POSTCOLONIAL ORGANISING:
AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE ERITREAN COMMUNITY
IN MILAN

Martina Martignoni
PhD
2015
School of Management
University of Leicester
ABSTRACT
This thesis explores the politics of self-organising of the Eritrean community in Milan and investigates the interconnections between postcoloniality, migration, difference and organising. Postcoloniality is seen as a crucial time-space for contemporary forms of organising. I employ a postcolonial approach not only to understand the historical environment in which my research is placed but also to imagine new forms of organising that involve migrants in Europe. I approach the problem of organising by engaging with literature on diversity management and multiculturalism. Moving from a critique of these practices I look for alternative forms of organising – specifically inside social movements – and ask what the effects of bringing postcolonial critique to bea organisational practices are and what does it mean to organise in a postcolonial way.

Oral history, the methodology I use, shares with postcolonial studies the attempt of deconstructing a homogenous approach to history, giving value instead to subjectivity and to radical conflicts around heterogeneity.

I examine the history of the Eritrean community in Milan from the vantage point of the lives of Eritrean migrants and second generations and I argue that two interrelated activities shaped their politics: practices of self-organisation in everyday life and the diasporic organization when dealing with politics concerning Eritrea. An analysis of this interrelation brings me to discuss what self-organising looks like in postcoloniality and what is the role of difference in it. While difference has often been connected to identities, I argue that the experience of the Eritreans in Milan suggests looking at difference as defined by practices. Difference comes to be a constituent divergence that rejects relativism and comparison. By thinking the relationship between postcoloniality and organization the thesis aims to contribute to the imagination of new forms of organising among differences.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank first of all the people who participated to my PhD research. My respondents, who trusted me and decided to tell me about their lives. It has been an honour to enter in your houses, know your families and listen to you. You are all brave and honest women and men and I will carry you in my life. In particular I want to thank Ades for being so kind with me and for becoming a friend. My supervisors, Dimitris Papadopoulos and Jo Brewis, who supported me and helped me with a lot of work and passion all over this four-years of adventure. You have been much more than just supervisors to me: friends and persons I could trust with everything.

Then I would like to thank all the people who helped me in different ways during my research. My PhD colleagues, the academics and staff at the University of Leicester, who with their activity, their comments and their interests have inspired and suggested me. In particular: Teresa and Sharon for working ‘behind the scenes’ and making things easy; the CPPE for creating a lively political and intellectual space of encounter and debate where I felt at home; the Leicester Migration Network for providing an environment where I could share my research and meet people working in my field; Donald, Blandine and Marco for giving me the opportunity to work and build one brick of my future with them. The people I have met during my study trip to California, in particular: Marisol de la Cadena, all the participants to the Sawyer Seminar at UC Davis in 2013 and James Clifford. You have made my journey so engaging and stimulating. My friends in Leicester, who made the – not always easy – stay in the UK an enjoyable period. I love you all. My family, a large one, made by all those – my parents, my sister, my relatives, my dearest friends and my dog – who always and unconditionally helped and loved me. Your love is returned.

I want to profoundly thank Andrea, my love and mate, for being always supportive and for never backing down even when things looked difficult. I am so lucky to have shared with you the last seven years and to share with you my future and the new life arriving soon.

This thesis is dedicated to all the migrants who today are struggling to get to Europe. Your courage, love for life and force will always push me to do more for freedom.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Introduction**

Chapter 1 – Postcoloniality and Organisation  
1.1 Postcoloniality  
1.2 Organisation Under the Lenses of Postcolonial Studies: Hybridity and Difference  
1.3 From a Postcolonial Critique to Forms of Postcolonial Organizing

Chapter 2 – Historical Context. Eritrea from Colonialism to Diaspora  
2.1 Italian Colonialism in Eritrea  
2.2 Eritrean Diaspora  
2.3 Eritreans in Italy

Chapter 3 – Research Methodology: Oral History  
3.1 Oral History: Bringing Heterogeneity and Difference into Historiography  
3.2 Data Collecting  
3.3 Data Analysis. Doing Research With Memories  
3.4 Oral History, an Experiment in Equality

Chapter 4 – Postcolonial Condition of Eritrean Diaspora  
4.1 Eritrean-Italian Relations in Eritrea  
4.2 Postcolonial Belongings in Second Generations  
4.3 (In)Visibility: Migrations, Subalternity and Agency in Postcolonial Condition

Chapter 5 – Autonomous Self-Organising in Migration  
5.1 Community Organising  
5.2 Literacy  
5.3 Housing  
5.4 Childcare  
5.5 Routes, Documents, Work and Social Status  
5.6 Conclusions

Chapter 6 – Rethinking Difference  
6.1 Diaspora Organising  
6.2 Intertwining Lives  
6.3 Difference and Identity in Postcolonial Organising  
6.4 Difference as Practice, Difference as Divergence  
6.5 Conclusions

Bibliography
Introduction

In the night between the 19th and the 20th of April 2015 some 800 people died off the coast of Libya while trying to reach Italian shores. Most of them were crowded into the hold when their boat capsized because of their attempts to be rescued by a nearby boat. The accident, the worst in the history of migrations through the Mediterranean, is just one of many similar events that are turning the sea into a cemetery for thousands of people. In the aftermath of this catastrophe, Ruth Ben-Ghiat, professor of History and Italian Studies and expert in Italian colonial history, retrieved, in an article published on line by CNN, “fascist past echoes” in how Italians are facing the migrant crisis. Recalling the historical link between Italy and Somalia, Eritrea – countries from which many of those migrants came – and Libya – the country from which the boats crossing the Mediterranean regularly depart – Ben-Ghiat (2015) wrote that:

“the migrants traversing the Mediterranean today form part of a century-long chain of migrations, expulsions, and exiles sparked by Italy’s imperial ambition and commercial interests, the post-colonial anger of African leaders, and now mass economic desperation and political strife. Long after the formal end of Italian colonialism, these Eritreans, Somalis, and Libyans have inherited the histories of influence and exploitation that shaped their home countries. It also affects the treatment of Africans who settle in Italy”.

The historical relations between Italians and Eritreans and their influence on the life of Eritreans who migrated to Italy are the starting point for my research. Coming from a background in Contemporary History and with a strong interest in postcolonial studies, I felt frustrated by the lack of academic studies on the Italian colonial past. Even more frustrating for me was – and still is – the absence of a public debate about the racist and violent past of my country and of an attempt to reflect on how this past might have consequences for our present, especially on how Italians perceive and experience the presence of migrants. Although this debate has come to the fore since 2011 thanks to the insurrections in the Maghreb and especially in Libya – a former colony and Italian economic and political partner up until recently – for years it had been left aside in the historiographical literature. As a matter of fact, issues of colonialism had been erased, for a long time, from an Italian historiography that, emerging from the Second World War and fascism, wanted to forget its past. The loss of Italian colonies, ratified by the United Nations in 1947, had been lived as an injustice suffered by Italy, a country only able to obtain a temporary trustee mandate for ten years over Somalia. Perhaps, the inglorious
nature of Italy’s colonial history is one of the reasons for its absence in the national historiographical debate, but the interesting fact remains that the end of Italian colonial power did not spark off a critical debate on colonialism.

In fact, the only reconstruction of the colonial experience offered by the Italian republic clearly shows a difficulty in overcoming colonial thinking. In the post-war years the Foreign Ministry published an impressive 50 volumes work – L’Italia in Africa/Italy in Africa – with the objective of mystifying the history of Italian presence in Africa. Underlining, especially through the comparison with other contemporary colonial projects, the merits of Italian colonialism the authors wanted to underline the ‘diversity’ of the Italian colonial experience (Del Boca 2000). It is this aspect that has remained in the collective imagination: that of a less important, but also less violent and aggressive, colonial enterprise when compared to the British or the French ones. The ease with which Italians continue considering themselves ‘brava gente’ (‘good people’) is surely the consequence of the missed reconstruction and circulation of the history of Italian colonialism. In fact it was a period, as Del Boca explains, characterised by the abundant use of violence, through, for example, the employment of chemical gases against the Ethiopian population between 1935 and 1940, the deportation of people from Cyrenaica, the creation of concentration camps in Libya, and the extermination of the followers of the Coptic Church. For a long time Angelo Del Boca has been the only Italian historian interested in such episodes of Italian history. Nonetheless, despite the absence of institutional or academic incentives and despite the difficulties in being granted access to archives, in the last twenty years some historians have published studies that finally allow us to deal with the colonial question. These range from the reconstruction of the military and colonial enterprises (Labanca 1994; 2002) to the reconstruction of the relations between Italy and the former colonies or of the ‘Italian conscience’ toward colonialism (Del Boca 1992); from the important exhibition on fascist racism in Bologna in 1994 “La Menzogna della Razza – The Fabrication of Race” (Jesi 1994), to more recent studies that investigate the relationships between colonial and postcolonial Italy (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2012). Looking for possible avenues of research I have discovered that a good number of scholars1 have started digging into Italian colonial and postcolonial history and have opened up a space, both inside and outside academia, for this topic to be researched and debated.

1 Others include: Sandra Ponzanesi (2004; 2005); Giulia Barrera (2005); Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan (2005; 2010); Giulietta Stefani (2007); Nicoletta Poidimani (2009); Sabrina Marchetti (2010); Uoldelul Chelati Dirar (2011); Gabriele Proglio (2011); Gaia Giuliani (2013) and Valeria Deplano (2014).
Feeling less lonely, I started looking for works that could shed light on the life of Eritreans in Italy. I was determined to do research that could speak of colonialism and postcolonialism in Italy and that could do it from the perspective of migrants. In a quite fortuitous way I encountered the work of Sabrina Marchetti (2010) on Eritrean domestic workers in Rome and from there I started building my puzzle. Working from the perspective of migrants meant for me first of all cultivating their subjective experience inside historical processes, hence the choice of using oral history (Portelli 1997) as my research methodology. It also meant finding stories that could open up an understanding of the active and autonomous practices of migrants (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013).

Reading about the Eritreans in Italy I found that the role of political organisation around the war of independence from Ethiopia was central to that community (Poidimani and Tabacco 2001). I found these practices of organising and especially the information about their relations with groups of activists in Italy fascinating. Therefore I decided to follow this trail and explore the history of how Eritreans in Milan organised themselves and entertained relations with others.

The questions that were leading me – which became my research questions – thus revolved around the organisational forms that migrants coming from Eritrea developed, the relations they built with other actors in the urban complex and the challenges they raised to the government in a country that in the past had been their colonial ruler. These questions – that underline strategies, political and living practices carried out by these actors of postcolonial migration – are useful to conceptualise the topic of the organisation in postcoloniality in order to imagine alternative ways of organisation. I call ‘postcolonial organising’ the analytical attempt of describing what could be an appropriate framework that considers postcoloniality as a key dimension for emerging organisations in contemporary Europe. My research questions here are what postcoloniality looks like when we look for it in forms of organisation; and how the intellectual turn of postcolonial studies – strictly linked to social movements and struggles against colonialism and for mobility – could be useful in generating a transformation of the practices of organising in a postcolonial time.

Hybridity and hybridisation (Bhabha 1994; Young 1995) – of cultures and social relations – seemed the first theoretical place to look for an answer, but during my research I moved from this concept to what seemed to me a more appropriate one, that of ‘difference’ and relations among differences. This movement was justified by the data I had
collected. I could see in there the importance of the distinctiveness of being Eritrean\(^2\) and its relevance in creating encounters and hybridizations both in everyday practices and in politics. The way in which I have debated the concept of difference in this thesis moves from a critique to a rethinking of it, from difference as the opposite of identity to difference as the opposite of indifference; from difference as belonging to difference as practice; from difference as rupture to difference as divergence.

The first chapter of the thesis delineates the underlying framework of my research: the encounter of postcolonial critique and organisation studies. In particular I discuss practices of diversity management and of multiculturalism to see how the encounter of differences has been theorised in organisation and management studies. Moving from a critique of these practices I start looking for alternative organisations among differences and retrieve the elements of postcoloniality which are present there. Examples from social movements are taken into consideration as spaces where alternatives are actively sought. Chapter two then introduces the historical context in which my research is placed, sketching the history of the encounter between Italians and Eritreans from the beginning of Italian colonialism in Africa and the ‘invention’ of Eritrea, to the migration of Eritreans to Italy. Here I discuss the concepts of diaspora (Clifford 1994) and of ‘diaspora space’ (Brah 1996) in relation to Eritrean migrations and present a historical account regarding the lives – and how they were represented in Italian newspapers – of Eritreans who migrated to Italy. In chapter three, I present the methodology used to gather my data – oral history – and offer clarifications on its connections with postcoloniality and migrations, as well as on its use in organisation studies.

Chapters four, five and six contain the analysis of my primary data – oral history interviews with Eritrean migrants and second generations living in Milan – mixed with secondary data from literary sources and newspapers. In chapter four, moving from the colonial period to the post-colonial one, mixing experiences of colonization and migration, I explore the postcolonial condition of the Eritrean diaspora, i.e. how the (post)colonial encounter is lived and enacted by Eritrean migrants. Chapter five presents an extended account of the autonomous practices of self-organising of the Eritreans in Milan – a city I have chosen as site of research because of the importance of its Eritrean community in the politics of Eritrean diaspora in the past. These autonomous practices are discussed as everyday interactions, lifestyles, and acts creating a community. By considering Milan a

\(^2\) As it will become clear in the thesis being Eritrean is not defined as a fixed identity, rather it is defined by a belonging to an on-going and changing struggle. It is a shifting signifier impossible to essentialise.
‘diaspora space’ constituted and shared by migrants and non-migrants I show how the everyday practices of self-organising of Eritreans open a series of questions and change the landscape of politics. In the final chapter I continue the analysis of the self-organising practices, focusing on diaspora on one side and on the encounter with others on the other. The results of this analysis allow me to theorise a different way of thinking differences and their organisation, which I develop in the last section of the thesis. By thinking the relationship between postcoloniality and organisation and the growing relevance of the postcolonial approach to understand emerging forms of organisation, the aim of this thesis is to contribute to the imagination of new forms of organising among differences.
Chapter 1
Postcoloniality and Organisation

The problem from which my research questions stem is what happens when forms of organisation are affected by postcoloniality. To start answering this question, in the first section of this chapter I establish how I understand and use the concept of postcoloniality and the approach that it entails. Then I move on to introduce how the postcolonial approach has influenced studies of organisation and management and in particular Critical Management Studies in its aim to deconstruct theories and practices of management. Among the aspects that have been considered by these studies, I will focus here in particular on difference and hybridity in forms of organisation. These two concepts, as will become clear, will be discussed throughout the entire thesis. Moving from a use of a postcolonial approach as a critique, to postcolonial as an approach useful for rethinking forms of organisation among differences today, in the last section of this chapter I start investigating how differences and migrations contribute to reshaping forms of organisation, especially inside social movements. At the same time I start imagining which elements need to be considered if we want to think and build forms of postcolonial organising.

1.1 Postcoloniality

With the term postcoloniality I want to stress different features: first, the importance of the colonial period and of its present legacies in building the western world, both materially and perceptually; secondly, the fundamental role of anticolonial struggles – and of antiracism and antiapartheid struggles – in making the inequalities of colonial and racist systems explode and in opening up the possibility of a global perspective on history and the present from those places that have been defined as the ‘peripheries’ of history; thirdly, I want to highlight the contemporary postcolonial composition of inhabitants of the former metropolis and therefore the active role of migrants in creating it. Postcoloniality can be defined as the reproduction and diffusion, inside the former metropolitan space¹, of a ‘protean space’, peculiar to colonial societies (Fanon 1961): a heterogeneous social space characterised by the coexistence on the same territory of different ways of production, different work regimes and different historical temporalities. The global diffusion and the irruption of this heterogeneous space, typical of colonial spaces, both inside and outside

¹ The term ‘metropolitan’ here and throughout is used in the French sense of the word. In the French colonial system, France, the territory of the coloniser country, was called ‘métropole’. This term is often extended in postcolonial studies to all the geographical spaces of the coloniser countries in opposition to the geographical space of the colonies.
the western world, allows us to define our present as *postcolonial* (Mezzadra 2008). We can imagine also the postcolonial as the implosion of geographical, historical and political distances inside the same space. Elements that once were distanced and separate collapse into the same time-space, creating heterogeneity.

So, what is postcolonial studies? A first descriptive answer would be that it occupies a mixed field of studies, including literature, a number of social sciences, and even economic theory. We should thus speak of a constellation of postcolonial studies (Loomba 1998). Born mostly within the Anglophone academia from the Eighties onwards, postcolonial studies have been taken up in many parts of the world and in many fields. Since its inception it has called into question disciplinary boundaries, issuing a challenge to modern (western) forms of knowledge organisation. Postcolonial critique aims on the one hand to problematize institutions, cultures, languages and histories that, more or less consciously and more or less openly, have their basis in colonial history and in an Eurocentric vision of history, culture, and so on. On the other hand postcolonial critique aims to give the possibility to histories, languages, cultures, institutions and people that have been captured, changed in their meanings and hidden by colonialism and the West, to express themselves, have legitimacy, and also challenge Western institutions and cultures.

We can in fact trace a double movement of postcolonial critique: deconstructive and constructive. Though these two moments are not at all conceptually separated and they are impossible to think and develop autonomously, I am going to use this distinction to present in a very general way the contribution of postcolonial studies until now and to look at how this approach, and in particular its constructive moment, might be an instrument to rethink practices of organisation.

Postcolonial critique can be interpreted as a stance able to unveil and deconstruct at various levels existing forms of organisation based on – in their broadest sense – colonial relations. First of all the postcolonial approach grew inside the contestation of the colonial organisation of the world by liberation movements². Postcolonial studies is, in fact, genealogically linked not only to colonial fractures, but also to anti-colonial struggles. There is, in other words, no ‘postcolonial’ without anti-colonialism. So, what does the *post* prefix mean? Simply put, the postcolonial time is the time that comes after colonialism. But the process of decolonisation has to be understood as a complicated one. Firstly, it extends in

---

² Fanon’s work for example is explicitly and strongly addressed to the colonised people, to ‘the wretched of the earth’. With his narration of the experience of the Algerian war that he lived from the inside taking part in the FLN (Front de Libération National), the Algerian liberation front, and which he analysed through the role of class, race and violence, Fanon (2012a) wrote the text that has been recognised as the manifesto of the anticolonial struggles and Third World liberation.
time and space, embracing three centuries in several parts of the world: from the 18th and 19th century, from the Americas to Australia and New Zealand, through Asia and Africa, up to the 1970s, in the cases of Angola and Mozambique for example. Secondly, the historical consequentiality and the linearity of historical time are immediately challenged by postcolonial studies. The decolonising process, indeed, is not the overcoming of the past’s remains. It is a process marked and conquered by anti-colonial struggles and by the resistances that have contested and, in the end, broken imperial chains.

