Transnational Engagement through a Comparative and an Ethnographic Lens: The Case Study of Eritreans in London and Milan

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As migration continues to shape the world around us, scholars and policymakers have tried to understand the connections that migrants create and sustain in their place of residence, their country of origin, and beyond. The types of connection that people forge are broad and diverse. They might include ties that are economic (remittances, donations, taxes), political (political demonstration, mobilisation, membership to political parties), social (visits to friends and family, membership to social clubs, contributions to newspapers, social remittances), and cultural (attendance at NDevents such as concerts and exhibitions, education) (Al-Ali, Black and Koser 2001a, 2001b). As researchers have shown, to understand these connections, we need to investigate people's priorities and aspirations as well as the political, economic, and social conditions in which they are embedded. Together, these factors shape both the *capability* and the *desire* that people have to cultivate particular relationships within and across borders.

Whilst many scholars have argued that we need to study how these factors shift over time, far fewer have made the case for analysing how they shift in different spaces. The case for comparative research here is obvious. As I think through the notion of 'liberating comparisons' though, I want to move

beyond the simple argument for more comparative research into the experiences and connections of migrant communities. Instead, I ask that we question what is often taken for granted – the homogeneity of experiences among migrants from the same country of origin – and adopt participatory research methods to capture the nuances that would otherwise be missed.

This is the approach that I have adopted in my own work, which uses comparison to explore how global, national, and local dynamics come together in people's lives within a particular time and space. I argue that by taking a migrant-centred research approach, we can better understand everyday practices of relationship-building. This, in turn, helps us to delve behind the statistics and macro-level analysis of migration so that we can develop policies that can bring transformative change to the communities studied.

My research focuses on the experience of Eritrean migrants in London and Milan through a multi-sited ethnography. This is an approach that takes people's geographic location seriously without thinking of 'the city' or 'the country' as a fixed unit of analysis that naturally and statically exists in the world. Cities and countries are constantly under construction, shaped by the everyday choices that people pursue as they try and make their hopes a reality in situations that are never completely of their own choosing.

Below, I explain how a migrant-centred comparison can help us to make sense of structural factors that shape people's lives without losing site of the specifics of their daily existence. I close by highlighting some of the insights that this approach gave me into the lives of Eritrean migrants in London and Milan.

Towards a Migrant-Centred Comparison

When developing any comparison, scholars must begin by considering the logic of their comparison. Clark and colleagues

(2002) outline three dominant approaches: theory-centred approaches, which try to test a theory in different countries or regions; case-centred approaches, which assume differences between countries and regions and try to explain these through comparison; and institution-centred approaches, where focus is placed on institutions as drivers of individual behaviour (266-67). The authors, however, suggest an alternative: taking an agent-centred approach to comparison. An agent-centred approach does not ignore the structural, institutional constraints within which people live, but it makes sense of those constraints through the lens of people's everyday lives. In doing so, it allows for the possibility that institutions and individuals both shape each other, albeit on uneven terms. This is the premise of the migrant-centred approach that guided my study. The lived experiences and biographical narratives of the people I spoke with were my starting point and guided my analysis of the larger institutions and structures I sought to understand. By taking this migrant-centred approach, I was able to forge a multi-sited ethnography that allowed me not only to study 'the life world of situated subjects' but also to see the 'associations and connections among sites' that, together, make the world of which we are a part (Marcus 1995).

Adopting a migrant-centred approach in my research did not come without its methical challenges. How was I to draw a comparative analysis of highly heterogenous migrant communities in two significantly different localities whilst ensuring a dialogue between the two sites occurred? I approached the challenge by ensuring that the socio-political context of the Eritreans' pre-migration and post-migration experiences over time were reflected in the sample of my research. By bringing to the fore the concurrent historical changes that took place in Eritrea, Italy, and the UK, I was able to draw parallels between the two sites of the comparison.

London and Milan were interesting sites from which to conduct my studies. Firstly, the UK and Italy present very distinct histories of immigration, which have attracted different groups of Eritrean migrants over time. Italy has historically acted as a country of transition among Eritreans, whereas the UK has historically been a destination country. Especially during the armed struggle for independence (1961–1991), only a relatively small number of Eritreans remained in Italy as, at the time, the Italian government did not recognise Eritreans as asylum seekers (Ambroso 1987; Arnone 2010; Martignoni 2015). In contrast, Eritreans easily received refugee status in the UK, which was conducive to a more positive experience of settlement among those who migrated prior to Eritrean independence and the establishment of multiple Eritrean Refugee Community Organisations (ERCOs) (Campbell and Afework 2015). Following the border conflict with Ethiopia in 1998 and the resulting authoritarian turn taken by the Eritrean government, new waves of Eritrean migrants started to flee the country. However, post-9/11, international migration policies were predominantly concerned with securitizing the nation by reducing the number of migrants entering the country (Bloch 2002; Zetter et al. 2003), which rendered it increasingly difficult for 'generation asylum' seekers to obtain indefinite leave to remain. Secondly, there was evidence that both migrant communities had developed different types of connections transnationally, not least in their response to Eritrean conflicts. Without pre-supposing causal relationships at any level, I sought to explore these differences from a migrant-centred perspective. Below, I highlight some of the insights that emerged.

