Families at a distance, distances within families

Borders and emotional bonds among migrants from Eritrea

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Abstract: This article investigates how mobility regimes and destination countries contribute to reshaping transnational family ties among refugees from Eritrea. Due to protracted political violence in the country, Eritreans are a geographically dispersed community, bonded together by solidarities, feelings of belonging and kinship relationships. Based on a multi-sited ethnography, this article sheds light on migrant family members living in different countries (Ethiopia, Italy, UK, Sweden), rather than on the relationships between migrants and their family members back home. By focusing on three case-studies and including vertical and horizontal family ties, it explores marriage forms, practices of parenthood and relationships among spouses and siblings, to show the phenomenological experience of family by refugees who find themselves in various family roles, with contrasting moral obligations and in unequal positions with respect to border regimes. The aim is to show how policy and labour constraints play a role in moulding migrants' family relationships, in addition to the geographical distance, and how people navigate this scenario through confronting dilemmas and taking decisions. While conceptualizing family ties not as "given" but as "made", this study analyses the forms of subjectivities which emerge in the inter-connections between social structures and desires.

Keywords: Eritrean refugees; Transnational families; Regimes of mobility; Moral obligation; Multi-sited ethnography.

"My wife and daughter have arrived, thank you!"[1]. With these words and with a smile Samuel[2] entered the Rome office of Associazione Libertà (The Freedom Association) where I was conducting my first days of ethnography in June 2017. Samuel is an Eritrean refugee and Associazione Libertà had been supporting him through the family reunification process. I met him a couple of months later in a cafe in the historical Eritrean neighbourhood in Rome, near the main railway station. He showed me pictures of the welcoming party organized for them, and of their journeys to Milan to meet their relatives. However, he stunned me when I asked how their life in Italy was going: "They are not here, they live in France", he replied. He explained to me that in Italy he could not offer them much, since he did not have a regular job and lived in a squatted building, whereas in France they could rely on a better reception system and family networks. In the following months of fieldwork, I realized that this arrangement is not unusual. Many Eritrean family reunifications I encountered did not lead to the reunion of a family group but were followed by new departures and separations. Interestingly, these separations did not necessarily cause (nor are caused by) a rupture of affective ties but rather bring about their reconfiguration. Putting a distance between himself and his wife and daughter, Samuel had not escaped his roles as father and husband but instead reinterpreted them from afar. Through the family reunification process, he was able to save them from life in a refugee camp in Ethiopia, bringing them to Europe and allowing them to reach France where they expected life would be better than in Italy.

This article explores the ways in which refugees from Eritrea rearrange family ties at a distance in the context of the limitations imposed by the current "regimes of mobility" (Glick Schiller, Salazar 2013), and according to the degree of desirability of the different destination countries. These degrees of desirability are based on both the structural characteristics of each country (reception systems, job opportunities, etc.), and migratory imaginaries. The aim is to show, on the one hand, how policy and labour constraints and opportunities play a role in moulding migrants' family

relationships, in addition to the geographical distance, and on the other how people navigate this scenario through making choices, confronting dilemmas and taking action, thus reshaping their experiences of family. In doing so, this paper breaks away from a consideration of the modern Western middle-class model of the nuclear family as universal. Rather, it looks at the wider webs of relatedness and kinship, solidarities and responsibilities, and feelings and moralities that make "family" a fluid entity, re-adapted across spaces, times and contingencies (Carsten 2004; Declich in this issue).

The ethnographic material presented here sheds light on both vertical and horizontal relationships, namely among spouses, children and parents, and between siblings – all of them part of what my interlocutors consider as *sidra* (family in Tigrinya, the mother tongue of my research participants). Although marriage forms, practices of parenthood and relationships among spouses and siblings could be single topics in themselves, I have included them all in my analysis in order to comprehend the multiple and contrasting implications that the obstacles to mobility and the hierarchies of destination countries have in a variety of long-distance family ties. This broad approach is also useful for looking at the phenomenological experience of refugees who, in the course of their migratory trajectory, can find themselves in different roles (for example being spouse and sibling) and in different positions in respect to border regimes. While most investigations into long-distance family ties focus on the relationships between migrants and family members back home, this article chooses a different perspective by considering migrant family members who do not live in the same country. Based on a multi-sited ethnography which I conducted over the last 7 years, it brings together Eritrean refugees who are located in different countries of transit or (at least preliminary) arrival, namely Ethiopia, Italy, Sweden and the UK.