Questioning historical linearity and the idea of a temporality that proceeds progressively through stages implies that postcolonial time tells us about the coexistence of several times. In other words, the post does not represent a radical rupture with the colonial past, nor the end of forms of inequality and exploitation inside a linear succession of development. On the contrary, the effects of colonialism are spread out at a global level, crossing the metropolitan spaces, even if colonialism as a historical process has ended. The term post therefore also contains inside itself a reference to neo-colonial processes, no longer geographically bounded, but re-articulated at a transnational level. At the same time, the term post shows the emergence of a clear break in history, the victory of anti-colonialist movements against colonialism. The struggles against colonialism have challenged the rigidity of the boundary between the métropole and the colonies. In destroying imperial powers, anti-colonial struggles have opened up possibilities for a new organisation of the former colonies: think, for example, of the important experience of the ‘non-aligned countries’. At the same time the dismantling of the colonial system has, in some way, represented the relation of coloniser to colonised on a global level and in a new way. In this sense postcolonial time doesn’t concern geographically ‘far away’ areas or geographically circumscribed spaces, but it is a time of contemporaneity and globalisation.

The ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ of the world are in fact a historical construction of colonialism that is today contested in everyday life through migrations. This conceptual division between centre and periphery, occident and orient, north and south, civilised and uncivilised regions, sustained the invasion of lands and the control of people by colonial powers and today still works at the level of ‘cultural’ differences. Edward Said, in his fundamental 1978 *Orientalism*, showed the workings of this division and its production of meaning inside the self-defined occidental world. Said’s (1995 [1978]) notion of *orientalism*

---

3 The Non-Aligned Movement is comprised of more than 100 countries and started officially with the first conference in Belgrade in 1961 (Fanon 1965 [1961]). The movement was promoted mainly by Josip Broz Tito (Yugoslavia), Gamal Abdel Nasser (Egypt) and Jawaharlal Nehru (India). It had the objective of giving the possibility to the ‘less developed’ countries to self-determine and propose a political alternative to the ones offered by USSR and the US.
is a fundamental contribution to the field: his study is mainly directed to analyse and deconstruct the colonial discourse, which is not simply retraceable in politics but also in literature. Said shows how orientalism is a hegemonic discourse that pervades the thinking of the occident in a “productive” and not “unilaterally inhibiting” way (Said 1995: 14). His work then is mainly addressed to the occidental world – and in particular to academia – on the basis that:

“Orientalism is – and does not simply represent – a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world.” (Said 1995: 12)

Said’s message goes to the core of the problem raised by postcolonial studies, the question of knowledge production. Through an approach that critiques a linearity of history and the centrality of the west – through the separation between ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ – we can see that western knowledge is simply one form amongst others and that, moreover, it is not ‘pure: it is the product of hybridisation and encounter, resistances and conflicts on the part of the very often silenced ‘subalterns’. It is from this perspective that Ranajit Guha in his *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983) critiques the category of ‘prepolitical’ – and the historicism linked to this kind of description – proposed by Hobsbawm in order to describe Third World peasants’ actions. Examining cases of peasants’ insurrections in the British India of the 19th century, Guha shows that it is not possible to apply in toto European categories of modernity – including Marxist ones – to the history of southern Asia, mostly because these categories, together with the related concept of historical time as uniform and uninterrupted, are challenged by this history. It is a history characterised by the presence of practices – such as the invocation of divinities and spirits – that cannot be interpreted as traces of the past but must be seen as essential aspects of the relations of power inside which the elites and the subaltern classes of South Asia operated. Inside the reasoning that generates a re-reading of the history of the Indian subcontinent from a subaltern perspective, the *Subaltern Studies* collective⁴ opened a discussion involving Marxist theories, engaging in particular with Antonio Gramsci (1992), from whom they take the concept of *subaltern*. The reflection about Marx’s thought, framed

---

⁴ Born at the beginning of the eighties amongst scholars (such as Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Gyanendra Pandey, Shahid Amin, David Arnold, David Hardiman, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Gayatri Spivak) mostly from the University of Delhi, the collective *Subaltern Studies* (Conference of Non-Aligned 1961) put at the centre of its research the more neglected and less represented figures in history and social sciences. The collective aim, indeed, is to rebuild the history of the Indian subcontinent, ‘listening’ and giving voice to the subalterns, whom the dominant historiography - Eurocentric and from the British colonisers, or from the Indian nationalist élite - had silenced.
within a wider critique of European concepts, is the main issue opened up by Dipesh Chakrabarty in his *Provincializing Europe* (2000a). He aims, starting from the work of Guha and of the collective of *Subaltern Studies*, to explore the potentialities and the limits of some social and political categories of Europe for the conceptualization of political modernity in the context of non-European life worlds.

Stemming from the struggles of generations of black people in several historical and geographical contexts, the production of alternative knowledge around race and the critique of the knowledge produced in the middle of a colonial and occidental landscape are another decisive front of struggle for postcolonial studies. The creation of race has been analysed in fact in different contexts: from the African slaves and their descendants in the Americas, to the movement of black people between America and Europe, the UK in particular; from the definition of race in the colonies to the impact of race in the lives of migrants in Europe. Authors like W.E.B. Du Bois and C.L.R. James gave an historical revolutionary insight on the history of black people in the Americas. Du Bois (1962 [1935]) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, studied the role of black people, and of slavery, in the construction of the U.S., in particular through the historical event of the American Civil War. Following the example of Du Bois – who provided inspiration with his work on the African slave trade (Du Bois 1999 [1896]) – another great black historian marked a break with the work of traditional historiography. With his book *The Black Jacobins*, James (1980 [1938]) not only writes the unknown history of the slaves’ revolution at the end of 18th century in Haiti, but also proposes a new reading of the French Revolution and European modernity itself. Through the narration of the history of this successful revolution, James not only brings to light an unknown but incredibly significant historical process, but also problematizes the universal and homogeneous narration of European modernity, highlighting its partiality. More recently, studies on blackness and race have varied from defining concepts of diaspora and diasporic culture and identity among black people (Gilroy 1987; 1993) to opening the field of cultural studies to the lives of women, black people, migrants and the marginalised, with particular attention to questions of blackness, race and anti-racism in the UK (Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hall 1980; University of Birmingham. Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies 1982). Particularly relevant in relation to my research are those studies that considered how the notion of race is constructed and continuously reshaped inside the colonial encounter. Significant studies (e.g. McClintock 1995; Stoler 2002) have focused on how racial boundaries were created

---

5 This topic will be explored more closely in relation to the Eritrean-Italian colonial encounter in chapter four.
through the management of sex inside the colonies. Racial discourses and practices, these studies show, were not static features but were introduced and modified so as to install and maintain ‘white prestige’ in the colonies. There is evidence that the separation coloniser-colonised was not self-evident or given, but instead created and managed.

1.2 Organisation Under the Lenses of Postcolonial Studies: Hybridity and Difference

Practices of organising are at the centre of my research, since I inquire upon the forms of self-organising of Eritrean people in Milan. It is crucial to ask what is the meaning of organisation in a postcolonial condition. To explore this meaning I decided to approach the field of management studies. Management didn’t escape from a critical review and in fact a postcolonial approach has been taken into account by Critical Management Studies in particular in order to deconstruct or ‘defamiliarise’ management. The first assumption that moves critical management scholars in taking into account the postcolonial approach is that our present is characterised by fragmentation and social, cultural, economic, historical, and juridical heterogeneity. Organisational dynamics cannot be read outside of this complexity. The second assumption is that the colonial experience affected the birth of management studies (Frenkel and Shenhav 2006) and, therefore, rethinking it in a critical way, ‘defamiliarising’ organisational phenomena, means also having a postcolonial approach to the present organisational processes. Given its capacity to underline some aspects of the present, such as the redefinition of the modernist concepts of space and time, the relation between colonial (past) and current neoliberal forms of control and management, but also resistance and subtraction as political practices, postcolonial theory is an useful approach in management studies and, in particular, it is apt for an internalist critique. The use of a postcolonial approach in management studies, thus, inserts itself into the broader critique of management offered by Critical Management Studies.

What are the effects of postcolonial research on theorising organisations and management in Critical Management Studies? Studies have focused on (a) the inextricable and deep connections between the birth and development of management and colonialism – and the construction of the discourse of modernity linked to these – and (b) the neo-colonial attitude still pervading management studies. Examining and understanding the influences of colonialism and resistances to it in constituting and producing current practices and theories of management, research has affirmed that “rather than being viewed as autonomous Western productions, management practices and discourses would come to be understood as having emerged from (and/or bearing the imprint of) the colonial
encounter between the West and the non-West” (Prasad 2003: 31). Analysing the role played by different management disciplines and sub-disciplines in establishing colonial or neo-colonial control, research has thus unveiled “the persistent imprint of colonialist ways of thinking and behaving in fields such as cross-cultural management, international management” (ibid: 32) and diversity management.

The first idea, i.e. that modern management theories and practices were born in the colonial encounter and grounded on a belief in western economic and cultural superiority, is well explained in work that through the light of postcolonial theories rereads management history and shows what it has denied. Bill Cooke’s work is particularly relevant here, showing how classical management theory was developed also on cotton plantations in the south of the United States. In a piece about slavery and management, Cooke (2003a) states that there has been a denial of slavery inside management studies’ historiography. In the country in which many see the birth of this discipline, the United States, during the nineteenth century there were about four million slaves working in the ‘plantation machine’, as Martin Luther King (2005: 265) defined it. None of the histories of management offers a genealogy in which there is a link with this huge productive reality. Cooke’s aim is to write this history, to “challenge any version of the history of management which explicitly or otherwise excludes slavery” (2003: 1896). Reviewing three of the most recognised histories of management, by Burnham, Braverman and Chandler, Cooke states that they have in common “the construction of a grand narrative, in which the emergence of management as an activity and of managers as a group or class is a consequence of the growth and increasing industrial sophistication of a globalizing capitalist economy” (2003: 1900). Against this, Cooke’s article demonstrates that the antebellum plantation economy has to be considered already part of the development of capitalism. The plantation economy was the site of the emergence of industrial order and control, there was a fairly sophisticated managerial practice developed there and it was implemented by managers. Cooke also shows that in the plantation economy there was a separation of conception from execution, which is one of the most important principles of Taylorism, and that this assumption was justified on a racist basis. As such, “white supremacist racism underpinned the creation of the managerial identity” (Cooke 2003: 1911).

Cooke’s research (2003b) also explores the birth of two of the central techniques, i.e. action research and group dynamics, associated with the management of culture and argues that they developed as part of the attempt to control the anti-racist struggles in the US. These practices, Cooke states, “may be viewed as an outcome of a state-sponsored U.S. attempt to manage, contain, and shape challenges to existing political, economic, social and
cultural order” (2003b: 87). Cooke tells the history of the creation of action research by Kurt Lewin (1890-1947), considered by orthodox management literature and practice as the father of change management. Despite being conventionally seen as an open anti-racist and anti-imperialist, Lewin, Cooke states, created his management practices in a context shaped by racism. The first ‘experiment’ of action research – the ‘New Britain workshop’ in 1946 – set up by Lewin at the request of the Connecticut State Interracial Commission, was about relationships between ethnic groups and, as Cooke shows, 29 per cent of the forty-one community activists delegates were African Americans. This, underlines Cooke, happened at a time “when the United States was an apartheid state, when segregation was legal, where African Americans were denied the vote, and lynching of African Americans were frequent” (2003b: 81). At the same time African Americans in New England in the 1940s were well-organised and led powerful political struggles. It is in the context of these struggles, and of the governmental attempt to control them, that Lewin’s experiments on action research and group dynamics must be contextualized. The answer of the US government was focused also on new forms of surveillance and “the workshop [New Britain], and consequently group dynamics and this application of action research, can be read as exemplars of these measures” (Cooke 2003b: 83). Indeed what Cooke, through abundant sources, shows is that the main result of this workshop was, through “the emphasis on personal feelings and group dynamics”, to shift “participants’ desires for action to this micro level, and away from the broader agenda of antiracist social change” (2003b: 84).

This critique is a good example of how the postcolonial gaze can subvert the terms of a prevailing discourse, subvert taken-for-granted narratives and understand better the strong connections between colonialism and modernity, and therefore management too. Similarly, the neo-colonial attitude still pervading management studies has been particularly analysed in some management sub-disciplines such as international business (Westwood and Jack 2007; Banerjee and Prasad 2008; Jack and Westwood 2009), cross-cultural studies in management (Kwek 2003) and managing diversity. Theories and practices of managing diversity and their critiques are particularly relevant to my research, since they directly point at the issue of encounter among differences in organisational settings.

What is difference and how encounters among differences work are the objects of discussion inside postcolonial studies as well. The key concept, the one that has fuelled the debate in recent years is hybridity. Homi Bhabha (1994) and Robert Young (1995) focus on this term to describe the processes of cultural displacement of the postmodern subject, of which the migrant could be said to be a paradigmatic figure. At the same time it has been claimed that this concept, theorised in order to critique a dialectical and binary structure of
power, risks neglecting the fact that power is no longer organised in a symmetrical way. Hybridity should therefore be read not only as a ‘liberating’ movement but also as a ‘symptom’ of the establishment of a new form of domination in contemporary globalised capitalism (Hardt and Negri 2000: 137-159). Inside this economic and political landscape, power has assumed the productivity of differences. In other words, we need to be aware that, unlike the colonial power that needed to code hybridity in binarism (orientalism) (Frenkel and Shenhav 2006), contemporary forms of domination don’t have this imperative, having operated a shift from differences as something to be repressed to differences as something to be exposed and valorised – although only apparently and anyway always inside a codification. The ‘weapon’ of hybridity against power then would be a weak one, or at worst, it could even reinforce a power that has completely assumed the productivity of differences or “normalise subjectivities in transnational and postcolonial conditions by including them in shuddering multicultural societies” (Papadopoulos et al. 2008: 141). For that reason,

“The postmodernist and postcolonialist theorists who advocate a politics of difference, fluidity, and hybridity in order to challenge the binaries and essentialism of modern sovereignty have been outflanked by the strategies of power. Power has evacuated the bastion they are attacking and has circled around to their rear to join them in the assault in the name of difference. These theorists thus find themselves pushing against an open door.” (Hardt and Negri 2000: 138)

Politics of difference, feminisms in particular, have also raised the problem of conceptualising difference, as it is a concept that oscillates between the possibility of defining freedom, distinctiveness and power and the risk of defining categories, essentialising belongings and restricting freedom (e.g. Weedon 1999). Difference is one concept that can therefore be employed in various ways and that is highly determined by the political use we make of it. It is quite evident that the modernist paradigm based on sharp binarisms in which differences were placed has been replaced by a rhetoric of hybridity and multiculturalism. At the same time, however, the western world is

---

6 An example of this shift from a hierarchical society to a society that instead valorises forms of freedom and of diversity can be found in Richard Florida’s study of the creative class. Here he makes a link between the movements of the Sixties in the US and the rising of a creative class in the Nineties: “the dislike of large organizations and bureaucracy […] an intense interest in the then-new technology of computers” (Florida 2004: 204) are characteristics that from being rebellious became productive. For Florida the creative class not only is born in the encounter of ‘bohemian values’ with the Protestant Work Ethic, but is also characterised today by a composition that considers diversity a value. Workplaces and cities lived in by the Creative Class are, and have to be, open to gay people and different ethnicities for example. The importance of this value is also calculated through indexes by Florida who states that diversity attracts Creative Capital and stimulates high-tech growth.
continuously experiencing tensions and conflicts around the continuing impact of those binarisms in contemporary society – just think of the recent riots and protests in the US against institutional racism and violence (Swaine 2015) or of the conflicts around migrations toward Europe and Islamophobia (Economist 2014). Moreover, the explosion of modernist binarisms has been replaced by a multiplication of borders, based on a myriad of differences and intersections of them, that are completely functional to capital (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). So how does the rhetoric of hybridity assumed by power work in practice? Which idea of diversity does it advocate?

Difference is a recurring term in discourses around the complexity of contemporary life, so much that it is legitimate to ask whether it is possible to arrive at a precise meaning of this term. In its absence, “difference” seems to amount to a word simply describing the incommensurable specificity of each person. However, the word might also be used to describe a more precise and specific idea of difference. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the noun ‘difference’ as follows:  

"1. a. The condition, quality, or fact of being different, or not the same in quality or in essence; dissimilarity, distinction, diversity; the relation of non-agreement or non-identity between two or more things, disagreement. b. (with a and pl.) A particular instance of unlikeness; a point in which things differ.” (Oxford English Dictionary)

The first definition describes difference as the opposite of identity and as something that has to do with the essence and quality of things (or people). In this sense to differ means being non-identical or being other. Following the second definition instead, difference is ‘a point in which things [and, I would add, people] differ: this is something that is obviously always present among people, regardless of gender, race, origin, religion, politics and so on. The second definition of difference underlines a relation in which both subjects differ, in which there is a difference between them; there is therefore reciprocity since the two terms are not compared but recognised as constitently different. My research wants to engage with and deconstruct the first definition, acknowledging it as a function of contemporary society and of the construction of identities in this context, but moving towards an idea of difference nearer to the second definition, therefore towards recognition of heterogeneity rather than difference. Importantly, theories and practices dealing with difference seem to refer pretty much to the first definition. The main question raised in speaking of differences in fact seems to be: how can ‘we’ (in most cases in the literature this ‘we’ is white western men/women) rethink our lives in the presence of differences from ‘us’? How do we manage those differences so that we maintain our ‘traditions’, our ‘culture’, our language and so on and at the same time permit and recognise
differences so that they become productive rather than conflictual? Diversity management (hereafter DM) is a case in point.

Against the celebration of diversity as an image of a happy mixing of cultures in a harmonious coexistence or a melting pot, a critical point of view that tries to put at the centre the tensions, contradictions and conflicts still pervading workplaces has developed (e.g. Prasad et al. 1997). Workplaces are still distinguished by discriminations based on gender, race, ethnicity and other socially constructed boundaries. One of the main critiques of practices like DM is exactly the fact that it considers diversity from a, so to speak, hidden standpoint. Its management becomes a set of procedures through which ‘we’ can make differences acceptable for the people considered as being on the ‘neutral’ side, diluting the possibilities for conflicts in workplaces and making differences ‘productive’ (e.g. Lorbiecki and Jack 2000; Lorbiecki 2001; Broadfoot and Munshi 2007; Bendl et al. 2008; Schwabenland and Tomlinson 2008). DM, as an example of organisation of hybridity in which differences are said to be valorised, is a starting point for exploring how postcoloniality is working inside organisations and forms of organising, keeping in mind that hybridity always has this ‘double face’ of being at the same time a ‘liberating’ movement and a symptom of the establishment of new forms of governance in contemporary capitalism.

DM developed at the beginning of the 1990s in alternative to equal opportunities and affirmative action practices and from the recognition of the necessity for hybridity both inside and outside of organizations. On the one hand, managers realised not only that their workforces were changing and becoming increasingly heterogeneous, but also that there was a need for “realising talents suppressed by mono-cultural organizations” (Lorbiecki 2001: 342; also see Schwabenland and Tomlinson 2008). On the other hand, a hybrid organisation was supposedly more prepared to respond to and represent both the new global market and the multicultural societies in which new ethnic groups were becoming consumers. Hybridity therefore was at the same time a fact and a resource that needed to be ‘managed’. Reasons for this have to do with the fears, and the related intolerance, of the, so to speak, ‘not diverse’ towards the ‘new incomers’ or the ‘space invaders’ (Puwar 2004): in other words, with the importance of “managing the negative side effects of undiverted and unaccepted diversity” (Lorbiecki and Jack 2000: S23).

