

An Endless Journey

Transnational and Peer Pressure in Onward Migration in Europe

The previous chapter examined Eritrean refugees' desire to move on from their first country of asylum after escaping from their homeland. That desire did not disappear after they arrived in their first European country, in this case, Italy.¹ In spite of easy access to legal protection,² well-established Eritrean communities, and long-standing historical linkages, most Eritreans do not want to settle there. Instead, they repeatedly gambled on the possibility to seek asylum elsewhere.

Secondary refugee movement in Europe is pervasive, notwithstanding policies aimed at limiting it, such as the Dublin Regulation.³ According to official figures, over 34,000 Eritreans landed on the Italian coast in 2014, but only 450 sought asylum there⁴. Most, if not apprehended by the authorities upon arrival, try to avoid the identification procedure and travel on to other countries, preferably Scandinavian ones, such as Norway and Sweden. This chapter adopts a transnational approach in order to make sense of how and why such movement takes place in spite of the related risks. Jumping from my informants' everyday lives in Italy to their families' houses in Asmara, I illustrate how the feeling of an "unfinished journey" emerges from several factors, ranging from limited contact with previous generations of Eritrean migrants to poor integration into local society, from the influence of information from destination countries to the expectations of families back home.

My argument is that the secondary mobility of Eritrean refugees is neither simply an adaptive strategy to cope with the difficulties of everyday life nor just the outcome of social connections in other countries. Rather, it is also the product of a shared cosmology of destinations that prescribes both socioeconomic goals and the most suitable destinations. Italy is not a final destination, either for migrants or for their families back home, in this set of moral obligations and geographic imaginaries, which overcome legal obstacles and persist even where local integration beckons.

HIDE AND SEEK: ERITREANS MOVING THROUGH ITALY

Many of the refugees whom I met in Eritrea, in Ethiopian refugee camps, in Addis Ababa and Khartoum, called me during the summer of 2014 to tell me that they were transiting through Italy. Lwam managed to cross over from Libya and continued her journey to Germany. Amanuel, the *krar* player who had managed the internet point in my neighborhood in Addis Ababa arrived in Sicily in August and proceeded to Norway a week later. Jacob, the resolute young engineer I met in Adi Harush, called me from Rome in June after almost a month in Libya to ask for help to continue his journey to Denmark. Seare, the promoter of the Mediterranean crossing at Maria's place in Khartoum, also called me from Milan before moving on to Denmark. Having known Lwam, Amanuel, Jacob, and Seare before, I was aware that Italy had never been their intended destination.

It was relatively easy for some of my informants to move on from Italy. Some of them simply bought a train ticket to Switzerland, Germany, or beyond. Others hired *passeurs* so as to cross without being caught and risking the registration of their biometric information—especially fingerprints—in the shared European database EURODAC, which would undermine their asylum application in other European countries. Invisibility is crucial for a smooth passage.⁵

Most of the Eritreans with whom I did my research in Italy between 2012 and 2013 arrived before 2009 and had not been able to escape the identification procedure.⁶ Although this had made it hard for them to be granted asylum elsewhere in Europe, it did not prevent them from trying. Since their fingerprints had been recorded, some of my informants went so far as to burn them off chemically. Others left their Italian documents with their friends and moved to northern European countries, hoping that their fingerprints would not be found and that their cases would be considered differently by the authorities. Most of them were deported to Italy, but some managed to have their applications accepted after repeated attempts.⁷

These repeated attempts to seek asylum outside Italy were puzzling to me. I certainly knew that starting a new life was not easy in Italy given the little institutional support provided to refugees; however, I also thought that easy access to

legal protection and well-established Eritrean communities in the country could function as magnets for newcomers. In light of the poor prospect of success, cost in time (two to three years on average), and dangers involved,⁸ attempting to reach northern Europe did not seem worthwhile to me, but my informants thought differently. Eritrean migration through Italy provides an interesting point of departure for revisiting the debate on secondary mobility in Europe.

WELFARE DISPARITIES, ESTABLISHED NETWORKS
AND ADAPTATION: REFUGEES' SECONDARY
MOBILITY IN EUROPE

In spite of the efforts to homogenize the European asylum system (CEAS) deep-rooted disparities across welfare regimes play a crucial role in stratifying refugee reception. Asylum seekers and refugees in Italy receive little institutional support, whereas in northern European countries they receive stipends, housing, and other forms of assistance.⁹

The Italian reception system is widely stratified and varied. Several systems have been implemented to address asylum flows since 2000, with shifting balances in the roles of local and central authorities, civil society, and private actors.¹⁰ This has produced extremely diverse reception conditions according to the period, the region, and the actors involved. Although regional differences in the assistance of refugees are not negligible and services provided can significantly vary from case to case, in general terms, the Italian reception system has hardly been effective in guiding asylum seekers and refugees through their local integration process.¹¹

Most studies on secondary mobility have thus considered secondary movements as adaptive strategies to cope with economic, legal, and social restrictions that make life hard in the first country of emigration.¹² However, when applied to the Eritrean case, these interpretations fall short. Eritreans are determined to move through Italy even before having experienced the challenges—or the opportunities—of living there. They are resolute as regards seeking asylum elsewhere in spite of significant risks.

