Backstage

Notes on Methodology and Ethics

There are three main problems for researchers of refugees and asylum seekers: how to access them and their settings; how to deal with the complex power dynamics produced within the discursive and political context of the international asylum regime; and how to address vulnerability and justify one's research with respect to it. These three main issues intersect with a wide range of other methodological concerns that have long occupied social scientists and are by no means exclusive to refugee or forced-migration studies, such as the role of trust in qualitative research, the influence of the researcher's positionality on his/her data, the gendered nature of every encounter in the field, and personal distance and engagement in the lives of informants. In narrating obstacles, encounters, and dilemmas of my own fieldwork, this methodological note revisits these wider methodological discussions in relation to the specific challenges of doing research with refugees in environments characterized by authoritarian regimes, paternalistic humanitarian structures, widespread lack of trust, and irregularity. In particular, I discuss the unavoidably covert nature of research in authoritarian regimes, the choice among multiple loyalties in the field, as well as in writing, and the complex web of reciprocal, and often unparalleled expectations that researchers need to navigate. Here, I account for the *microphysics of participation,* as Giorgia Donà called it,[1] that characterized my fieldwork. By describing the shifting power dynamics that

informed my fieldwork and the variable—more or less vulnerable—positions occupied by different actors, such as the researcher, my refugee informants, other participants, and helpers, this note works against essentialist methodological accounts that reify refugees as the "vulnerable other." In line with the rest of the book, this methodological note aims to overcome more or less explicit paternalistic attitudes that shape ways of thinking about and doing research with refugees. Drawing on these considerations, I also advance some reflections on what research on refugees should ultimately aim for and the intrinsic importance of representation in it.

DANGEROUS, REMOTE, AND ENCLOSED: ACCESSING THE FIELD

Researchers' access to refugees can be hindered in many different ways. First of all, refugees' contexts of departure have generally remained outside researchers' scope. As refugees are by definition escaping from areas marked by violence, war, and lack of freedom, the possibilities of studying them are undoubtedly limited. Although social scientists have recently started debating the role of researchers in settings of war, and violence,[2] it is hard to deny that, in some contexts, the risks for scholars and their informants can be too high. Dangers are not necessarily connected to open war, but can be even more present while doing research under authoritarian regimes,[3] as the death of Giulio Regeni tragically proves.[4]

Yet those who fortuitously found themselves in the right place or were persistent and bold enough to venture into the heart of the crisis managed to provide precious accounts. Among the most notable examples, Stephen C. Lubkemann's ethnographic work during the civil war in Mozambique illustrates how different localized social conflicts within the broader national war influenced specific groups' perceptions of risks and mobility strategies.[5] The importance of "being there" as ethnographers lies[6] in making sense of how individuals, groups, and communities survive in conditions of protracted crisis, and what role mobility assumes in these contexts. Given the fact that most refugees come from areas of chronic crisis, the investigation of their everyday lives in the context of departure is crucial if we are to grasp the commonplace, but no less disrupting, dimension of violence.[7]

Research in refugees' areas of origin is important for investigating, not only the root causes of their mobility/immobility, but also the social embeddedness of their migration projects.[8] This entails exploring how refugees, as well as migrants, engage in transnational relationships with their home country, communities, and families. From this perspective it is possible to consider how these actors contribute to the emergence of migration desires at the outset of the journey, and in subsequent steps. Acknowledging that in practice implies walking refugees' pathways in the opposite direction.

The second main problem in studying refugees involves their isolation from the general population. Not only they are often located in remote areas, but also they are institutionally separated. As Barbara Harrell-Bond and Eftihia Voutira put it, "refugees as persons are subsumed under elaborate bureaucratic structures which control them."[9] These bureaucratic structures can be camps, reception or detention centers. Here, international and national authorities responsible for protecting refugees are also the ones responsible for regulating the access of those who could expose their failing to do so (including but not limited to researchers). Within such paradoxical bureaucratic contexts, researchers are often denied access to refugees and, even when they are allowed to do so, their work is closely monitored and restricted. These are the kinds of situations that I had to face in doing research among Eritreans in camps in Ethiopia. Even in urban areas, however, refugees may be "hidden" populations because they often have no permission to reside there.

Aside from these practical obstacles, one of the main challenges of doing research with refugees is their deeply rooted distrust of strangers, officials, authorities, or anyone associated with authority figures. This is especially the case in communities—Eritreans and Ethiopians being cases in point—in whose home countries the regime maintains extensive espionage networks both at home and abroad.[10] In these contexts, trust building between researcher and researched acquires further theoretical facets and methodological implications. Lack of trust, secrecy, and lies were omnipresent ingredients of my fieldwork in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Italy. This leads us into the second main issue of doing research with refugees: the importance of considering the power dynamics inherent in the bureaucratic and discursive settings of the international asylum regime. However, before I move on to that, let me expand on the complications involved in accessing refugees, drawing from my fieldwork experience.

ERITREA AS *TERRA NULLIUS:* LOW-PROFILING AND SECRECY

In 2000, Kjetil Tronvoll started one of his articles on highland land tenures by saying that Eritrea was *terra incognita* in terms of ethnographic research.[11] Except for Italian and British colonial officers who did some ethnographic investigation,[12] Eritrea has rarely been a fieldwork site for anthropologists, especially over the past fifty years. Lack of freedom, violence, and war have not only caused refugee flows but been the reasons why ethnographers have had a hard time investigating Eritrean society.