Research on DM indicates the importance of studying both the discourses and the practices of diversity, and suggests the existence of a discrepancy between the two. Discourse on the management of diversity has produced two sets of ideas around identity and difference: the fact that the encounter of diverse identities can be an encounter of
equals and the fact that identity is a fixed and stable term of singularity over time. Several critiques have underlined the absence, in such discourses, of both power and resistance, of historical paths and of their political and social implications. The particularity of this rhetoric is that, on the one hand, it depends on the possibility of inserting people into categories that are both fixed and rather large (ethnic, racial, gender categories and so on), categories that ought, in theory, to be capable of representing both specific groups and their difference in respect to others. Of course, this ignores the problem that at times these categories intersect in singular bodies marked by multiple ‘differences’, as theories of ‘intersectional’ would have it (Crenshaw 1991). On the other hand, however, this rhetoric dispossesses these groups of history, with the consequence of dissolving and obfuscating the bases of present disadvantages and of focusing “on individual differences rather than power differentials” (Lorbiecki and Jack 2000: S27). Therefore, though individuality is at the centre, it is an individuality that is marked by its belonging to a set of fixed categories that define its identity. A double movement is present here: while essentialisation of identities opens the possibility for hybridity to be a tool, reinforcing the concept of margins rather than destabilising it (Schwabenland and Tomlinson 2008: 330), the concurrent individualisation of identities creates the space for difference to become a ‘positive’ value, disconnected from the concepts of discrimination and inequalities. As Balibar clearly puts it:

“What is perhaps most striking in the dialectics of difference, differentiation and diversity in contemporary critique is a general shift from the collective to the singular, the issue of typologies and classifications becoming the issue of personal identity and its normative character, which accompanies a reversal in the ‘value’ of the category itself, whereby difference, instead of being associated in a negative sense with the ascription of unequal social roles and places for discrimination, becomes a positive value, a freedom from homogeneity and uniformity, therefore a basic component of liberty.” (Balibar 2005: 25-26)

It appears clear, once more, how difference and hybridity can be accepted and valorised if they are dispossessed of their historical and political characteristics and attached instead to the continuous production and multiplication of commodified ‘patchworks of identities’. Achille Mbembe points out, in regard to the relationship between the west and Africa that “here is a principle of language and classificatory systems in which to differ from something or somebody is not simply not to be like (in the sense of being non-identical or being-other); it is also not to be at all (non-being). More, it is being-nothing (nothingness)” (Mbembe 2001: 4). Paraphrasing Mbembe we can say that ‘to differ’ becomes acceptable when it moves from ‘not to be like’ to ‘not to be at all’ or ‘being nothing’. This is, at
bottom, what DM does in dispossessing difference of its history and of its politics. These opposing forces (individualisation and essentialism) in fact create a balance that seems to capture people in a grip where differences are recognised, legitimised and affirmed as a product of a neutralizing demarcation processes. Even though the lack of recognition of power relations might be the reason why “many diversity interventions were shown to have backfired” (Lorbiecki and Jack 2000: S22), these conceptions of diversity and of hybridity are very much alive and well in society.

How is this discourse on diversity – as opposed to equal opportunities or affirmative action policies – put into practice? DM discourses seem to focus on two elements: to start with, there should be an emphasis on the valorisation of differences in general, rather than a focus on specific minorities and, secondly, the process of transformation ought to be grounded in the already existing differences within the organisation, rather than through the introduction of a more ‘diverse’ workforce. The minorities in question are generally identified as women, ethnic and religious minorities and people with disabilities. More critical research on the practices of DM, however, shows that these are difficult to distinguish from equal opportunities practices. While on the discursive level diversity is described as the necessity to overcome equality approaches, valorise all differences and affirm that we are all different, in practice diversity policies mainly address minorities (Gröschl and Doherty 1999; Zanoni and Janssens 2007; Kalonaityte 2010), showing the rhetoric of DM to be

“a tool in the struggle for symbolic domination in which organizational power holders attempt to extend their domination at the workplace by reducing employee diversity into individual level, whilst trying to strip themselves of as many ethical and legal obligations as possible under the banner of voluntarism” (Tatli 2011: 247)

Whereas the rhetoric of DM would like to suggest that we are all equally different, it then affirms in practice that those considered different are the ones belonging to ‘disadvantaged’ categories. Moreover, the conclusion of the more critical research on DM appears to be is that “organizations do not know how to translate the diversity discourse into practical interventions that are progressive and inclusive and go beyond legal compliance” (Tatli 2011: 246). That means that often diversity practices are limited to attention to the inclusion and acceptance of minority employees without any attempt to rethink the organisation itself through the ‘valorisation of diversity’. Furthermore, studies (e.g. Jones et al. 2000; Kalonaityte 2010) have underlined how DM practices depend largely on the institutional and cultural environment in which companies are based, showing on one side
the strong relation between DM and the commitment of companies to comply with legislation on equality and, on the other side, the impossibility of giving a universal definition of diversity. In that sense, some important questions are raised: “are diversity programs organizational smoke screens concealing enduring patterns of discrimination and prejudice? Or are they merely enjoyable training interludes, after which managers return to unchanging realities of race hostilities and gender tensions in the workplace?” (Prasad et al. 1997: 14). Indeed, one reason why diversity discourses may be difficult to translate into practice could be the obscurity of the definitions of difference and diversity themselves. What is suggested by this critical literature is that DM does not address the complexities and the politics of difference. Critical accounts indeed have proposed that we historicise, politicise and make more complex the knowledge underlying this practice, using postcolonial and queer perspectives.

Going beyond the workplace, the model through which hybrid compositions in postcolonial societies have been organised in the social and political spheres of many countries – in particular the UK, the US, Canada and Australia – is multiculturalism. Multiculturalism can be understood as the social and political version of diversity management, as it similarly grew from the assumption of the need to ‘manage the consequences’ of cultural diversity due to migrations and to the history of colonialism and slavery. As stated previously, hybridity is not simply a liberating movement of recognition of differences, but also a process of valorisation by markets and firms. A reading of contemporary globalisation as a movement of collapse of market, national, international and supranational political institutions into each other (Banerjee and Linstead 2001) allows us to understand that hybridity is valorised not only and strictly in production and consumption, but also in belongingness and beliefs. Multiculturalism in this sense should be understood as a ‘doctrine’ that “aims at preserving different cultures without interfering with the ‘smooth functioning of society’” (Banerjee and Linstead 2001: 702). Even more, as Ben Pitcher affirms referring to the UK, “multiculturalism has been the site at which the state has sought to resolve a range of other social problems that do not or need not have their origin in discourses of race” (Pitcher 2009: 166). In this sense, the organisation of society following multiculturalist policies by the state is used as a mechanism of regulation. Paradoxically, multiculturalism is in this sense used to reinforce a sense of nationalism. “Multicultural nationalism is an ideology that describes a tolerant and plural nation, but which uses these very ideas to prescribe a racialized limit to national belonging” (Pitcher 2009: 167). Multicultural political organisation of differences seems to push people to belong to a community (ethnic, racial or religious) in order to be recognised in their
peculiarity of ‘being different’. Multiculturalism affirms the necessity of belonging to a group with fixed and recognisable characteristics and boundaries, in order to have the possibility to be different and at the same time to be included in the nation.

As an attempt to organise a hybrid society, multiculturalism wants to recognise and legitimise differences and at the same time keep them separated as much as possible, not affirming hybridization but instead a sharing of public space by differences. Again the question is: different from who or what? Is there, in other words, a blueprint and what is it? The sharing is indeed thought inside specific rules to ‘preserve’ the prevalence of one difference, of one identity over the others. This is the case for example in Australia, as Banerjee and Linstead (2001) explain, where differences are ascribed to ‘individual cultural heritage’ and are expressible in the public arena as long as they remain inside the boundaries of and don’t go against the ‘interests of Australia’, defined as based on a British White heritage. What becomes evident therefore is that multiculturalism, focusing on individuals’ and communities’ cultures, doesn’t allow a challenge to the hierarchy of cultures present within the same territory: in that sense “the possibility of multiple structures and institutions serving multiple cultures is a real fear for governments” (Banerjee and Linstead 2001: 704). Ghassan Hage explains that in the 1990s when Australia shifted from multiculturalism as cultural government – that is “multiculturalism as a marginal reality in a mainly Anglo-Celtic society” – to multiculturalism as national identity – that is “multiculturalism that displaces Anglo-Celtic culture to become the identity of the nation” – the reaction was the resurfacing of what he defines “White paranoia”: the fear of Anglo-Celtic Australians of being culturally or even physically replaced by others or of losing their European White identity because of hybridisation with other people and cultures (Hage 2002).

Looking at practices of management of differences today we can see that there is evidently an assumption of differences and hybridities as productive, but also as needing a certain type of management in order to be so. What multiculturalism, like diversity management, explicitly wants to remove from the discussion are the historical roots that created differences and in that sense “the need is to distinguish therefore between multiculturalism-as-usual (ethnic restaurants, carnivals and special arrangements for school meals, burial, etc.) and […] ‘multiculturalism-in-history’ – unresolved conflicts that leave a bitter and often lasting legacy” (Werbner 2012: 199). The kind of diversity these practices advocate is one that brings back the need of identities and identification, of hierarchies of heterogeneities, that are recognised but not acknowledged, integrated but not unsettling. What to do with differences then? One option is to dismiss their relevance in order to
think alternative and contesting forms of life. Postcolonial studies has shown though the centrality of differences in history – and of historical difference – in questioning western colonialisit and capitalist homogenisations of lives, production, space and time. Ignoring such insights would be an error. We need therefore to embrace this relevance, understand how power today embraces it as well and move from a deconstructive gesture to an attempt to think differences inside alternative forms of organising that disrupt the functioning of power.

1.3 From a Postcolonial Critique to Forms of Postcolonial Organising

Looking to alternative forms of organization in the postcolonial time is a project that postcolonial studies and its contribution to management studies are still developing. Indeed the target of giving the possibility to histories, languages, cultures, institutions and people that have been captured, changed in their meanings and hidden by colonialism and the west to express themselves, have ‘citizenship’ and also challenge western institutions and cultures has not yet been achieved. In that sense Prasad (2003) describes two possible contributions of postcolonial studies to management studies: (1) try to understand non-western management practices and (2) develop fresh insights about power, control and resistance in organisations. A special issue of *Organization* (2012) constitutes an attempt from a postcolonial point of view in management studies to do exactly what Prasad suggests in point (1). This issue is dedicated to management and organizational knowledge practised and constructed in the ‘global south’. In the editorial (Alcadipani et al. 2012) the authors affirm that, even if management and organizational knowledge “has assumed a one-dimensional façade being a discipline under US epistemic coloniality” and there is a marginalisation of the ideas from the south and homogenising tendencies of dominant thinking, the south has “demonstrated the possession of relevant management and organisational knowledge throughout history” (Ibid.: 133).

Some of the contributions in the special issue linger over the organizing of the excluded, which “may express a more participative way of producing knowledge, distributing resources and protecting lives” (Ibid.: 138). The article dedicated to this question examines the organisational forms of people living in a *favelas* area in Rio de Janeiro and in the townships of Harare in Zimbabwe (Imas and Weston 2012). Through the histories of the ways of self-organisation for survival amongst these people, the authors aim to
“first, give voice to their existence in organisation studies; second, make them part of a subject that retains an elitist position to account for their knowledge; and third to re-address (with them) the Eurocentric management/organization discourse, ingrained in rational management practices and theories and neo-liberalist economy that imposes a legitimate justification for their exploitation and ultimately their exclusion from society” (Imas and Weston 2012: 206).

The “south embodies the organization struggle […] of the marginal” say these authors, being somehow the representation of all the people inhabiting all the marginalised and excluded areas of the world, from the Indian slums to the banlieues in Paris. But it is not sufficiently clear here what the specificity of the global south is in developing alternative forms of organisation. The special issue editors mention that “the North and the South divide is not any more a mere matter of countries, but an interwoven reality in different geographical locations” (Alcadipani et al. 2012: 140). Why shouldn’t we speak then of a postcolonial geography? It is important to affirm that ‘western management practices’ can be found all over the world in a context in which it is difficult to make a sharp division between forcefully imposed and completely assimilated western management as it relates to ‘non-western’ people; in the same way ‘non-western practices’ can be found both in the ‘centre’ and in the ‘periphery’. The reasons for this are several, not least the presence of migrants moving towards the former metropolis. It is crucial therefore to speak of and to look at new forms of organisation in postcolonial geographies and times.

The question is: how can we develop a framework that considers postcoloniality as a key dimension for organisational structure and organisational dynamics? In one of the first articles that appeared about the necessity of “reading organization development from the margins”, Holvino stressed the need to:

“first, bring the marginal and the absent to the centre [...]; second, identify, destabilize and question the oppositions which ground and limit our discourse [...]; third, displace the unified, rational, universal, abstract, organizational subject and explore “organization” from the concrete perspectives of specifically located embodied subjects and multiple subject(ive) positions [...]” (Holvino 1996: 529)

In my research I want to explore in particular organisation from the material perspective of embodied subjects frequently marginalised, bringing them to the centre of my research. Migrants, who need to create new forms of organisation in order to sustain their lives, are today marginalised subjects, considered a problem in society and without the possibility of being protagonist in it. We then need to ask here what a postcolonial organisation of migrants looks like in the concrete, and what are the characteristics that shape it.
A reflexive approach to diversity management and to multiculturalism asks us, it seems to me, to recognise the necessity of an historical approach capable of acknowledging the paths through which differences were and continue to be created and, therefore, to show that identities are not fixed but historically determined and therefore changeable. A way to answer the limits and problems of diversity management and multiculturalism is to propose an anti-colonial attitude towards the composition of differences. This implies a recognition of the processes of the western construction of knowledge, which stereotype the ‘other’, and of differences inside historically determined power relations. However this anti-colonial move could still somehow reproduce a division if it does not consider the transformations of postcolonial time as creating a more complex picture, in which this division between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is completely mixed up and there is the creation of new plots. Going beyond this division means that “the imaginary of the Otherness can be located neither on the side of the Self nor on the side of the Other, is neither ‘occidental’ nor ‘oriental’, since it refuses this symmetry, but is also not occupying a transcendent place [...].” (Balibar 2005: 31, emphasis original). The question becomes: how do we move from a self-centred critique – when the self is no longer a clear and distinct subject – and beyond the deconstruction of orientalising concepts and attitudes? How can the postcolonial be operationalized into a framework that goes beyond the acknowledgement of a time coming after colonialism, as it seems to be for example in the multicultural model? We need to question how organisational processes can be ‘postcolonial’ as an adjective, in a way that “entails a demand for equality in conditions of inequality. This demand is not that those excluded, marginalised or exploited are extended the same rights and obligations as dominant ‘races’ and classes. It is a demand for a re-articulation of the body politic which transforms the conditions in which lives are lived, and the terms on which subjects recognise each other and themselves.” (Devenney 2007)

To start addressing these problems, before moving on to my research, I want to take a look at the organisations and the experiments of organisation that reflect, in their organising practices, the postcolonial condition. Earlier, I presented diversity management and multiculturalism as two current modes of organising that reflect the postcolonial and hybrid present, and I showed how a postcolonial approach sees in these modes a reproduction of differences, boundaries and divisions whose origins lay in the colonial experience. Here, I would like instead to address the issues of diversity and hybridity within social movements’ organisations, focussing on migrants’ activism, in order to look for models of anti-colonialist and anti-racist organisational forms. A central aspect of the forms of organising that reflects the heterogeneity typical of postcolonial space and time is
their composition, i.e. the multiplicity and hybridity of the set of actors who participate in them. A hybrid composition, a composition of differences, is the first element in a postcolonial way of organising, because we cannot think postcoloniality in western countries without migrations and without the encounter of differences. Three examples of postcolonial organisations are presented. The first one shows the working of organizations in which migrants are central and non-migrants act as ‘supporters’ or facilitators; the second one represents knowledge transfer of practices of organising; and the third case focuses on processes of hybridization inside the most recent experiences of radical democracy like the 15M movement in Spain in which differences are strongly valorised thanks to complex and inclusive practices of decision-making. These three ‘models’ of postcolonial organising in social movements in some cases interrelate and, often, the space in which this happens is the neighbourhood.

Organisations of solidarity towards migrants and the self-organisation of migrants for the their rights are quite common in Europe. Examples of self-organised movements are the Sans Papiers movement in France (Cissé 1997), the No Borders movement present across Europe (Anderson et al. 2011) and specifically in the UK, and the various ‘migrants’ coordination’ projects in Italy (Oliveri 2012). ‘Natives’ helping migrants in various forms (legal issues, housing, finding jobs, anti-racism, social inclusion and so on) and migrants self-organising: the kind of relation established between migrants and non-migrants is one of solidarity. Migrants are treated as belonging to a category that has specific needs, different from those of non-migrants. While some organisations would interpret their activity as charitable and others in a more political fashion, in practice all the organisations belonging to this spectrum act in such a way that a difference is recognised and maintained between two subjects – migrants and non-migrants – whether the distinction is made in the first place by non-migrants or by migrants themselves. Many experiences of organisation involving migrants are framed in this way; and some of them have been and are very important in terms of giving visibility to migrants’ problems and granting migrants access to rights as well as creating networks of solidarity helping people on the move.

A second way in which postcoloniality enters organisational processes is through the creation of connections through what we can call a postcolonial geography of social movements. Here experiences developed within the geographical ‘peripheries’ are increasingly translated into the ‘centres’ thanks to, on the one hand, migrations, and on the other to the attention (created exactly by postcolonial literature) to a global history from below. A perfect example of this is the global circulation of the Zapatistas’ struggle – the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación National (EZLN). The EZLN was born at the beginning
of the 1980s to achieve the liberation of the native population of Chiapas from the state of Mexico and its participation in the neoliberal global system ratified by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Not only has a global organisation of solidarity – whose activities range from selling Zapatistas products in many countries of the world to organising ‘militant tourism’ in Chiapas – been built around the Zapatistas but there have also been attempts to translate some of the Zapatistas’ forms of organisation, recognised as innovative forms of radical democracy, into completely different political and geographical contexts. An example is the ‘Movement for Justice in el Barrio’ (MJB) in New York, which involves the participation of many Mexican migrants (Maeckelbergh 2012b). Aiming to connect the struggle for housing in New York City to struggles for housing and for land around the world, a migrant group living in New York creates a mobilizing frame that connects people across the boundaries of states. Influenced by the Zapatistas, MJB imported in New York practices of organising previously experimented with in Chiapas. This experiment, known as Urban Zapatismo, takes what we could call the philosophy of Zapatismo – that “mobilization is a ‘bridge’ that allows for communication and thus mobility of ideas and people across divides” (Maeckelbergh 2012b: 666) – and applies it in urban contexts. The main instrument used by MJB to create bridges is the form of the encuentro, in which

“[…] geographically dispersed organizations and networks come together as a way to create cross-fertilization of ideas and to spread skills and knowledge (power) among members. […] meetings are organized through a set of directly democratic principles of decision-making that were first introduced into global movement repertoires by the Zapatistas in 1996, but which are now commonplace in global movement networks from anti-G8 protests to the World Social Forum”. (ibid: 667)

Maeckelbergh (2012a) underlines the connection here present between horizontality and the recognition and preservation of diversity. From her point of view this is a fundamental aspect determining experiences of radical horizontal democracy like the World Social Forum or more recently the Occupy and Acampadas movements. Occupy movements in 2011-2012 were themselves a translation of the model of protest developed by Egyptian people in Tahrir Square in Cairo. In that sense Occupy movements themselves are an example of knowledge transfer.

