship and community networks and the ability to mobilize them. While exploring the structural circumstances that reproduce my informants' immobility along the Eritrea–Europe corridor, the analysis points to the paradox first made explicit by Lubkemann's work: mobility, even in highly constrained circumstances, represents an expression of agency, of capability to act upon one's own situation. Involuntary immobility is rather the condition in which the powerless

and most vulnerable end up being—repeatedly—trapped, whether in their own home countries or in transit after crossing their national borders.

However, immobility is far more than a physical condition.<sup>18</sup> As scholars have pointed out, using terms such as “waithood,” “existential immobility,” “chronic crisis,” and “stuckedness,” people are stuck not only because they are not able to migrate, but because they cannot reach a socioeconomically recognized position. They are unable to become the men and the women they wish to be and to grasp the future they aspire to for themselves and their families. This feeling of immobility is widespread among youth living in a context of protracted crisis all across Africa. Achille Mbembe,<sup>19</sup> James Ferguson,<sup>20</sup> Alcinda Honwana,<sup>21</sup> and Henrik Vigh,<sup>22</sup> among others, have documented in various ways in which young Africans’ aspirations are often frustrated by the structural incapability of postcolonial African economies to accommodate a new labor force, by the wider effects of corrupt political establishments, the failures of developmental measures, recurrent conflicts, and deteriorating climatic conditions. Although specific in many regards, Eritrean migration also represents the response to similar frustrated aspirations—especially among the youth—in a context of chronic crisis, stagnant economy, and political stasis. Such a context where different aspects of being forced and being willing to move—or to stay—continuously intertwine, defies the boundaries of forced and voluntary migration.

#### REFUGEE AND FORCED MIGRATION STUDIES: ON BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN TYPOLOGIES

Article 1 of the Geneva Convention (1951) defines a refugee as someone who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.”<sup>23</sup> In spite of later modifications of the Convention and the establishment of a set of juridical tools aimed to protect refugees and expand the Geneva definition—such as the Organization of African Union (OAU) Convention (1969) and the Cartagena Protocol (1984), not to mention national legislation and, in the European Union, the regulations established since the early 1990s<sup>24</sup>—the 1951 Convention is still the most widely recognized one. In fact, it is the text of refugee law on which most national and international legislation is based.<sup>25</sup>

This juridical framework shaped the early development of refugee studies as a discipline. Refugees have long been analyzed as an intrinsically different category from voluntary “economic” migrants. In 1973, for instance, E. F. Kunz claimed that refugees’ migration is triggered by push factors alone, with a complete absence of pull factors.<sup>26</sup> B. N. Stein has similarly argued that the refugee constitutes a distinct social type, and that the main common characteristics of the “refugee expe-

rience”—that is, loss of social ties and trauma—can be delineated.<sup>27</sup> The refugee condition has been regarded as exceptional in the migration scenario, as well as the responses required. Even today, refugee policies still have an emergency, humanitarian character that does not reflect the systematic and structural nature of refugee problems.<sup>28</sup> This is reflected in a theoretical segregation of the field of refugee studies from the broader debate of migration studies.

However, the contemporary asylum/migration scenario has dramatically changed in the past sixty years and calls for new interpretative tools. At the end of World War II, beneficiaries of international protection were perceived to be from Europe and victims of the recently ended war and of national ethnic cleansing. More than sixty years later, the world refugee population mainly originates from Africa, Asia, and South and Central American countries.<sup>29</sup> Most refugees come from countries marked by chronic low-intensity conflict, state fragility, livelihood disruption, human-rights violations, and protracted socio-economic crisis, such as Afghanistan, El Salvador, Eritrea, Guatemala, Honduras, Myanmar, and Somalia.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, refugees are not alone in their dangerous journeys. Many migrants, hardly definable as refugees in a conventional sense, are ready to take enormous risks to reach Europe or other developed countries. Whatever the reason for leaving their country, conventional refugees and other categories of migrants may accumulate the same vulnerabilities and share a similar need for protection. The multiple, interlinked motivations that push migrants and refugees to embark on high-risk journeys are reflected in concepts like “the asylum-migration nexus”<sup>31</sup> and mixed-migration flows.<sup>32</sup> This points to the difficulty in distinguishing between refugees and purely “economic” migrants, since causes of forced mobility, such as wars and human rights abuse, are often linked to failed development and poverty. This has led to a reexamination of previous categories that were crucial to the birth and development of refugee studies as a discipline.<sup>33</sup>

It is no surprise, then, that the international asylum discourse has progressively multiplied labels for vulnerable individuals in need of protection, variously called IDPs (internally displaced people), environmental refugees, cultural refugees, gender-based persecuted refugees, and so forth. Some academics have proposed new categories such as “survival migration”<sup>34</sup> and “crisis migration,”<sup>35</sup> which may be more inclusive than previous ones.

As the legal and humanitarian regime concerning asylum was looking for more encompassing definitions and new grounds to provide protection, another category, that of the “forced migrant,” has become prominent in the academic debate since the mid-1990s. This has come to include and replace the label “refugee” in the literature. The definition of forced migration, although far from well delimited and clear, mainly refers to all people who leave their homes owing to forces beyond their control. It includes legal categories such as IDPs, environmental refugees, and other less well defined populations of migrants.<sup>36</sup>