Tronvoll's ethnography of a highland Eritrean village (1998), David Bozzini's study of the resistance of young Eritreans to unlimited conscription (2011), Magnus Treiber's research on young Eritreans' coping strategies in Asmara (2009), David O'Kane's research on the impact of war on peasants (2012), and Valentina Fusari's demographic study on postconflict Eritrea (2011) are some of the few

recent ethnographic studies available on the region. Many journalists, researchers, and employees of international agencies have long been prohibited from going back to Eritrea because the Eritrean government has considered their work not aligned to the regime's values.[13] Others, even if not blacklisted, would not go back for fear of government reprisals. All the stories I had been told by development workers and other experienced researchers were on my mind when I applied for a tourist visa at the Eritrean consulate in Milan. However, after a month, I found out that against all odds my application had been accepted.

My decision not to officially declare that I was doing research in Eritrea was the result of numerous chats with more experienced scholars of Eritrea and my refugee friends. The extremely sensitive and politically charged nature of the subject I was investigating could have either led Eritrean authorities to reject my visa application, or to put me and the people I encountered under close scrutiny. My semi-covert research in Eritrea was certainly not a first; most of those who have written about the country were arguably there as university lecturers or employees of international organizations, not as declared researchers. However, there is little discussion of what such secrecy entails or of why it may be necessary.

The lack of discussion of this may be due to a general condemnation of covert research in the social sciences. Informed consent and transparency are generally held to be basic elements of any ethical research.[14] However, some authors have remarked how undisclosed research in informal settings should be accepted as a normal practice, inasmuch as it does not breach any entitlement to privacy.[15] Others, such as those who have done "dangerous fieldwork" have contended that the circumstances faced by ethnographers in that context challenge ethical codes. As J.C. Kovats-Bernat argues, transparency implies, first, that the ethnographer is in control in the field; but this is often not the case, for example, with researchers working in dangerous circumstances, where risks cannot be anticipated and usual binary distinctions—a colonial legacy according to this author—between researcher and researched are subverted. Secondly, the calculation of risks and potential advantages—often mentioned as an important prerequisite for conducting research in dangerous fields—is based on the mistaken assumption that data exist independently of the surrounding violence.[16]

In my case, it was hard to separate the risks of the research from the relevance of the data which were embodied by my informants' subtle but omnipresent everyday experience of structural violence. Dangerous fields are not only those in open war or among widespread violence, such as those explored by Kovats-Bernat and other scholars,[17] but also those under authoritarian regimes where ethnographers are under the arbitrary discretion of authorities as much as the citizens. Openly talking about taboo research topics or presenting oneself as researcher in these contexts may not be in the best interest of the ethnographer and his/her informants, as discussed by Marlies Glasius and her colleagues.[18]

I thus followed a rather localized ethic in my fieldwork in Eritrea. To quote Kovats-Bernat, "rather than guide my fieldwork with hegemonic assumptions about uneven power relationships between ethnographer and informants, I took stock of the good advice and recommendations of the local population in deciding what conversations (and silences) were important, . . . , the questions that were dangerous to ask, and the patterns of behavior that were important to follow for the safety and security of myself and those around me."[19]

Even though I managed to enter the country, my movements there were quite limited. Foreigners are generally only allowed to visit certain areas in the country, such as Massawa, Keren, and Mendefera, and even then they need specific permission to do so.[20] Other areas are forbidden. Non-nationals must carry their travel permission to move from one place to the other and show it at the frequent military check points on the way. This is also why most of my time in the country was spent in Asmara where I lived with Ester's family, hung out with its young members and their friends, and connected with other families. However, thanks to some locals, I also managed to reach a few rural areas, where I was able to visit my friends' relatives and observe the manifold effects of migration there. All this was done while trying to avoid institutional figures as much as possible and keep a low profile.

Secrecy and suspicion thus became part of everyday life while doing research in Eritrea. In the coffee shops I used to go to with my friends, it was usual to see someone sitting alone close to us listening in to our conversation. Was that simple curiosity or was he a spy? The country was full of spies, according to my informants. At the beginning of my fieldwork, when I used to go out in the evenings with Salam and her friends, I was surprised that they would order a tea or a soft drink from the car and consume it there. "We have privacy here . . . you know, people like to listen to what other people say," Salam told me once.

Once I asked Lwam and Johanna how spies could be spotted. They told me that it is was hard, but, according to Lwam, some may pretend to hate the government and then will go to the police to denounce their neighbors and colleagues. After that discussion I started suspecting anyone expressing negative views about the government. Sometimes I even doubted my best informants and friends, thinking they might be government spies. I never conducted formal interviews and I never used a voice recorder; I just wrote up my field notes on my laptop every evening, while Ester, Saba, and the girls were watching TV.

For the same reasons, I did not often divulge that I was doing research there. Unless my informants were directly involved with me, I would not present myself as a researcher. Due to their significant contribution in the study and our close relationship, I spoke to Lwam, Sister Lethe Brahne, and Valentina about it, but all of them warmly advised me to keep my research topic to myself. Upon my return to Italy, Gabriel asked me to keep my mouth shut about the fact that I had lived with his family in Asmara: "You know people talk too much and they think too

far . . . they may think you are a spy . . . are you?" Although I had explained to him many times that I was a university student, Gabriel still had his doubts about me, and I guess he was not the only one, because most of my informants never really grasped the purpose of my stay. Many times, as I explained my role to them, their looks seemed to say: "How could someone possibly be willing to live as Eritreans live and face several dangers just for research purposes?" I understand it was quite hard for them to believe me.

The above ethnographic instances call into question the possibility of being transparent about our roles and our aims as researchers with our informants. Although there is wide acknowledgement of the importance of being as open as possible with research participants about the scope, aims, and methods of the research,[21] little is said about the fact that in practice, ethnographic research often remains incomprehensible or irrelevant from informants' points of view. Although many of my informants were supportive, others were simply not interested but still helped me out. Their cooperation mostly emerged from personal friendship, sympathy for me, or hope of obtaining benefits unrelated to the research, ranging from financial support to some kind of access to Europe.