Other common explanations of refugees' secondary mobility in Europe argue for the relevance of historical and social connections in directing asylum seekers' destination choices.¹³ Based on these accounts, asylum seekers would tend to go to countries—usually the ex-colonial metropole—with which they often share a common history, language, and cultural traits, and where they can often count on an already well-established community of compatriots. Even in this case, however, Eritreans seem an exception. In spite of colonial linkages to Italy and a historic Eritrean diaspora there, Eritreans generally do not want to remain in the country.¹⁴

In order to understand Eritreans' secondary movements, it is crucial to examine the transnational field of relationships in which refugees' everyday lives are embedded. Although relatively peripheral to refugee studies, the transnational

approach has been crucial to understanding refugees' integration patterns, decision-making, aspirations, and movements.¹⁵ Cindy Horst shows how the longing for onward mobility among Somalis living in Kenyan camps emerges from the continuous exchange of ideas, images, and money between refugees in developed countries and those in camps.¹⁶ Khalid Koser and Charles Pinkerton highlight the role played by informal social networks in circulating information about possible destination countries and directing the choices of prospective asylum seekers.¹⁷ Specifically with respect to the case of Eritreans seeking to reach Scandinavia, J.-P. Brekke and G. Brochmann argue that perceived inequalities between conditions in northern Europe and in Italy are only in part the result of objective disparities.¹⁸ They also mirror information, images, and the aspirations of Eritreans in different locations.

Studies on transnationalism, however, consider the links between two sites; typically, the destination and the home country, or the home country and the expected areas of transit, or the area of transit and the preferred destination. Nevertheless, refugees participate in different transnational flows, which link them not only with compatriots who have reached their intended final destinations, but also with their families back home. On the one hand, they are often in contact by telephone, visits, and internet social networks with those kin and friends who have reached their final preferred destinations, usually a northern European country. On the other hand, Eritreans in Italy are linked to their families back home by a more or less implicit system of expectations concerning remittances, support for kin's prospective migration, and suitable countries of destinations. Such a trifold focus is of paramount importance to grasp Eritrean refugees' motivations to continue their journeys onward from Italy, as well as to understand their perception of "being stuck."

SPIES AND TRAITORS: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND GENERATIONAL DIVIDES AMONG THE DIASPORA

Eritreans have migrated to Italy since the 1960s. At first, this emigration mainly involved women employed as domestic workers by middle-class Italian families—who had often lived in Eritrea during the colonial era—in cities like Rome, Naples, and Milan.¹⁹ In the late 1970s, however, many young men arrived, fleeing from violence and forced conscription in Eritrea. These often came to Italy with the intention of moving on to other countries that offered them better employment prospects and legal protection such as Germany, Canada, and the United States.²⁰

Sociological literature from the 1980s describes numerous politically organized communities of Eritreans in Milan, Rome, Bologna, Bari, and Naples. In 1983, it was reported that in Milan there were some three thousand Eritreans with legal residence permits. Similarly, in Rome, it is reported that Eritreans numbered

around three thousand in the early 1990s.²¹ These numbers are likely inaccurate, however, given the difficulty in differentiating Ethiopians from Eritreans—they had the same nationality—and there were also numerous undocumented migrants.

Against this background, the literature on migrants' social networks might simplistically lead us to see the cohesive community of Eritreans in Italy as a major reason for refugee newcomers to stay in the country. However, the community in Italy, as much as elsewhere, is deeply divided.²² Those who arrived before the 1990s are usually supporters of the former EPLF and current PFDJ government. Motivated by government propaganda, they see Eritreans who fled after independence as deserters and traitors.

During my field visits in Genoa, I met several Eritreans who had come to Italy in the 1970s. "These who come to Europe now are not refugees, but economic migrants!" Mrs. Gianna thundered from behind her desk in the local migration bureau when she heard what the subject of my research was. "They say that in Eritrea there is no freedom only because they want to attack the government! . . . They just do not want to work hard, but want to have a lot of money, a car . . . they see the pictures of their friends online, leaning on a Ferrari, but the Ferraris are not theirs! Only when they come here do they realize that the situation is very bad."

Mrs. Gianna's attitude to her young compatriots clearly reflected a pro-government rhetoric that denied all the political aspects producing contemporary Eritrean migration, and in this, she was no exception among older Eritreans in Genoa. She introduced me to Rachele and her husband Giovanni, Eritreans of the older generation who had a small shop in one of the port alleys. I asked them if they knew any of those young Eritreans who had arrived in Genoa in the past five years. "I don't know them, Rachele replied. "I only see them passing through." Rachele and Michele also seemed to be convinced that there was no political reason to flee Eritrea, a political division that has hindered solidarity with recent Eritrean refugees. The older and the younger generations of Eritreans deeply distrusted each other. Mrs. Gianna's migration bureau was meant to be an important point of reference for immigrants and asylum seekers in the city, but the Eritrean refugees I met in Genoa were purposely avoiding it. "Mrs. Gianna and her friends are spies of the government," Brahnu, a twenty-seven-year-old refugee who had arrived in Italy in 2007, said. "We do not like to go to her office." My informants in Milan and Rome also routinely avoided contact with pro-government older Eritreans. As many of them owned Eritrean restaurants and the bars in the two cities, and the choice of where to have a meal could be complicated at times. Explaining why he did not want to take me to a specific restaurant in Milan, Gabriel said, "There are many things old Eritreans do not know . . . they have an old-fashioned mentality."

This does not mean that all connections between older and younger generations were severed. Not all older Eritreans were pro-government. Many were guerrilla fighters in the ELF (the front antagonistic to the EPLF; see Introduction) and had been opposed to the current rulers right from the start. Older Eritreans

in Italy are also often the ones who send money to help their kin migrate to Europe. Moreover, there were some local Eritrean organizations assisting young Eritreans. At the beginning of my fieldwork, I tried to contact these associations in order to gain better access to the community, but I quickly realized that they were rarely a point of reference for recently arrived Eritreans. First, these associations were mostly engaged in transnational activities, rather than in providing services locally. Second, they had a more or less explicit political stance against the Eritrean government, and for this reason many newcomer refugees preferred not to have anything to do with them. As various scholars of Eritrea have highlighted, the exercise of “voice” has been significantly hindered by fear of government reprisals, as well as by the ongoing influence of the national unity and patriotism discourse.²³ Although some of the young Eritreans I met supported the recent opposition movement called Eritrean Youth for Social Change (EYSC), most tended to reject political engagement and to distrust everything associated with politics. Unlike in the 1980s, political parties now played a minor role in the lives of Eritrean refugees in Italy.²⁴ It is probably the generalized suspicion of all politicized forms of organized assistance that has led many newcomer refugees to organize among themselves to cope with the challenges of living in Italy, such as the lack of housing facilities.