The ‘No-global’ cycle of struggles and Occupy movements are contexts in which differences meet, with the aim of creating a common global project going beyond mere solidarity. In alternative to representative democracy, in which minorities have little power to challenge the majority, the World Social Forum has seen the development of the idea
that there is no democracy without the consideration of every position, including minoritarian ones. The attempt of the movement of the Acampadas in Spain and Occupy in other parts of the world is to use the consensus model, through which all points of view are taken in consideration, until a common perspective emerges. Diversity of points of view in these movements is generally seen as a resource, rather than a problem, and horizontality is the way through which it is possible to ‘manage’ it. Horizontality therefore provides a more democratic and inclusive attitude towards diversity. Horizontal organising has been a fundamental feature of Global Justice Movement (della Porta 2009; Reiter 2009) and the Occupy wave of movements that had the characteristic of combining the spontaneity of the event with the experience (Flesher Fominaya 2015) gained previously by autonomous, feminist, environmentalist and workers’ movements (Atzeni and Ghigliani 2007; Kokkinidis 2015). All these social movements in fact practiced and claimed the necessity for self-organising and for horizontality against hierarchical and leader-guided organisations (Sutherland et al. 2014). This mechanism of participation not only wants to affirm and ‘prefigure’ (Maeckelbergh 2011) – practicing horizontal organising – a democracy different from the representative model, but also makes the effort of bringing together differences. Finding commonalities among heterogeneity, without wanting to reduce complexities and resolve differences but, instead, sharing and opening a channel of communication, made decisions on common grounds possible.

Through my research I want to explore whether forms of political self-organisation such as movements, collectives, or associations of migrants, can be the starting point for the experimentation with a new idea of difference and a collective rethinking of forms of organising. What is at stake here is whether the intellectual turn made possible by postcolonial studies can generate a turn inside the practices of organising in a postcolonial time. From the critique of diversity management and multiculturalism it is clear that a horizontal ground of encounter is more appropriate than a hierarchical organisation of differences. It is also evident that exclusive ‘selves’ hide the common and historical patterns constituting either identities or elements of identities and belonging. At the same time, however, in moving from individualisation to ‘commonalisation’ the risk is that of entering into a logic in which individuals see their diversity recognised only because they belong to a specific group. In my research I want to go beyond multiculturalism, radicalise it and think of an encounter of differences that reshapes the meaning of difference itself.

First of all I acknowledge that organisations live across borders, moving and changing the terms of inclusion and exclusion, of what is divided and what is connected. Any movement or political organisation in fact does that: the coming together of people
(acampadas and occupy), the connection of distant realities (MJB) and the operation of ‘widening the borders of citizenship’ (Sans Papiers) are all acts that displace existing borders in order to create new, and dynamically defined, ones. The idea I want to develop through my research is that of a postcolonial organisation as a mode of organisation that functions across borders, and that sees borders as moving rather than static entities. Borders are here taken into consideration as proliferating across political space. Postcoloniality should be thought of, as already stated, as the irruption inside the ‘centres’ of heterogeneities typical of colonial societies, therefore as the development of societies formed by a more and more fragmented composition, in which these ‘fragments’ are somehow connected and live inside the same world. Lines of division, internal borders, cross this global space, which doesn’t have an outside.

If it is true that fragments are not only divided but also connected, and that ‘there is no outside’, these borders, consequently, are not mere lines of separation. They must be thought of also as lines that produce inclusion and connection. Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson have described the border as performing topological functions that “at once connect and divide, cross and cut political space, include and exclude” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2012: 63). They affirm that “connectedness and disconnection have to be taken and reflected upon together if we are to gain an accurate picture of the emerging heterogeneity of global space” (Ibid.: 64). Borders therefore have to be thought as flexible tools because they change, because they contribute to “making a world rather than dividing an already-made world” (Ibid.: 59) and also because they move with people. Crossing boundaries entails moving them; which means both reshaping the forms of control through borders, and moving the borders from the perimeter, from an outside to an inside a space. We can figure that, thinking that from the moment a migrant crosses a state border she brings the border with her, she moves it with her and it becomes both a border that lives inside herself – through fragmentation of identity – and a border that lives in her social life – making her illegal or a second class category of citizen, or exploitable. Starting from the experience of migrants we can say that resisting means crossing borders and that crossing borders entails moving and reshaping them.

Therefore, if we accept that boundaries make the world (Biemann 2002: 32), rather than believing in the existence of a premade space which is subsequently divided by boundaries, then we need to move from organisations as object of research to the act of organising, i.e. the act of dividing and of boundary-making. Inspired by the philosophers of process (e.g. Bergson, Whitehead and Deleuze), some scholars in management studies (e.g. Robert Cooper (1992), Robert Chia (1999; 2002), Sally Maitlis and Haridimos Tsoukas
(2002)) have indeed moved the focus from ‘organisation’ to ‘organising’, giving more importance to the process of continuous change, rather than to the static nature or the primacy of organisations. From this point of view, there are no organisations that are transformed by organisational change. Instead, change is the ever present force, process is the main power, and organisations are merely the attempt to crystallize change so that we can make sense of it (e.g. Chia 1999). What these writers suggest is that when we want to understand how a form of organisation was created we should think about which are the boundaries that were moved and shaped to create this organisation, how the process of organising worked, what was left outside, what was integrated, which portion of the continuous flux of change was held, which borders had to be moved and so on. As Robert Cooper puts it, “organizing activity is the transformation of boundary relationships” (cited in Spoelstra 2005: 114). Keeping this definition of borders in mind and paying greater attention to organising practices than to organisations, I want to understand how difference and hybridity play inside forms of organisation.

Imagining what I want to define ‘postcolonial organising’ means developing the answer to two research questions: what are the effects of bringing postcolonial critique inside organisational practices?; and what does it mean to organise in a postcolonial way? The contribution I want to make, offering answers to these research questions, is bringing the encounter of organisation and postcolonial studies – at the moment stopped at the level of critique – to the level of understanding and foreseeing forms of organisation in postcoloniality. These questions will be developed in the following chapters through the experiences of a ‘community’ of postcolonial migrants, the Eritreans living in Milan. I use the term community because my respondents used it in the interviews – in Italian ‘comunità’ – to describe the collective experience of Eritrean people in Milan. They define the Eritrean community (of Milan) something that existed in the past and that now does not exist any longer because today there is no unity of Eritrean people in diaspora. With this specific term they refer either to the institution of the formal Eritrean Community of Milan (ECM) created in 1983 – see section 5.1 – or to the sense of belonging to a group defined by solidarity among Eritreans.

Migrants, as autonomous actors of our present, are makers of new routes, solidarities, spaces and organisations. The encounter through migrations today opens the possibility for re-thinking political struggle and organisation. It is an occasion for a struggle that is not only a gesture of solidarity toward someone who has less rights, but a fight for a common horizon, that is to say the construction of a new model of social life regarding everyone. I will explore these questions looking at the specific case of Eritreans living in
Milan. In the next chapter I will describe the historical context of my research and introduce the colonial and postcolonial encounters between Italians and Eritreans.
Chapter 2

Historical Context: Eritrea from Colonialism to Diaspora

Moving from theories of postcoloniality to a specific (post)colonial space, in this chapter I sketch the history of the encounter between Italians and Eritreans from the beginning of Italian colonialism in Africa and its ‘invention’ of Eritrea to the migration of Eritreans to Italy. The chapter is divided into three sections. In the first one I briefly delineate the Italian colonial project in Eritrea and then move on to examine the political changes in Eritrea after independence from colonialism, most notably its union with Ethiopia, which produced the thirty-year fight for independence by the Eritrean People Liberation Front (EPLF). In the second section I discuss the concept of diaspora in relation to the Eritrean migrations, caused by the political instability of the country and the war against Ethiopia. In section three, relying on secondary data, I present a historical account regarding the lives, and their representation by Italian newspapers, of Eritreans who migrated to Italy, focusing in particular on the period of the 1970s-1980s. The choice of this period has to do, on the one hand, with the fact that the 1970s constitute the beginning of a visible Eritrean presence in Italy, and, on the other hand, with the fact that the 1980s represent the peak of Eritrean political activity around the issue of national independence (achieved in 1992).

2.1 Italian Colonialism in Eritrea

The motivations behind Italy’s colonial enterprise in Eritrea are still the object of historiographical debate. On the one hand, the actions of the newly established Italian state (1861) can be put in the wider context of 19th century imperialism, and explained in terms of an attempt by Italy to align itself to the other European powers. The conquest of Eritrea can thus legitimately be read as an issue of prestige, as a political act aiming at establishing the new Italian state as an equal partner vis à vis other European colonial powers (Labanca 2002). On the other hand, it is interesting to explore the relation between colonialism and domestic politics, especially on the issue of wealth distribution. The first period of colonialism in Eritrea was characterized, as a matter of fact, by demographic expansion and population settlement. The idea was to push Italians to move to Eritrea and start their own activity there, generally related to agriculture. At the end of the 19th century, when colonisation began, the largest part of the Italian population was very poor. Many people were migrating – especially to the Americas – and there was a big problem of unequal distribution of wealth and, more specifically, of land.
During the period 1891-1894 a socialist and anarchist movement of peasants in Sicily called ‘Fasci siciliani’ fought for the redistribution of land but was repressed by the government led by the Republican Francesco Crispi. Colonialism, from this perspective, appeared as a socially acceptable solution to the problem of land shortage. This, at least, is Antonio Gramsci’s view, as formulated in a passage in his *Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci suggests that though Italy lacked the necessary capital to invest in the colonies, Crispi’s fear of the rebellious Southern Italian peasants made colonisation appear as a more appealing solution to the problem of land shortage than agrarian reform.

“Crispi’s colonial policy is connected to his obsession with unity, and in it he proved able to understand the political innocence of the Mezzogiorno [southern Italy]. The southern peasant wanted land, and Crispi, who did not want to (or could not) give it to him in Italy itself, who had no wish to go in for ‘economic Jacobinism’, conjured up the mirage of colonial lands to be exploited. Crispi’s imperialism was passionate, oratorical, without any economic or financial basis.” (Gramsci 1971: 67-68)

This reading of the colonial move, however, appears to be appropriate only when applied to the first period of Italian colonisation. The settlement policy succeeded up to a point, and soon Eritrea became predominantly a place from which Italy extracted resources such as land, materials, and, of course, people.

Having in mind these two hypotheses – the colonial project as a matter of European prestige and as a way for resolving wealth distribution among Italian population – let’s look now briefly at the colonial project itself. Italian colonialism started with the purchase of the Assab Bay by an Italian company called Rubattino in 1869. The Bay was then taken over by the Italian State in 1882. In 1885 Italian troops moved toward the Eritrean interior and conquered the city of Massawa. In 1887 there was the first defeat of the Italian army against the Ethiopian army at Dogali (Labanca 2002: 64-73). Despite this defeat, in 1890 Eritrea was proclaimed officially as Italian colony with Asmara as the capital city. From this moment the project of colonial settlement began. In order to create the possibility for Italians to go to Eritrea and work on the land, the Italian state began a large expropriation of lands normally inhabited by and used for cultivation and farming by native groups. Indeed, “between January 1893 and the beginning of 1895 over 400,000 hectares of land were expropriated and declared available for Italian colonists” (Negash 1987: 34). But the expropriation of land caused a response by Eritrean natives who, until that point, had not resisted for two main reasons. First,
“[…] between 1890 and 1891 the colonial state eliminated more than half of the traditional political elite together with their supporters. Over one thousand people were summarily executed. Those chiefs who were not killed on the spot were detained at Nokra, near Assab and many later died in prison” (Negash 1987: 121)

Secondly the invasion of land by the Italians took place during a period of great famine (1888-1892) that made it difficult for the natives to organise forms of open resistance. But a mass-based resistance exploded on December 14, 1894:

“Bahta Hagos, the leading chief of Akele-Guzay and Seraye [two regions of Eritrea] and a trusted man [of the Italian colonial government] since 1888, gathered his forces of about two thousand men and issued his call for resistance. The revolt is defeated few days after. But Baratieri [the Italian colonial governor] decided to invade Tigray, where the followers of Bahta were regrouping, in order to suppress any further resistance. What started as a limited campaign turned into a battle about the colonization of Ethiopia and brought to the battle of Adwa (1st March 1896)” (Negash 1987: 124-125)

In fact, in order to respond to the attack of Bahta Hagos, Baratieri invaded a territory under the control of the Ethiopian empire, which caused a reaction from the Ethiopian army and the battle of Adwa where the Italians were defeated and lost many soldiers. The defeat at Adwa (1st March 1896) is one of the key points in Italian colonial history: its impact was important not only at the moment of the defeat but also successively, because it allowed in the creation of the myth of the revenge against Ethiopia evoked by the fascist regime (1922-1943). The defeat at Adwa brought about an Italian-Ethiopian treaty that redefined the borders of the Italian colony, which remained the same until 1936 when the Italian fascist troops invaded Ethiopia (Labanca 2002: 84). At the moment of the treaty the local Eritrean population was around 200,000-250,000 people.

Subsequently, the colonisation by Italy of Eritrea followed a development that can be divided into three periods: exploitation of raw materials and a strategic position on the Red Sea from 1896 to 1906; from 1907 to 1932 Eritrea became mainly a source of supply of soldiers to deploy in other colonial battles (Somalia in 1907 and Libya in 1912); and from 1932 to the loss of the colonies, the so-called ‘imperial period’⁹, Eritrea became again a settlement colony for Italians. The number of Italians who moved to Eritrea in this period, however, was smaller than what expected by the Italian government though and grew significantly only in the last period of colonisation. In 1904 there were 2,333 Italians (1851 men and 482 women); in 1913, 2,410 (1679 men and 731 women); in 1931, 4,188

⁹ The fascist regime declared the Italian Empire in 1932 that was constituted by Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Libya.
(2471 men and 1717 women), plus 515 mixed children recognised by their fathers; whereas in 1938 67,000 Italians lived in the colony, although the census of this year didn’t distinguish between men and women (Sòrgoni 1998).

The fascist period was characterised by the search for and establishment of an empire. According to Labanca (2002), fascist Italy expressed a completely different approach to the colonial project from that typical of liberal Italy. For the latter colonial politics had tactical relevance, while for the former they had a strategic value. In the liberal period the conquest of the colonies was intended more as a tool for displaying Italy’s status as a great European power; in the fascist period colonialism, instead, became ‘an end in itself’ and acquired the meaning of giving to Italy what (from Fascism’s point of view) it already ‘deserved’, i.e. an empire. The creation of the empire involved the conquest of Ethiopia and the reaffirmation of control over Libya. Eritrea therefore was less involved in the colonial operations of the fascist government, and was used essentially as a reservoir of military personnel. The impact of colonial fascism on Eritrea can be seen mainly in the following dimensions: the rhetoric, in particular the ‘myth of the frontier’; the important role given to the Catholic Church; and the introduction of racial laws.

As fascism relied largely on populism to affirm its ideology, colonialism was framed inside a discourse around the history of Rome and its empire on one side and about the colonies as frontiers on the other. This discourse exalted the desire for the unknown, the exotic, the ‘other’ and the adventure as an “escape from modernity” (Labanca 2002: 157). Images of women – as I will discuss in Chapter 4 – were an important element in the construction of this imaginary. Another element that distinguishes the fascist period from the liberal period in the colonies is the role that the Catholic Church assumed, matching the imperial mission of fascism with the universal and evangelical mission of the Church, which was not the case during the liberal period. But the reason why fascist colonialism is remembered among Eritreans is the promulgation of the racial laws that established a regime of racial separation. With the Law of 30th December 1937 the regime wanted to punish any Italian who had relations with ‘subject women’. Subsequently other rules imposed a physical and geographical separation of areas and public spaces as well as transportations. In 1938 in Italy anti-Semitic laws were approved. In 1939 sanctions were established for the ‘defence of the racial prestige vis-à-vis the natives’: in other words, the law defended arbitrary acts perpetrated by white people against black people. Fascism institutionalised colonial racism (Labanca 2002: 355-360).
It shouldn’t surprise us that, although there were no visible and organised forms of resistance in the colonies, during the Second World War, when the Italian military position became weak, Eritreans began to desert the Italian army and asked the British to free them from Italian colonial rule. The numbers of the Eritreans who would have liked to remain tied to Italy were very small. With the arrival of the Allies in Africa and the worsening of the position of Italy in the Second World War, Italian colonies came under the control of the British Army (at the Battle of Keren, 1941). While the defeat of Italy marked an important passage, the future of Eritreans was not in their hands. It was up to the United Nations to decide, at the end of the war, the future of the country. During the time in which the British Military Administration (BMA) was in charge (1941-1950), Eritreans complained about a substantial continuity with the Italian colonial administration because the British did not review the dominant role of Italy in the economic, bureaucratic and juridical aspects of Eritrean society, which thus remained substantially colonial. Nonetheless important changes occurred during the BMA, in particular the formation of Eritrean parties that tried to influence the decision of the United Nations on the future of Eritrea. While the Unionist Party asked for the union of Eritrea and Ethiopia, the Liberal Progressive Party advocated for independence and the Moslem League against an assimilation of Eritrea into Ethiopia.