Without underestimating the importance of trying at least to make informants active participants in research, I see a need to rethink the possibility of engaging our informants in meaningful ways more humbly. Based on David Turton's statement that all research on human suffering ultimately needs to find justification in trying to alleviating the suffering itself,[22] some authors have argued that research with refugees should be empowering, or even therapeutic.[23] These considerations seem to me the wishful thinking of researchers more rather than what goes on in the field. I sympathize with the considerations that support a participatory approach, such as the need to consider refugees as more than mere sources of data; I likewise appreciate the criticism vis-à-vis the practice of informed consent as the ultimate proof of informants' willingness to be part of a study. However, it seems to me naïve to think of most research as based "on a reciprocal relationship between researcher and participants in which there is a more equal exchange of ideas and of the benefits to be gained by being involved" in it.[24] Although some research may have managed to bring equal benefits to refugee participants and researchers, it would be misleading to overemphasize their interest and gain from the research. In practice, refugees have many more important things to worry about. It seems equally naïve to me to justify research with the idea that it will eventually contribute to social change, since in practice nobody can realistically forecast what a particular study will bring about in terms of practical improvement. Yet the study may still be worth doing not only from the researcher's point of view.

Although some of my informants were not interested in the study, others understood it and enriched it with different meanings. Tsegay, the smuggler, for instance, decided to talk to me precisely because he saw my research as a way to

make Eritrean people's suffering known. Likewise, Stephanos, one of the novice priests in Addis Ababa, encouraged me and helped me find key informants because he believed that I might perhaps "make the voice of the voiceless heard." Their perceptions of my research motivated me and enlarged my own understanding of what my research aims should be. However, acknowledging researchers' limited capabilities of sharing their plans with informants and of controlling how they represent "us" in the field is of crucial importance in analyzing data. This is especially vital while conducting research in highly sensitive and institutionalized contexts, such as reception centers and refugees camps, where researchers may be regarded by refugees as authorities, spies, or service providers.

HIDING AND AIDING: ACCESSING REFUGEE CAMPS

Although my research mainly relied on informal and family refugee networks, I sometimes had no alternative but to ask for the help of humanitarian organizations or NGOs working with refugees. This was especially the case when investigating secondary movements from refugee camps in northern Ethiopia to Sudan and Libya. Even here, I knew it would have been hard to get permission from ARRA, the national agency dealing with all refugee affairs, which was well known for being particularly diffident with researchers and journalists. To make things even more complicated, a few months before my arrival in the country, the camps had been the sites of large riots, which had been violently repressed. After those episodes, a sort of state of emergency was declared and all refugee issues suddenly became even more delicate.

I decided to try to get access to the camps anyway and contacted NGOs and international agencies such as the UNHCR, naïvely thinking that they might find the scope of my research interesting for their operations and would assist me in entering the camps. Instead, all of them kindly refused to help me, saying that the subject I wished to research was rather sensitive. Although I understood their concerns, I was also surprised to see how uninterested they were in the topic of the research—the same topic that, some months later, the European Union paid millions of euros to consultancy firms and other research institutions to investigate.[25] This defensive stance was even more surprising when I saw how eager many refugees were to participate in the research, thinking that I could expose their situation more to the world.

Without neglecting the possible ethical intricacies of doing research with refugees,[26] I feel it is important to point out how closely the protective attitude of the humanitarian organizations I approached reflects the paternalistic stance that Michael Barnett identifies as a marker of international humanitarian actions in our contemporary world, defining paternalism as an "attempt by one actor to substitute his judgment for another's on the ground that it is in the latter's best interest or welfare."[27] In my case, the refugees were effectively prevented from

having the last say on their being actively involved in the research.[28] Although it may be hard to judge whether paternalism is ethical or unethical, it can nonetheless be debated to what extent refusal to let refugees decide on their own was aimed at safeguarding their well-being, rather than protecting the delicate cooperation between international organizations and the Ethiopian authorities at the cost of transparency.

I then decided to address ARRA directly. Interestingly, the government agency proved less intimidated by my study than the humanitarian organizations in the field. Armed with a few letters of reference and a lot of patience, I went to the ARRA office almost every week for about two months before receiving an answer—ultimately a positive one. The Addis Ababa office apparently communicated my imminent arrival to the Shire office, but as I soon discovered, permission to do research in the camps meant being under the constant control of the authorities.

THREATS AND LOYALTIES: RESEARCH IN HIGHLY CONTROLLED SETTINGS

Although I had gained permission to go to the camps, my freedom to conduct research had to be negotiated with authorities at each location. As soon as I arrived to the local office in Shire, the head officer carefully interrogated me. By that time I already knew that authorities mainly wanted to be reassured about the "nonpolitical nature" of my study. I had never quite understood what that meant, but, from the first moment, it seemed that my statement about the academic nature of my research was sufficient for them to provide me with a car to reach the camps.

However, logistical help was simply another way to keep me under scrutiny. In Shimelba, ARRA offered me a room in their operational compound adjacent to the camp for a week. Almost every day one of the protection officers would come to ask me if I had finished my research. As I quickly realized, in ARRA there was an almost undecipherable difference between a "protection officer" and a "secret security agent."[29] On my first day, I was given a first hurried tour by car around the camp, and I had to sit and listen to an organized meeting with members of the local Refugee Central Committee (RCC). This body, supposed to represent the residents in the camp, was used by authorities to keep informed regarding the underground atmosphere. I then tried to get in touch with my previously established contacts among the refugees in the camp, but I soon gathered that I was not supposed to walk around asking questions. While I was conducting an interview with Noah, my Kunama translator, a protection officer, Philmon, and two of his colleagues suddenly walked in.

"You cannot go around the camp by yourself. It is a question of safety. Why aren't you talking to RCC?"

"I am not alone. Noah is with me. I talked with RCC yesterday."