LIVING AS SQUATTERS: BOTTOM-UP INTEGRATION OR SEGREGATION?

For those Eritreans who arrived before 2010, the general path was usually the following. During the assessment of their asylum application, they resided in a CARA (the Italian acronym for Centri di Accoglienza per Richiedenti Asilo, reception centers for asylum seekers), then they were pushed out without any assistance. The main system of assistance in place for refugees and asylum seekers since 2001, the Servizio centrale del Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati, or SPRAR, and its related regional projects could only host about 7,600 individuals in 2011, for example, when there were 37,000 asylum applications.²⁵

Extreme poverty among refugee populations has been widely documented in the main Italian cities. The economic crisis, which has particularly hit those sectors where foreign workers are mostly employed,²⁶ has increased the difficulties for newcomers in finding employment. Moreover, due to limited institutional support in terms of housing, many refugees have found informal accommodation in squats, shantytowns, and overcrowded houses. In Genoa, my informants tended to share cheap flats in the area of Sampierdarena, an ex-working class neighborhood on the periphery of the city, today mostly inhabited by immigrants;²⁷ in Milan and Rome, many had started squatting in abandoned buildings. Looking at these housing arrangements is crucial to understanding the complex interaction between social segregation, forms of local integration, and transnationalism. It is in these



FIGURE 14. Collatina, the first squat inhabited exclusively by Eritreans and Ethiopians in Rome (photo by the author, 2012)



FIGURE 15. Ponte Mammolo, a now dismantled shantytown on the periphery of Rome (photo by the author, 2012)

contexts that Eritrean refugees exchange information about living conditions in other countries and reciprocally foster the desire to move on.

Along with the informal settlements—more or less shantytowns—that autonomously emerged at the periphery of the city, such as the village of Ponte Mammolo (fig. 8), organized squats have become one of the main housing strategies of recently arrived Eritreans in the city. These organized squats are the result of an interaction between refugees' housing necessities and the local movement for housing rights,²⁸ which has been active in the area for over fifty years.²⁹ Such an interaction has produced a wide range of different squats inhabited by Eritreans, characterized by different levels of ethnic concentration, socioeconomic integration, autonomy from the political movements and seclusion from the outside.

Four informal housing arrangements inhabited by Eritrean refugees—the shantytown of Ponte Mammolo and the squats of Collatina (fig. 7), Anagnina (fig. 9), and Metropolis (fig. 10)—became the focus of my observations in Rome between June and December 2012. At the time of my study, Collatina hosted around five hundred Eritreans and Ethiopians; Anagnina had around eight hundred inhabitants, mostly Somalis, Ethiopians, and Eritreans; a hundred Eritreans were living in Ponte Mammolo, along with migrants from eastern Europe; and some eighty people from all around the world lived at Metropolis. Although these places had infrastructural problems, they also had services such as running water and electricity, as well as shops, restaurants and cafes. Along with other neighborhoods of the city where Eritreans have traditionally been present—such as the area around the Termini railway station—the squats had become important meeting points.

In the beginning many of these squats were occupied by refugees with the help of left-wing groups of the local housing rights movement, but lately many squats have become independently managed by refugees, and some have been squatted at refugees' initiative, such as the building close to Termini Station.³⁰

A combination of institutionalized marginality and instances of active citizenship,³¹ these squats evolved into self-segregated areas mostly off-limits for the locals. For example, Collatina, the first squat (2004) exclusively managed by Eritrean refugees, had become inaccessible to Italians. A sign on the front door of the building stated: "Access to the building is not granted to people who do not live here." Unsurprisingly, the rule applied only to "outsiders" and not to fellow Eritreans, who could visit friends inside or use the internal shops and facilities (restaurants, barber shops, tailors, etc.). Similar to Collatina, entrance to the Termini squat was prohibited to "non-Habesha." When I visited Alazar, I had to sneak in without being noticed by the guard always standing at the door. According to my informants, these entry policies have been enforced by the organizing committee for fear of journalists' drawing the squats to the authorities' attention.

Squats like Anagnina and informal settlements like Ponte Mammolo were less strict in their entry policy but nonetheless very isolated and closed to the outside. While I was free to enter and exit Anagnina and Ponte Mammolo, people there



FIGURE 16. Anagnina, a Roman squat inhabited by over 800 people from the Horn of Africa (photo by the author, 2012)



FIGURE 17. Metropolis, a squat inhabited by both Italians and migrants (photo by the author, 2012)

would still look at me with suspicion if I was not accompanied by an insider. This closure to the outside is probably due to the irregularity of these settlements and the fear of being spied upon and reported to the authorities. However, this perpetual suspicion is also somehow typical of Eritreans, as a result of the extremely repressive political environment that they have experienced throughout history (see Appendix). In practical terms, the Eritreans' suspicion of strangers meant, not only that I had to make significant efforts to gain the trust of my informants, but also that I could not rely on a single informant to grant me access to different sites, even in the same city. Because it was such a segmented and divided community, I had to navigate different social networks to access different populations of Eritreans.