However, the shift from refugee studies to forced-migration studies has not corresponded either to a substantial shift in the theoretical development of the field or in the global political agenda. The change has, rather, been a superficial, nominal one. Even today, in the literature and especially in policy documents of humanitarian agencies, it is not rare to encounter the commonsense assumptions that “refugees have no choice but to leave,” “forced migration is a reaction to a sudden threat,” “political refugees are intrinsically different from economic migrants,” and so forth. Even the most recent international policy developments, represented by the Global Compact on Migration<sup>37</sup> and the Global Compact on Refugees (2018),<sup>38</sup> adopt a binary approach (migrants vs. refugees) that does not address the asylum-migration nexus. As a result, in spite of their structural existence and their repeated patterns, refugee movements keep being defined as emergencies, exceptions in migration scenarios.<sup>39</sup>

In sum, although the category of forced migration has its own merits, including that of showing the limits of previous definitions, it does not seem to be a solution in itself, inasmuch as it reproduces a binary distinction between those who can and those who cannot choose. Such clear-cut distinctions have been widely criticized in the past decade by scholars from different disciplines, such as law, anthropology, political science, and sociology.<sup>40</sup> Marta Bivand Erdal and Ceri Oeppen argue, for instance, that although the forced/voluntary dichotomy may serve migration-management purposes, it does not reflect the complex reality of migration decisions.<sup>41</sup> To define a migration flow as forced does not clarify under what circumstances it takes place, or how it is distinguishable—if at all—from other kinds of migration, and to what extent constraints, personal agency and enabling resources interact to produce mobility. Finally, this dichotomy between forced and voluntary migration tends to reproduce limited access to protection rights for some groups, who are deemed to originate from safe areas or not to fit the label.

However, when stating the continuity between forced and voluntary migration and the space for choice in migration dynamics, researchers may face a major ethical dilemma. On the one hand, we are afraid to undermine the system of categories that protect research participants. On the other hand, we feel the need, as Thomas Faist puts it, “to challenge the power of categorization which oppresses the subjects we talk about.”<sup>42</sup> The more the distinction between economic migrants and refugees gets blurred; the higher the risk of moral and political claims for international protection losing momentum and cogency. The cynical but not implausible question could then be, if refugees are not fundamentally different from voluntary migrants, why should an international legal system to safeguard them be maintained at all? In the European political arena (and Europe is not an exceptional case), xenophobic declarations are popular, and fears focused on migrant populations orient the political agendas of leading parties. It is therefore understandable that providing scientific foundations for such an argument is a cause of concern for academics, myself among them.

Presenting my work to a diverse audience of students, practitioners, and refugees, I found out how unsettling the statement “economic migrants and refugees are not categories apart” can be. In one occasion, one refugee auditor exclaimed that while I was talking, “people who need protection and have the right to be saved” were dying at sea. Others, mainly practitioners, told me that I should not mix “bogus refugees” with “real ones.” The former felt that my argument was questioning refugees’ entitlement to be protected and welcomed in Europe; the latter felt that I had perhaps missed the point, and that the people I was talking about had in fact *no* entitlement to international protection. These comments shocked me: Was I saying that my Eritrean informants, my friends, in fact, had no proper right to obtain asylum in Europe? Although I felt that some of my critics’ associations of ideas were off-target, their comments made me think of the potential implications of my own argument.

For me, rejecting the dichotomy between forced and voluntary migration means contesting the exclusion and illegalization that inevitably derives from a stereotyped understanding of reality. Instead, the focus on mobility and immobility in their manifold aspects across borders enables the researcher to untangle factors underpinning migration pathways. It allows us to go beyond depersonalized accounts of forced migration, whether humanitarian or security-oriented, and to provide insights into how gender, age, class, cultural, and social background influence not only the possibilities but also the desire to be mobile and the experience of being immobile. Together with scholars such as Faist, Erdal and Oepen, and Sandro Mezzadra,<sup>43</sup> I believe that the debate on refugees and migration calls for creative solutions to interpret mobility going beyond the categorization of forced and voluntary. There is a need to think out of policy-driven categories, to portray real stories in their complexity, to account for vulnerability as much as for capabilities, aspirations, and desires in migrants’ struggles for mobility. These struggles over mobility reflect more or less implicit political contestations about the nature and the fairness of borders, migration regulations, and related distribution of rights.

#### WHY ERITREA?

Although specific in many regards, Eritrean migration is a typical response to the constraints and opportunities produced by the contemporary asylum regime in its interaction with national migration policies. Its analysis can illuminate the effect of this system on the daily lives of millions of refugees, as well as its consequences on their mobility choices. At the same time, Eritrean pathways respond to a distinctive structure of opportunity. Emigration is severely restrained by the Eritrean government, which grants its citizens passports only after they have done their national service. However, even those who are legally permitted to leave the country often cannot move to their preferred destination. Visas to study, work, or visit

Western countries are extremely hard to obtain for those coming from developing countries, and even more so for those who originate from a refugee-producing country like Eritrea. Western embassies tend to believe that Eritreans applying for temporary visas are unlikely to return home on expiry of their permission of stay. Those who manage to leave Eritrea, with or without authorization, usually end up in Sudan or Ethiopia, with limited possibilities for legal and socioeconomic integration there.

Since resettlement rates are extremely low—less than 1 percent of the refugee population worldwide—and work and study visas are hard to obtain, most Eritreans, like most refugees in the first countries they reach—usually low-income nations—live in encampments with few prospects of long-term solutions. Those who do reach developed countries usually have wider prospects to study, work, and enjoy a decent life—although other forms of deprivation may be present.<sup>44</sup> The repeated migration attempts I document in the book mirror the contradiction between the immobility of substantive rights and the physical mobility required to gain access to them.<sup>45</sup> It is important to note that, although things could quickly change, Eritreans, unlike other nationalities, have high rates of recognition as “legitimate” refugees in Europe. As Erdal and Oeppen point out, it is important also when analyzing forced migration to keep in mind “the anticipation” by migrants “of the particular labelling by immigrant authorities in Europe.”<sup>46</sup> This is crucial, inasmuch as it provides them with some prospects of access to legal and social protection once arrived in Europe, unlike those migrants whose asylum applications are typically rejected based on the fact they come from what are deemed “safe areas.”<sup>47</sup>

Eritreans were one of the main national groups of the 2015–16 European refugee crisis. UNHCR estimates that the number of Eritrean refugees, asylum seekers, and other categories of concern was over half a million at the end of 2017, making Eritrea the ninth-greatest source of refugees worldwide, with one of the relatively most numerous diasporas in the world.<sup>48</sup> Although statistics on the Eritrean population are largely unreliable and out of date, it is safe to say that there are at least a million and a half Eritreans who live outside their country, out of a total population of fewer than five million.