"Give me the list of the people you are going to talk to."

"I won't. Firstly, I don't have a list, and even if I had I would not give it to you."

"Well, from now on, I will follow you. I do not want to listen to your conversations, but I need to see who you are talking to."

I did not notice anyone following me that day, but the following day Philmon summoned me alone. He took me to a small dark room adjacent to the clinic of the camp. There were only a desk, two chairs and a small window: alarmingly similar to the interrogation rooms I had only seen in movies.

"I want the list of the people you want to speak to," he ordered. I was intimidated by the circumstances, but my answer could not be any different:

"I already told you that I have no list. Subjects are randomly chosen and I guaranteed them anonymity."

"I heard you want to talk to Mebrathu [the name of one of my friends' contacts]. Why do you want to talk to him?"

"He is a friend of a friend and I just thought to meet him for coffee, that's it."

"You know, he called me yesterday. He was very scared because he heard you were asking around about him. You know we've recently had riots in the camps surrounding Shimelba, and people are scared to be involved. Keep doing your research, but do not talk to Tigrinya people."[30] Understood?

The dangerous position ethnographers find themselves in when they have information of interest to the relevant authorities is stressed by B. A. Jacobs.[31] Researchers may run into serious trouble if they are dedicated to protecting their informants' privacy. Since I was not supported by an international organization in the field, my position was even more fragile with respect to the requests of Ethiopian authorities. However, the aggressive nature of the pressure I experienced convinced me even more that the anonymity of my informants was of utmost importance and that I should be extremely careful while asking around. Again, recording seemed too risky for me and my informants, and I decided to write my field notes in private, away from the gaze of security officers and their associates.

Knowing what the right thing to do is rarely straightforward.[32] Doing research in refugee settings often means entering a field of complex power dynamics in which researchers might feel stretched between conflicting loyalties: on the one hand, the predisposition to comply with regulations set by local and international authorities, on the other hand, the commitment to one's own respondents. As Didier Fassin writes, "carrying on an ethnography is cumulating debts."[33] These debts are not only to those who respond to our questions, but also to those who facilitate or allow the research to happen. These debts carry different weights, however, and the ethnographer must often pick a side. In my case I felt indebted to the Ethiopian authorities for allowing me to conduct my research in the camps, but I had little doubt that my loyalty ultimately lay with my research participants, given their vulnerable position vis-à-vis the authorities.[34] Their disadvantaged position and their risk of being questioned or harassed by camp security easily convinced

me that the least I could do to protect my research participants was to reject the authorities' requests for their names.

Yet even loyalty to informants vis-à-vis the authorities can be a source of dilemmas when respondents are engaged in criminal activities. For example, in researching people smugglers, was it my duty to report them? Was I making myself complicit by not denouncing Michael or Tsegay to the authorities? Reflecting on her own fieldwork on organ trafficking in Brazil, South Africa, and Israel and the decision to share her information with the U.S. government and other authorities, Nancy Scheper-Hughes argues that at times it is necessary to collaborate. She writes: "Anthropologists are not detectives, and we are trained to hold anthropologist-informant relations as a sacred trust. But surely this does not mean that one has to be a bystander to international crimes against vulnerable populations."[35] In my case, however, the smugglers were not engaged in exploitative activities, as in the case of the organ traffickers interviewed by Scheper-Hughes. Even if ambivalently judged, their actions could have liberating and emancipatory consequences for their customers. Their undertakings may have been seen as criminal by the state and international authorities, but were not intrinsically destructive. Although my informants' activities could possibly entail violence, I neither witnessed nor knew of any violent actions that would have justified my collaboration with authorities. Again, these ethnographic engagements with diverse subjects push us to revisit commonly held ethics of fieldwork and consider the importance of reflecting contextually on the issues of privacy, responsibility, and morality.

My refusal to cooperate with camp authorities, however, had direct consequences on my fieldwork. On the one hand, it hindered productive collaboration with the camp's main managing body; on the other, it won me the trust of my refugee informants. As noted by Jacobs apropos of dangerous fieldwork, by resisting institutional pressures, the ethnographer can increase his/her credibility in the eyes of informants.[36] My unpleasant encounter with Philmon turned out to be positive inasmuch as Noah started seeing me as an enemy of ARRA and thus— since the enemy of the enemy becomes an ally—we became closer and started speaking more freely about the tensions in the Kunama refugee community, threats of the Kunama liberation front to his family, and the corruption involved in Kunama resettlement (see chap. 2).

TRUST OF STRANGERS AND SECRETS AMONG FRIENDS

Access to the field, not only as a physical place, but also as a bundle of relationships,[37] can also be substantially limited by difficulties in winning refugees' trust. Mistrust lies at the heart of many refugees' experience, as E. V. Daniel and J. C. Knudsen note in their edited volume *Mistrusting Refugees*.[38] The conditions that surround their departures—be they ethnic conflicts, state persecution, or generalized violence—often shake the ordinary circumstances in which individuals have

some degree of control over their lives. After fleeing, refugees find themselves once again in precarious legal and material conditions and often under the scrutiny of authorities, or the gaze of international workers. In such contexts, researchers—with their looks and questions—can be easily associated with the authorities or with those agencies providing services. It is no wonder that trust is a rather rare and precious ingredient in research with refugees.[39] Throughout my research, I observed the effects of my informants' mistrust of foreigners, be they Ethiopians, Sudanese, or Italians. I have described how lack of trust in local society turned Eritrean squats in Rome into closed enclaves, and how Eritreans' deep-rooted mistrust of Sudanese prevents collaboration with them in Khartoum even given promising openings.