The position of Italy in this delicate situation shifted continuously. Faced with the idea that Eritrea would no longer be an Italian territory, the Italian state proposed to the UN the partition of the colony into two halves (giving a part to Sudan and a part to Ethiopia). When the UN assembly rejected this proposition, known as the Bevin-Sforza plan, Italy started to push toward Eritrean independence, complete and immediate. The support for independence was reinforced by the creation of a party in Eritrea, the ‘Pro-Italy party’ and of an ‘Independence Bloc’. The idea was that an independent Eritrea would remain strictly attached to Italy for production and commerce, since Italians ran the main activities in the country and a lot of Eritrean imports and exports depended on the relation with Italy. But for the Unionist Party the possibility of independence explicitly meant the return of Italy and of colonial rule (Negash 1997: 49). The possibility of a return under new forms of Italian colonialism saw a reaction not only of the Eritreans organised into parties who were firmly against this option, but also in other forms of resistance, particularly banditry, known as shifta. According to the British chief administrator there was a direct correlation between acts of banditry against Italian settlers in Eritrea and the political claims for independence of the Pro-Italy Party (Ibid.: 50). Negash also comments that:
“The politically motivated shifta started initially against Italian funding of political organizations. By 1948 there may have been up to ten groups that could be identified as political shifta. [...] the political shifta concentrated on ambushing Italians and destroying their property. Between 1947 and 1950, the political shifta bands had killed 25 Italians.” (Ibid.: 64)

In 1950 the United Nations approved a resolution that established a federation between Eritrea and Ethiopia and, in March 1952, the first elections to the Constituent Assembly took place. Those elected represented the very different positions of the parties described above, in particular the Unionist Party and the Moslem League, the first favourable to the union, the second firmly against an assimilation of Eritrea into Ethiopia. The disparities between the Ethiopian part – unified, strong and with a long experience of government – and the Eritrean part – weak and divided – marked from the beginning the impossibility for the Federation to be based on the same level of autonomy of the two countries. Dissenting voices were quickly suppressed, in particular that of the Moslem League – its newspaper, The Voice of Eritrea, was closed in 1953 – and the elections of 1956 marked the victory of the Unionist party. It was indeed only a short time before Eritrea was fully incorporated into Ethiopia, in November 1962. During this period the presence of Italians diminished from 17 000 in 1952 to 11 000 in 1956 and 10 200 in 1958, with adverse effects on the economy of Eritrea, since all the manufacturing establishments were owned and run by Italians. The reaction of the Italian government to the complete loss of control of the colonies was first of all silence. As Del Boca writes:

“[...] the first form of revenge was disinterest and then silence. Italy, which had the duty to ensure that the mechanism of the federation of Eritrea and Ethiopia would work properly, instead distanced itself from its obligations, even when Eritrean autonomy was repeatedly and plainly violated, and even when, on November 14, 1962, Emperor Haile Selassie imperiously dissolved the federation and incorporated Eritrea as the fourteenth province of his empire.” (2003: 28)

At the same time, when a merging of Eritrea into Ethiopia looked inevitable, a movement for the liberation of Eritrea began arising. The Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) was established in 1958 by Eritreans exiled in Sudan, and became a nationwide movement against the erosion of the federation. Other exiles in Cairo, inspired by the Algerian Liberation Front and the Palestinian movement, decided to form another group in 1960, called the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and primarily made up of Muslim Eritreans. The ELF started their armed struggle in 1961. Against its Islamic character, other
formations started to challenge the hegemony of the ELF from the beginning of the 1970s. These were groups known under the acronym of PLF (People’s Liberation Force). One of them, led by Isaias Afwerki (who became the first President of Eritrea in 1993) and made up of Christian fighters who broke off from the ELF in 1969, constituted the future EPLF (Eritrean People’s Liberation Front), which became the only group guiding the liberation fight both inside and outside Eritrea. The EPLF distinguished itself from the other groups because it declared itself to be socialist and because, even if its membership was mostly Christian, it was reclaiming the right of Eritrean self-determination not on religious or ethnic bases, but in the name of historical and territorial reasons. From the second half of the 1970s onwards, the conflict became more intense and bloody and it came to the attention of the world thanks also to the activity of the Eritrean diaspora that played a big role both in the rise of the EPLF and in the visibility of the struggle outside Africa. By the end of the 1970s, the EPLF had gained control of the liberation movement. The war ended in 1991 when, on May 24, the EPLF entered Asmara.

2.2 Eritrean Diaspora

“Diasporic experience is necessarily both nationalist and anti-nationalist. Absolutist invocations of blood, land and return coexist with the arts of conviviality, the need to make homes away from home, among different peoples” (Clifford 2007: 220)

The migration of Eritreans has often been associated with the word ‘diaspora’. Diaspora speaks of migration but in a particular way. As a conceptual category, it primarily wants to underline two aspects: the scattering of a people across many different parts of the world and the strong link of those people to an original common place of departure, a place that remains present in the experience of migration. One could argue that actually every migration is a diaspora, as long as inside migration there is a battle going on between the place(s) of departure and the one(s) of arrival. But the word diaspora also wants to stress another aspect, the fact that the people migrating in great numbers create a network of relations, memories, cultures, words and music related to the lost ‘home’ and the experience of losing and reinventing it, a network that holds together the migrants ‘dispersed’ in different parts of the world. It means that the experience of migration has a strong narrative, a way of telling a story that holds together the very different local and
historical experiences of migration. It also means that even if an original common place of departure exists, the particularity of diaspora lies less in a project for an actual return and more in how the distance is lived and in the power of the common place in creating relations outside of it.

The concept of diaspora has to do a lot with this network, this space ‘in between’, in which both narratives of diaspora and the lives of the migrants are set. The ‘black Atlantic’ described by Paul Gilroy (1993), for example, appears as a fitting example of a space of the diaspora. In his narrative about the migration of people from Africa to the Americas as slaves and then to England during the 20th century, Gilroy puts the Atlantic, the ocean through which people, stories, languages, and songs travelled, at the centre. For Gilroy, in other words, the centre of the diaspora, is the space in between, not the original land, as if diaspora was something in itself that, starting from a ‘lost land’, can’t ever go back to it but develops inside itself the tensions between returning and making home elsewhere, as if the core of diaspora resided in the being “not-here to stay” (Clifford 1994: 311). In that sense diaspora speaks more of spaces than of trajectories, more of connections than of cuts, more of exchanging and moving than of borders.

But there is also another space of diaspora, the space, or better the spaces, of historical experiences, i.e. the local spaces of migration. Both James Clifford (1994) and Avtar Brah (1996) suggested thinking of diaspora as the acts through which people on the move struggle in order to “define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement” (Clifford 1994: 308). Clifford underlines the tension present in diaspora cultures in mediating between a ‘living here’ and a ‘desiring another place’, a ‘homing desire’, as Brah defined it, wanting to differentiate it from the desire for a ‘homeland’, the return to the origin. Therefore these authors see diaspora as the space in-between and how this space in-between lives in local experiences. If Clifford underlines the importance of “routing diaspora discourse in specific maps/histories” (1994: 319) and avoiding the risk of making of diaspora a trope for the ‘postmodern subject’, Brah suggests thinking of a ‘diaspora space’. This concept is particularly relevant for thinking the connection between migration, postcoloniality – as the space/time for the encounter of differences – and self-organisation. First of all Brah wants to connect borders, diaspora and dis/location, therefore conceptualize the interplay of movement and location, the confluence in a historically determined space of “economic, political, cultural and psychic processes” (1996: 191). Movements of people and the borders that differentiate them create specific spaces where the actors try to define their belonging in relation to one another. Through the
concept of diaspora space the attempt is to think “politics of location as derived from a simultaneity of diasporisation and rootedness” (Ibid.: 242). Brah wants to include inside the concept of diaspora space not only migrants, but also ‘natives’, radically questioning discourses on originality. In that sense the politics of location is defined by the tensions in defining relational positions.

“Diaspora space as a conceptual category is ‘inhabited’ not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous. In other words, the concept of diaspora space (as opposed to that of diaspora) includes the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of ‘staying put’.” (Ibid.: 181)

Starting from this, taking diaspora space as a concept that contains both migrants and non-migrants – seen not necessarily in opposition, but living inside the same space, physical and political – as a concept that questions the tensions between diasporisation and rootedness – between ‘routes and roots’ – it is possible to inquire about specific diasporic formations, i.e. historical diaspora spaces. As Brah suggests this concept allows us to “interrogate, for example, what the search for origins signifies in the history of a particular diaspora; how and why originary absolutes are imagined; how the materiality of economic, political and signifying practices is experienced; what new subject positions are created and assumed […]” (1996: 197). In the next section I describe the Eritrean diaspora, its history and its different experiences in space and time. Then I will enter inside a diaspora space, a place of encounter of diasporisation and rootedness, the space of the city of Milan crossed by the experience of self-organisation of Eritrean migrants and their interaction with other political and social experiences inside the same territory.

Eritreans are a population that have migrated in great numbers all over the world. The reasons for migrating were mainly related to the political situation starting at the end of the 1950s with the negation of autonomy for Eritrea, its incorporation into Ethiopia in 1962 and the war between the two countries. It is estimated that in the period of the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia (1961-1991) one third of Eritrean people, around one million people, migrated. The migration never stopped though, even after the end of the war in 1991 and the acquisition of Eritrean independence in 1993. A new conflict, started in 1998, caused more migrants (and deaths). Many Eritreans moved to nearby Sudan, where they lived in very difficult situations in refugee camps. For many, however, Sudan was the starting point for a longer journey. One of the first countries of arrival outside Africa in the first period of substantial migration was Italy, although many Eritreans passed through Italy to go to other European countries (mainly Germany, the UK, Norway and Sweden),
the US, and Canada. Indeed they looked for countries that recognised their status of refugees – Italy didn’t because it was providing asylum mainly to people escaping from the Soviet Union.

The first Eritrean migrants were either students who went to Europe or the US to attend university – most of them came from the capital city, Asmara – or women who moved together with their children, due to the engagement of men in the struggle for independence. Women were fighting too and indeed the EPLF had a politics that sustained women’s rights and equality; women were participating in resistance and this aspect was underlined in many EPLF official documents, as well as in the international press and scholarship. Nonetheless, the majority of Eritrean migrants in the 1960s and 1970s were women. Most of them worked as domestics or in other low skilled jobs – caretakers, porters, etc. At the same time the presence of students among migrants was very significant for the subsequent organisation of the international support for the fight.

The diasporic dimension of Eritreans evolved around the growing sense of belonging to a nation and the struggle for its formation and defence. It can be said that the idea of nationhood itself grew inside the experience of war against Ethiopia and didn’t really exist before. It grounded itself in the historical experience of being differently determined from the rest of the Horn of Africa by the colonial experience. The shaping of the nation was enacted largely by the EPLF, which became, from the middle of the 1970s, the leading force in the struggle for independence. Their idea of nation was based on a territorial and historical unity and claimed to overcome the internal differences of language, ethnicity and religion; differences that, as Ethiopians claimed, didn’t make Eritrea a nation. As such:

“Eritrean nationalist discourse rarely suggests the idea of an Eritrean people culturally unified throughout history but instead refers to an identity shaped by shared experience of domination. […] Eritrean nationalism emphasized its roots in Italian colonialism and shared experience of struggle against Ethiopia.” (Sorenson 1990: 301)

If we take seriously the interpretation of nation as an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 2006 [1983]), we understand how the sense of belonging can be shaped by the interplaying of a body of people with practices and narratives. Eritreans – without any distinction between those living in Eritrea and those living abroad – imagined and built their community around the war for independence and around an ideal sustaining the changing of Eritrean society through its independence. Marxist thought mainly inspired this ideal. Authors such as Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao were translated by the EPLF into
Tigrinya\(^{10}\); some of the cadres of the EPLF received training in China and in the USSR and the ELF was inspired by the organisation of the Algerian FLN (Bernal 2004: 8). Reading any official document, publications or communiqués from the EPLF makes the influence (at least in the language) of Marxist thought on the Eritrean struggle evident. Their practices in the liberated zones also tried to reflect this ideal, creating democratic assemblies in the villages, redistributing land and trying to provide equal education and health services to all the population.

Though for some involvement in the ELF or EPLF consisted in armed struggle in Eritrea, for many others it was a matter of support given from abroad with the help of a transnational organisation. It was understood that, though only those fighting and dying for the national cause were martyrs (who are celebrated every year on the 20\(^{th}\) of June), all the Eritreans, even in diaspora, were considered fundamental for the cause and part of the fight. Since “for the majority of Eritrea’s 3.5 million people, becoming Eritrean, or more abstractly nationalist, stemmed from direct participation in the life of ELF or EPLF” (Hepner 2003: 275) and given that many of these people experienced this participation outside of Eritrea, diaspora and nation are, in the case of Eritreans, inextricably linked. Diaspora evolved around the nation, and the nation was formed also through diaspora.

As far as the transnational organisation is concerned, at the very beginning of the 1970s, when the EPLF began affirming itself in Eritrea, the organisation of the Eritreans for Liberation in North America (EFNA) emerged and “evolved into perhaps the strongest Eritrean movement in the world next to ELF and EPLF” (Sorenson 1990: 274). In 1973 the first meeting of Eritreans at the ‘Casa della Cultura’ in Milan took place and there it was decided to create the first Italian section of the EPLF. In the second half of the 1970s the EPLF “actively formed more organizations in other parts of the world and linked them together through its leadership, creating a global network of mass organizations, all coordinating activities and resources on behalf of independence struggle” (Hepner 2003: 274). The diaspora was organised in a complex way in the EPLF, with sections for women, students and workers, all divided into geographical areas. It had several meetings: a global one in Bologna (Poidimani and Tabacco 2001) and regional events like the one once a year in Washington for the diaspora in the US.

The ways in which the diaspora collaborated in the war for independence were both economic and political. On the economic level, Eritrean people in diaspora self-taxed to send money to support the fight and attempted to mobilize civil society to help their

---

\(^{10}\) Tigrinya is the most widely spoken language in Eritrea. The second spoken language is Arabic.
cause economically – mainly buying machineries for the liberated zones (i.e. for water or irrigation etc.) or medicines. On the political level, the Eritreans in diaspora mobilized to involve as many actors as possible in supporting their cause of self-determination: governments, parties, unions, political and humanitarian associations flourishing in the 1970s all over the world. They were asking governments to express themselves on the ongoing war, trying to advocate for a referendum leaving freedom to Eritreans to decide about their autonomy, and they did anything possible in order to the Eritrean struggle visible to the non-African societies in which they were living.

The power that the EPLF had inside Eritrea was mostly the same outside of the country among the Eritrean diaspora. Even if people connected to the ELF in diaspora continued to exist and to organise autonomously from EPLF organisations, the latter was hegemonic in the transnational organisation of diaspora. Outside of its control, only humanitarian and social organisations had the possibility of developing. At least in Canada, following Hepner’s research,

“[…] forming a viable secular community association that functioned both transnationally and as a resource for diaspora Eritreans proved extremely difficult. […] the refugees worked at building explicitly non-partisan community associations that could assist with language skills, employment, housing, and the coordination of humanitarian projects in Eritrea.” (2003: 276).

The power of the political organisation may indeed have created troubles for those wanting to take part in diaspora organisations without having to ‘prove’ their belonging to a party. But this is only one aspect of the story, for it can also be argued that it was precisely the transnational organisations and their willingness to politicize people that provided the inputs and material means necessary to organise at the local level. It is indeed still an open question whether the EPLF in the diaspora inspired and helped local political, social and humanitarian actions, or conversely impeded them.

What is quite obvious, at any rate, is that the divisions inside the diaspora and the different points of view came out more vigorously in the last two decades, and especially thanks to three events: the war of 1998, the introduction and use by the Eritreans in diaspora (and from 2000 by the use in Eritrea) of the internet and especially discussion forums and blogs, and, finally, the migration of many Eritreans through the desert and the Mediterranean to reach Europe. These discussions have concerned the issue of democracy in Eritrea, a particularly relevant question to Eritreans given that only one leader, Isaias Afwerki, has lead the country since independence in 1993. At the same time as these events occurred new forms of organisation among Eritrean migrants emerged that favoured
organisation around religious organisations, providing a safer and less politicised space, although still affected by nationalist sentiments (Hepner 2003). From the beginning of the 1990s the Internet has played a very important role in the creation of a new space for the connection of the diaspora. In particular online forums for discussion on Eritrea for those living abroad have become a central instrument for sharing and creating community, and also a kind of ‘public opinion’ of the diaspora. For example in 1992 ‘ordinary’ Eritreans in the Washington D.C. area created, independently from any existing organisation, a website called Dehai, Eritrea Online (www.dehai.org). The website is a space of discussion – described in detail by Victoria Bernal (2004; 2005; 2006) – that became popular and significant enough to influence policy in Eritrea (Bernal 2005: 663). The website is dedicated mainly to the discussion and dissemination of news “about Eritrean politics rather than to share information and ideas about the many issues that confront them in their daily lives in North America and Europe” (Bernal 2004: 13). At the same time, giving details of meetings of any kind organised in the diaspora and about Eritrea, it also functions as a space for connecting people and promoting their activities inside the diaspora space. Other websites like asmarino.org also expanded the cyberspace of the diaspora, providing new means for ‘nationalizing the transnational space’.

The Eritrean diaspora has experienced significant changes since the end of the war (1991) and the independence declared after a referendum in 1993. This moment signalled the end of the formal transnational organisation of the EPLF. Obviously the links remained and the EPLF transformed itself into a political organisation – the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) – that took control of the newly established Eritrean state. Although the offices of the EPLF in Europe and the US were no longer in operation, this didn’t mean the end or the weakening of the relations between Eritrea and the diaspora. The government invented new infrastructures for the maintenance of this relation (Al-Ali et al. 2001: 589-590; Bernal 2004: 18). A form of taxation of 2% on the annual income of each Eritrean in diaspora was introduced. Citizenship was forged on the idea of a diasporic people, therefore based on blood lineages and not excluding another citizenship. Moreover Eritreans in diaspora take part in national political decisions through voting (an important moment was indeed the referendum in 1993) and through the recruitment among Eritreans from the diaspora of people to cover government positions. All these practices, together with the creation of a public space of discussion on the Internet contribute to reinforce the national bond inside an affirmed transnational space. In that sense, “transnational migration doesn’t reflect the decline of nation-state” (Bernal 2004: 19).
But isn’t diaspora a phenomenon that puts national belonging into crisis? Isn’t diaspora the space of hybridity and creation of new languages and histories? How is it possible that inside this space the nation lives a new, strong life? Clifford, speaking of diaspora, wants to underline the distance that this experience creates from nation building. He writes:

“It is important to distinguish nationalist critical longing and nostalgic or eschatological visions, from actual national building – with the help of armies, schools, police, and mass media. […] Diasporas have rarely founded nation-states: Israel is the prime example. Whatever their ideologies of purity, diasporic cultural forms can never, in practice, be exclusively nationalist” (1994: 307)

If Israel is the prime example, Eritrea is a good example too. The Eritrean diaspora has actually founded a state with the help of armies, schools, organisations, books and leaflets, websites and through the economic and political contribution of migrants. The Eritrean diaspora is not simply nostalgic for an original land and culture; it is actively engaged in the affirmation of a nation-state. Indeed this transnational and diasporic dimension didn’t undermine the nation-state at all. On the contrary, the organisation of the diaspora represented a fundamental contribution to the nationalist efforts, and provided a good example of ‘long-distance nationalism’ (Anderson 1992). If we consider diaspora as the creation of a network and a narrative among migrants, the Eritrean diaspora, as already said, cannot be thought without the nation. But which form of nation? Two aspects contribute to answer this question: the fact that Eritrean nationalism is shaped by anti-colonialism; and the role of diaspora in defining the relation of Eritrean migrants with nationalism.