Taking the Long View

Key to understanding people's experience of migration was understanding *when* they had migrated. In her study

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of Eritreans in Milan, Arnone (2008) uses the notion of 'generations of arrival' to refer to the different waves of Eritrean migration, to bring to the fore the degrees of separation and difference that characterises the Eritrean 'community' in Milan but also emphasise the distinct experiences of 'journey' that each generation experienced. Similarly, Hepner (2015) adopts a historical perspective, emphasising the significance of the pre-migration experience and distinguishes between 'generation nationalism', to indicate the experiences of those who fled during the liberation movement (1961–1991), and 'generation asylum', to point to those who migrated after the border conflict with Ethiopia (1998–2000), which also marked the authoritarian shift of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) rule. In my research, I use the concepts of 'generation nationalism' and 'generation asylum'. I focus here on 'generation nationalism'. Although some scholars have previously observed and highlighted the heterogeneity of livelihood strategies (Riccio 2008) reasons to migrate (Binaisa 2013), and degrees of integration in the country of residence among migrants from the same country of origin (Mazzucato 2008; Riccio 2008) the comparative nature of this study allows for a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which changing political and historical contexts, both in the country of residence and in the country of origin, shape those differences over time.

What emerged from my research is that migrants and their descendants fluidly inhabit multiple (trans)national spaces where competing formulations of belonging, citizenship, and national identity are situationally enacted. My study brought to the fore some of the ways in which Eritreans' transnational engagement is shaped not only by their pre-migration experiences as they relate to the state – hence distinguishing between the experiences of 'generation nationalism' and 'generation asylum' (Hepner 2015) – but also by specific political conditions in the country of residence.

These experiences, for example, shaped transnational engagements with Eritrea's conflicts. Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia in 1991 after thirty years of armed struggle. The armed struggle was initiated by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), a Muslim-dominated movement that was based in Cairo. In its final stages, however, it was the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) that led the country to independence. The fundamental role played by the diaspora in supporting the war financially and politically led a number of scholars to refer to Eritrea as a 'quintessential diasporic or transnational nation-state' (Hepner 2015, 186; Hepner 2008; Iyob 1995). By 1991, it was estimated that up to one million Eritreans lived in exile (Hepner and Conrad 2005). A second conflict with Ethiopia broke out in 1998 and ended two years later, resulting in thousands of deaths on each side of the conflict. The border conflict also marked a shift in the rule of the PFDJ (former EPLF) that resulted in the closure of civil societies and independent media outlets and an increasing focus on the militarization of the population. While the contribution of the Eritrean diaspora to the war for independence has been widely documented, relatively less researched are the experiences of the diaspora's settlement and community organising in their countries of residence (Arnone 2008; Campbell and Afework 2015; Martignoni 2015).

With regard to 'generation nationalism', my study revealed that while Eritreans both in London and Milan were actively involved in supporting the armed struggle for independence, the ways in which the first forms of transnational community organising developed in the two cities differed in important ways. In Milan, the local EPLF branch held an almost exclusive monopoly not only over the political organising to support the war at home but also over the social life of the first wave of Eritreans. Experiences of social isolation, challenges in accessing housing and secure employment, and frustrations with discriminatory laws that prevented Eritreans

from regularising their migration status all contributed to the development of a strong network of solidarity among the first wave of Eritrean migrants. In Milan, for that first generation of migrants who fled within the context of the armed struggle, the EPLF played a fundamental role in creating a transnational space that fostered a sense of belonging towards Eritrea and loyalty towards the EPLF.

Conversely in London, the set-up of the first forms of Eritrean community organising were less entangled with the EPLF. In the UK, up until the late 1990s, the system of reception for asylum seekers relied heavily on the work of Eritrean refugee community organisations (ERCOs). Funded by the Home Office and the local authorities, various ERCOs offered a diverse range of services that facilitated the settlement experiences of migrants. The diversity with regard to ethnic, religious, and political affiliation of the Eritrean migrant population in London also raised important questions about the ways in which multiple social vectors, such as education, gender, class, and religion, facilitate specific migratory trajectories.

Pulling the Threads Together

The complexities of the experiences and journeys I have encountered among my respondents both in London and Milan raise important points of reflection for transnational scholars and migration practitioners. Methodologically, they highlight the need to move away from simplistic analyses that explore only the ties maintained between 'here' and 'there', 'home-country' and 'host-country'. Resisting such approaches, we must expand our focus to capture the multiple factors that shape migrants' ability and willingness to engage in transnational practices, in all their complexity (Al-Ali, Black and Koser, 2001a). At the beginning of my study, I expected that disparate histories of immigration and distinct

policy set-ups in Italy and the UK would produce different local patterns of Eritrean community organising. What I did not initially account for was the effect of local discriminatory laws on transnational forms of identification and loyalties.

In Milan, the EPLF played a central role in articulating an Eritrean national identity that advanced their political agenda of self-determination and self-reliance, but it also effectively alleviated some of the challenges of settlement that came with life in *sidet* (exile). Both of these factors instilled a sense of loyalty towards the EPLF/PFDJ that is still prevalent today. In the face of social exclusion and discrimination at work and in everyday interactions with native Italians, Eritreans in Milan quickly developed a form of 'reactive transnationalism' (Snel, Hart, and van Bochove 2016). This solidified strong networks of solidarity around the war at home.

In contrast, only a small portion of the Eritrean migrant population in London was actively involved in homeland politics before and after independence. In part, this was due to the system of reception available in the UK, particularly up until the 1999 dispersal act. In part, it was also shaped by the diversity of the Eritrean migrant population in London with regard to political affiliation, religion, and ethnicity. Together, these factors contributed to the expression of a formulation of Eritrean identity that was more diverse and less centred on the EPLF. Networks of solidarity were established and maintained along multiple social, cultural, and political vectors. Consequently, Eritreans in London were more likely to participate in formal and informal social and cultural activities, where 'community moments' (Alexander *et al.* 2007) were enacted predominantly within personal networks of family and friends.

The cross-national approach adopted in this study has brought to the fore the role of the nation-state in mediating migrants' ability to engage in cross-border activities. As

migrants are embedded within the national social field of the country of residence but also the transnational social field of the country of origin, state policies need to be incorporated in the examination of any transnational engagement.

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