

Conclusion

What pushes thousands of young people to leave their homeland every month? What makes Eritrea—a country neither involved now in open war nor really at peace for almost two decades—the ninth refugee-producing nation worldwide? What leads Eritreans to migrate on after they have reached first countries of refuge in spite of the incredible dangers of doing so? This book has answered these questions by illustrating the power of transnational moralities, shared imagination, and emotions in the migration stories of my research participants and their families. Their struggles to evade detection, cross borders, and find a suitable home speak of the many paradoxes surrounding asylum regimes, migration management, and their implications in the contemporary world.

Against the common framing of refugee flows as emergencies or exceptional events, *The Big Gamble* has aimed to emphasize the “normality” of these movements.¹ This does not mean that the political and institutional conditions that produce and reproduce them should be accepted. Quite the opposite. Analyzing the systematic/normalized aspect of these migrations implies acknowledging how extremely critical circumstances have become ordinary owing to the unchanged political situation in countries of origin and the inability of asylum regimes to provide prospects for those in protracted displacement. Recognizing that high-risk mobility has become the norm and not the exception allows researchers to investigate not only how political and institutional factors influence the drivers of migration, but also how individuals, families, and communities organize to respond to chronic lack of prospects, both at home and in exile. In this way, it is possible to illuminate agency and the exercise of choice even among those conventionally defined by the lack of those.

In contexts where crisis has become ordinary, old-fashioned categories such as the binary distinction between voluntary and forced migrants make little sense. For people struggling every day with structural violence, lack of freedom, and deprivation, the desire to leave home is deeply intertwined with the need to do so. Mobility here is a choice, although extremely constrained; it is an aspiration socially cultivated to the point of becoming an expectation. Among communities with a global diaspora—the result itself of a decades of displacement—these expectations tend to be directed toward certain destinations, historically identified as providing better prospects for safety and stability.

One of the main implications of these considerations is that forced migration should not be the key notion in the debate on asylum rights and refugees. It should rather be replaced by analysis of how mobility and immobility are produced and reproduced at different stages of the migration process. This analysis should be focused on the moral, social, and emotional factors that enable and hinder aspirations to mobility and their realization. Although the idea of forced migration emerged as a conceptual tool more widely to embrace those circumstances—not necessarily mentioned in the Geneva Convention—that force people out of their country, its theoretical strength remains limited. The condition of “being forced” is still an overwhelming part of it. This implicitly excludes appreciation of the role of aspirations, imaginaries, and moralities in understanding why many leave their home country, and why they try to keep moving forward once they have reached a first, second, or even third safe haven.

This argument has implications for public discourse, since the moral—as well as legal—grounds for providing protection to asylum seekers should not be based on how helpless/choiceless/pushed they are. The right to seek protection should be separated from the assumption that the only deserving refugees are those who are exceptionally forced out of their countries by a sudden humanitarian crisis or an explosion of violence. Vulnerability does not equate with lack of choice and agency. In fact, in some cases extreme vulnerability may be the result of an active attempt to circumvent border enforcement. As Noelle Brigden and Cetta Mainwaring highlight, “migrants temporarily surrender control at points during the journey, accepting momentary disempowerment to achieve larger strategic goals.”² Prevailing discourses over refugee deservingness should not exclude an appreciation of refugees’ agency and their capabilities.³ This is crucial not only for understanding who can move and who has to stay put, but also to shift common visions of refugees as burdens to social welfare, rather than potential contributors to richer societies. Those who seek to improve refugees’ living conditions and chances of protection should not try to impose the image of the deserving refugee as a choiceless victim, but rather to discard the binary logic opposing forced and voluntary migrants, deserving victims and bogus migrants. Due to the tragically ordinary dimension of its exodus, the Eritrean case is a point of departure from which to blur boundaries between forced and voluntary migrants, to reflect on

the manifold meanings of immobility in migration journeys and the transnational social mechanisms reproducing refugee movements over time.

Migratory departures are an ordinary reality in Eritrea. Historically associated with the sacrifices of the war against Ethiopia, as well as with the crucial importance of remittances to the livelihood of those who stay behind, migration is a key ingredient in the symbolic and practical organization of Eritrean society. Nationalistic propaganda, intimate family histories, and locals' daily survival revolve around it. However, in an illiberal political atmosphere such as the Eritrean one, current emigration remains a covert and counterinstitutional enterprise, which is publicly condemned and severely punished. As in many other contexts characterized by chronic stagnation and structural violence in Africa, and not only there, escaping is seen by the young as a way to achieve freedom, economic stability, and the moral status associated with adulthood. Migration may be differently perceived by young men aiming to become family breadwinners and young women fleeing a suffocating patriarchy, but geographic mobility is generally viewed as a path to social recognition among their peers and respect from their families. Migration from Eritrea cannot be reduced to a reaction to danger. Rather, it is a long-term strategy to combat socioeconomic, political, and existential immobility, enable family survival, and pursue one's dreams.