Aside from its timeliness and statistical significance, the theoretical relevance of this case has primarily to do with the state of chronic emergency that characterizes not only Eritrea but most “refugee-producing countries.” In spite of its contemporary momentum, migration from Eritrea is much more than a simple reaction to an individual life threat. Rather, it is a historically developed communal strategy against hardships. As such, it represents a key case to understand how concepts, such as aspirations, imaginaries and transnational moralities, originally elaborated in the study of labor migration can apply to the research on refugee movements.

### *A History of Migration*

Geographic mobility is ancestral history in the Horn of Africa. Different ethnic groups have long moved from one area to the other in search of better pastures for their animals, to find better lands to cultivate, to escape violence, to take control of the resources and the people of other regions. For some ethnic groups, especially pastoralists, systematic and periodic geographic mobility has been a normal part of their social organization and livelihood strategy in facing harsh climatic conditions. However, it was at the end of Italian colonization that Eritreans systematically started traveling across national and international borders.

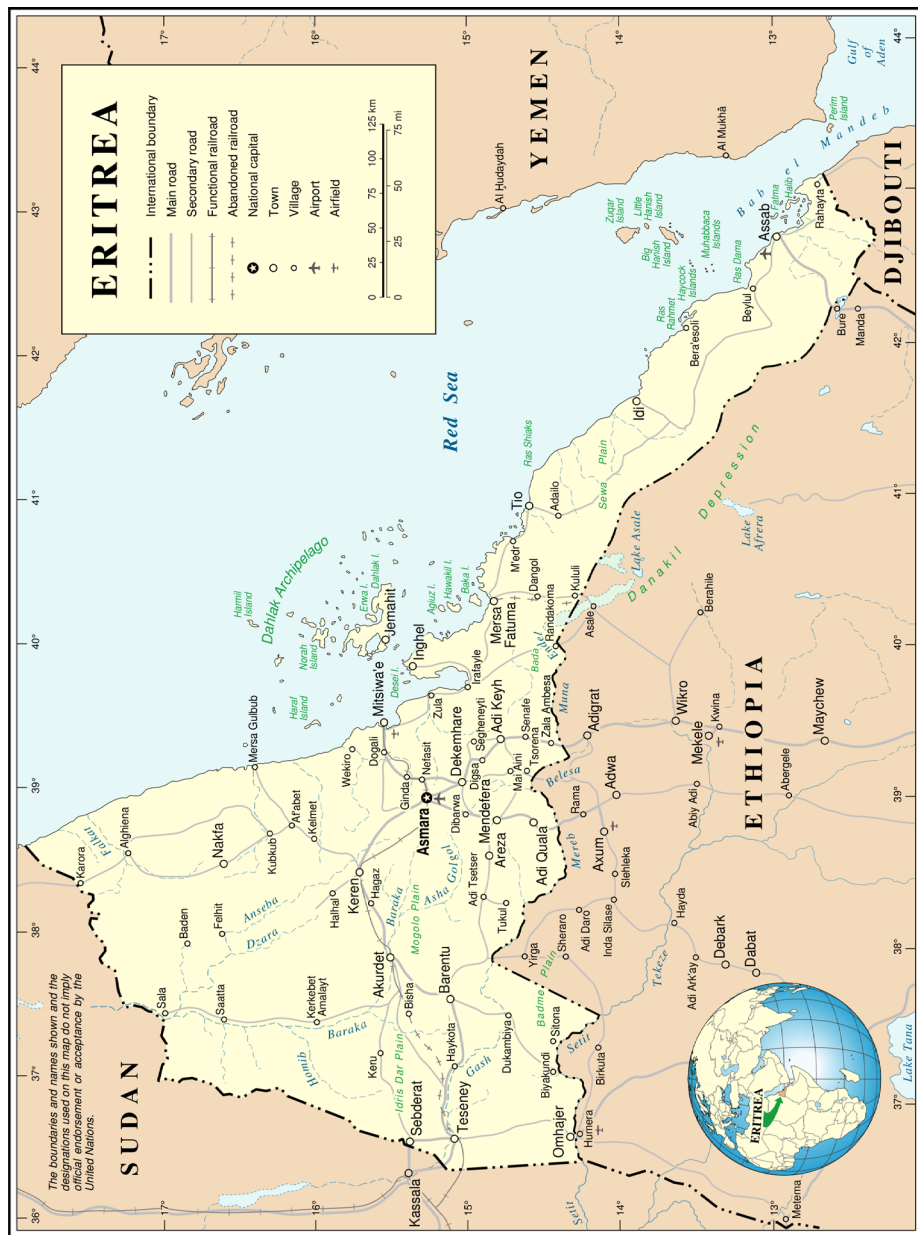
The history of Eritrea is not a unitary tale of a people on a delimited territory. As revealed by archaeological findings at the ancient Red Sea port of Adulis in the northeast of the country, the Eritrean coast was part of the kingdom of Axum, which flourished from 100 to 800 CE. The Axumites spoke a Semitic language, adopted Christianity, and had a sophisticated political system and trading relationships with India, China, the Black Sea region, and Spain.<sup>49</sup> When the coast was invaded by Arab expansion in the eighth century, the kingdom of Axum was cut off from trade and its decline became inevitable. After the fall of Axum, the region became politically fragmented: people from Sudan and Egypt occupied the coast and the western lowlands, while in the highlands mostly Tigrinya and Amhara local rulers based in different regions competed for power until the nineteenth century.<sup>50</sup>