I was able to gain access to these places thanks to my long-term friendship with Alazar, his networks, and my previous contacts with Eritreans in Genoa. After having been given five years-refugee-status, Alazar left Italy in 2009. A few months later, I had a phone call from him. "Milli, how are you? I am in Norway! It is cold here," he said. The conversation did not last long, because my Tigrinya was too limited, as was Alazar's English. We spoke again on the phone a few times and then lost contact for a year. I then heard that he had been deported to Italy after Norwegian authorities discovered that his asylum case had already been processed and accepted there. When I started my research on Eritrean refugees in Italy in 2012, I found him living in the Anagnina squat in Rome and working as a skycap at Ciampino Airport for a few days a week. Alazar knew people and places and everyone knew him.

He introduced me to Senay, a childhood friend of his from Asmara, who put me up on an old sofa that reeked of alcohol in his one-room flat in Metropolis for most of the time I spent in Rome. Located in a particularly deprived and marginalized area of the capital, Metropolis was a mixed squat where Peruvians, Roma, Moroccans, Sudanese, Italians, and Eritreans were living together. Although life in the squat was marked by interethnic collaboration, the cohabitation was not always easy: I witnessed several violent fights between Peruvians and Roma during my stay there. Entry policy was very strict there as well, but at Senay's request, the committee, mainly led by an Italian left-wing organization called *Blocchi Precari Metropolitani* (Precarious Metropolitan Blocks), or BPM, temporarily accepted me. Nevertheless, at the entrance gate there was always a picket line to check who was going in and who was going out.

Although Alazar and Senay could grant me access to most squats and Eritrean gathering places in Rome, they were not familiar with the Eritreans living in the shantytown in the Ponte Mammolo area. Alazar would not even enter the messy accumulation of shelters comprising the settlement. In order to have a guide in that community, I had to call my Eritrean friends in Genoa, who put me in touch with Kibreab, a former sociology student at the University of Asmara. Like most inhabitants of Ponte Mammolo, he had a common back-

ground with my informants in Genoa: they all came from the same area in the south of the Eritrea.

Alazar, Senay, and Kibreab became my main informants in Rome. All three were nearly thirty, unmarried, living in unstable material conditions, and had come to Italy the hard way across the Mediterranean. They had all tried to move on from Italy, but had been sent back. Nonetheless, they were still planning the next move to try to circumvent the Dublin Regulation. At the time of writing, Alazar is the only one of the three left in Rome; Senay managed to obtain asylum in Sweden on his second attempt; Kibreab, after trying to obtain asylum in the Netherlands, gained entry to the United States by marrying an acquaintance living there. Each of them enabled me to enter a different informal settlement, peopled with different characters, and with its own rules and features. Alazar showed me the world of Anagnina squat, hosting me there for several nights and days; Senay welcomed me in his room in Metropolis for a few weeks; Kibreab guided me through the Ponte Mammolo shantytown.

These settlements were ethnically homogeneous and their population was characterized by low socioeconomic and cultural integration. With the exception of Collatina, which had almost become a permanent squat for Eritreans and Ethiopians who had regular jobs and had been living in Italy for a while, the population of the other squats was mainly jobless, or employed part-time in low-skilled temporary or seasonal jobs. My Eritrean informants living in Anagnina, for instance, were working as transporters in Ciampino airport or for global couriers such as TNT and SDA. Those living in Ponte Mammolo were unemployed or worked as fruit pickers in summer. Moreover, they spoke little Italian and did not have any contact with locals. They used to spend their free time in Eritrean bars in the area close to Termini Station or in the cafes and restaurants inside Anagnina or Collatina.

This systematic separation from the Italian society is important to examine how social expectations and desires concerning other destinations are reproduced. The levels of internal homogeneity and external segregation of Eritrean refugees in Italy are comparable to those of their counterparts I met in refugee camps or in Addis Ababa and Khartoum. Although the structural confinement of the camps is different from the complex socioeconomic processes that pushed Eritrean refugees together in these informal settlements, these settings share two remarkable commonalities: limited or no interactions with the local society, and a widespread suspicion and fear of locals, who are often identified as possible threats.³²

FEELING AND BEING STUCK: PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES OF (IM)MOBILITY

The term “stuck” has often been used of asylum seekers and migrants settled in transit countries who would like to seek asylum elsewhere, but cannot.³³ “To be

stuck in transit” conveys the idea of a status that should be temporary becoming permanent because of structural constraints on mobility. It also implies normalization of precariousness and uncertainty, at least for some categories of people.³⁴

Although the idea of “being stuck” touches on migrants’ limited access to geographic mobility, it is important to keep the two concepts separated. As Joris Schapendonk observes,³⁵ the perception of being stuck does not always correspond to a physical impossibility of moving. In his case study, migrants that got stuck in Morocco were very mobile in their daily practices. They moved camping arrangements to be prepared to escape from local authorities; they regularly crossed the Moroccan-Algerian border to work, and some of them even went back to their countries. Likewise, Eritreans in Italy felt stuck, but were highly mobile. In spite of being fingerprinted in Italy, they had tried more than once to seek asylum in other European countries; some of them had gone back to Africa to visit their families (in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan) or/and to marry other Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia, Sudan, Angola, and elsewhere. After Alazar arrived in Italy in 2008, for example, he sought asylum first in Norway, and then in Sweden. When his fingerprints were found, he voluntarily came back to Italy. He then went to visit a friend in Angola, and in 2012, he went to Ethiopia for a month to get married. Such movements were common among Eritreans I met.

To be stuck in transit is thus not necessarily a physical condition. Rather, it points to an emotional and social condition, or to an existential perception of unsettledness. As Ghassan Hage observes, “a viable life presupposes a form of imaginary mobility, a sense that one is going somewhere.”³⁶ When this sense of going somewhere is lost, individuals experience existential immobility—which he calls *stuckedness*. According to Hage, most voluntary migration stems from a willingness to react to this immobility. This is also the case for the many Eritrean refugees I met. Yet they felt stuck at all stages of their migration. My informants in Eritrea thought that their life was going nowhere due to the—as they perceived them—hopeless economic and political conditions of the country. Likewise, those Eritreans I encountered in Ethiopia and Sudan felt that they had no future there. Thus, the experience of existential immobility among my informants in Italy was a perpetuation of what I encountered before.