Eritrean migrants represent a privileged case study, as they are geographically very dispersed. Since 2001, due to the ruling regime's authoritarianism (Hepner, O'Kane 2009), half a million Eritreans have fled, going to Sudan and Ethiopia, but also to Europe, North America, the Middle and Far East. These migratory flows follow paths well-worn by previous generations of Eritrean transnational migrants, who had left the country from the 1950s onwards for political and economic reasons. Due to the current lack of legal migratory channels from Africa to Europe, contemporary Eritrean migrants have to adapt to the obstacles they encounter along their journey. Consequently, their trajectories are rarely linear and family reunifications are often not a significant determining factor in shaping their migratory paths.

The remainder of this article is organized as it follows. Firstly, it offers a review of the interdisciplinary debate on transnational families, distance and inequalities; secondly, it introduces the socio-political configurations of the cases of Eritrean migration and family ties included in the study. After presenting in the third section the settings of my ethnography and discussing my methodology, I then focus on three case studies. The first one reconstructs the experiences of two women who have taken advantage of kinship ties in particular historical moments in order to cross semi-closed borders. Through the story of a nuclear family living between Rome and London, the second case investigates how visa systems can lead to new ways of being a father and can influence relationships among couples. The third case focuses on how the inequalities between European countries of settlement can mould relationships among siblings. In analysing how individuals reshape (and are shaped by) their changing positions within family ties, this article interprets subjectivity as "the ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear, and so forth that animate acting subjects [...] as well the cultural and social formations that shape, organize, and provoke those modes of affect, thought and so on" (Ortner 2005: 31). In this perspective, subjectivity refers to the configuration of the ways through which people have historically experienced the world and acted in it, within the constraints of certain power relations (Moore 1994; Pinelli 2013). Through this perspective, individuals emerge at the intersection of multiple positions, social roles, ways of being and acting, which are always situational and relational.

Migration, family and inequalities: a background

Family relations play an important role in migratory projects, influencing the decision to migrate, the routes taken and the destination countries. Likewise, kinship in migratory settings is not simply a "resilient field", that is to say it is not an autonomous space that reproduces itself across and in spite of borders (Decimo, Gribaldo 2016). As the critical and reflexive perspectives on kinship studies have demonstrated, family configurations not only are historically and locally variable symbolic constructions, but change according to many factors – such as political configurations (i.e. border regulations), technological innovations (i.e. ICT) or social changes (i.e. driven by migration) – as well as according to people's practices and choices (Carsten 2004). In this perspective, relatedness within "trans-national families" (Bryceson, Vuorela 2002) is not something "given", but is rather "made" and even "unmade". While dispersion across long distances,

lasting separations and lack of face-to-face interactions may fragment pre-existing family ties, people can actively work to keep them alive and to retain a sense of collectivity and intimacy in spite of being apart (Chamberlain, Leydesdorff 2004; Riccio, Giuffré 2012). In the same way, transnational families problematize the Western image of "normal" nuclear family life, composed of a two-parent household with children under the same roof where physical distance among members is assumed to be undertaken only out of extreme necessity (de Guzman et al. 2018). Transnational families show instead how family unity is an ideal that can be informed by other factors, such as job opportunities, educational chances for children, safety, and availability of caregivers. These factors may lead to consider parenthood from afar a viable option (Parreñas 2005; Millman 2013).

As a number of empirical investigations have shown, long distance kinship ties and family care are cultivated in several ways: by travelling back home (Mason 2004), sending remittances, building "palpable connections" through parcels (Povrzanović Frykman, Humbracht 2014) or virtual ones through ICT (Madianou, Miller 2012). While keeping their long-distance relations with spouses, parents and children, migrants refashion the meanings and practices of relatedness along transnational lines (Gardner, Grillo 2002), with a profound impact on the emotional field (Svašek 2010; Boccagni, Baldassar 2015). Regardless of whether these shifts are considered capable of changing conceptualizations of family life, or rather regardless of whether family life is believed to remain stable to some degree (de Guzman, Brown, Edwards 2018), undoubtedly notions of belonging and familyhood in transnational families entail choice and negotiation, effort and cultivation, as well as conflict and constraint. Indeed, networks of reciprocity and obligation, love and trust, are fraught with tension and relations of unequal power (Baldassar, Merla 2013). Thus, the inequalities and dependencies which usually characterize the relationships between family members, in the case of transnational families can be reinforced or reshaped by distances and by the migrants' destiny (Drotbohm 2009). In this process, visa regulations, telecommunication and the economic conditions and nature of state institutions in the receiving countries play an important role in favouring or hampering transnational care, and in moulding familial dependencies and hierarchies. While these aspects are crucial for analysing the Eritrean families living apart, it is also important to shed light on the historical, cultural and political elements that characterize Eritrean migration and that influence family ties.