Wariness, suspicion, and distrust characterize Eritreans' everyday lives long before leaving their homeland. In this sense, their flight does not contravene ordinary circumstances where trust is the norm. It rather prolongs their usual mistrust of strangers and insiders. The first question I was asked, not only by refugees in Ethiopia and Sudan before they spoke to me, but by NGO workers and national officialdom as well, was: "Is your research political?" I knew the answer had to be "no," even though that way of articulating the question did not make sense to me. Yet it was clear that the question meant much more than it appeared at first. By posing it, refugees were actually asking: "Is your research going to put me in danger?" "Were you sent by the Eritrean or Ethiopian government or the UNHCR?" Their fears usually disappeared after meeting me in person. I seemed harmless, many told me.

However, it would be wrong to think that strangers were the only objects of my informants' mistrust. I was always amazed to realize how many secrets self-declared "good friends" were keeping from each other. Maria's network of friends was a striking example of this. Seifu, one of Maria's contact in Khartoum, had a son by a man who was not the one with whom she was reuniting in Sweden (nobody seemed to know who the father of the baby was). Seifu's housemate often dressed in revealing clothes, used to receive Sudanese men in her room, but nobody spoke about it. Gebreyesus was a freelance journalist and anti-government blogger, but nobody in the group knew about his "political" activities. Michael was a *semsari* and everyone seemed to ignore it. This lack of openness may be due not only to distrust of fellow Eritreans, but also to a sort of respectful discretion in sharing delicate information about each other. Navigating mistrust and respectful discretion, for me, took time, some cultural learning, and a good dose of acquired mistrust in my informants' narratives.

MEANINGFUL LIES: REFUGEES' REPRESENTATIONS OF THE SELF

Lying informants have a great significance in research, as F. A. Salamone noted over forty years ago.[40] In particular, Salamone maintained that informants' lies

should not be discarded as wrong information, but investigated as potentially revealing tools for identifying crucial cultural values and underlying rules of social relationships where fieldworker and informants interact. The debate has remained open since then.[41]

In my own experience with Eritreans, I encountered several "lies" and misrepresentations of the self. My informants in Follonica reception center often narrated invented or semi-invented biographies to me, thinking that I could help them in their Refugee Status Determination (RSD) procedures; others, knowing that I was a single woman, hid the fact that they were married, perhaps hoping that an affair with me might develop into something advantageous to their cases. The refugees I interviewed in the Tigrayan camps often sought to conceal the fact that they received support from their relatives in the diaspora, probably thinking that this would make their cases for resettlement look more urgent. This was because I was often identified with UNHCR resettlement officers, even though I stated my independent role of researcher before every interview. Many Eritreans I met in Italy tended to hide their attempts to move to other European countries, or the fact that they had got married and were preparing their cases for the family reunification process.

Most of the above lies were connected to the refugees' attempts to obtain legal status or present their cases in a way that would increase the likelihood of their being assisted or considered for resettlement. These responses are clearly influenced by their position as vulnerable subjects who feel constantly under scrutiny.[42] However, there is more to it than that. The identification of such fabrications and their examination are of great theoretical significance for analyzing refugees' responses to certain political and humanitarian discourses.[43] On the one hand, my informants' deceits were reflexively aimed at complying with the categories of the international asylum regime, which builds on the distinction between the deserving refugee—the victim and eligible recipient of humanitarian and welfare aid[44]—and the many undeserving migrants. On the other hand, their lies were active manipulations to circumvent what they saw as "unfair rules".

I am not arguing that there is a truth out there that the ethnographer can discover by overcoming the untruths of his/her informants. However, if these narratives are not duly interpreted based on structural relationships in the field, the understanding of migration strategies, motivations, and trajectories may become biased. I believe that identifying what informants themselves recognize as "lies" may enable the researcher to get closer to his informants' point of view and his/her own positionality in the field, by detecting the webs of power, roles, and related expectations embedded in fieldwork. Ethnography based on long-term engagement with informants and with their living environment is particularly well placed, to do that.[45]

Nevertheless, as Karen Jacobsen and Loren Landau remark,[46] it is common to read studies based on interviews originating from extemporaneous encounters

with refugees in asylum centers or in structured contexts. This is particularly the case in Europe, where respondents are likely to lie in order to reinforce their asylum case or to construct an image of themselves that helps justify their presence there. If the scope of the study is to analyze refugees' narratives, in-depth interviews may be an important technique, but if the aim of the investigation is to reconstruct real trajectories and the motivations behind the migration decision, interviews may not be enough.

It was by observing and participating in the everyday lives of my informants in the most significant sites of their journeys that I was able to perceive the gap between their narratives and their practices. For instance, observant participation with refugees in Italy and with their families in Eritrea enabled me to grasp the multifaceted relationships between migrants and left-behind kin. Likewise, triangulation and familiarity with different social actors, such as authorities, refugees in different countries, families at home, relatives abroad, and the professionals of unauthorized migration were key in gaining a deeper understanding of transnational marriages and of smuggling among refugees, smugglers, and relatives abroad. Moreover, the more I knew Eritreans, and the more I became acquainted with their tricks and their mind-sets, the easier it was to navigate the varied constellation of images they had of me.

BEYOND VULNERABILITY: ON THE BLURRED BOUNDARIES OF "US" AND "THEM" IN REFUGEE RESEARCH

Refugees are often extremely vulnerable populations.[47] Precarious legal and material circumstances as well as the traumas they experience before and as a result of their flight from home undeniably mark the lives of many of them. Yet the vulnerable condition of refugees should not be essentialized. Throughout this book, I have illustrated prospective refugees' abilities to cope with present adversities and plan the future even in extreme conditions. Even when discussing methodological approaches to refugee studies, it is important to go beyond a crystallization of informants as vulnerable subjects. As a result of this crystallization, the researcher's relationship with his/her informants is typically conceived as an unbalanced one between individuals with incommensurably distant lives, power stances, and possibilities. Without underplaying the difficult conditions most of my informants were facing and the multiple power imbalances that characterized my relationship with them, I attempt here to provide a more nuanced understanding of the shifting power dynamics I experienced in the field.