Although the Eritrean highlands have often in the course of history been a partly independent province, they have historically been linked to the Ethiopian highlands. Alemseged Abbay speaks of a trans-Mereb identity (the river Mereb marked the Eritrean and Ethiopian border in colonial times) founded on precolonial institutions,<sup>51</sup> which would have included the Coptic Church and its monastic culture, the linguistic roots of the Amharic and Tigrinya languages in the Ge'ez script, the land tenure system, and the feudal political order of the several regional kingdoms. The self-designation "Habesha," used both by Tigrinya-speaking Eritreans and the inhabitants of the Ethiopian side of the plateau, such as Tygraians, Amhara, and Oromo, is evidence of this ethnic, cultural, social, and political connection.<sup>52</sup>

Eritrean and Ethiopian Tigrinya speakers and the Amhara (Coptic Christian Amharic speakers), who inhabit the more southern Ethiopian highlands, have historically been the dominant political groups of the area.<sup>53</sup> In Eritrea, lowlanders are usually Muslim nomadic pastoralists (with several exceptions among the Kunamas and the Bilen groups, who are agriculturalists and often non-Coptic Christians). They belong to different ethnic minorities (see "Eritrea at a glance").

The history of Eritrea as one country begins with Italian colonization (1889–1941).<sup>54</sup> Italian occupation lasted for almost fifty years and had a profound impact on the country, especially on the highlands.<sup>55</sup> Many Italians came to settle in the





MAP 1. United Nations map of Eritrea



## ERITREA AT A GLANCE

*Population:* The United Nations estimate is five million, but Fusari 2011 suggests 3.2 million, taking into account the emigration rate and decreased fertility since the 1980s. The only available census dates from 1993.

*Geographic features:* The southern and central regions of Eritrea are dominated by Ethiopian north-south trending highlands, which descend on the east to the coastal desert plain, on the northwest to hilly terrain, and on the southwest to plains.

*Climate:* Eritrea consists of a hot, dry strip of desert along the Red Sea coast, cooler and wetter central highlands (rain falls mostly between June and September), and semiarid western hills and lowlands.

*Capital:* Asmara, recently listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

*Main religions:* Muslim (47%), Christian Orthodox (39%), Roman Catholic (5%), Evangelical Protestant (1%), vernacular religions (2%), other Christians (4%). There are groups of Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses and other Christians in the country, but they are not institutionally recognized.

*Main ethnic groups:* Tigrinya (50%), Tigre (27%), Saho (5%), Afar (5%), Hidareb (4%), Kunama (3%), Bilen (2%), Nara (2%), Rashaida (1%).

*These percentages are provided by the Eritrean government ([www.eritrea.be/old/eritrea-people.htm](http://www.eritrea.be/old/eritrea-people.htm)).*

*Languages:* Tigrinya and Tigre are the main spoken languages in the country. Like Amharic (the main spoken language in Ethiopia), they derive from ancient Ge'ez. Arabic and English are also widely spoken. Ethnic minority languages are also studied in school and widely spoken.

*Essential timeline:*

- 1000 BCE: Semitic peoples from the South Arabian kingdom of Saba' (Sheba) migrate across the Red Sea, absorbing the Cushitic inhabitants of the Eritrean coast and adjacent highlands.
- 100 to 800 CE: Emergence and fall of the Axum empire, a strong trading and political power that developed around the port of Adulis. Christianity becomes the area's main religion around 300 CE.
- 9th–19th centuries: Arabs invade the coast. Solomonid dynasties rule in the Ethiopian highlands, with Eritrea the northern province of their kingdom. The western lowlands are controlled by Sudanese empires and the eastern lowlands mostly by Afar rulers. From the 16th to 19th centuries, the coastline around Massawa was part of the Ottoman empire.
- 1869–1944: Italian colonization. The Genoa-based Rubattino shipping company buys the bay of Assab from the local Afar sultan and Italians progressively expand their control as far as the Mereb River.
- 1941–52: After Italian defeat in World War II, Eritrea becomes a British protectorate.
- 1952–62: Ethiopia and Eritrea are federated but maintain a degree of political and administrative independence.

- 1961–62: Following forcible annexation of Eritrea to Ethiopia under the emperor Haile Selassie, a liberation struggle starts in the lowlands.
- 1974: Haile Selassie is overthrown in Ethiopia by Menghistu Haile Mariam, who establishes the Derg regime.
- 1983: Conflict between the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean People Liberation Front (EPLF). The EPLF defeats the ELF and becomes the only militant Eritrean front.
- 1991: De facto independence. EPLF and TPLF (the Ethiopian Tigray People Liberation Front) enters Addis Abba and overthrows Menghistu's government. The EPLF becomes the Party for Freedom, Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), which has ruled Ethiopia since then.
- 1998–2000: Conflict with Ethiopia, allegedly for disagreement on border demarcation around the village of Badme.
- 2000: The Algiers agreement. A period of “no peace, no war” between the two countries begins. Diplomatic and trade relations are blocked.
- 2018: Peace process between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Ethiopia recognizes that Badme belongs to Eritrea, and the newly established Ethiopian prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, pays the first Ethiopian diplomatic visit to Eritrea in eighteen years.