Unlike that of forced migration, the concept of involuntary immobility, as elaborated in the work of Jørgen Carling and Stephen Lubkemann,⁴ is crucial for making sense of current exodus from Eritrea. To leave a country where passports are not easily obtainable takes a lot of effort and resources. Those with enough contacts among high-ranking officials may be able to secure permission to exit. Others need money, contacts, physical strength, and courage to cross highly patrolled borders without authorization. This means that access to geographic mobility is highly stratified in Eritrea. Who can and who cannot move depends crucially on socioeconomic family status and the accessibility of transnational networks. Those who can pay more are also those who can travel more safely—by employing more experienced brokers, safer means of transport, or obtaining semi-legal papers—even if in unauthorized ways. Whereas a successful passage generally mirrors individuals' determination, as well as families' contacts, resources, and networks, immobility is the only option left for those who do not have the means or the capabilities to pursue their aspirations. All my informants' histories were extraordinarily telling about freedom to move on (conspicuous by its absence) or backward as a powerful factor of social stratification on a global scale.⁵

(Im)mobility, however, is much more than a physical experience that Eritreans, like many other migrants, face at every step of their fragmented migration trajectories.⁶ Their sense of being stuck is telling of other forms of immobility. Most of them share a perception, as well as a very real condition, of *social* immobility, related to the lack of access to resources able to fulfil their basic social rights,

as well as deep-rooted aspirations to modernity; and, in parallel, of *generational* immobility, pointing to the societal constraints on the transition to adulthood that they were expected to realize, and to which they aspired. Both forms of immobility are remarkably gendered in their manifestations. More fundamentally, the Eritrean youth I met—whether movers or stayers—were often exposed to a form of *temporal* immobility, inasmuch as their precarious conditions seemed to lock up their lives in an “extended present,” with little scope for long-term projects, unless projected elsewhere; and indeed, of *existential* immobility, as highlighted by their ways of positioning themselves in socially widespread and legitimated cosmologies of destinations. Finally, there is another crucial aspect of immobility that I observed: the sense of entrapment that binds migrants to try again and again to reach their desired destination in spite of incredible dangers. Further research on the interplay between mobility and immobility, as enacted at all of the levels highlighted above, can contribute to advancing the understanding of contemporary migration at large, well beyond the conventional and hypostatical categories of refugees/forced migrants versus economic/voluntary migrants—and, for that matter, well beyond the Eritrean case.

Many concepts developed in the study of voluntary migration, such as aspirations, cultural imaginaries, and culture of migration, are valuable in the study of refugee flows too. All these notions emphasize the symbolic value of migration in societies marked by long-term outflows of people, but they do not directly connect these symbolic dimensions with the moralities underpinning migration motives and practices. This is why the notion of cosmologies of destinations is of added value here. Unlike previous notions, the idea of cosmologies of destinations specifically refers to the distinctive sets of norms and prescriptions associated with the right/wrong destination that have been stratified in decades of exodus from the country. The web of moral obligations connecting families back home, refugees in transit, and kin in the diaspora is key to accounting for the persistent desire to move on, to grasping the complex negotiations over journey payment, and to appreciating emic perceptions of borders and smugglers. In sum, drawn from the classic understanding of cosmologies as cognitive and moral ways of categorizing the world and orienting subjects’ actions, this concept illustrates (1) how collective imaginaries of places entail moral views of what it means to reach them; (2) how deep-rooted images and moralities influence daily interactions between refugees and locals; and (3) how these moral and cognitive views shape further attempts to migrate.

From the outset of their migration and through subsequent steps, the young men and women whom I met pictured a hierarchy of worlds, the top level of which can be reached only through migration. Specific destinations, such as northern Europe, US, or Canada, are perceived by them as well as by their families, their peers and their enlarged networks as sites with better prospects in terms of security, work, and freedom. This collectively shared hierarchy is not simply an imagi-

nary, but mirrors a moral understanding of the world, not unrelated to the amount and quality of remittances, that defined some places as suitable destinations and others as unsuitable. Thus, whereas Alazar's brother in Canada was perceived by his family as brilliant and successful, Alazar, who was still stuck in Italy, was subjected to their criticism.