As mentioned in a previous chapter, structural obstacles to migration are only one of the various dimensions of their immobility. Their feeling of being stuck emerged from the social condition of dependency. In practice, my informants in Italy were still unable to provide for their families. They often felt trapped in that state of eternal adolescence which they had hoped to escape by leaving Eritrea. “I have been working in Italy for five years and I still cannot support my brother who is getting married in Eritrea, nor send money to my family,” Ogbazgi muttered amid the strident noise of the Genoa railway station. We were waiting together for the train that was to take him to Switzerland, his final destination. He added, “This is not good—I am not a child anymore.” His words exemplify the feelings of

underachievement of many Eritreans in Italy. Their journeys cannot end until they have attained the status of adulthood.

Moreover, as often highlighted by those scholars who have studied migrants in transit,³⁷ the perception of being stuck in transit implies limited engagement in the country of residence, and a strong emotional orientation toward the desired country of destination. The Eritrean refugees I met were highly connected with other Eritreans in other countries and in the homeland, but did not show any intent to engage in the place where they lived. Not only were social and economic contacts within the Italian society limited, but also their intentions to get a job, to learn Italian, or to obtain regular housing were weak. For instance, when I asked Kibreab why he did not work harder on his Italian skills, he answered, “My mind is not settled. I cannot focus on studying. We have too many problems and our families back home are waiting for our support.” Although it is undeniable that the Italian context was challenging in many senses, one may wonder if their pessimistic attitudes also contributed to their own marginality. The perception that it was possible to quite easily obtain everything they needed “somewhere close by” seemed to direct all their efforts toward the next attempt to seek asylum in another country, rather than toward trying to find their way in Italy.

WHAT PUSHES ERITREANS TO MOVE ONWARD?

Peer pressure . . .

Living in squats with compatriots at the margins of the receiving society and sharing the same ideas and desires about future migration are the two factors that underpin Eritrean refugees’ attempts to move beyond Italy. Similar to what I have previously observed in refugee camps and in urban setting in Ethiopia and Sudan, dwelling in the same spaces may facilitate the emergence of a shared emotional atmosphere that is conducive to further migration, which I have called a state of *collective effervescence*.

Some of the informal settlements where I stayed in Rome, the houses I visited in Genoa, and also the public spaces usually frequented by Eritreans were crossroads of people coming and going. The ground floor and second floor of Anagnina, in particular, was known as a kind of informal center of assistance for Eritreans who have no other place to go and cannot be privately hosted by friends or relatives. Those in need were usually “Dubliners” (i.e., returnees to Italy from other European countries under the Dublin Regulation) or new arrivals. For instance in the summer of 2013, after I came back from my fieldwork in Eritrea, Anagnina was busier than usual: the main hall and the second floor were flooded with old mattresses on the floor where the new arrivals, transiting from Lampedusa to other European countries, were sleeping.

In Anagnina as well as in other places mainly inhabited by Eritrean refugees, new arrivals find not only accommodation and some practical help, but also some

protection from the risk of meeting public officials who may force them to provide their fingerprints. In Metropolis, for instance, Senay hosted a young man who had not been fingerprinted yet and wanted to move on to Switzerland. Similarly, in the houses in Sampierdarena (Genoa) I visited, Eritrean women who had joined their husbands through family reunification procedures were waiting for the right moment to reach another European country and seek asylum there.

Likewise, Ponte Mammolo was a refuge for people in transit and for others who had been forced to return. Some had just arrived from reception centers in the south of Italy, and some others had recently been sent back from northern European countries. While I was walking in Ponte Mammolo with Kibreab, I saw many women with children and asked him if the kids were going to school. “No, they usually don’t,” Kibreab said. “They are in transit here, waiting to move on toward other countries where their fathers and uncles are.”

While all these people were moving northward, those who were stuck in Italy were feeling left behind. Conversations about the pros and cons of living in different countries were continually going on in places like Anagnina. “Have you ever been in other countries in Europe?” Alazar’s neighbor asked me in one of the many afternoons I spent chatting and listening to music with Alazar and his friends on Anagnina’s first floor.

“Yes, I have been to France, for example,” I answered.

“Oh! How is it?”

“It is a nice country . . .”

“And is it good for refugees?”

“I think it is more or less like Italy.”

“Oh . . . I see. Northern European countries are better.”

The hierarchy of destinations I observed in Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Sudan was evident in this conversation, too. Northern European countries were considered top destinations, while Italy was believed to be a good place to some extent—for the weather and because people were deemed friendlier—but with no socioeconomic opportunities. The United States, Canada, and Australia were also seen as top destinations. On the contrary, Greece and Spain were known for being undesirable and even unsafe countries. These widespread representations were also reproduced by the flow of information, images, and people coming back to Italy from those top destinations.

. . . information and images from the First World . . .

Despite their ethnic segregation, the Eritrean refugees whom I met in Italy were deeply embedded in transnational relationships with their kin, friends, and acquaintances in other countries. The transnational dimension of their daily lives is noticeable in their use of technology.³⁸ For example, Alazar used to receive many calls a day from his friends still in Sudan, from others who had reached northern Europe, from family members who worked in Israel, and still others in the United

States. Senay was more active on Facebook: he used to spend a long time looking at the pictures of his friends who lived in other countries and chatting online with them. Such a widespread flow of information and images elicits a feeling of disparity between the “unlucky” ones in Italy and the “lucky” ones who live elsewhere. It also produces of a sense of longing for further migration.