Here I would stress, paraphrasing Karsten Pærregaard, how often it was my own vulnerability that allowed me to "slip through the native gaze."[48] As Pærregaard convincingly argues, the researcher is caught in a web of overlapping representations by her/his informants. Seen variously as intruders, tourists, and government agents, researchers often have to overcome all these images gain the

necessary recognition before their respondents feel ready to share their experiences. As noted earlier, refugees often perceived me as a journalist or a UNHCR official, or feared me as a spy. This was the case, not only with those with whom I had chance encounters in institutional settings, but also with others with whom I had long-term relationships.

There was no standard rapport with my informants. Every meaningful relationship I had in the field was characterized by different levels of indeterminacy, divergent expectations, and misunderstandings on both sides. As opposed to romanticized accounts of fieldwork as an unproblematic terrain,[49] the following sections describe the ambivalent relationships of friendship, care, and desire that marked my fieldwork and the resulting ethical dilemmas.

FRIENDS . . .

Ethnographic literature is rich in examples of friendships between ethnographers and their informants.[50] Some authors highlight how friendship can be a valuable resource insofar as it provides insights based on trust, inside perspective, and depth—especially when doing research in critical situations;[51] others emphasize the possible negative implications of a friendship with informants,[52] such as the deceptive mechanisms it can lead to[53] and the differential power relation that it may mask.[54] Marina de Regt, for instance, gives a poignant account of her long-term relations with her informant Noura and critically discusses what friendship means when it involves continual financial support. Caught in the web of expectations and crucial needs expressed by Noura, de Regt reflects how their relationship became more similar to a fictive kinship rather than a reciprocal friendship.[55]

Equally, my friendships with my informants were imbued with unparalleled expectations and marked by different economic and life possibilities. My relationship with Maria discussed in chapter 2 became more and more unbalanced due to the her continual requests for money and was progressively eroded by different ideas of long-term solutions for her and her child. In other circumstances, what I perceived as friendship was instead romantic interest on the part of my male informants. Nevertheless, among all these ambiguities, friendship—intended as a reciprocal involvement in each other's life beyond the time and the scope of my research—remained a crucial ingredient and unavoidable, natural result of many of my relationships in the field.

In spite of (socioeconomic, citizenship, gender, and racial) differences among us, my relationships with Violetta, with Johanna, and with Alazar were also characterized by reciprocal caring, mutual understanding, and resemblances. Violetta and Johanna were my age-mates, highly educated and unmarried like me. We had similar ways of feeling and understanding things. They were the ones who supported me when things were going wrong in the field, such as when Violetta took care of me for two weeks when I fell sick in Ethiopia. Sharing the everyday

lives of our informants not only reveals their vulnerabilities, but also our own. As Cynthia Mahmood observes,[56] every ethnographic encounter, especially in critical contexts, entails a risk for those who let the researcher into their lives, and for the researchers who put their lives in their informants' hands. Power imbalances are shifting and contextual, and do not ultimately prevent us from bridging the gaps with our informants.

Mutual involvement in each other's lives has resulted, in my case, not only in meaningful insights into how Eritreans cope with exile, but with access to social networks that would have been impossible to enter otherwise. It was thanks to my long-term friendship with Alazar, for instance, that I gained entry to buildings occupied by Eritreans at the beginning of my fieldwork in Rome. It was thanks to Gabriel's willingness to help me that I found a family ready to host me for over two months in Asmara. This is not a roundabout way to acknowledge my informants' help. Rather, it is a statement about the unavoidably personal nature of doing ethnographic research.

Involvement, however, implies neither credulity nor lack of reflexivity about the potential impact of our research on the lives of our interlocutors. My involvement in my informants' lives was often complicated with a range of asymmetric and ambivalent expectations, over which I had limited control.

. . . CAREGIVERS . . .

Contrary to the stereotypical power imbalance between a strong researcher and his/her vulnerable subjects, my informants perceived me as vulnerable—as an outsider without family in a unfamiliar setting—and thus felt responsible for my well-being.[57] This sense of responsibility was enhanced by the fact that it was usually a dear friend or relative who had sent me to them. Before going to a site, I would usually ask my informants if they had relatives or friends living there. If they agreed to give me their contacts, it usually meant that the person on the site was going to take care of me. It was a question of respect for the person who had sent me.

For example, in Asmara, Lwam took good care of me because I had been sent to her by her brother. By the same token, she was very surprised that Samuel, Alazar's brother, was avoiding me against his brother's request: "It is not respectful to his brother. If my brother sends you to me, I help you, because I love my brother." This comment was unexpected, since I had not realized that Lwam was sticking around me mostly as a moral obligation to her brother.

This is probably also why my informants have rarely accepted money from me. Gabriel's family did not want me to pay rent in Asmara. Likewise, my informants in Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Sudan wanted to invite more than be invited for dinner or lunch. They mostly felt they had to take care of me as a guest and somebody who had been sent by a loved one. I was rarely left alone, always accompanied

everywhere and treated like someone needing protection/guidance rather than the independent researcher I liked to see myself to be.

As the one being taken care of, I also often found myself playing the role of the child. This is because, as an outsider, the researcher has to be acculturated, as Chiara Pussetti points out.[58] He/she has to be warned about possible dangers unknown to him/her, and also taught how to behave properly with others. Due to my role as student and my relatively young age at the time of the fieldwork, I was perceived as especially vulnerable to the often unsafe circumstances we were living in. In their eyes I was to be educated, to be protected, and also to be proud of when I behaved well in front of other members of the group. Maria, for example, often scolded me because I was hesitant to take a shower twice a day due to water shortages, and often forgot to dust my shoes before walking into the room as a good Habesha woman would do. Violetta tried to teach me to speak better Tigrinya, how to cook *shiro,* a typical Eritrean dish, and how to deal with guests politely. Violetta's guests often complimented me on my newly acquired Tigrinya manners, ability to speak a bit of the language, and knowledge of Eritrean history and culture, saying: "She is a real Habesha!"