Migration and family ties in the Eritrean transnational social space

Current Eritrean migratory flows are deeply interconnected with the re-pressive turn that occurred in the aftermath of the Ethiopian-Eritrean war (1998-2000), and that has imposed on its citizens a poorly remunerated and indefinite national service and one of the most illiberal regimes in the world. However, migrants are driven not only by political oppression but also by a "culture of migration" (see Cohen, Sirkeci 2011; Degli Uberti 2014), which is rooted within the long history of Eritrean transnational migration (Kibreab 1987; Hepner 2009), and which shapes the aspirations of would-be migrants and the expectations of those left behind. For a long time, this culture of mi-gration has imbued both the Eritrean nuclear family – that traditionally makes up the household (*sidrabet*) – and the extended family. In a context where each individual is part of concentric collective groups (from the family to the lineage, from the village to the nation), the family constitutes the ba-sic social unit, which has historically allowed access to the land, and more recently has been involved in the construction of nationalistic sentiments (see Tronvoll 1998; Smidt 2007). In this context, current migrants often leave with the moral obligation to relieve their kin (parents, siblings but also nephews, nieces, cousins) from material precariousness and to help other family members to migrate (Treiber 2014; Costantini 2017). Eritrean transnational family ties are thus based on a moral economy which estab-lishes bonds of solidarity with kin members back home. These moral solidar-ities both help and constrain, can be transgressed and can also be unfulfilled, provoking a sense of personal failure (Belloni 2019).

In the contemporary geopolitical conjuncture, the migration-family nexus is also interlaced with regimes of mobility, namely the relationships between the privileged movements of some and the forbidden migration of the powerless and exploited (Salazar, Glick Schiller 2014). These regimes monit-or, filter and decelerate the movements of large sections of the global popu-lation, usually coming from the so-called Global South (Shamir 2005; An-dersson 2014). In the case of Eritreans, these obstacles force them to rely on the help of family members abroad both to live in refugee camps in neigh-bouring countries (Ethiopia and Sudan) where they find themselves stuck, and to travel irregular and dangerous paths to wealthier or more secure des-tinations.

Moreover, close family ties can themselves be a resource for mobility, as in the case of family reunification. Although family reunification regulations vary greatly among European countries, they are usually more open to hold-ers of international protection than they are to those who are registered as

economic migrants. In the Eritrean community, weddings are sometimes organized with the sole purpose of migrating and with the payment of a certain amount of money (Treiber 2013; Costantini 2017; Belloni, Fusari 2018). In cases I came across during my fieldwork, these marriages were between a refugee or a naturalized citizen in a Western country and a refugee living in Ethiopia or Sudan, since emigration is mostly forbidden in Eritrea.

Once in Europe, Eritrean refugees still have limited freedom of movement. As forced migrants, they cannot go back to Eritrea. Moreover, their legal status implies some limits to transnational mobility. For instance, refugees in Italy can travel within the Schengen area, but need visas to enter countries such as the UK and the US, which are difficult to obtain. These border regulations have deep repercussions on family ties, their morphologies and the possibilities for cultivation through periodic visits. As it is impossible to return to Eritrea, many of my interlocutors in Europe often visit their relatives and friends living in other European countries, or more seldom in Ethiopia and Sudan. Moreover, since in Eritrea those who are not enrolled in the national service can obtain a passport and an exit visa, it is not uncommon for the parents of refugees to visit their children in Europe. These journeys map a wider family space which goes beyond both the local dimension and the country of departure and includes the different settings in which family members live.

Doing fieldwork across a hierarchy of destinations

With almost no exceptions, Eritreans are eligible for international protection in all the countries where the Geneva Convention has been ratified. However, the kinds of support they receive, as well as the possibilities they have of accomplishing individual aspirations and family expectations differ greatly. At the time my research was being conducted, in Ethiopia (one of the first countries of asylum) the majority of refugees lived in inhospitable camps and those who had a permit for living in the towns were not allowed to work. As a consequence, they could not integrate at a local level, nor become family providers sending money back home, but instead depended on support from relatives living in Western countries. In Italy too, the possibilities of realising their migratory project are scarce: due to the limits of the refugee reception system and of the job market, even having resided years in Italy many of my interlocutors lived in squatted buildings and survived on irregular, intermittent work and, again, frequently with the help of relatives who live elsewhere. This situation often fuels a strong desire to move to Northern Europe, which however cannot be satisfied, leaving them "stuck in transit" (Brekke, Brochmann 2015). Due to

the Dublin regulation[3], migrants have to apply for international protection and settle in the first European country of arrival. Implemented through the registration of migrants' fingerprints in a European database, this regulation aims at preventing secondary movements within the EU towards those countries which are considered to be "better destinations". Although Eritrean migrants are often at the bottom of the social fabric in terms of housing, education and working conditions in Northern Europe as well, there they can more easily attain better living conditions and experience upwards social mobility within the Eritrean transnational social space.