Information and images from the First World not only reach Eritrean refugees in Italy through technology. As most of them have attempted to seek asylum further north, they have directly experienced the differences of being an asylum seeker in Italy and in a Scandinavian country. Senay, for example, had tried to seek asylum in Sweden and often remembered his days as an asylum seeker there as a beautiful period of his life. “You see, Milena, I was fat at that time, because I was relaxed,” he told me, while we were sitting in front of his Facebook pictures. “I had such a great time there,” he added. “I met my old friends from Asmara, and you see what a house we had?! Not like the ugly squat where I live now.”

“Dubliners” are not the only ones who come back to Italy. Whenever the Eritreans who have made it to the First World come back on vacation, they bring images and information that make their “stuck” friends want to leave. Social, cultural, and economic remittances play a key role, not only in places of intense out-migration, like Eritrea, but also in so-called transit areas, such as Italy. Once, I went with Alazar and Senay to meet a friend of theirs, Girmay, who had come from Switzerland for a few days’ vacation. We sat in an Eritrean bar, not far from Termini Station, where Alazar, Senay, and Girmay and the bar owner gossiped for a whole afternoon, exchanging information about how to move from one place to another and sharing views about the lifestyles and living conditions in different countries.

Moreover, unmet family expectations concerning their migration path and economic support for their kin weighed like stones on their shoulders. While ethnographically exploring the disturbances in the flows of communication, gifts, and remittances between refugees in Italy and their families in Eritrea, the next sections illustrate the implications of these unmet expectations on practices and resilient aspirations of onward mobility.

. . . and expectations from Eritrea

Eritrean emigration is not perceived only as an individualistic search for better life prospects, but also as a strategy to ensure families’ well-being through remittances. It is embedded in a web of economic, moral, and cultural expectations concerning the destination of the migration journey, the kind of life they should have in that country, and the kind of support refugees will provide for those who stay behind. Although many studies investigate the moral economy of migrants’ remittances, kin obligations, and gift exchange in transnational families,³⁹ the influence of families on migration decisions has rarely been considered an important factor in refugees’ movements.⁴⁰ However, kin-bound obligations and values directly impacted my informants’ feelings of being stuck, as in Gabriel’s case.

Gabriel arrived in Italy in 2007, when he was twenty-three. He stayed in a center for assistance of asylum seekers in Crotona in Calabria for a few months, the time necessary to be granted legal status. Then, like most other refugees in that period, he left on his own. He went to Rome, where he slept in the Anagnina squat for a while, and then moved to Milan, where a friend of his had told him that there were more work opportunities. He remembered the period in Anagnina as a horrible nightmare. “Everything was dirty and we were sleeping on the ground. I hate Rome.” In Milan, too, until it was demolished, he lived in a squat—in Porta Romana, where he had a small shop. “I was doing good business there,” he told me during our long strolls around the periphery of Milan. He found a job in Rho Fiere, an industrial area of Milan, and worked there for two years, but when I met him in the summer of 2012, he had lost the job and was involved in a legal dispute with his ex-employers.

Gabriel loved Milan, especially for its elegant shops, from which he liked to buy expensive clothes and shoes, which made him feel he had really reached the First World. Although he often complained about his compatriots, he spent most of his time in the Eritrean neighborhood around Porta Venezia, where he used to eat his lunch or drink beer. He felt at home there somehow. He kept on saying that he could have found a job whenever he wanted in Milan, because he knew people and was a hard-working man. However, his job hunt was continually delayed: he was undecided whether to stay in Italy or move on. “My family thinks Italy is not good for me,” Gabriel used to tell me. “They want me to go to Germany, where we have some relatives . . . but I want to decide my life for myself.”

At first I did not give much importance to this statement about his family’s pressure to move on, but as soon as I entered Gabriel’s family’s house in Asmara in 2013, I realized that I had been wrong not to do so. After having let me through the door and into the living room, Ester sat down in front of me, briefly introduced herself, and welcomed me into the family. Then, only a few minutes into the conversation, she asked me why Gabriel did not move to Germany or a Scandinavian country. She was worried about her nephew and thought the situation in Italy was not good for him. I explained to her that Gabriel was not allowed to seek asylum in another European country, and that it was probably better for him to try his best to find a new job in Italy. However, she was not convinced. After a while, Yordanos, Ester’s eldest daughter, came into the living room. “I know it is not easy,” she said, “but we see other people who have settled down in other countries in Europe. Now they are doing well. We wish the same for him.”

Gabriel’s relatives were aware that life for refugees in Italy was hard. As I realized during my fieldwork in Eritrea, most families knew that. I was often asked: “How is the crisis going in Italy?”; “Is it true that people cannot find work there?” Aragay, one of our neighbors in Petrosia, told me, “Everyone knows that our guys in Italy are living in bad conditions, work is hard to find and people sleep in the street.” This information was usually provided by those Eritreans who had man-

aged to pass through Italy and were residing in other countries. Eritrean national television also used to broadcast news about refugees' hardships in Europe so as to discourage further illicit emigration from the country. However, the fact that refugees were facing hardships in Italy was not enough to exonerate them from blame. Believing that other countries in Europe could offer young Eritreans more opportunities, families often complained about the fact that their sons had not made enough of an effort to move to those "good countries."

Although families had general ideas about opportunities in different European countries, they seemed to ignore other important, but more specific aspects of migrants' lives abroad. In particular, they did not know about the Dublin Regulation and the problems that refugees had to face after being expelled back to Italy. Young Eritreans seemed better informed on these issues; for example, many of them knew about the importance of avoiding being fingerprinted in Italy in order to seek asylum in other northern European countries. Nonetheless, even among them, misinformation was far from rare.