This does not mean that the differences between them and me could be avoided. As a middle-class white woman with a European passport, I was there by my own choice. I could take a flight anytime to go back to my home and my family. My informants could not say the same. However, my efforts to live like "one of them," eschewing comforts available to me and trying to understand their problems, and the simple fact that I knew the places where they had been, led my informants to trust me more and recognize me as a self-defined subject rather than a "researcher," a "European," or a potential source of benefits. Moreover, my familiarity with their home back in Eritrea and the daily shared experience of difficulties allowed me to achieve more recognition among my informants. Once I had seen their houses, met their beloved parents, and lived the way they had lived before, my informants started to treat me less and less as an external observer and more as part of their clique.

. . . AND SUITORS

Being a relatively young woman conducting fieldwork on my own with mostly male young informants, I sometimes realized that my interlocutors, most of them young single men, were developing romantic interests in me. As noted in chapter 4, I received several marriage proposals while in Ethiopia. Most of them were simply mirroring a desire to reach Europe. Other times, instead, the desire to migrate and romantic feelings seemed to mingle in a way that made me wonder to what extent my presence in the field was influencing their geographic imagination. My "field," configured as a bundle of relationships, was also as a site of emerging desires and flowing imaginaries. I was part of it in one way or another.

Although the issue of the researcher's sexuality in fieldwork has for long time been a taboo, recently scholars have started debating the complex ethical and epistemological implications that sexual encounters, untold desires, and intimate connections can have on research.[59] Some authors have highlighted the value of intimate experiences as sources of knowledge and insights, but Jill Dubisch for one warns against breaching intimate interpersonal boundaries.[60] It is in any case certain that the researcher's sexuality is part of ethnographic fieldwork, either explicitly or implicitly, and, as such, should be rightly acknowledged and reflectively examined. My ethnography was no exception. Although I have never been romantically involved with any of my informants, their expectations and desires have certainly had an impact in allowing me to be part of their lives or in assisting me throughout my fieldwork. No matter how much I tried to be clear with them, stating that my interest in their stories had nothing to do with romance, I had little control over what they expected of me. For example, it became progressively clear that Gabriel, my informant in Milan, did not see me only as a friend. Once I came back from fieldwork in Eritrea, and he asked me whether he could visit me in my hometown, where I was spending some time with family. I naturally accepted, bearing in mind all the generosity and trust he and his family had shown me. However, I did not foresee his expectations. He came to stay with us, and it soon became clear that he wanted me to be his girlfriend. I again had to clarify my position, which led to a small drama: Gabriel drank too much and got lost somewhere in my town. My family became alarmed by our guest's behavior, and I drove around my hometown trying to find him. I finally found him on a bench of the park at 3 a.m. and took him back home. Although he apologized for his conduct in the morning, our friendship was compromised.

That episode left me wondering whether I had unknowingly taken advantage of Gabriel's feelings by involving him in my research, and conversely, what I risked by trusting my male informants. Close relationship with them may have indirectly enabled me to gain insights that would have been hard to attain otherwise, but on other occasions, this has also exposed me to potential harm. This never translated in my case to anything more than dodging sexual advances and enduring sexist proposals by refugees, local gatekeepers, and more or less institutional male figures whom I met throughout my fieldwork.[61]

This brings us back again to the shifting power dynamics in the field and the idea that the researched are exclusively vulnerable. Rather than conceiving research with refugees as ineluctably shaped by an unbalanced relationship between an authoritative researcher and vulnerable refugees, I argue that one's relationships with refugee informants assume many different meanings, according to gender, emotional attitudes, age, and the power dynamics and social ties that inform our presence in the field. All these aspects shape fieldwork relationships well beyond crystallized categories built around the assumption of the "vulnerable other." Nevertheless, in a field of close, but often unbalanced relationships,

researchers may face dilemmas regarding reciprocity and responsibility to informants, with no easy solution.[62]

<div align="center">ETHICAL GUIDELINES? SOME UNSOLVED DILEMMAS IN
REFUGEE RESEARCH</div>

Managing the expectations of my informants was and still is the hardest part of my fieldwork. After I had already finished my fieldwork, I kept receiving calls from refugees in Libya who wanted my financial support for their journey over the Mediterranean; Michael called me to ask me if he could transfer fifty thousand euros into my account so as to save some of his earnings; and Gabriel came to visit me in my hometown thinking that, after what his family had done for me, he could become my boyfriend.

All these situations have put me in a continuous ethical dilemma in the months since my fieldwork. The hospitality and availability that many of my informants showed me during the research was priceless; it was not only material, but also emotional support. For this reason, my emotional engagement with them has transcended the research site and the ordinary forms of rapport between researcher and informants. Nevertheless, my part in the relationship was not always easy, because of the power imbalance, geographic distance, and discrepancy in expected roles.

Sometimes, a "no" was not a big deal: Michael was not offended, for example, when I explained that it would be hard to answer questions from my bank about a sudden massive transfer of money from a Sudanese account. But in other cases, a "no" could mean a lot: refusing to pay for the journey of someone held by the smugglers in Libya may have significant implications for his/her life. Once, Jacob, one of the refugees I met in Ethiopian camps, called me from Libya to ask for money for continuing his journey to Italy. Although this confronted me with a severe conundrum, my inability to actually raise that money on the spot gave me some time to look for alternatives. I tried to call Jacob's sister in Sweden to consult with her on how to help Jacob, and kept checking on him via phone calls. Jacob's sister did not respond, however, and communication with Jacob became harder due to network failures. After a month Jacob called me to say that he had safely arrived in Italy. The positive epilogue to this story luckily solved my practical doubts, but did not answer my ethical riddles about the role of the researcher in such a case. It is easily understandable how helpless, angry, and worried I felt when something similar happened again with Maria. As I already narrated, a few months after I left Sudan Maria called, asking me for money to pay for her and Anna to get to Libya and then to Italy. Fortunately, in that case I was still in time to discourage her from leaving.