My long-term research conducted in four different countries (Ethiopia, Italy, the UK and Sweden), has allowed me to move across my interlocutors' hierarchy of destination countries, from the least desirable (Ethiopia) to the most desirable (Sweden and the UK). My interest in Eritrean migration began with my PhD research project, which led me to conduct a fieldwork project in Ethiopia in 2013-2014 on urban refugees' aspirations, daily life and relationships with their host communities. Following this, in 2016 I conducted ethnography in Rome on newly arrived migrants, looking in particular at their travel experiences and the reconfiguration of their sociality. More recently, I carried out fieldwork in Rome, London and Stockholm in 2017-2019 on migrants' ways of making and remaking home in the countries of settlement[4]. Although none of these research projects had a specific focus on family issues, *sidra* was a recurrent topic in my discussions with my research participants and a determining element in their migratory journeys, their concerns and their sense of home. In the ethnographic effort to understand what mattered most for them in respect to their social life, the study of family ties became a common theme running through my multi-sited research. As Boccagni writes, in transnational migration research the relevance of a multi-sited ethnography lies less in "the multiplication of relevant sites (which is an unsurprising outcome of extended mobility), than [in] the ties that enable a relational interdependence between them" (2016: 14). Thus, my aim was to explore the social practices and emotions on which

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3. The Dublin Regulation is a key part of the European effort to create a common regional asylum regime. It was introduced in 1997 and reformed in 2003 (Dublin II) and 2013 (Dublin III).

4. My PhD research was supported by the Doctoral School in Anthropology and Epistemology of Complexity (University of Bergamo) and was part of the activities of the IEMET (the Italian Ethnological Mission in Ethiopia-Tigray). After that I was involved in the project "Interview study in six transit and arrival countries", directed by the Felsberg Institute for Education and Academic Research. Finally, I conducted investigation in the ERC project "HOMInG – The home-migration nexus" (European Research Council Starting Grant no. 678456 (2016-2021)).

this connectedness relies and to sense and understand how they change at the different stages of people's migratory and biographical trajectories. In terms of methodology, I collected data through in-depth and biographical interviews and informal conversations. The latter emerged as a powerful tool of investigation in a community where discomfort towards direct questions, mistrust and suspicion are historically rooted attitudes, fuelled recently by the authoritarian government they have escaped and their condition as refugees (Massa 2016). Beside verbal interactions, I also accompanied migrants in their ordinary activities, attended celebrations, conducted home visits and spent time socialising with them.

Kinship for moving or staying put

At the beginning of 2014, Luam invited me for a tea in a fancy cafe in downtown Mekelle, the Northern Ethiopian town where I was conducting research. As soon as we sat down, she told me that during her stay in Addis Ababa a week earlier, she had married an Eritrean refugee in Italy and was waiting for an interview at the Italian Embassy as part of the family reunification procedure. As she explained, the decision was taken together with her parents who hoped that having a child in a Western country could improve their living conditions. During my fieldwork Luam and I often spent time together and this laid the basis for a friendship that allowed me to become intimately acquainted with her personal history.

As she explained to me on several occasions, migration was not a novelty in her family. In the Seventies, her father, Hagos – like many of his generation (Massa forthcoming) – had moved from the Northern Ethiopian countryside to the city of Asmara which at that time was part of Ethiopia. In Asmara he got a good job, married an Eritrean woman, had five children and, following Eritrean independence from Ethiopia in 1993, became an international migrant. His life conditions changed suddenly with the outbreak of the 1998/2000 Ethiopian-Eritrean war, when Ethiopian communities living in Eritrea became "enemies" and the target of violence and deportations (Negash, Tronvoll 2000; Riggan 2011; Massa 2017a). Hagos was forced to repatriate to Ethiopia, leaving Luam's mother alone with their children. As I showed elsewhere (Massa 2017b), recent political dynamics between Ethiopia and Eritrea have made many families "transnational", inducing people to confront painful choices and new prospects of mobility. While preparing *bunna* (traditional coffee) during one of the afternoons I spent in their home, Luam's mother explained me that in order to protect their children from post-war discrimination she had registered them as Eritrean citizens by relying on her nationality and thus transgressing the

common rule of patrilineality. However, when they were about to turn 18 and to be enrolled in the Eritrean national service, she had pushed them to restore the traditional model of lineage, acquiring their father's nationality, so as to have the chance to enter Ethiopia as citizens. For some years she sent her children away even against their will and only when the last child was safe in Ethiopia could she join them there.