country, where they were given land confiscated from the local population; cities, roads, and other infrastructure were built and several industries were established around the region. The colonial rulers imposed a hierarchical system that systematically limited the rights of the indigenous population. Under racial laws passed in 1935, indigenous Eritreans were allowed to study only up to fourth grade. At the same time, new modes of production, the introduction of modern technology in agriculture, and the construction of urban centers deeply influenced the traditional social structure of Eritrean society. Local imaginaries, aesthetic tastes, and cultural models were also significantly shaped in those years, with long-standing implications for contemporary politics, Eritrean people's horizons of meaning, and migration pathways.<sup>56</sup>

In 1941, Eritrea then became a British protectorate. The British dismantled industries and infrastructure such as the Asmara-Massawa Cableway, built by the Italians, as war compensation. They also lifted the ban on higher education for indigenes and allowed the growth of a free press and political parties. This was a period of lively political activism, from which the protagonists and ideas of the later independent Eritrea sprang.<sup>57</sup>

Starting in the 1950s, many Eritreans who had been working for Italians moved to Addis Ababa. Others, mostly female domestic workers, followed their employers back to Italy. Still others, mostly Muslims, left for the Arab world (mainly

Sudan, Egypt, and Gulf countries) to work and pursue further education.<sup>58</sup> Then, with the beginning of the thirty-year-long war against Ethiopian rule, Eritrean international migration skyrocketed.

In 1952, Eritrea was then federated to Ethiopia, but kept most of its political, administrative, and judicial autonomy. In 1961, however, the emperor of Ethiopia dissolved the Eritrean parliament and unilaterally annexed Eritrea. Hamid Idris Awate, a former *ascaro* (indigenous soldier in the Italian army), fired the first shot against Ethiopian occupation in the western lowlands on September 1, 1961, launching the country's long independence struggle.

*The seeds of crisis: the independence struggle and “no peace–no war”*

The Eritrean independence struggle has complicated historical roots in ethnic conflicts, regional instability, and political claims, which have been thoroughly investigated by several historians.<sup>59</sup> In fifty years of Italian colonization, Eritreans had developed a separate political identity from their Ethiopian cousins. Moreover, Muslims, traditionally marginalized by Christian highlanders, interpreted the annexation to Christian Orthodox Ethiopian rule as a new attempt to subordinate them. It was mostly owing to them that the independence struggle started. The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), initially constituted by Muslim lowlanders, began the rebellion in the western plains, triggering retaliation by the imperial army against civilians in those areas.<sup>60</sup> This led thousands to cross the border with Sudan in search of refuge.<sup>61</sup> In 1974, the Derg, a military regime led by Menghistu Haile Mariam, overthrew the Ethiopian emperor and the war spread to the highlands and the cities. Thousands were killed and more were displaced throughout Africa, the Middle East, Europe and the United States, creating the bulk of the numerous, worldwide population of Eritrean origin that was a crucial ally for the liberation fronts in the war and for the government subsequently.<sup>62</sup> In that period, moreover, the original liberation front—the ELF (the Eritrea Liberation Front)—and a newly emerged Eritrean People Liberation front (EPLF) came into conflict (1982), which resulted in further displacement.

In 1991, the military regime in Ethiopia was defeated by an alliance of Ethiopian and Eritrean liberation fronts and Eritrea gained its *de facto* independence under the rule of the EPLF. Since then EPLF cadres have ruled the country through the PFDJ (People's Front for Democracy and Justice) party. Initially enjoying widespread support among the population and the Eritrean diaspora, this regime was praised by the international community for its progressive agenda on social and economic development and gender equality. Some Eritreans who had fled decided to return home, and the fragile economy of the country seemed to benefit from government intervention and foreign investment.

This illusion lasted only until 1998, when a new conflict broke out with Ethiopia. Allegedly, the war was triggered by an issue of border demarcation around

the small town of Badme, but the reasons behind it are far more complicated and range from the control over the ports to deep-rooted ambitions in regional politics.<sup>63</sup> Around a hundred thousand Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers died, and hundreds of thousands of people were displaced. At least seventy thousand Eritreans were expelled from Ethiopia in 1998, and thousands of Ethiopians were forcibly returned from Eritrea.

The conflict officially ended in 2000, when the two countries agreed to a cease-fire. The UN Eritrea–Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) ruled that Eritrea had a legitimate claim to Badme, and that Ethiopia should withdraw its troops from the town, but Ethiopia never respected this decision. Although the war had ended, hostilities continued. Diplomatic and trade relationships ceased, with negative consequences for both countries. Ethiopia lost cheap access to the sea, and Eritrea lost its natural trading partner. Moreover, Eritrea has progressively become isolated on the international scene, owing partly to bad relations with all its neighbors and partly to a deep-rooted mistrust of the international community.<sup>64</sup>

Eritrea's economic and political efforts at self-reliance since its independence have reflected a wary anti-colonialist mentality, reinforced by the fact that whereas Ethiopia's noncompliance with the UN recommendation over the border issue was not followed by international measures, Eritrea has been a target of UN sanctions since 2008. Although these sanctions have mainly been an embargo of weapons and freezing the financial assets of the Eritrean leadership, these measures arguably had a widespread negative effect on the Eritrean economy, discouraging investors, increasing the diplomatic isolation of the country, and thus indirectly worsening the living conditions of the population.

Twenty years of cold war and isolation have recently been interrupted by a drastic change in regional politics. In July 2018, following a shift of power in the Ethiopian leadership, the newly appointed Ethiopian prime minister Abiy Ahmed withdrew Ethiopian troops from Badme. This has led to the peace agreement between the two countries and the reopening of the border between them. Since then, families who had been separated for decades have been able to meet again, and trade and diplomatic relations have resumed, decreasing the cost of living and leading to renewed hope among Eritreans at home, as well as fear among those who sought asylum in Ethiopia, who wonder about their safety. The short- and long-term implications of this radical change are still hard to forecast.