Families' expectations about their children's onward mobility were not only rooted in the belief that Italy could not provide good conditions for settlement. They also mirrored the hope that migrant children would be able to support them. More specifically, support was expected in two domains: economic remittances for everyday survival in Eritrea and assistance to siblings who intended to migrate. This is crucial not only for understanding the pressure experienced by refugees abroad, but also to analyze the relational mechanisms that maintain the flow of refugees from Eritrea to Ethiopia, Sudan, Italy, and beyond. The fact remains that most of my Eritrean informants in Italy were not able to meet their families' expectations, since they were struggling simply to survive. This had significant implications for their family relationships and for the social status ascribed to them by their community of departure.

THE PRICE OF DISAPPOINTING FAMILIES

Gabriel's family members in Asmara, particularly his sister Lwam, were bitter about the fact that Gabriel had not remitted anything since his arrival in Europe. Although they knew life was hard in Italy, they still felt bad—especially because he did not send anything through me. "Not even a picture," Lwam said, saddened. "Life is hard in the village where my parents are. I hope one day I will be able to help my father." At that time, she was often thinking about migrating to make up for her brother's lack of success.

Lwam used to accompany me on visits to the families of my "Italian" informants. She often shared the feelings of frustration of the families for whom I had not brought gifts. She once commented to me upon leaving one home, "For people here, if someone migrates and cannot survive on his own, but still waits for money from relatives, it is like he is dead. It is already a shame to live with family here

in Eritrea, but you can accept it. But if you go abroad and you have to ask others [for money], that is not life, it is death.” Her words powerfully define the price that an emigrant may have to pay if he/she disappoints social expectations. The risk of “social death” feared by refugees I met in Ethiopian camps seemed to be even greater for those who had reached Italy but were not able to send remittances back home.

Not only families but also the community at large negatively judged refugees who did not help their families back home. That became clear to me when Lwam and I went to visit our neighbor Tegesti for a Sunday coffee. Tegesti was a smiling, prosperous woman in her fifties who often used to come to Ester’s place for a chat and a cup of coffee. Her family had a clothes’ kiosk at the market close to the *medeber* (“caravanserai” in Tigrinya). Her house—a construction of sheet metal, scraps of wood, and plastic tarps—was just one street behind the one where my hosts used to live. Tegesti invited us to sit on the terrace outside, while Aragay, her husband, was shaving, holding a small broken mirror with one hand and the razor with the other.

While we were drinking our coffee, Tegesti started speaking about her two sons abroad. They were apparently doing well in Angola, but had not yet started to send remittances to the family. One son had left three years before and started working in Khartoum as an electrician. All the money he earned there was spent to help the younger brother emigrate. After his brother joined him, they moved to Angola and started working in a supermarket. With four other children to support, Tegesti was hoping to receive some money soon: “We cannot survive here without their help! 100 euro a month is 5,000 nakfa here!”

Tegesti then asked me about Lwam’s brother, Gabriel. I reported that he was fine, and she exclaimed wryly: “It is not enough if he’s okay, because the family here is waiting for nakfa! Nakfa! Nakfa!” She rubbed her thumb and index finger together in the “money sign,” looking into my eyes to be sure I got the point. Lwam laughed bitterly. She clearly felt embarrassed about her brother. Aragay mediated, saying that everyone knew how hard life was for refugees in Italy.

In order to avoid the social stigma associated with being in Europe but unable to help family members back home, Eritreans I met in Italy kept trying to move on to other European countries, deemed to be more generous. Until they succeed in that, however, they have a hard time dealing with their families back home. While mobile phones as well as other communication technologies have greatly facilitated transnational communications, they have also increased social control over migrants. Calls to and from family members and friends may become a burden for refugees, who feel overloaded with requests for money.⁴¹ Avoidance of communication is one of the possible strategies to cope with overwhelming demands. Several of my informants had, in fact, stopped calling home. Senay had not called home for two years. Senay’s lack of contact with his family was common among

other Eritrean refugees I met in Italy. For instance, while I was in Asmara I met with Samhar, Kibreab's eldest sister. She told me that Kibreab rarely called them: "He says he is busy . . . I know that he does not call because things are not going well in Italy and he cannot help the family. Please, when you go back tell him that things are okay here. Just ask him to take care of himself"

In fact, Kibreab had been homeless and jobless for most of the previous four years. Back in Italy, I showed him the pictures of his family and gave him his sister's message. "I feel ashamed to call them and hear about all their problems without being able to send them anything," he told me bitterly. "I want to call when I can send some money. We have come here to help them . . . but now things are hard."

Kibreab's words show that contact avoidance is not only rooted in the intention to escape requests, but also in feelings of shame about what is recognized as an unfulfilled family obligation. Not much had changed in these young men's perceived social status since they had left Eritrea. Geographic mobility had not led to the expected social mobility. In Eritrea they could not reach adulthood because of compulsory national service, and in Italy they were still children who could not support their relatives, or please them with eye-catching gifts.

GIFTS AND COSMOLOGIES

Before leaving Italy, I had asked my Eritrean friends if they wanted me to take some gifts to their families, and some of them filled my luggage with pasta, olive oil, clothes, electric razors, phones, shoes, and pictures. Others did not answer my question, but still gave me the contact details of their families, whom I then visited. Others just avoided me for the whole time that preceded my departure. I noticed that those who sent gifts were the ones with a more stable emotional and economic situation. They were also the ones who had kept more in touch with their families.

Brahnu, a thirty-year-old who lived in Genoa, asked me to take some gifts to his family in Decamhare. Although he was still struggling in many senses, Brahnu was better off than many other Eritrean refugees in Italy. He had a job as a waiter in a catering business and carved traditional music instruments to sell over the internet to musicians around Europe. When I told him I was going to Eritrea, he gave me a bag full of things for his family: shoes for his mother, religious posters, family pictures, a razor for his brother, and a camera—the latter two items being needed for a business scheme he had thought up for his brother and cousins. When I went to Brahnu's family to deliver the gifts, his mother told me that her son had always been very mature and clever. Brahnu called his mother that day, and they all praised him for his generosity.