Luam, having arrived in Ethiopia at the age of 17, was aware of the ways in which family could be a source of mobility capital for crossing semi-permeable borders. Although we had often discussed the mechanism of spousal migration within the Eritrean and Ethiopian communities, she denied having paid her husband and explained to me that the man, a former friend in Asmara, had had feelings for her since they were children. This version of the story was contradicted by rumours in the community, according to which her relatives abroad paid the market price for the marriage, about 10/15 thousand dollars. Regardless of the veracity of these contrasting versions of the story, they highlight the presence of different conceptions of marriage (of convenience, romantic, arranged), with Luam choosing to represent her own as romantic. To some extent, Luam's attempt should be read in light of what she had to prove and perform during her interview at the Italian embassy.

Indeed, at the time, the Italian embassy had been rejecting a growing number of applications for family reunification because the high number of applications for spousal reunification aroused suspicion, and these marriages came to be considered as "marriages of convenience". This is not surprising. Family reunification is the predominant form of migration into the European Union, leading EU member states to develop checks for identifying fraudulent marriages (de Hart 2017). These forms of scrutiny are implicitly based on contemporary Western ideas of family and intimacy (D'Aoust 2013; Infantino, 2014), since states do not legislate in a cultural vacuum but rather design their laws in line with the dominant values of the national culture. As Eggebø clarifies (2013), the norms used to detect the so-called marriage of convenience recall the idea of a "pure relationship" developed in the late twentieth century in the West (Giddens 2013), in which partners are bound together by love, equality and intimate sexuality, and in which love (rather than migration) is considered as the only acceptable motive for marriage. This idea of a "pure relationship" contrasts with other conceptualizations of marriage whereby, as in the Eritrean case, arranged marriages are the norm rather than the exception, and marriages for migration become socially legitimated under conditions of migration imaginary.

Luam worked hard for the interview with the Italian embassy which would determine whether or not she would be granted an entry visa. She often told me about her efforts to memorize the largest possible amount of information concerning the private life of her husband to make a good impression. Through Facebook and other social media, she tried to build a virtual form of intimacy with her husband, as a means of proving that her marriage was "authentic", valid and credible. Intriguingly, she spoke of these efforts using an ironic register which could be understood as a way of subverting the presumed objectivity of a certain idea of the "true marriage".

However, Luam's attempt to prove her marriage was not merely for convenience was not only addressed to the Italian embassy. It should also be understood in relation to the ways she thought of and represented herself. As part of an educated, urbanized and Westernized élite, and in line with Ethiopian governmental educational policies and with contemporary global flows, Luam acted as and felt herself to be a "modern woman", that is, as a subject imbued by values and fantasies in contrast with a model of femininity locally considered to be "traditional" (Adami 2018). Luam studied in a private college to improve her professional prospects, while also working several precarious jobs to grant herself financial independence and to fulfil her desires for commodities her family could not afford. Moreover, she was fascinated by the imaginary of modernity, which emerged in the ways she dressed and in her interest in languages, people and lifestyles coming from the West. While not abandoning but simply delaying her role as wife and mother, Luam, together with many other young women, interprets modernity not only in terms of consumer goods, but also through practical knowledge made up of values and feelings, such as autonomy, personal success and romantic love. Romantic love is a powerful vector for the dynamics of individualisation within modernity, and plays an increasing role in people's understanding of themselves (Mai, King 2009). In our moments of leisure, Luam told me without inhibition of her previous relationships with men, portraying these relationships in contrast with the models of arranged marriages and of marriages of convenience, a marriage type she herself was entering into in 2014. Paradoxically, migration reshaped Luam's conjugal ties but in the opposite way one might have expected. Her "not so romantic marriage" was indeed in contrast with her ideas of love which stemmed from local dynamics of change, and was rather in continuity with an idea of the spousal relationship she had not imagined for herself. At the same time, this choice seemed to be the best way for her to achieve her personal aspirations, which match with her family migratory desire.