Whether it is simply revealing its true nature, as some believe, or reacting to the constant threat from Eritrea's more populous and powerful Ethiopian neighbor, the repressive attitude of the PFDJ has remained unchanged since 1998. Eritrea has not had free elections since its independence, the Constitution has never been ratified, and all of the PFDJ's political opponents have been eliminated as supporters of the Ethiopian enemy.<sup>65</sup> There is no free press, and religious and cultural liberties have been severely curtailed. Parallel to this political atmosphere, development efforts have mostly fallen on the shoulders of young citizens, who are

obliged to work for years in different sectors of public interest—education, health service, defense—with little or no pay. This is the background of the stories I tell in this book.

### A MOBILE ETHNOGRAPHY: THE ERITREA–EUROPE CORRIDOR

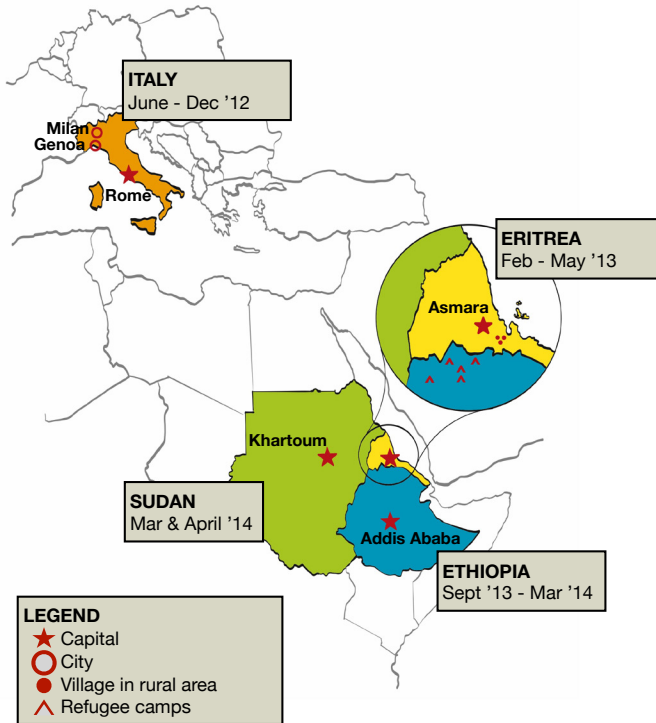
As a twenty-three-year-old student at University of Siena, I met Alazar, an Eritrean who had been rescued from sea in November 2008, at a temporary asylum center in the nearby tourist town of Follonica on the Tuscan coast. My classmates and I visited the center twice a week for three months, and as a result of the friendship that developed between us, the stories of Alazar and the other young Eritreans I met in the center became part of my life.

When I began researching Eritrean migration in 2012, Alazar became my point of reference for the community of refugees living in Rome, who wanted to move on. In June–December that year, living in squats typical of those inhabited by many Eritreans, I explored the contradictions of their daily lives and also paid regular visits to other informants I had come to know in Genoa and Milan. Most of my research subjects in Italy were Christian Tigrinya men (some of them Catholics, others Orthodox) in their late twenties, who had come to Europe by crossing the Mediterranean.

At the beginning of 2013, to explore the conditions underpinning my informants' decision to leave home, I asked them for contacts among their families in Eritrea. For three months, I subsequently shared the everyday life of a family in Asmara, hanging out with young men and women I met there and visiting the families of other informants in the Eritrean capital, as well as in rural areas.

As many of the young people I encountered in Eritrea wanted to escape to Ethiopia, I continued my fieldwork there from September 2013 to March 2014. I was familiar with the country, since I had lived there for four months in 2011, and I already had some local contacts among local humanitarian workers, Italian diplomatic officers, Eritrean families, and relatives of my friends in Italy. Through these already established and newly emerging relationships, I conducted ethnographic research in refugee camps in Tigray (northern Ethiopia) and lived with a young Eritrean doctor, Violetta, in a neighborhood of Addis Ababa with a high concentration of Eritrean refugees. It happened to be the period of the year when most of our neighbors were planning their departure via Khartoum to Libya.

Khartoum then became the last site of my fieldwork (March–April 2014). There I lived with Maria, a young Eritrean and her eight-year-old child, Anna, in a shared house with four other Eritrean refugee families. While hanging out with her refugee friends from Asmara, I came in touch with a middleman facilitating illicit border crossings through the Sahara and his colleagues. This enabled me to explore the hidden world of smugglers from an inside perspective. Being in

**MAP OF FIELDWORK LOCATIONS (2012-2014)**

MAP 2. Fieldwork locations (Designed by Sarah Anschütz)

Khartoum also allowed me to catch up with other informants whom I had met in Eritrea and Ethiopia. The main locations where I conducted my research are shown in map 2.

Multi-sited ethnography seemed to me an obvious choice to investigate mobility practices and related transnational societal spaces.<sup>66</sup> My mobility was the result of a cumulative, open-ended research design—one that was continuously constructed with my informants, depending on contingent field circumstances. I progressively extended my fieldwork boundaries to the main nodes of the migration corridor connecting Eritrea with Europe. I could not include Libya owing both to time and energy constraints and to the extremely unsafe conditions there in the period in which the research took place. This corridor connecting Italy with Sudan, Ethiopia, and Eritrea can be seen not only as a geographic route but also as an imaginative pathway for families, friends, and co-nationals living in different locations, who exchange expectations, aspirations, desires, and ideas using media, internet, and mobile communication.<sup>67</sup> The observation sites I chose along the way were not only key locations to explore migration, but also fields of social relation-

ships that I navigated along with young refugees and their families and friends. The observation of specific sites was as important as grasping the interactions between them, and within them, at different but interdependent points of the migration corridor.<sup>68</sup> Sharing my informants' everyday life in their home country as well as in exile allowed me to appreciate the role of interpersonal micro-dynamics—such as family ties, peer pressure, and social expectations—in producing and reproducing refugees' movements.