My informants' trajectories across Ethiopia, Sudan, and Italy were determined not only by limited integration prospects and legal constraints, but also by transnationally reproduced family obligations, and common visions of the expected goal—and destination—of migration. Communication with compatriots around the world and with families back home feeds into what is perceived as the moral obligation to move on. On the one hand, information and images from those who had reached their final destinations elicit the desire to move there. On the other hand, the obligation to remit back home push those "in transit" to migrate no matter the risk. These considerations bear significant implications also for the study of secondary mobility, not only in Africa, but also within Europe, as I show in the case of Italy. The determination to migrate elsewhere, typically to northern European countries, in spite of repeated deportation back under the Dublin Regulation can only be understood by keeping in mind financial obligations to left-behind kin that cannot be met by people struggling with limited institutional assistance and poor labor market opportunities. Although the Eritrean case has its own historical, cultural, and legal specificities, it is likely that similar conclusions could be drawn about the motivations and the trajectories of migrants stuck in transit areas such as Ventimiglia, Calais, or Dunkirk.

Historically developed moral assumptions about places and their inhabitants significantly impacted the interaction between my informants and locals in different locations they inhabited after leaving Eritrea. Resulting from colonial legacies, historical conflicts, and long-term discrimination, a deep-rooted distrust of locals often influenced my informants' limited contacts with locals. While living together in camps or in shared housing in Addis Ababa and Khartoum, my informants nourished one another's feelings of being stuck. When a migration corridor opens, the urban and camp areas become "effervescent" with an emotional atmosphere that contagiously encourages even the undecided to depart. In a way, these forms of collective effervescence are the emotional manifestations of the shared worldviews and norms that constitute the cosmology of destinations. Similar mechanisms are visible in the areas where Eritrean refugees live in Italy.

Although most of the Eritreans whom I met across my research sites seemed to share similar preferences for certain destinations, different individuals may have different views according to what they seek, their possibilities, and changing circumstances in those locations and across their pathways. Refugees I met in Ethiopian camps seemed to pattern their preferences on the basis of their contacts and the structural openings of legal channels and migration corridors. Reaching certain destinations also had a different meaning for different informants according

to their gender, contacts, age, religion, and political orientation, among other things. Moreover, not all of the Eritreans I encountered in my research wanted to migrate. Although I have touched only briefly on Eritrean patriotism here, it is important to highlight that there are some Eritreans who believe in the national project followed by the government and are ready to stay there to contribute to it.⁷ Another instance of chosen immobility is the case of Eritrean Kunamas living in Shimelba camp. As with many other refugees who strive for repatriation, their example shows that a cosmology can also be retrospective, projecting the future back into the homeland, rather than toward further destinations. In sum, the notion of cosmologies of destinations does not define a specific set of preferences, but rather refers to the shifting relationship between collective imaginaries, normative expectations, and personally felt moral obligations connected to certain migration destinations.

Cosmologies of destinations imply specific moral understandings of national borders and legitimate ways to cross them. While the international asylum regime and the visa policies of different Western states are unable to provide solutions to protracted displacement, unauthorized mobility and those who enable it assume a positive role in the eyes of many refugees. Contrary to the current claims of the international community, smugglers are not specifically blamed for fatalities at sea or in the desert. In my informants' accounts, it is instead the lack of long-term solutions for refugees and those who restrict their access to regular migration who are responsible for them. Facilitators of unauthorized migration are no more than service providers, who can be judged by the quality of their services. Transnational marriages, either arranged or paid, represent ways to help each other out of the stasis young Eritreans experience at home and in Ethiopia and Sudan.

The idea of cosmologies of destinations provides a framework to analyze perceptions of risks as embedded in emic understanding of the world, and the subject's views of his/her own position within it. However, to understand refugees' determination to move on in spite of dangers, it is of key importance to consider the cumulative aspect of migrants' efforts. Here is where the metaphor of *The Big Gamble* becomes an analytical tool to advance the understanding of high-risk migration.

Drawing on studies of gamblers, I have advanced the idea of entrapment to make sense of my informants' repeated attempts to move on. My informants "gambled"—often more than once—when they fled Eritrea, then when they left Ethiopia and Sudan, again when they journeyed through Libya, and finally when they sought to move forward from Italy. These attempts should be considered as cumulative. The sacrifices they had made to attain the migration goal increased the further they went from home. This leads to a sense of "entrapment" similar to what gamblers experience. To turn all the losses into gains, the goal of migration—be it a specific geographic destination or the social recognition of families and peers—has to be reached.

Migrants, thus, are trapped into trying again and again to overcome the obstacles that separate them from their desired goal. When these obstacles are represented by migration policies, it is likely they will not produce the results expected by policy makers. This unexpected interaction between structural obstacles and migrants' motivations to move on could be one factor explaining why migration policies often fail.⁸ With border controls becoming increasingly restrictive and European states doing their best to keep asylum seekers out, the above considerations about perception of risks suggest that there is no easy way to stop the refugee flow. When what is at stake in migration is such a deep-rooted moral and socially shared goal, policies aiming at deterring flows are unlikely to be successful.