Parenthood and long-distance relationships

Efrem is a 34-year-old Eritrean refugee who has been living in Rome for 10 years. We met in August 2017, when the squatted building in which he had been living for 4 years was suddenly evicted by the police. Together with his previous neighbours, Efrem participated in the protests organized by the housing movement and shared their indignation for the injustice they suffered as well as their concerns for the future. Nonetheless, in that same period, another event contributed to his sense of frustration, namely the news that the British embassy had denied him the entry visa he had requested to attend the birth of his son in London. Before leaving Eritrea, Efrem had married Huda, a young woman from a nearby village, who, in 2014, managed to get to London, then obtaining refugee status in the UK. The marriage had been an arranged marriage but constituted a deep bond between the two, since "it was celebrated in the name of God" as both explained to me.

Efrem was upset and saddened by the visa denial. He consulted a layer but he also demonstrated a certain degree of resignation. As a young man coming from Africa, he was well aware of the mobility regime which forced him to use the Mediterranean crossing to get to Europe. He was also familiar with the limited possibility of movement he had in Europe. In the three and a half years during which Efrem and Huda had both lived in Europe, the visa system for refugees between Rome and London determined the location, length and peculiarities of their meetings. Except for a two-month visit by Huda to Rome before the Schengen visa became mandatory for refugees travelling from the UK to Italy, the two had always met in Paris, where they could both travel to freely. The transnational equilibrium they had established in their intermittent relationship, however, entered into crisis with the birth of their son Said.

Huda also felt angry when she learned that her husband could not be present at the birth. I met her and Said in London in November 2017. While sipping a cup of a hot Eritrean spiced tea in the cosy flat provided by the local council, she nostalgically compared the images of birth she had from Eritrea, where a woman who has just given birth is able to rest for 40 days thanks to the care of her female relatives and neighbours, with her experience in London, where she found herself alone. Although Huda recognized Efrem's efforts, she also expressed disappointment with his hesitancy in applying for family reunification to move to the UK.

Each time I spoke with Efrem about his future he expressed his reluctance to leave his life in Rome, his permanent job, his good salary and even the new flat he was renting after the eviction – all achievements which he was

proud of. Indeed, compared with the precariousness experienced by many other Eritrean refugees in Rome, the level of stability he was able to achieve was quite exceptional, to the point that he had no desire to reach Northern Europe, as was the case with many of his peers. This stability allowed him to accomplish his moral and economic obligations towards his parents and relatives back home, by sending them remittances and by contributing towards his cousin's difficult journey to Europe. It also permitted him to take care of his older son by another woman, meaning he could bring him to Italy through the family reunification process when the boy was 8. Since the minimum fingerprinting age is 14, Efrem was able to stay with his child in Rome for some years and then, similarly to Samuel whose story opened this article, accompany him to Germany where the boy received protection as an unaccompanied minor.

At the same time, he was frustrated by this long-distance paternity, which he could experience and perform only through social media and parcels. When we met, Huda told me about Efrem's continuous requests for pictures and videos of Said, so as to follow, though in mediated and fragmented ways, his child's development. Moreover, a few days after the birth of his son he sent Huda a parcel of clothes, a baby carrier, blankets and toys for Said. He explained to me that he spent days collecting all these high-quality goods. Beside their economic price, those objects had deep symbolic and emotional value, as they were able to densify and materialize his parental care towards Said (see Svašek ed. 2012). However, that parcel was lost by the postal services, increasing Efrem's discouragement.

Nonetheless, he knew he could not ask them move to Italy: the social support that Huda received in London and the better possibility she had there for social, housing and economic integration made this option impossible. Many studies (see McSpadden 1999; Fàbos 2007; Jansen 2008) have demonstrated how forced migration have deep consequences on gendered subjectivities and particularly on masculinities, which social actors often articulate in terms of the loss of social status and gendered authenticity. In her study on migration to Denmark and the UK, Kleist (2010) shows how in Somali narratives welfare states play a significant part in shattering pre-existing gender relationships, by empowering women and leading to male misrecognition and loss of authority over their families. Within a transnational family arrangement, Efrem was experiencing a similar situation: the British social support for refugees and single mothers diminished the value of his achievements in Italy and his role as a breadwinner, conversely putting Huda in a position to put pressure on him to join them in London, remoulding the gender power relation. Moreover,

Huda's requests fuelled in Efrem a sense of his duties and responsibilities as a husband and a father, and reinforced the social and family pressures to move towards "better countries in the North" that many Eritreans in Italy are subject to. Efrem often expressed the feeling of being caught between his role towards his wife and son on the one hand, and his work, his ability to send remittances, his social life and his sense of home in Rome on the other. These two aspects are part of the same moral model of the "successful migrant" but could not be reconciled due to the mobility regime that operated between Italy and the UK that prevented him from freely moving back and forth.