I gathered that Brahnu kept in touch regularly with his family, sometimes sent them money, and was ready to help his brother to leave the country. His gifts were

certainly appreciated for their economic value, but they were primarily symbols of an ongoing relationship between him and his family. Brahnu's family also filled my bag with gifts for him and his daughter: a traditional dress for the girl, traditional baskets, homemade *shiro* (traditional legume flour), and *berbere* (a local spice mix).

This system of gift-exchange tends to parallel the flow of remittances, but is still distinguishable from it. Some scholars frame gifts as another kind of material remittance,⁴² but gifts among my Eritrean informants and their families are better analyzed by looking at the example of the *kula* ring in the Trobriand archipelago described by Bronisław Malinowski.⁴³ The exchange of products involved in the *kula* ring—such as necklaces and bracelets made of shells—did not have a direct economic value, but was crucial to reaffirm trust, which underpinned trade relationships among the different islands. In a similar vein, the gifts sent by my refugee friends to their families were not as important for their economic value as for their symbolic value: they were symbols of an ongoing relationship that included economic remittances and practical support for other members of the family to migrate.

This is also the reason why, in other cases, my informants avoided sending gifts. Gifts had no meaning when the relationship between the family and refugee had been interrupted by the impossibility of the refugees fulfilling their perceived obligations. For Senay, Gabriel, and Kibreab, it would have been ridiculous to send gifts if in reality there was no real possibility of providing material help to their families. Moreover, their families did not make an effort to send gifts back to them, except for a few packets of homemade *shiro* or some pictures.

Even though the value of transnational gifts was mostly symbolic, they still had to fulfil some requirements. Things coming from Europe should be new, advanced, or the latest model. Family members often expect high-quality products, consistent with the “modernity” associated with life in the First World. Anything less than that may be criticized, and the sender may be judged selfish and not generous.

Alazar's family, for example, was very critical of the gifts he sent them. On my first visit to their place in Asmara, I brought them pasta, soap, olive oil and some second-hand clothes that Alazar had given me at Termini Station before my departure. I then met them again in Addis Ababa, after they had all fled the country and were trying to find a way to move on to Europe or Canada. Robel and Lula—Alazar's younger brother and sister—had crossed the southern border between Eritrea and Ethiopia on foot. After three months in a camp, they managed to get permission to leave. Alazar's mother Minia and her husband went to Khartoum by bus and then by plane to Addis Ababa, and they all started to live together again in one of the big condominiums in Mebrat Haile, just a few blocks away from my own flat. Alazar had also given me some gifts for them on this visit, such as a second-hand computer, a pair of brand-name sneakers, a second-hand mobile phone, and several cheap items of clothing.

During one of my visits to them, Lula told me with a disgusted expression that the gifts sent by Alazar were not nice. “The problem is that Alazar does not like to share his money with others. All the clothes he sent are not good. I hate them. I don’t like anything there. I don’t even like skirts, I’ve never worn them. He sent so many . . . Look! All the stuff he sent is still in the suitcase!” Robel agreed, snickering, and complained about the laptop: “You see, it only works when plugged in!”

Minia, on the other hand, was more defensive about “her” Alazar, but she was trying to understand from me what kind of life Alazar was leading. She did not know much about her son’s living conditions: she was not aware that he had a job, she did not know where he was living, and could not understand the hardships he faced. Then Lula started praising Gaim, their other brother: “Gaim is really generous. I would like to become a medical doctor. I want to become a perfect person. Especially since I met Gaim. . . . He could not study when he was a child, but he’s done so many things for me, making me study. I feel I want to be perfect for him.”

Gaim had earned a lot of money working in Israel and had just managed to move to Canada with a fake Ethiopian passport. He had paid for everyone’s flight from Eritrea and was trying to get his siblings out of Ethiopia whatever it took. Alazar for his part could not see the point in helping everyone migrate to Europe, when life is so hard there too. The way he saw it, it would have been better for them to settle in Ethiopia and start a small business there. When he came to the railway station to give me the gifts for his family, he showed me the nice pair of brand-name sneakers that he had bought for Robel. “This costs 90 euros! I never [would have] bought this for myself. . . . They asked [for] so many things, but they do not realize that with a salary of 800 euros, it is hard to survive here. They ask, ask, ask, because I am in Europe. But I let them ask,” he said, laughing.

By comparing the gifts from Alazar with those from his brother, the left-behind kin were reproducing the cosmology of destinations that frames Italy as a country of transit and Canada as a top destination. An interesting parallel can be drawn here with Ivan V. Small’s findings on transnational gift exchanges in Vietnam and their impact of the spatial imagination of remittance receivers.⁴⁴ According to Small, in the eyes of those who receive them, remittances and gifts represent not only the intentionality of the overseas giver, but also the world he inhabits. Using Small’s interpretation, the gap in the recipient’s valuation between the gifts received from Alazar and those received from Gaim represented the gap between the two worlds they inhabit: Italy, where Eritreans were still struggling, and Canada, a modern, First World country that offers a “good life.”

To a certain extent, we could also say that people are valued according to the place they have managed to reach. Alazar was seen as unsuccessful compared to Gaim, who had managed to reach Canada. The help that Alazar was giving to

the family was also devalued by the comparison with the support that Gaim had been giving to the family. His gifts were considered insignificant compared with the ones sent by Gaim. Even the migration support that Alazar had managed to arrange for Lula was not comparable with what Gaim could do for them from Canada. In fact, Alazar had arranged a fake marriage for his sister and was trying his best to find another one for Robel, but, as Minia happily exclaimed, “Now that Gaim is in Canada, he will send visas for everyone!” Things were obviously not as easy as Minia thought, but her words illustrate the widespread system of values, images, and expectations related to migration and specific destinations.