In my research, multi-sited ethnography did not mean only conducting participant observation in different countries and at different sites within the same country, but also simultaneously engaging with diverse social and ethnic networks in different sites within the same country. In Eritrea, I did research in several towns and cities; in Ethiopia, I resided in Addis Ababa and visited the camps of Tigray; in Sudan, I lived in Khartoum; in Italy, I conducted participant observation in Rome, Milan, and Genoa. This plurality of sites included an even larger variety of informants, gatekeepers, and subjects of research. Several networks of religious, ethnic, geographic, and family affiliations gave me access to different perspectives and diverse experiences of living in the same place and connected me with other cultural environments, which I would have not been able to explore if I had only stuck to one gatekeeper or a “clique.” Although most of my observations pertain to Tigrinya Eritreans, the dominant and most numerous ethnic group in Eritrea, the multiplicity of sites and networks I navigated allowed me to meet Eritreans from minority backgrounds (Saho and Kunamas, for instance) and from rural areas. Moreover, during my research I would often hang out with locals—Sudanese in Khartoum, Ethiopians in Addis Ababa. The interactions that I involuntarily created between locals and refugees worked as sorts of experiments—I put in touch two worlds that rarely interface. This enabled me to observe how trust and distrust among locals and refugees play out in real encounters and how conflictual these relationships can be.

The above considerations show that my presence in the field was far from being a neutral one. My relationships with informants were characterized by reciprocal emotional engagement, prolonged involvement in each other's lives well after the formal end of the research—sometimes, even despite me. Friendship, care, unparalleled expectations, love, and disappointment were all ingredients of my fieldwork in ways that I could not anticipate at its outset. This allowed me to gain insights that would have been hard to attain otherwise, but that also exposed me to ethical dilemmas. Throughout the book, I mention these aspects when they are relevant for the interpretation of my observations, but I have restricted discussion of the main methodological and ethical challenges of my fieldwork to the Appendix.

Although I did not “follow people” in a literal sense, the very fact that I was moving within the same geographic and imaginative space as my informants enabled me to come across the same individuals at different stages of their migration process. For example, in Ethiopia, I encountered families whom I had previously







met in Eritrea; likewise in Sudan and in Italy. Moreover, even after the end of my fieldwork, my informants and I have kept in touch, and many of them contacted me when they reached Italy to ask for help or simply to let me know that they had arrived in Europe safely. Sometimes they preceded me and sometimes I preceded them in the corridor, but my informants and I were following the same steps of the journey. Following a corridor rather than a group of people enables a researcher to see who, at each step, can move on and who has to wait or simply stay. This allows one to account not only for differentials in capabilities (based on access to legal migration, economic resources, and social networks), but also for their will to do so or not, in the presence of incredible risks. Within the current debate about mobility and immobility, this is a crucial option for advancing the state of the art on these underinvestigated issues.<sup>69</sup>

The Eritrea-Ethiopia-Sudan-Libya-Italy corridor's existence should not be considered permanent, but fluctuating on the basis of policy changes, border control practices, and geopolitical arrangements in the countries of transit, origin, and destination.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, this corridor is only one of the many possible pathways taken by Eritreans to find a new home. The route through Egypt to Israel, for example, used to be extremely popular until 2013. It is estimated that close to forty thousand Eritreans reached Israel by way of Egypt's Sinai Peninsula between 2006 and 2012. Then, in 2012, Israel implemented a series of border controls and progressively restrictive measures on illicit migration and resident asylum seekers that practically stopped arrivals.<sup>71</sup> Other Eritreans moved on to other less predictable destinations, such as Uganda, Angola, and South Sudan (until civil war broke out there in December 2013). Still others have reached countries in the Middle East, such as Dubai, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, which have been historic destinations of the diaspora since the 1960s.<sup>72</sup> The fact that I encountered only a few Muslims during my research may also reflect the historic trend of Muslim Eritrean minorities' migrating to the Middle East rather than to Europe. It is important to take these considerations into account so as not to generalize about the migration practices of an extremely diverse population of migrants from Eritrea.

At this point, it is important to advance a few epistemological considerations that have oriented the analysis of my data. In interpreting my observations and my informants' narratives, I considered what Frank Salamone, following Georges Condominas,<sup>73</sup> calls the *preterrain*, that is to say, the preexisting structural relationships that underlie, and possibly shape, research settings and interactions. For Salamone's study in Nigeria, the *preterrain* consisted of colonial-related inequalities in power distribution. In my case study, not only postcolonial relationships, but also the social dynamics produced by the international asylum regime had to be taken into account. Doing research with asylum seekers and refugees, in particular, has meant entering into a shifting constellation of roles where refugees, framed (or framing themselves) as victims, right holders, and resource recipients, interact with border guards, asylum practitioners, and resource providers.<sup>74</sup> In this

game I could often be identified with the latter group. This was especially—but by no means exclusively—the case in highly controlled research settings such as refugee camps, where I was doing on-the-spot interviews with informants I had just met, with whom I had not been able to build reciprocal trust.