It can be argued that the form of nation imagined among Eritreans is something different from the imagined communities described by Anderson and the forms of nationalism experienced in the 19th and 20th centuries in Europe. Instead it is more connected to the imagination of the nation shaped inside the anticolonial and independence movements in Africa and Asia in the 20th century. Partha Chatterjee analysed the concept of nationalism, tracing how it developed during the 20th century particularly in regards to colonised countries:

“Looking back, it seems clear that this was the time, in the two decades following the end of World War II, when the nation-state was established as the normal form of the state everywhere in the world. This normative idea was unequivocally endorsed in the principle of self-determination of peoples and nations. The fact that the norm had not been fully realized was pointed out as a shortcoming, something that has to
be overcome. It presented to the peoples of Asian and African countries an object of struggle, a goal that had complete moral legitimacy. It also provided a criterion for identifying the enemy: colonialism, the practices of racial superiority, and the lingering fantasies of world domination by the old imperial powers.” (2005: 489)

Anti-colonial nationalism brings with itself contradictions, as Chatterjee explains:

“Nationalist . . . [movements] were addressed both to ‘the people’ who were said to constitute the nation and to the colonial masters whose claim to rule nationalism questioned. To both, nationalism sought to demonstrate the falsity of the colonial claim that the backward peoples were culturally incapable of ruling themselves in the modern world. Nationalism denied the alleged inferiority of the colonized people; it also asserted that a backward nation could ‘modernize’ itself while retaining its cultural identity. It thus produced a discourse in which, even as it challenged the colonial claim to political domination, it also accepted the very intellectual premises of ‘modernity’ on which colonial domination was based.” (Chatterjee 1986: 30)

Eritrean people did not escape this postcolonial contradiction that exposes the centrality of colonialism and anti-colonialism in the definition of their nationalism (see Chapter 6 for a discussion of Eritrean anti-colonial nationalism through the opinions of my respondents).

Beyond anti-colonialism, the diasporic dimension of Eritrean experience influenced the imagination of the nation. As I have underlined, for many Eritreans the idea of the nation was shaped in diaspora and doesn’t have for them a practical everyday relation with the land: “Eritrean nationhood itself was built out of Eritreans’ connections to one another (across borders) rather than on their connections to Eritrean soil (or to resources and livelihoods located within Eritrea)” (Bernal 2004: 9). Not only is there a difference between the nation-state lived in Eritrea and the nation as infrastructure of diaspora, but also the idea of nation itself is thought and lived differently by the Eritreans in Eritrea and those in diaspora. The nation in diaspora has its own autonomy. Indeed it was in and thanks to the space in-between that the idea of nation took shape and thus it cannot be easily detached from it. The diaspora, although built around the concept of the nation, has its own dynamics and its own way of organising that are different from life inside Eritrea; not only because of the material everyday life that migrants have to negotiate in their local diasporic spaces that inevitably change their forms of life, but also because diaspora is something in itself, a transnational space, or as Hepner defines it a ‘transnational civil society’ (2003: 288). Several examples demonstrate this, from the fact that very few people in diaspora went back to Eritrea after independence (Al-Ali et al. 2001: 583-584); the different relation they established with the country through tourism (Arnone 2011) to the substantial autonomy of the diasporic cyberspace from actual Eritrea (Bernal 2005: 667-668). But the diasporic
Eritrean nation has also created some particularities that need to be investigated more. Indeed:

“It seems that transnationalism and globalization have not rendered nations and nationalism obsolete, but perhaps they have rendered some of our ways of thinking about nations obsolete.” (Bernal 2004: 21)

All this is useful to think about the possibility of a diaspora in which the actual building of a nation-state doesn’t mean directly the myth of return, and in which this aspect coexists with “the specific local interactions (identifications and dis-identification both constructive and defensive) necessary for the maintenance of diasporic social forms” (Clifford 1994: 321). Again, taking into consideration diaspora as the space ‘in between’, the space of circulation of the narrative of diaspora and of the lives of people migrating, we can say that the nation constituted exactly this space in-between for the Eritreans, and probably the persistent object of this history that remains a history of migration, movement across borders, creation of new languages and encounter of differences. The way in which I use the concept of diaspora therefore is not in order to describe a kind of migration in which the element of the return home is emphasized, but instead as a way to describe the importance in this migration of the space in-between and the transnational space of organization; as a way to underline the existence of a diasporic community, as fragmented and contested as it may be. This diasporic community is at the same time transnational and local. The local – historically, physically and politically determined – space is what Avtar Brah (1996) calls diaspora space, constituted and shared by migrants and non-migrants; a space that we may want to call postcolonial. In the next section we are going to enter one of these spaces, the Milan of Eritreans.

2.3 Eritreans in Italy

“How come you came to Italy?”

“How come you came to Italy?”

(By the same road on which you came to Eritrea”

(an Eritrean migrant answering an Italian, quoted in Ambroso 1987: 159)

Before discussing the specificity of the history of Eritreans in Italy and in Milan, I want to briefly focus on the representation of the Eritrean presence in Italian newspapers. I have used this source because I wanted to analyse the presence in the Italian public sphere of Eritrean migrants and also because it was readily available and covered a period going from
the first arrival of Eritreans in Italy to present day. The three main newspapers that I have used as sources are: *Corriere della Sera, la Repubblica* and *l'Unità*. While the first expresses liberal-conservative and the second liberal-progressive views, the third was the official newspaper of the Italian Communist Party (and since its dissolution in 1990, of the Partito Democratico della Sinistra – Democratic Party of the Left). I have researched using these newspapers’ online archives on a time span that goes from 1973 – the first record of news regarding Eritreans in Italy dates back to the 13th of April 1973 – to 2008 – after this date I couldn’t find news regarding the political activity of Eritreans in Italy, while the news concerning Eritreans started to be linked only to the arrival of new migrants crossing the Mediterranean. All the translations from the newspapers are mine. In this section I focus on the period from 1973 to the end of the 1980s because I want to look, on the one hand, at the impact of the new presence of Eritreans in Italy and, on the other, at the political activity of Eritreans, which declined in the early 1990s due to Eritrea having achieved independence. Starting from the 1990s, Italian public discourse becomes increasingly focused on other migrations and the necessity of regulating them. The attention to and specificity of Eritrean migrants are therefore lost. At the same time, with the victory of the EPLF in Eritrea, the political activity of Eritreans in diaspora becomes less intense. A new focus on Eritrean migrants in the newspapers rises again in the early 2000s when Eritreans start escaping their country en masse in order to reach Europe through the Mediterranean sea. I will discuss this new wave of migration in sections of chapters 4, 5 and 6.

The results of the research I carried out on these newspapers confirmed that the presence of Eritreans was, from the beginning of the 1970s, a relevant one, especially because it was through them that Italians first experienced the impact of inbound migrations. While in the years before 1980 newspapers focussed on the fight of Eritreans in Eritrea, starting from 1980 the emphasis shifts as these media begin speaking of Eritreans from the wider perspective of the conditions of life of migrants in Italy and of the impact of migrations on the country. There was, thus, a shift, most probably due to the increase in migrations towards Italy, and, consequently, a growing attention to this phenomenon as it became increasingly visible. There is a clear difference between the three newspapers in the amount of coverage dedicated to these changes in Italian society. *Corriere della Sera*, based in Milan and including daily pages dedicated to news of Milan, seems not to care about the presence of Eritreans in the city and it is very difficult to find any news about them. *La Repubblica*, on the other hand, shows greater interest in the topic of migrations toward Italy (and especially on racism thanks to a series of articles written by the journalist Giorgio
Bocca). It is, however, *l’Unità* which dedicates more space to the issue of migration as well as to the struggle for Eritrean liberation (with the limits that *l’Unità* didn’t have daily pages dedicated to Milan specifically). Most of the references here are, thus, to *l’Unità*. I am conscious of the fact that this newspaper had a strong ideological approach and that it is necessary to ‘encode’ the messages they sent. For instance, the communist morality prasing hard workers, communist organisations and especially reporting political actions mostly when related to the communist party (PCI) or the unions’ confederation (CGIL-CISL-UIL) clearly represents an obstacle to the possibility of an understanding of self-organisation of Eritreans. The first obstacle that appears is the role of the newspapers in depicting migrants in stereotyped ways, even when clearly adopting a favourable stance towards them. *l’Unità* is a good example. Most of the articles underlined the poverty of migrants, calling them ‘desperate’ and ‘exploited’, living in a ‘hell’. But migrants in this representation are always victims, asking for help from someone or something and are almost never portrayed as possessing agency. Their experiences of self-organisation, the main research question of this thesis, are often overlooked or even contested by *l’Unità*, since they are outside representative politics.

The other striking thing is the protracted absence of studies and insights into migrants’ life in Italy. For twenty years, articles speaking about migrants in Italy keep asking the same questions: who are those migrants? where do they come from? why do they come? which jobs do they have? are they educated or not? what do they think of us? The answers, as can be expected, vary significantly. Sometimes we read that migrants are more educated than Italians may think and that they do low-skilled jobs beneath their capacities; other times we read that migrants don’t have skills and need to be educated to learn to do a job. The consistency of these tropes over twenty years is remarkable, and it would not be surprising to read an article employing them nowadays. The overall impression is that of an unawareness of the various changes that occurred over the years, an unawareness that appears to be connected to the Italian state’s idea that migration would be a temporary phenomenon.

Importantly, both *la Repubblica* and *l’Unità* reported on cases of racism and racist violence against migrants. A series of violent aggressions, especially at the end of the 1980s, challenged Italian society. The question asked by most newspapers was: are Italians racist? The answers provided by newspapers however varied from affirming the racism and violence of Italian society, especially its neofascist parts, to claiming that, after all, Italians are generally tolerant and that migrants do not expect a hostile or violent reception in Italy.
The anxious attempt to understand whether Italians were racist or not was raised every time an episode of violence occurred, without, however, being accompanied by a serious analysis of what racism is, which forms it can take, and how it is connected to the colonial past. Colonialism is out of the picture both when speaking of Italians (and racism) and when speaking of migrants; but, ironically, if there is a reference to the UK or France and migrants, there is also a reference to their colonial past. Only in a few articles in which Eritrean migrants themselves speak there are references to the colonial past. Past news reports about racism are important not only because they allow us to see how racism was discussed but also because they remind us of something that now seems forgotten: that migrants in Italy have undergone violence and attacks that occasionally turned into murders. A chronology of these attacks and their heterogeneity – in forms and geography – makes clear the fact that these were (and are) not episodes, but instead delineate a history about how a part of Italian societies reacted to changes brought by migrations. In the next section, using data from the newspapers and combining them with information that I found in books, academic articles and other publications I will introduce the conditions of life for Eritrean migrants in Italy and the EPLF organisation in Italy and its solidarity with the Eritrean liberation struggle.

The Eritrean Embassy estimates that during the 1970s the presence of Eritreans in Italy reached a peak of 40,000 people (Marchetti 2010). The choice of coming to Italy was justified “because of the colonial links that made the migrants hope for a better treatment than elsewhere” (Ambroso 1987: 154). But those expectations of better treatment in Italy were often not met because of the lack of acknowledgement by the Italian state of its colonial past, a forgetfulness that was demonstrated also through the absence of a law that gave the possibility to Eritreans to seek asylum. Nowadays Eritrean citizens in Italy number around 8,100 (Istat 2011). The two main communities are located in Rome and in Milan. In 2010 more than 2,500 Eritreans lived in Milan (Comune di Milano 2010). If today this number, in proportion to the total number of foreign inhabitants in Milan (more than 217,000), is quite small, this was not so during the first period of substantial waves of migration in the city, when the Eritreans represented a quite important community, not only in virtue of their number but also of their self-organization and their capacity to be in contact with local organizations. Moreover, if the migration of Eritreans toward Italy, and Milan in particular, dates back to the end of the 1960s, it is at the end of the 1970s that there is a gradual but important turn happening inside the community, linked to changes happening in Eritrea. As it became clear that the war against Ethiopia was not going to end
quickly, the possibility of returning to Eritrea became consequently more remote. The migratory flux became more consistent and the first regular family units of Eritreans in Milan were formed – thanks also to the possibility of accessing housing (see section 3 of this chapter). At the beginning of the 1980s many children were born among the community. During 1984-1985 the Eritreans in Milan numbered around 2,500 out of a total population of 40,000 foreign inhabitants. Moreover, by 1984, a period in which global migrations toward Italy were only starting, around 10% of the Eritrean population in Milan was born in Italy and aged between 0 and 10 years, signs of a community already stable in the territory.

Eritreans in Italy during this period of time didn’t have access to asylum. Until 1990 asylum in Italy was inscribed inside its role as a frontier country between western and eastern Europe, therefore Italy recognized asylum only for people escaping from other European states, in practice only for people escaping from the Soviet Union. Article number 10 of the Italian Constitution foresaw the right to political asylum in Italy but the law that should have assured this principle was never passed. Italy is also a signatory of the Geneva Convention of 1951 on political refugees, but the applicability of this convention as said was reserved only for those exiled from European states (following the logic of the Cold War) and was extended to Chilean people after the Pinochet coup d'état. In any case there was no constitutional right of asylum and refugees were in a situation of constant uncertainty and at the mercy of the state police (l’Unità, 26th February 1979). Moreover, since Eritrean people were fighting for independence from Ethiopia but were formally Ethiopian, they experienced problems with the Ethiopian embassy in Rome, for example when they had to renew their passports. The successive move of Eritrean migrants from Italy to the UK, the US or Canada was mainly due to the possibility in these countries to seek asylum. Those remaining in Italy, mainly in Rome or Milan, had permits connected to their status as workers or students or else they were forced to live without documents.

Consequently, the state of ‘illegality’ was for many a forced situation. The migrants who were excluded from this general problem were domestic workers, but even for them the permit was strictly connected to their job, putting them in a relation of inferiority towards their employers. Other migrants, mainly men, entered generally with a student or tourist permit and then either simply stayed when it expired or they extended their student

---

11 La Repubblica, 29th October 1988, Lo stipendio o il passaporto. Ricatto agli eritrei in Italia [The wage or the passport. Blackmail of Eritreans in Italy]
status as much as possible. Expulsions of Eritreans were not infrequent. The EPLF denounced this problem in its publications (e.g. EFLE 1977). Newspapers reported cases of expulsions related either to the status of ‘illegality’ due to the lack of a job and a permit, or due to the requests of the Ethiopian government persecuting people for political reasons. In a letter published in l’Unità, a group of Eritreans asked why Italy was making Eritreans suffer: “Italy forgot about Eritrea and all those who fought for Italy, that is our great-grandfathers, grandfathers and fathers. Today young Eritreans, especially here in Italy, can’t be free and live in peace. Because they are not called Eritreans, they are called ‘strangers’. We always remember the past, we should be considered and well helped” (l’Unità, 15th of August 1973). In some cases the process of expulsion created dramatic consequences. One example is the case of Giabre Michael Abeba Kifle, a young Eritrean woman who in August of 1979 set herself on fire because she didn’t want to be expelled and died on the 11th September 1979 after a month in hospital.

In 1986 the state proposed a law (n.943 of December 1986) to regulate the entrance and stay of migrants and a so-called sanatoria – “literally ‘healing’, refers to the process of granting legal status to undocumented foreigners who can prove they have regular employment” (Giordano 2014: 140). The law was criticised by associations of migrants because it was mainly repressive and didn’t propose solutions to the problems of migrant workers in Italy. As Ghirmai Habtemicael, a representative in Milan of the EPLF, said in an interview: “the law proposed by the minister of interior contains exclusively police laws, not norms on work. If for years immigrants worked without a piece of paper in their hands, why suddenly should employers give them contracts?” (la Repubblica, 5th January 1986, Stranieri, primi espulsi a Genova [Strangers, the first ones expelled in Genoa]).

---

12 L’Unità, 4th March 1982, Studenti a vita per non finire tra gli illegali. [Students so as not to become illegal].
14 L’Unità, 15th August 1973, Il governo aiuti i patrioti eritrei venuti in Italia [The government should help Eritrean patriots arriving in Italy].
15 L’Unità, 15th August 1979, Giovane Eritrea si dà fuoco. Non voleva essere cacciata. [A young Eritrean woman set herself on fire. She didn’t want to be expelled]. Giabre Michael Abeba Kifle was twenty-six years old. Policemen went to her apartment to take her to the airport and send her back to her country. While they were waiting she went to the toilet, used alcohol and set herself on fire. She didn’t have a job, she didn’t have money, her permit to stay had expired three years previously. She was badly injured. She arrived in Rome four/five years previously from Asmara looking for a job. Initially she worked as a domestic but then she remained without a job.
The *sanatoria* to regularise undocumented migrants already present in the Italian territory (a practice that has remained popular until today) didn’t work as expected by the state, as most of the undocumented migrants didn’t apply. One explanation given was that undocumented migrants preferred remaining in a status of illegality with an irregular job rather than being regularised and most likely losing their job\(^\text{16}\). The fact was that, without collaboration between the migrant worker and the Italian employer, regularisation was impossible. Migrants denounced the fact that employers didn’t want to regularise their jobs, without which it was impossible to apply for the *sanatoria*. In a public meeting in Rome, migrants of the association Jerry Masllo – named after a young South African man killed in Rome – affirmed that only 65 employers in the capital city decided to use the sanatoria and regularise their employees. Less than 10\% of the estimated undocumented migrants present in Italy at the time (around 700,000) applied to be regularised in 1987\(^\text{17}\). Another *sanatoria* was promoted in 1988, but again it was not taken up widely and ended up being a failure\(^\text{18}\).

In 1978 a Censis survey showed the presence in Italy of a number between 280,000 and 400,000 ‘foreign workers’ (*l’Unità*, 27\(^\text{th}\) October 1978). Among them, the survey stated, between 70,000 came from Capoverde, the Seychelles, Mauritius, Eritrea, the Philippines and Somalia. This kind of group created by the Censis reflected the composition of work, and, more precisely, referred to domestic workers. The survey showed also that in Milan 75\% of Eritreans worked as domestic workers and that 80\% of those workers worked between 12 and 16 hours a day. Wages were very low and jobs in general taken by migrants were mainly low skilled manual jobs. The fact that migrants were weakly represented by the unions and that they lived in conditions in which they probably preferred to some degree to have access to the illegal job market made them more likely to end up in low skilled jobs (*l’Unità*, 4\(^\text{th}\) April 1979). The Italian law also made it very complex for a migrant to look for a regular job (*l’Unità*, 5\(^\text{th}\) February 1979).

Many would have liked to change the house in which they worked but they didn’t because they were scared by the reaction of the employer and by the possibility of being expelled from the country (*l’Unità*, 11\(^\text{th}\) February 1979). In an interview given to *l’Unità* on the occasion of the EPLF Bologna meeting in 1979 an Eritrean woman said that she was blackmailed by her employer, who told her not to complain about her working hours because otherwise they would have tear up the contract and withdraw her permit to stay

\(^{16}\) *L’Unità*, 25\(^{\text{th}}\) April 1987, Ultime ore per i lavoratori immigrati [Last hours for immigrant workers].

\(^{17}\) *La Repubblica*, 23\(^{\text{rd}}\) April 1987, Solo 5 giorni per mettere in regola gli stranieri [Only 5 days left to regularise foreigners].

\(^{18}\) *L’Unità*, 5\(^{\text{th}}\) November 1988, Né lavoro né permessi: sanatoria fallita [Neither jobs nor permits: failed sanatoria].
(confirmed also by a representative of the CGIL union in Rome Bruno Mignucci, in an interview in *l’Unità*, 3rd January 1985). The description of the life these migrants had was not so far from the life of a servant rather than a worker. For example Eritrean workers were ‘lent’ from one family to another, they had to move with the family for whom they worked when they went on vacation, they had to stay awake until very late if their family was giving a party at home, and often they worked in couples so that they could share all the jobs to do in the house. Racist episodes were ordinary.