These episodes exemplify the possible tensions between ethically required intervention,[63] and not encouraging actions that would be harmful for informants.[64]

Not paying for some of my interlocutors' trips (assuming I had the money to do so) might put them in danger; paying for them might create a fatal precedent for other informants, motivating them to embark on dangerous journeys in the belief that I could support them. Moreover, by paying their smugglers, I would have contributed to an illegal activity. As yet I have no solution for these ethical dilemmas, which suggest the unavoidable moral and ethical indeterminacy of ethnographic fieldwork.

BEYOND GAZE AND ADVOCACY: REPRESENTING REFUGEES' LIVES

Once I came back from my fieldwork, I started thinking about what my responsibility was as an ethnographer who had been able to share the lives of my informants and to collect their stories. The end of my fieldwork overlapped with the explosion of the "European refugee crisis" across 2014 and 2015, focusing the attention of the whole world precisely on the people and the routes I had been studying for over two years. Although I was not a public intellectual but a mere PhD student, I was often asked how the crisis could be solved. This often left me with little more than superficial policy suggestions about the need for increased resettlement quotas, the unproductive implications of border enforcement, and the importance of acknowledging the legal rights of those who seek asylum in Europe. However, I was left dissatisfied with my own responses. Certainly, these were useful circumstantial solutions to specific issues, but they did not fundamentally address the paradox that lies at the foundation of the asylum crisis: the need of the welfare state to protect the security and social rights of its citizens and the ethical imperative to guarantee prospects to those who seek safety and a decent life.

If my research was not providing solutions and probably had little short-term policy relevance, what was it for? Without overemphasizing the potential impact of research in the "real world," I still needed to be aware of the possible consequences of my writing on the lives of those with whom I worked.[65] Sensitive to the positions of those who argue for a militant role on the part of researchers—including but not limited to migration studies[66]—and to refugee scholars who claim that all work should ultimately aim to promote social justice,[67] I began wondering how I could balance realistic depiction of the social realities I encountered and the safeguarding of the rights of those I studied with a critical stance toward the overall asylum regime. In my case, it seemed especially hard to reconcile these ethical imperatives, since I often felt that protecting Eritrean asylum seekers was somehow in contradiction with the need to criticize the asylum regime and its categories, which protect and exclude at the same time. How could I escape the categories that protected as well as oppressed my informants? How to account for the bravery, the determination, and the dreams of my informants, if I had to keep reproducing the image of the victim so that they could be recognized as legitimate refugees?

These considerations have also led me to think about who I was ultimately accountable to while writing. My informants, the Eritrean people, refugees, migrants, the academic community, truth, or all of them? Even if my debts to my informants made me especially accountable to them, the divides among them still made it hard to decide what perspective to privilege.[68] Eritreans are deeply divided along generational, political, and regional lines. Even if my loyalty mostly lay with those who participated in my research—which does not equate with Eritreans or Eritrean refugees in general—this still meant facing a deeply ambivalent audience divided between appreciation of the actions of the Eritrean government and denunciation of its violence, to mention only one of the many issues dividing them. But even among the closest circle of my informants, perspectives differed: some thought that the manuscript—which I shared with them—should have denounced the human rights violations of the Eritrean government more strongly; some thought I should stay out of political debates; some wanted me to highlight the daily challenges that make refugees' lives so hard in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Italy even more than I did; some thought I should focus on more eminent refugee personalities, rather than on ordinary refugees nobody would be interested in.

The conversations I had with my informants and with the texts of those scholars who had addressed these issues before me left me alone with my own authority, its related responsibilities, and a lot of choices still to make. Although I acknowledge the impossibility of remaining neutral in a deeply political debate such as the one on migration and asylum, I started recognizing that my main responsibility as a researcher was neither militancy nor advocacy. For me, both of these stances betray a paternalism on the part of the researcher, who purports to know what is best for others and to speak on their behalf.

I decided to let my informants' stories largely speak for themselves, but I am not naïve about the choices involved in how I represent my informants and their lives. The rationale that oriented my writing can be summarized by rephrasing Didier Fassin's reflections on the difference between fiction and ethnography: "If the fictional imagination lies in the power to invent a world with its characters, the ethnographic imagination implies the power to make sense of the world that subjects create by relating it to larger structures and events."[69] In this perspective, the researcher's most important responsibility is to provide nuanced representations of the stories, the people, and the situations he/she encountered, making sense of his/her informants' points of view, while explaining the structures of power that shape them. I certainly did not want to serve institutional attempts to map my informants' trajectories; rather, I intended to contribute to understanding the implicit political stance expressed by my informants' ways of counter-mapping by crossing borders at all costs. The depiction of their aspirations and possibilities, along with the representation of the challenges they faced in different contexts, also aimed at overcoming the depersonalization of forced migration widely criticized by scholars from varied theoretical backgrounds, such as

Thomas Faist and Sandro Mezzadra.[70] The focus on migrants' social, imaginative, and emotional worlds meant restoring their subjectivity beyond stereotypical media portraits and policy categories. Herein lies the most revolutionary contribution that a researcher can bring to the public debate, I believe; it is neither by advocating on behalf of his or her informants nor by attempting to produce research that is directly policy-relevant or primarily aimed at social change. Our task is rather to unveil the everyday lives of refugees, who are often spoken about but mostly misrepresented.