Attention to structural circumstances and power dynamics of the field have informed not only the analysis of my data, but also the way I reached out to my informants in the field. I have systematically tried to navigate the informal networks of my Eritrean informants to meet other informants and access the field, although several choices have been constrained by circumstances beyond my control. Although I also interviewed humanitarian workers, diplomatic and government officers, and local NGO staff, I rarely relied on them for access to the field or to introduce me to refugees and locals. This has facilitated a closer, less institutional relationship with many of my informants and has enabled me to observe refugees' attitudes both "onstage" and off.<sup>75</sup>

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This book gradually moves from the alleys and sitting rooms inhabited by Eritreans in their home country via Ethiopian tent camps and lively neighborhoods in Addis Ababa and Khartoum to the crowded squats some of them occupy in Rome. From Eritrea, through Ethiopia, Sudan, and Italy, the first three chapters geographically follow my informants' main pathways to reconstruct the bundle of desires, fears, and pressures that push them across borders in spite of mounting risks.

Chapter 1 investigates the aspirations of young men and women trapped in the hardships of national service in contemporary Eritrea. Drawing on ethnographic research in urban and rural areas, the chapter illustrates how, in a context of chronic crisis, emigration has become normalized even in its most dangerous and tragic aspects. Many young Eritreans and their families tend to perceive migration at all cost as the only alternative to a life "without a future." While investigating the daily struggle of young men and women to escape social, generational, and geographic immobility, this chapter also accounts for the importance of aspirations and imaginaries in young Eritreans' desire to move elsewhere. By elaborating on the concept of cosmologies of destinations, this chapter describes widespread hierarchies of preferred destinations ordered along the perceived possibility of achieving freedom, stability, and self-realization there.

Based on participant observation in Ethiopian camps, Addis Ababa and Khartoum, chapter 2 illustrates why most Eritrean refugees are determined to move onward. Eritreans face several challenges in their first countries of asylum, ranging from their limited freedom of mobility outside camps to the lack of opportunities in local labor markets. However, their desire to move on does not only emerge from this disadvantaged socioeconomic context. Collectively shared and transnationally diffused sets of memories, norms, and images also define Ethiopia and Sudan as undesirable destinations. While describing how the desire for

migration is continually reproduced in camps and shared accommodations in cities, the chapter accounts for the matrix of socioeconomic and cultural conditions that stratify possibilities and aspirations for geographic mobility. Most refugees were stuck in spite of their will to move on, and some chose to stay put, awaiting eventual return to Eritrea.

Chapter 3 investigates the reasons why many Eritrean refugees try to move north from Italy. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with refugees in Rome, Milan, and Genoa, as well as with their families in Eritrea, this chapter shows the role of family expectations, peer pressure, and individual aspirations in Eritreans' repeated attempts to seek asylum in northern European countries in spite of policy obstacles. Preexisting aspirations to further mobility are reinforced and kept alive for Eritreans living in buildings illicitly occupied in Rome in a context of substantive deprivation and marginality. It is argued that refugees' decision making has to be studied in a larger transnational frame, which includes families back home, as well as relatives and friends in northern Europe.

Chapter 4 explores the roles, social mechanisms, and emic moralities involved in illicit border crossings, perceived by the main protagonists as legitimate ways to attain freedom. Building on refugees' narratives and on ethnographic research with two smugglers in Ethiopia and in Sudan, the chapter describes the complex world of the professionals of illicit migration and the moral and social embeddedness of their business in these refugees' communities. The chapter then goes on to illustrate the complex of affection, economic interest, and desire for mobility among transnational refugee couples. Partly emerging from the reproduction of traditional marital arrangements and partly from business opportunities, transnational marriages are mostly perceived as legitimate mechanisms to help compatriots pursue further mobility.

Chapter 5 revisits migrants' complex trajectories and illustrates how they, like gamblers, become at each stage more likely to bet their resources and lives in onward migration. It brings together the findings and observations made in the previous chapters to develop an analytical framework of Eritrean refugees' mobility. Borrowing the concept of entrapment from gambling studies, this chapter shows that in Eritreans' migratory decisions, as a sequential process, each stage is marked by a cumulative set of psychological and social pressures to make a further move, even at the price of risking everything yet again. In fact, every stage makes interrupting the journey more difficult for both structural and symbolic reasons. The concept of entrapment not only helps us understand what immobility means from a cognitive point of view, but contributes to the analysis of high-risk stepwise migration. This analytical framework promises to feed into a more refined understanding of the motivations of high-risk migrants, which have, until now, been studied without the sequential nature of their movements being considered.

In the Conclusion, after summarizing the main findings of my case study, I outline its implications for the general debate on refugee studies. I argue that the

concept of cosmologies of destinations is a promising tool for analyzing underinvestigated aspects of migration dynamics from areas of protracted crisis. Then I reconnect the notion of cosmologies of destinations with the other main theoretical contributions of my ethnography to the literature. In particular, I focus on the following major issues: the importance of moral, imaginative, and social aspects in the analysis of refugee movements; the dialectic relation between mobility and immobility and its manifold meanings; the normative aspect of unauthorized migration, in particular the unwritten moralities that underpin it; and the idea of entrapment and the cumulative aspect of migrants' high-risk journeys.

The methodological Appendix revisits the main challenges of the research, reflecting on the difficulties in gaining access to refugees and their living environments, and in building mutual trust, as well as managing the expectations emerging from complex and unbalanced fieldwork relationships. Drawing from field experiences, the Appendix elaborates on the researcher's positionality in terms of gender, age, and sexuality, narrating significant episodes of conducting covert research in an illiberal political environment, avoiding authorities' scrutiny in refugee camps, and deconstructing refugees' self-representations. Finally, it discusses ethical issues concerning the researcher's accountability to his/her informants, as well as the moral and political role of research in the larger debate on asylum.