“An employer pretends that the butler wear gloves when serving at the table because the hand of a negro “are disgusting”; another employer doesn’t want that the Eritrean girl uses warm water to wash the dishes: it would be a waste, anyway the hands of a negro don’t become run down by dishwashing” (*l’Unità*, 24th August 1979).

Connected to the problems of documents and work there was the quest for housing and for the use of social spaces. *l’Unità* underlined in an article the request on behalf of migrants in Rome for spaces for social encounters. Normally migrants were, and often still are, left without any choice if not that of meeting in public squares; it is not surprising that “the first request is a cultural and social centre where foreign workers can meet. Scattered in the city, without points of aggregation, the risk is that of being swallowed up in the magma of the great marginalisation while the frustration of not being able to be ‘different’ in culture, of not being equal for law grows” (*l’Unità*, 15th October 1982). The necessity for spaces for encountering and spending time outside working hours was mostly addressed by the same organisations of Eritreans, in particular the EPLF.

On the 9th September 1973 the first meeting of Eritreans in Italy at the ‘Casa della Cultura’ in Milan was held. Here it was decided to create the first Italian section of the EPLF. The EPLF’s headquarters for the internal organisations (women’s, students’ and peasants’ organisations) for the whole Eritrean diaspora were located in Arese, ten miles from Milan. The Front also had a political office in Rome dealing with political affairs at the Italian level. Several Eritreans in Milan worked for the EPLF, whose important presence entailed that some of the main political figures of the organisation at the European level lived in the city, but also that the Front was quite important in organising the social life of Eritrean migrants in Milan.

---

19 see Chapter 4 for an extended history of Eritrean politics on housing in Milan
Four times a year, the Front organised festivals with Eritrean bands to support the EPLF inside the squatted social centre Leoncavallo – set up in 1975 near the neighbourhood inhabited by the Eritrean community (Porta Venezia) – where Eritreans used to also run a bar and a space for both cultural and social events. For the same purpose – supporting EPLF activity in Eritrea – a one-week congress and festival with Eritreans coming from several countries of Europe and North America was organised in Bologna every August. Tabacco and Poidimani’s (2001) work collects all the documents around the eighteen meetings of the EPLF in Bologna, from 1974 to 1991. In addition to general EPLF meetings, gatherings of sections of the organisation were also set up. For example in May 1986 the Union of Eritrean Women organised a conference in Viareggio about ‘The Eritrean woman: from tradition to resistance’. The EPLF used to inform the Italian press through press conferences held in Rome about the situation of the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia with the intention of keeping alive the attention of international public opinion. The EPLF pushed the Italian government several times to intervene in order to suggest a peaceful resolution of the conflict. The Italian state never acted in a significant

21 The following events were all reported in l’Unità:
21st January 1971: the Federation of the African Students in Italy and the Association Italy-Eritrea wrote a document to ‘the students, the workers and the revolutionary forces’ so that they sustain the fight for national liberation of the Eritrean people ‘against imperialism, colonialism and neocolonialism’.
18th March 1978: the Eritreans reply in a press conference in Rome to the accusation of the Soviet Union to fight ‘on behalf of imperialism’. Andamichael Kassai, member of the Central Committee of the EPLF, in the headquarters of the FLM (Federazione Lavoratori Metalmeccanici – Federation of Metal Workers), restating the willingness of Eritreans to find a pacific solution to the conflict, asked for the solidarity of the democratic and progressive Italian forces; the intervention of the United Nations and of the Organisation for African Unity; the withdrawal of foreign forces from Eritrea; the acknowledgment of the right to self-determination and independence; and the acknowledgment of the two fronts, the EPLF and the ELF, as legitimate representatives of the Eritrean people.
29th August 1978: Sebhat Efrem, member of the political bureau of the EPLF, interviewed by a journalist of l’Unità explains the state of the art of the armed conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia.
7th December 1978: a press conference is held inside the offices of the union confederation, with the presence of parliamentarians and representatives of Italian political parties and unions. Ermias Debesai, from the central committee of the EPLF, updates the Italian press on the situation in Eritrea. Politicians from different parties (PCI, DC and PDUP) intervene to report the denial from the police in Rome of an authorisation for a demonstration of Eritreans that was to happen that same day. A representative of the union (Gabaglio) declared that the union would itself announce a demonstration in support of the Eritrean people right to self-determination.
21st December 1978: a demonstration of the EPLF in Rome is held in the neighbourhood Testaccio, supported by CGIL-CISL-UIL.
22nd December 1978, Naples: a press conference is held inside the research institute Pisacane on the actual situation of the fight for independence of the Eritrean people, together with representatives from the EPLF.
7th December 1979: a public announcement from the EPLF about violent armed fights going on around the area of Nacfa.
way and in some cases Eritreans made it clear that Italy was doing a ‘dirty job’ in the Horn of Africa (in particular through an interview given to an Italian journalist by the leader of the EPLF in Eritrea, Isaias Afwerki\(^{22}\)). In September 1988, after a visit of the president of Ethiopia, Mengistu, to Italy, Eritrean rebels strongly advocated for a mediation of Italy in the conflict (\textit{la Repubblica}, 16\(^{th}\) September 1988).

But if the State was not attentive to the development of the war, other important public and political organisations were. The confederation of Italian unions (CGIL-CISL-UIL) was immediately sensitive to the cause of Eritrean liberation and supported it actively. In 1978 a delegation of the Italian union confederation of Milan visited Eritrea. In 1983 a delegation of the unions of Milan participated in the Congress of the organisation of the Eritrean workers (UNLE) and women (UNDE). In 1984 the union promoted the constitution of a solidarity committee. The general secretaries of the unions wrote a petition for it and many well-known political and cultural Milanese figures subscribed to it. The programme, decided in collaboration with the Eritrean organisations, had as its goals information, the political and material sustenance of the liberation fight and of the process of development of the liberated zones as well as the defence of the rights of Eritrean workers in Milan. Eritreans used to participate in the demonstration of workers on International Workers Day – 1\(^{st}\) of May – in Rome, Bologna and Milan\(^{23}\) and Eritrean women used to participate in demonstrations on the International Women’s Day – 8\(^{th}\) of March – in Rome organised by the ‘democratic forces’\(^{24}\). Eritreans used to also participate in the annual gatherings of the Italian Communist Party, the ‘Festa dell’Unità’, in several Italian cities\(^{25}\).

The relation of the fight for independence with the Italian Communist Party was not easy. The official newspaper, \textit{l’Unità}, seemed sympathetic to the Eritrean struggle, but

\(^{22}\)This is an extract from the interview: “For a long time Italy has been playing a very dirty game in the Horn of Africa. It sustains the Ethiopian regime with millions of dollars, it supports the collectivisation and the ‘villagisation’ wanted by Menghistu in the country and hated by the people; it gives food aid that ends up in the army’s warehouse. The Italian government has evil intentions. It did everything to push for a reconciliation of Ethiopia and Somalia, against the interests of Eritrea. I don’t expect anything from Italy and I think that Italy doesn’t have any role to play in the region and even less in Eritrea. I tried to establish contacts with the persons in charge of Italian foreign politics, thinking, naively, that they had all the elements to understand our situation. I made propositions. And I have ascertained that the interests of the Italian government and business that make money in Ethiopia go in a totally opposite direction to the one of Eritreans. Italy stands on the side of our enemy and for that we don’t have to expect anything. I am not speaking emotively, but out of a negative experience of a failed attempt” \textit{(la Repubblica}, 17th June 1988).


actually the position of the party was more complex\textsuperscript{26}. Eritreans were fighting against a nation that declared itself communist and had had a revolution. This didn’t mean that the Communist Party was not sensitive to Eritreans’ claims for independence but it didn’t share them totally. Italian communists were more favourable to a solution of the problem through the concession of great regional autonomy to Eritrea and not the separation of it from Ethiopia, as demanded by the Eritrean national fronts. This is clear from some articles reporting meetings between members of the central committees of the PCI (Italian Communist Party) and of the EPLF and ELF, in which rather divergent perspectives emerge clearly: “it was decided that the differences about the analysis of the actual perspectives can’t and must not prevent more fraternal relationships” (20th January 1978); and “beyond the specific positions of the two sides, it was decided to reaffirm the necessity that the open military conflict stops in Eritrea (20th May 1978). However support for the Eritrean struggle came from local networks beyond the CGIL union, characterised by the presence of many communists, in particular the FLM–Federazione Nazionale dei Lavoratori metalmeccanici (National Metalworkers’ Federation - NMF) section of the union\textsuperscript{27}.

The strong link with the unions was strategic for the EPLF, for it allowed it to try and influence parties and parts of the state into support of the Eritrean struggle. This was done through the organisation of meetings and public demonstrations. In April 1986 in Rome the EPLF organised a demonstration of the organisations of the Front with the support of the unions. Around 1 000 Eritreans participated and asked for the approval of a law for the recognition of their rights as asylum seekers and an intervention of the Italian government to facilitate the resolution of the conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia. As is clear in this case and as I will make more evident in the following chapters, the struggle for rights as migrants and as workers and the struggle for Eritrean independence are always intertwined in the experience of Eritreans in Italy.

Beyond the unions, parts of the Communist Party, and autonomous organisations like the Leoncavallo Social Centre, solidarity came from city councils as well. In particular the city of Florence, stimulated by the unions and the EPLF, on more than one occasion organised fundraising or used public money to buy essential goods like medicines to send

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{l’Unità}, 15th March 1978.
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{l’Unità}, 14th March 1978, Solidarietà della FLM con la lotta Eritrea per l’indipendenza [Solidarity from NMF with the Eritrean fight for independence].
to Eritrea. Eritreans themselves organised events to raise money: in 1984 in the context of a public campaign sustaining the populations of drought-stricken sub-Saharan countries, the Eritrean Community of Milan – the formal community organisation of Eritreans in Milan – collected money in order to buy and send a tank truck to transport water to the liberated zones of Eritrea. Support for the EPLF’s fight came also from the ‘Permanent peoples’ Tribunal’ of the International League for the Rights and Liberation of Peoples. In 1980 (24th-26th of May) they organised a session on Eritrea’s right for self-determination in Milan (Tribunale permanente dei popoli 1982). They chose Milan because of the good integration of the Eritrean organisations inside the socio-political context of the city.

All this political activity around Eritrean politics, as I have shown, entailed the creation of social and political relations with Italian local and national organisations from which Eritreans expected support and solidarity. Although the end of the war for independence, and the divisions that then emerged inside the Eritrean movement (between those supporting the government of Isaias Afwerki and those opposing it), undermined the continuation of these collaborations and hybridisations of organisations, Eritreans are still today taking advantage of this history. Young generations escaping Eritrea today organise politically on different levels – from everyday politics around housing to the organisation of an opposition to Afwerki’s regime. They can rely on the networks created by their predecessors back in the 1970s and 1980s. And often they reproduce their practices in a completely new political landscape – for example Eritreans in Milan squatted a building in 2008 and when they were evicted they marched into the main square of Milan and slept in front of the Duomo (the Cathedral) to affirm their right to housing.

28 All the following initiatives were promoted in accord with the EPLF. 19th June 1978: a demonstration inside Florence City Council in solidarity, promoted by the unions and the “League for the Rights of the People”. 5th August 1978: The city council of Florence decides to send medicines worth of five million lire to the Eritrean people. 17th October 1978: Constitution of a Committee in support of the freedom of Eritrean people, constituted by various political organisations in Tuscany and chaired by Enzo Enriques Agnoletti. 24th December 1978: a tent is placed in a central square of Florence calling on the Italian government to intervene in order to simplify the road toward a peaceful solution of the conflict, and calling on the Soviet and Cuban governments not to intervene and side against a liberation movement. 19th January 1979: health materials are sent to the Eritrean people from Florence City Council. 4th March 1979: a solidarity demonstration in Florence City Council rooms. (Source: l’Unità)

29 l’Unità, 25th May 1980. The Permanent Peoples’ Tribunal (PPT) is a body which, by statute, is part of the International Section of Lelio Basso Foundation. Set up in June 1979, the PPT is an opinion tribunal whose activities include identifying and publicising cases of systematic violation of fundamental rights, especially cases in which national and international legislation fails to defend the right of the people (www.internazionaleleliobasso.it).

30 l’Unità, 18th November 2005, Dauit e gli altri: rifugiati politici da sgombrare [Dauit and the others: asylum seekers to evict]. L’Unità, 30th December 2005, Milano, i rifugiati lasciano la piazza per i container [Milan, refugees leave the square to go in containers].
In the following chapters, I want to explore the history of the forms of self-organisation of the Eritreans in Milan, their impact on the life of Milan, the transmission of organising practices from one generation to another and the extent to which these practices have created a hybridisation of forms of organising. This will contribute to answer my research questions on what the history of the Eritreans in Milan can teach us in relation to thinking differences and forms of organising in a postcolonial condition. The methodological approach I take, that I will introduce in the next chapter, strongly influences the insight I have into all these aspects. I focused in fact on individual/collective experiences, that is to say on how individuals experienced and narrate a collective experience that strongly influenced the lives of Eritreans in Milan. My research methodology, oral history, enabled me to do so.
Chapter 3
Research Methodology: Oral History

“Memories are the fruit of chance. Only tricksters have ordered recollections.”
(Pennac 2001: 104)

3.1 Oral History: Bringing Heterogeneity and Difference into Historiography

Oral history, or rather the use of oral sources in historiography, is a methodology related to historiographical research, but that shares with social science the form of the qualitative interview. It is useful in qualitative research that is interested not only in the present but also in past experiences, and that is eager to think about what it means to question the past. From this perspective, an historical approach is not merely useful, but essential. Knowledge of ‘never told histories’, histories remaining at the margin, at risk of being lost, becomes possible in undertaking interviews with the people who lived them. This is the case for histories of migrants in Italy coming from former Italian colonies, about whom there is a very limited bibliography of reference, due to the absence of interest in comprehending, among Italian scholars, the Italian postcolonial dimension. Not only is the bibliography scarce, but also ‘classical’ sources are limited to these that represent migrants from outside, mostly as a phenomenon to control – official documents and newspaper articles such as those I have presented in Chapter 2. The use of oral history (Perks and Thomson 1998) is important therefore not only because it is able to dig up forgotten or hidden histories, but also, and mostly, because it allows one to get in touch directly with the social actors whom I want to research. Oral sources are in fact atypical historical sources (Portelli 1998): firstly because they are mostly created for the aims of the research for which they are used, different from archival sources; secondly because their genesis is the result of a dialectic between the researcher and the people interviewed, giving the possibility of conducting an inquiry about their lives, collective and singular; and thirdly because they fit in the field of the memory bringing implications on the level of narration and self-representation. These three atypical aspects are some of the reasons that make oral history a good method for my research.

In its definition as a historiographical method opposed to the classical ones, oral history has made contacts with other disciplines – anthropology, sociology, psychology – that defined it as a malleable tool, and moreover as an instrument with the potential capacity of putting history as a discipline into crisis. This hasn’t happened completely,
however, even if oral history has opened a discussion about the social meaning of history. If at the beginning of the development of oral history, born with the intention of giving voice to non-hegemonic classes, its function as a factor of ‘democratization’ of history was underlined, oral historians subsequently came to question what this democratization should actually mean. The democratization of history, it was affirmed, shouldn’t become a form of populism in which oral history would be “merely an alternative ghetto, where at last the oppressed may be allowed to speak” (Passerini 1998: 53) nor “a panacea designed to fill in the blanks in women’s or traditional history, providing ‘more’ history”; nor the juxtaposition of the history of the working class to the history of hegemonic classes or of oral history to “the customary tradition of European historiography” (Ibid.: 54). Against all these interpretations of oral history as democratizing history, scholars called for a history committed to a change both in historiography and in society. This should be done looking at the specificities of oral sources not merely in order to give the possibility to non-hegemonic classes to speak, but mostly to allow the sphere of subjectivity to emerge, questioning the positivistic and empiricist approach of conventional history.

The homogeneity and uniqueness of historical time as a progressive line and the impartiality of written sources have been criticised, from a different geographical, historical and political perspective, by Subaltern Studies as well. In their attempt to give voice to those who were not taken into account by historiography, the Subaltern Studies collective tried to write another history of Indian people, using categories and elements completely extraneous not only to classical historiography, but also to occidental critical historiography. Amongst such innovations was oral history. Following this experience, scholars in colonial studies worked with memories as an alternative source in order to describe the colonised and subalterns’ histories, otherwise difficult to narrate unless using and interpreting canonical sources. Nonetheless, historians in colonial studies have recently identified potential problems in this use of memories, pointing mainly to the risk of making instrumental use of them; that is, to use oral sources mainly to counter official sources, without questioning the sources themselves, i.e. the “subaltern acts of remembering” (Stoler 2002: 169). This model would imply two further problems: first that “subaltern accounts already possess hidden circuits of movement” that wait to be decoded by the historian; second that “the commitment to writing counter histories of the nation has privileged some memories over others” and that focusing on specific events “may in fact block precisely those enduring sentiments and sensibilities that cast a much longer shadow over people’s lives and what they choose to remember and tell about them” (Stoler 2002: 169-170). Stoler’s critique of uses of memories doesn’t stop at this counter model but also
includes an approach that, refusing to look at memories as repositories of the past, interprets them as constructions of and for the present. Against these two approaches Stoler proposes an interpretation of memories as “an ongoing and uneven production process”, an “interpretive labor” (2002: 170). Therefore in work about memory the focus has to be on not only what is remembered but also how it is remembered, on the way in which memories are stated and on all the possible different games that can be played in one phrase. Using the vocabulary of organisation studies, there is a need for “a shift in terminology from ‘organizational memory’ (an object) to ‘organizational remembering’ (a practice)” (Adorisio 2014: 465).