Hierarchies among peers

My last case study is Binyam, a 34-year-old Eritrean man living in Rome, whose story highlights how the differences between European countries can influence horizontal ties, in this case, relationships between siblings. One day in June 2018, when we were both attending the wedding of a mutual friend, he told me of his discomfort in relation to his younger brother's request: "He lives in Sweden and wants to visit Rome with his wife and children. How can I host them here? You know where I live". Binyam was living at the squatted building in the outskirts of Rome, an abandoned public sector office which the inhabitants had turned it into a living space by installing shared bathrooms and dividing it into small apartments. However, the building was dirty and old and the ever-increasing number of squatters (about 800) meant there were not enough toilets and rooms. Binyam lived in a room with two friends and a makeshift kitchen. What is more, many of the inhabitants suffered from forms of marginality and socio-economic deprivation. While creating the possibility for forms of solidarity with which to challenge the lack of work and housing support, this type of informal accommodation also contributed towards producing forms of exclusion and self-exclusion. Binyam went on: "My brother has a beautiful house there in Sweden, even though he reached Europe after me".

Binyam is the third of four brothers, all of them in Europe, and was the second of them to leave Eritrea in 2003, at the age of 17. At that time, the Eritrean government had started to expel all international organizations from the country (HRW 2009), including the German NGO for which Binyam was working as a translator. As someone previously employed by a foreign NGO and as a young man who should have been enrolled in the national service, Binyam attracted the interest of the military police: "One day they knocked on my parents' door, but luckily I was not at home. When they told

me about it, I decided to escape. After a few weeks, I crossed the border into Sudan together with my girlfriend". Binyam and his girlfriend reached Italy six months later thanks to the financial support of his brother who lived in the Netherlands. While Binyam's fingerprints were registered by the Italian authorities his girlfriend managed to evade the Italian authorities and was thus able to move abroad. Together they decided that she would continue her journey to Northern Europe with Binyam's brother's support. Then, once she had settled somewhere, they would get married and request a spouse visa. The young woman reached the UK, but things did not go as Binyam expected: according to his account, after a few months she got engaged to someone else. Binyam told me how furious he was with her, but also how confused he felt about his life. He had already spent more than one year in Italy but, imagining himself to be in transit, he had done nothing to integrate. Finally, he decided to try his luck and went to the Netherlands to ask for asylum there. In the Netherlands he stayed in a refugee centre that was relatively close to his brother's town, so they could meet frequently. However, after three years, his request was rejected on the basis of the Dublin regulation and he was forced to go back to Italy.

Binyam did not like to talk about the first few years following his return to Italy. As I have already mentioned, when we met in 2017, he was experiencing housing insecurity and was surviving on precarious jobs, which had nevertheless allowed him to economically support his younger brother's journey to Europe. His brother had landed in Italy in 2013 when the procedure of collecting fingerprints at the Italian coast was less rigorous, and thus he was easily able to reach Sweden and obtain refugee status there.

Binyam felt a deep bond with his siblings, a bond which he expressed through social media, posting their pictures or using a collage of photos of them all in their countries of settlement as the wallpaper for his phone. These kinds of collages were often present on the mobile phones and Facebook walls of my interlocutors. They reunite siblings but also parents and children at a distance and can be understood as a sort of "virtual household", where affective ties are reinforced from afar. At the same time, when Binyam talked about his siblings, his love towards them was intertwined with a sense of unease provoked by his less favourable housing and economic conditions. This unease was particularly strong with regards to his younger brother who arrived in Europe after Binyam and whose beautiful house, job and marriage, made him feel left behind and outdone. In Eritrea as elsewhere (Christiansen, Utas, Vigh 2006), youth is invested with a lower level of social prestige, power and authority than later life stages, so migration is an attempt at accessing adulthood as well as modernity.

Binyam, who refused to get married despite pressure from his older brothers, was stuck in a condition of quasi-adulthood and frequently said he felt "old". This feeling of being old can be read in relation to the mismatch between his actual life and the roles he expected to (and was expected to) achieve.

This mismatch was also exacerbated by the difficulties he had in hosting his siblings. In the Eritrean diasporic social space, it is very important to host friends and family members for holidays and celebrations such as weddings or funerals. Hosting is a way in which migrants can demonstrate the success of their migration, but it is also a practice of family making, since it allows people to remain in and become part of kinship networks, performing them despite the distance. Moreover, due to the years he spent in the Netherlands and the particulars of Italian citizenship laws, Binyam was the only one of his siblings who still had a long way to go before obtaining European citizenship. Becoming a European citizen has an important symbolic value for many Eritrean refugees, not so much because it builds a bond with the host country, but because it allows people to move within the European space, to travel and to return to Eritrea. Binyam, for example, often expressed the burden of not having been able to see his mother for more than 16 years and could not hide his sense of shame when thinking about how his younger brother would visit her before him.

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to show how obstacles to mobility penetrate relationships among parents, spouses and siblings at a distance, by taking into consideration a transnational space that is wider than the one described by the polar tension between sending and receiving countries, for it also includes migrants' affective geographies, namely the plurality of localities which are linked by affective relations among dispersed migrant families. In the ethnographic cases presented here, these locations - which include Ethiopia, Southern and Northern European countries, members and non-members of the EU - have different reception policies, job opportunities and social support systems that can complicate and reshape family relationships at a distance. While describing a landscape of legal structures, constraints and limitations within which migrants try to move, settle and realize their aspirations, this study has sought to shed light on the forms of agency which emerge in the interconnections between social structures and desires. These forms of agency are irreducible to a model of the universal and rational individual, for they are interlaced with migrants' subjectivities, the emotional and social ties between them and their relatives in their country

of origin, as well as with a whole web of values and duties shaping individual and collective expectations, aspirations and moral codes of conduct (see Thorsen 2017). In looking at Luam's choices and reflections on her marriage, Efrem's dilemmas about his secondary mobility with respect to his role as a father and husband, and Binyam's discomfort in relation to his siblings, I show the relevance of moral economies, feelings and desires, which guide social action in situations of constraint, powerlessness and inequality, and which are often inconsistent and in conflict with each other. I take into consideration different kinds of family ties precisely to shed light on the multiple tensions migrants face and the tactics they deploy in their efforts to conform at a distance to the multiple kin roles they occupy, as well as on the distress and dilemmas of those who fail.

The first ethnographic case shows kinship as a resource for mobility and, conversely, the relevance of the decision to migrate in forming new ties. While it is known that people use kinship ties in creative ways to suit their interests, the cases here presented shed light on how these ways of "playing" with family ties are transmitted across generations. Far from being new phenomena related with contemporary transnational migration, such practices have historically depth and can be fruitfully approached from a diachronic perspective (see Declich 2016). Moreover, the discourses which Luam, the young woman, used to talk about her marriage choice show the complexities of a subject at the intersection of different scales of values and moral economies (being a modern woman, going to the West, helping her parents). This complexity suggests that rather than asking if a marriage is one of love or convenience, we should consider the multiple social individual expectations which are involved in both conceptions of marriage. From the point of view of a young Ethiopian-Eritrean woman, marrying an Eritrean refugee in Europe could be considered an attempt to escape the feelings of abjection which characterize African youth (Ferguson 2006), and to build connections to a globalized and modern world she feels she is part of. In the case of Luam, her marriage is not purely romantic, but neither is it merely instrumental, since it involves the category of desire. Desire is in fact a privileged analytical category through which to grasp the ways in which migrants occupy or resist the different positions in which they find themselves placed.

Desire also emerges as a central element in the case of Binyam who, after being "betrayed" by his girlfriend, experienced the failure of his migratory project in relation to that of his brothers, as well as in the case of Efrem who pondered over reuniting with his wife and son in light of multiple personal, social and family factors. These ethnographic materials demonstrate how

the hierarchies of destination countries and obstacles to mobility can be a factor in putting geographical distance between families. Yet they can also influence reciprocal expectations among relatives, and the ways in which a person can perform a certain role towards her/his family members, such as the one of parent or partner. Moreover, they can contribute in creating a disparity of power between couples or siblings to the benefit of the spouse or the brother/sister living in a better country, regardless of their age or gender. During their migratory trajectory, people can find themselves in one or more of these contrasting roles, revealing the complexities of the family at a distance. From this perspective, this article describes the interplay of distance and closeness, love and a sense of inadequacy which characterizes many transnational families and brings into question the aprioristic conceptualization of distance as a pure necessity (de Guzman, Brown, Edwards 2018).

To conclude, these pages have demonstrated how in the intersection between legal constraints and opportunities, affections and family responsibility, personal aspirations and subjectivities, new family configurations emerge, which can create the premise for new mobilities or immobilities, new proximities and new distances. Hence family ties appear as plastic and creative, but not immune to the violence of national categorizations. Looking at transnational conjugal, parental and sibling ties is a vantage point with which to analyse border regimes, globalization, unequal economic and power relations in their most intimate dimension.

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