While I see the point that Stoler makes against the ‘hydraulic model’, it should be underlined that oral historians themselves have made similar observations about oral history many years before. An example is Paul Thompson who in 1978 wrote:

“There is no point in replacing a conservative myth of upper-class wisdom with a lower-class one. A history is required which leads to action: not to confirm, but to change the world” (Thompson 1978: 17)

Equally the considerations by Passerini reported above show a consciousness amongst oral historians of the potential problems of their approach. As a historiographical method that wants to question what has been classically understood as history, oral history is not only opening a space for the existence of a multiplicity of histories, but also puts at the centre the fundamental role of the relation between social life and individual life in making history. Focusing in particular on the stories of those without voice, of the subalterns, oral history is an approach that doesn’t simply want to substitute or to enlarge the history of the ruling classes by adding the history of the subalterns: instead, it wishes, more widely, to discuss the discipline and the production of history itself. In that sense I think that oral history shares with postcolonial studies the attempt of provincializing the so-called centres, examining the perspective to the so-called peripheries in order to contest the writing of “History” and to produce, instead, the writing of histories, giving value to radical conflicts around difference and heterogeneity:

“The task of producing minority histories has, under the pressure precisely of a deepening demand for democracy, become a double task. I may put it thus: good minority history is about expanding the scope of social justice and representative democracy, but the talk about the limits of history, on the other hand, is about struggling, or even groping, for nonstatist forms of democracy that we cannot not yet either understand or envisage completely. This is so because in the mode of being attentive to the minority of subaltern pasts, we stay with heterogeneities without
seeking to reduce them to any overarching principle that speaks for an already given whole.” (Chakrabarty 2009: 107)

On one side therefore oral history is a tool of deconstructing a homogenous approach to history, and on the other side, it is a way of creating a direct relation and intervention in fieldwork, shaping meanings while doing the research. Wanting to take into consideration the complexity around how differences work in shaping identities and belongingness in my research, I asked myself which methodology could help me in working through differences without re-presenting divisions and instead opening up the research to experiments of hybridity and rethinking difference through the research itself. There are probably multiple ways to answer this question, but the method of oral history possesses elements that are useful in order to think how we create through the research new relations and new spaces that didn’t exist before. Oral history can be a method of research that reflects postcoloniality and creates the possibility for experiencing forms of encounter between differences, getting in touch directly with the social actors I want to engage with and developing a common framework for exploring experiences and political organisation in a postcolonial perspective. Being based on the relation between present and past and on the role of memories – i.e. on how past experiences live and are re-elaborated in the present – this methodology breaks with the idea of differences as something without a history, putting at the centre not only the fact that differences have histories, but how these live in the present and in the everyday life of people. From a postcolonial perspective the question becomes: which past is remembered? Do we (in the case of my research, Italians and Eritreans) share a common past? Or is it a fragmented and conflicting past? How does this conflicting past work inside the possibilities of present political relations (between migrants and non-migrants) and organisations? Oral history becomes therefore not only a method of research but also a method of intervention, an experience or, as Portelli defined it, “an experiment in equality”. What does Portelli mean when he speaks of research as an experiment in equality? He is concerned with disparities and differences and the encounter of these, but instead of believing that it is possible to erase the disparities we have to face during the research he thinks that it is instead useful to make those differences clear to start from there in order to explore the possibility of an exchange. So the role of the dialectic between researcher and informant is thought of as central in this methodology. In other words, oral history suggests that exchange is possible only in difference. I will explore more this point in section 3.4.
Because of its focus on subjectivity, oral history is also a method that can help to understand forms of autonomy in migration\(^{31}\) (Papadopoulos et al. 2008; Mezzadra 2011; Martignoni and Papadopoulos 2014) giving an account of how migrants’ lives cross history and how they make history through their lives. Individuality and collectivity are in that sense interpreted as continuously interacting and shaping each other. The attempt is in fact “to keep the tension, the ambiguity, to think the single individual, \textit{at the same time}, as a particular case and a totality”\(^{32}\) (Loriga 2012: 196, emphasis original). This tension opens up questions about how individual experiences narrated in interviews tell us something about organisations and forms of organising together. It also opens up a focus on escaping the reduction of singularity to collectivity when trying to use oral history interviews in order to describe the history of an organisation, a community for example. Focusing on everyday life practices I have accessed a space for understanding this tension and relation. In other words, when we focus on everyday practices we see the necessity of looking at the individual forms of contributing to the organisation of a community. Therefore the importance of the individual in relation to the collectivity is evident and at the same time valued. In this way we can see how supra-individual social forms such as organisations are created, sustained, lived, contested and modified in everyday life. Along these lines I am contributing to a current debate in the field of organisational memory studies – see the special issue of \textit{Organization} (2014) on “Narratives and memory in organizations” for example – that has focused on the role of narratives and the concept of ‘organizational remembering’ (memory as a practice) as opposed to ‘organizational memory’ (memory as an object).

Next to the question about the tension between singularity and collectivity, there is another problem to take into consideration when using oral history to investigate forms of organising and histories of organisations. This is the relation between the discursive and the practical/experiential dimensions. In other words the question is to what extent a discursive approach can be useful in order to understand dynamics of organisation. Or, what is the relation between narrative and practice? Or, can I gain an insight on organisational practices through these being narrated? Wouldn’t it be more appropriate to observe practices of organising? First of all, if we are trying to look at the history of an organisation, then observing is obviously not enough to gain knowledge about how things have been done in the past and how and why they became as they are in the present. But narratives also have the capacity of reconciling two aspects entailed in remembering: the

\(^{31}\) The autonomy of migration approach is debated in Chapter 5.

\(^{32}\) My translation
contextual and the experiential (Adorisio 2014). In taking oral history interviews about the history of a community, we access, in other words, a very particular source that is a muddle made of practices, the context in which those practices were born and sustained, personal experience of those practices and the understanding of them on the basis of the experience that occurred between that specific past and the present. In that way, we can understand the discursive dimension in knowing about practices of organising not as a limitation but as a rich resource that needs to be at the same time left in its messiness and disentangled. Oral history, because of the importance it gives to the interviews in the text, is very useful in this direction.

3.2 Data Collecting

The fieldwork was undertaken in two phases. The first one was in February 2013 when I collected secondary data and started figuring out the ways to contact Eritreans in Milan. In this period I mainly looked for written sources on the presence of Eritreans in Milan. Newspapers, books, pictures, conference proceedings and documents of any sort were what I was looking for, mostly in public libraries in Milan. This phase was fundamental to create the framework inside which my second part of the fieldwork would develop. Collecting these data allowed me to gain knowledge which proved to be fundamental in organizing the interviews: dates, places, events, names and organisations regarding the history of Eritreans in Milan. The second part of my fieldwork took place between September 2013 and January 2014, when I collected my primary data, the interviews. A few days after I arrived in Milan to start the second part of my fieldwork, something happened which was quite important for the development of my research. The relevance of this event is related in general to the situation of migrants in Italy and in Europe and in particular to the Eritrean people. On the 3rd October 2013 a boat that left from the Libyan coast carrying migrants sank near Lampedusa Island, south of Sicily. The shipwreck was a highly dramatic event, with 369 people dying. Most of these people were Eritreans and Somalis. The event was immediately decisive for my research, in fact my initial contacts – an Italian woman working for Milan City Council social services and an Italian-Ethiopian man who runs a shop in Porta Venezia (Milan) the area where all the Eritrean business are – suggested to me to wait some weeks before contacting my informants because it was a period of mourning. And indeed I waited before contacting the people they suggested to me. After a couple of weeks I wrote first time to the Eritrean consulate to inform them about my research and to ask them for advice and help.
In the meantime, on the 7th October 2013, a demonstration was organised in Milan in memory of the people who died at Lampedusa. I participated in the demonstration and had the possibility to get in touch with the Eritrean people living in Milan. A few days later I did my first interview with a man who runs an Eritrean restaurant in Porta Venezia. I met Aster and Feven then, two young second generation women organising the G2 Network in Milan. They both told me about their lives and those of their families and we discussed their political and social commitment and its relation with the commitments of their parents in the past. They also explained to me their relation with Eritrea, telling me about their travels there and how they ‘lived’ it through their families. While I was speaking with them inside the headquarters of G2 Network in Milan city centre, just behind Piazza Duomo, an Eritrean man arrived. He had an appointment with Aster to borrow her video camera. They stopped him and told him about my research so he sat down and told me about his life. When we finished, the man, whose name is Tekle, told me about a demonstration taking place the day after in Rome and that he was going to participate in it. I asked him what the demonstration was for and he answered: “Because we have had enough, we need to say something, to do something. The poor youth… We have to get rid of the dictator [Afwerki]. We are going to Rome, I asked for holidays at my workplace days ago. We are leaving tonight”. So I asked him for his phone number, to contact him and arrange an interview with him and I left. While I was going back home, walking to catch the metro, I started thinking I should go with them to Rome. It was a good occasion to meet many Eritrean people and talk with them, as well as participate in the demonstration. So I called Tekle and asked him if I could join them on the bus, he called me back a few minutes later and told me ‘yes’.

I went to Porta Venezia at 10:30pm that night to catch the bus. While we waited for the bus, which eventually left at midnight, I met several people to whom Tekle introduced me, explaining my research. This was a significant moment of creation of direct contact with people. The travel to Rome, the demonstration, and the travel back home were

---

33 The demonstration and its implications are described in details in Chapter 6
34 “Network G2 – Second Generations is a non-party national organization created by sons and daughters of immigrants and refugees born and/or raised in Italy. Who belongs to the Network G2 self-defines as “son/daughter of immigrant”, not as an “immigrant”: people born in Italy who did not migrate, and those who were born abroad but raised in Italy didn’t migrate voluntarily, but were brought to Italy by parents or relatives. “G2” therefore doesn’t stand for “second generations of immigrants” but for “second generations of the immigration”, understanding immigration as a process that transforms Italy, generation after generation. […] The objectives of the Network G2 are: 1) reform of the law about the concession of Italian citizenship so that it is more open toward second generations. […] 2) cultural transformation of Italian society to make it more aware and capable of recognising itself in all its children, independently of their origins.” (Taken from the website http://www.secondegenerazioni.it, my translation).
extremely important for the development of my research. I was the only non-Eritrean on the two buses, therefore I induced curiosity among people who were asking themselves or me who I was. Most of them assumed I was a journalist. With many I had the chance to speak and explain I was a PhD student doing my research on the history of the Eritrean community in Milan. They all received my presence very well. I not only created a network of people for my research, but I actually created some relationships that turned out to be friendships. Once back in Milan I used the contacts I had collected in Rome to interview people. It went quite well, even though the process of arranging a meeting was always very slow.

I continued at the same time to follow other paths for contacting people I could interview, and I wrote again to the consulate since I had not received an answer. They replied that they had not received my first email and said they were going to forward it to the Eritrean Community – although I know that they are basically the same people in the same place. I never received an answer. So in November 2013 I did eight interviews and collected new contacts whom I then contacted in January 2014. Most of these contacts were opponents of the Afwerki regime. I have to make clear at this point that the Eritreans in Milan are divided between those who openly reject the Eritrean government and organise themselves to change it, and those who either don’t expose themselves or who openly support the government (as for example those who belong to the Consulate and to the Milanese Eritrean Community). These aspects will be analysed in detail in the following chapters. Suffice it to say, for the time being, that my fieldwork has been profoundly influenced by the present situation in Eritrea and the political positions and divisions among Eritreans in Milan. These divisions are evident not only in how people position themselves in relation to the political present, but also in how they interpret and speak about their past, showing clearly that we shouldn’t look at the past in organizations as a shared common heritage giving a sense of continuity, but as a conflictual space of remembering (Ybema 2014).

A research field is always shaped not only by events erupting, but also by resistances encountered, by people who don’t want to be approached and by some situations that can make it very difficult to move freely in the field. In the case of my research, the biggest resistance I have encountered as I mentioned was from the Eritrean Milanese Community and the Eritrean Consulate in Milan; neither allowed me to meet them and gave me no access to informants. I can’t say exactly what the reason was but I can give two hypotheses: the first is that the Eritrean government is under the spotlight, especially from journalists. So perhaps they see a threat in any outsider, especially if that
outsider wants to conduct interviews – although I repeatedly specified that I was not interested in the present political situation, but in the history of the Eritrean community of Milan. The second hypothesis is that they were aware of the fact that I have participated in the demonstration in Rome and that I was near to many people of the opposition so they have classified me as an opponent. This second hypothesis might have a tinge of conspiracy, but Eritrean people frequently speak about the control to which they are subjected, a control that makes it, for example, very difficult and very risky to visit Eritrea once they have exposed themselves as against the regime. So, although the first hypothesis appears more likely, I can’t completely dismiss the second one. The fact that I haven’t interviewed Eritreans from the Consulate can be explained by the fact that they never replied to my emails and calls and it was almost impossible for me to get in touch with them. On the other side, shortly after I arrived in Milan the Lampedusa tragedy happened. As I started to figure out the situation and the position of the people of the Eritrean Milanese Community and of the Consulate, I started asking myself what was my position on the Eritrean government, whether I should have to take a position at all and if it was ethically right to speak with people who support a dictatorship without questioning them directly on that. Eventually I didn’t even have the opportunity to interview them. During the research I have developed a strong empathy with the people I met and interviewed, who are all (apart from one) against the regime of Afwerki and most of them make of this position an important dimension of their life.

The second resistance I encountered came from established members of the Eritrean community who refused to meet me. In particular a woman who was elected to the Milan City Council in the 1990s refused to meet me because, she said, she had already given many interviews in the past to researchers but they hadn’t, from her point of view, given anything back. Hearing that was quite difficult for me because it questioned my position, my role and my responsibility toward the community I was researching. Answering to my request opposing her will of not giving an interview was a political point she was making saying in other words that Eritreans do not need others to narrate their lives, because they want to narrate them on their own and with their own ideas and terms, and especially expressing her strong doubts about the utility for the community of these kinds of research. I think though that it was useful for me hearing this position as well because I had one more reason to think about the ethics of knowledge production involved in my research and I started thinking about the research project in a way that tried to go beyond the PhD thesis (see Chapter 6).
The third resistance I encountered is related to the meaning of history and the role of oral history. Some people I wanted to interview, mainly women, tried to extricate themselves from the interview saying: “I don’t think I have something important to say, or something interesting for you to hear. My life was not exciting: I arrived here, I have always worked as a domestic worker, and that’s it.” Eventually I convinced them of the relevance of their lives, at least to me, and they agreed to do the interview, but even then some kept this attitude and didn’t speak much in the interview. Eritrean women in particular have quite difficult lives, working long hours and having to take care of their families – sometimes including elderly people who move for a period from Eritrea to Italy because they need healing or assistance – and at times they lack either the time or the desire to be interviewed. Moreover, even at the individual level, people are sometimes scared of being interviewed. The political situation in Eritrea gives them a certain prudence, and a desire to not compromise themselves, even when I repeatedly specified that interviews would be kept anonymous. Interestingly, opponents of the current Eritrean regime always replied to me, with a certain pride, that I did not need to hide their names.

At the end of my fieldwork I had conducted eighteen interviews. Nine interviews were with men and nine with women. Ten of the interviewees arrived in Italy in the 1970s and 1980s, two are recent migrants (after 2000) and six are daughters of Eritreans and were born in Italy. Interviews took place in different places: Eritrean restaurants and bars, the G2 Network headquarters, my flat in Milan and interviewees’ flats. I normally introduced the interview by explaining my research interest and where it came from. Then I gave the interviewee some guidelines, some foci which I would like them to discuss during the interview. I asked them to speak mainly about four things. To start with, their life: their childhood and youth in Eritrea; the decision to migrate; how and why it happened?; how they organised the migration?; what happened when they arrived in Italy?; how has their life in Italy been so far in terms of working, housing, having children, studying, doing politics? Secondly, I asked them to talk about the role of the community in their life in Milan, how it was organised, political participation but also the role of the community in making things work better in everyday life. Thirdly, I asked them to tell me about their relation to Eritrea; what is Eritrea to them?; how do they think it and live it? I asked them also what they thought of the fact that Eritrea has been ‘built’ from a diaspora. After they had finished giving their answers, I asked them more detailed questions about facts, people and places they had mentioned, trying to be more specific and to examine things I thought were important and that they didn’t develop sufficiently. I would always end with a question about the presence of Italy – in terms of people, culture, economy and history – in Eritrea.
I asked interviewees if they had stories in their families of the colonial period and what they remembered, if anything, from their experience of the presence of Italians in Eritrea. It is quite difficult to describe the actual content of the interviews, which are made up not only of facts but also of sentiments, anecdotes and interactions. These are difficult to summarise but I try to convey a sense of them to the reader in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

3.3 Data Analysis. Doing Research With Memories

Oral history considers memories as an active agent in the present and not as fixed elements crafted in the past and definitively fixed. Memories, in this sense, are the product of continuous elaboration in the present of past events. Moreover, even if some scholars (Portelli 1997: 57-58) have underlined the ultimately subjective nature of memory, i.e. the fact that memory materializes only through the minds and mouths of individuals, this elaboration is not individual but collective. Not only are our experiences of events in our life socially constructed (Halbwachs 1992), but the re-elaboration of their meanings throughout our lives is too. This entails a commitment to the use of memories not simply in order to better understand the past or ourselves, but also to grasp their social construction and therefore to use the results of their analysis in order to understand social life in the present.

Comparing oral history to other research methodologies using memories – memory-work and memory studies – is a good way to understand the specificity of what data analysis looks like in oral history research. What shapes the difference between memory-work and oral history is, I think, the relation to the objects analysed. While in memory-work (Haug 1987; Haug and Livingstone 1992; Haug 1999) the analysis of memories is done in relation to social constructions, behaviours and customs (which are thought of as political), in oral history the analysis of memories is done in relation to history, therefore to historical facts relevant for the people involved in the interviews. While memory-work is more interested in analysing how we make our own sense of present social life, oral history is more concerned in understanding how we make our own sense of history. Obviously the two things cannot be sharply divided, but the two approaches stress, nevertheless, different aspects. Another approach that works with memories, the field of memory studies (Keightley 2010; Allen and Bryan 2011; Kleist 2012), is defined in terms of which memories are analysed. More specifically, memory studies examine memories in relation to other memories, the emphasis being on how memories are shaped and built, especially on a narrative level. As Emily Keightly (2010) writes, the
analysis of memories in memory studies is characterised by treating each narrative or testimony “as a text in the cultural sense of the word” and “a critical interpretation of the meanings of memory narratives in terms of both form and content” (page: 64). The emphasis here is on the linguistic level of narration, therefore the choice of specific words rather than others, the construction of the sequence of tenses [?], and so on. Though this specific work is done also in oral history, it isn’t done in such a systematic way, and therefore instruments for data analysis such as coding methods as used in memory studies are unlikely to be used in oral history.

As an historical approach oral history is based on the historical method of research and analysis (Gunn and Faire 2012). In historiography, as opposed to the social sciences, there hasn’t been a large production of literature on different, more or less codified, methods of analysis. Everything relies on broad rules internal to historical research that basically concern the validity of the results. The validity of historical research is therefore determined by different aspects: an absence of ideological understanding of events and processes; intensive research into the topic and the sources used; and, on the level of analysis, it seems to me that the only significant rule in historical research is the need to check all the existent sources on the specific topic of your research in order to be able to sustain your thesis, so it can’t be clearly invalidated by an available source. Beyond this the analysis of data can be done in many different ways, which have not been somehow classified as in the social sciences. Chronological and thematic analyses of data are possibly the two main forms, often intertwined and with the first one increasingly losing ground.

The stress, in historical research, on the validity not only of data but also of their analysis is the main reason why oral history has for a long time been criticised by historians and it has been the only field in historiography that has devoted time to a critique and explanation of its methodology, starting with a vindication of the ‘different validity’ of oral sources. Because of the absence of one or more methods in analysing oral data in oral history, it is necessary to analyse some examples of oral history research to have an idea of how it can be done. I will here analyse the method used by Alessandro Portelli (1991; 1997; 2003; 2010). My choice of his work is linked to his capacity to keep together different levels of experience: historical, collective, personal, present. First of all Portelli underlines the importance of an inductive approach, based on rooting the analysis in concrete events and basing all further elaboration on them, a way of proceeding similar to that used by a detective. Being nonetheless aware of the fact that any research is informed by some conceptual framework and an idea of what one is looking for and expects to find, Portelli stresses the importance in oral history of encounter and dialogue. He defines interviews as
“learning situations”, in which the narrator provides information that the interviewer does not have, and the act of interviewing as a relational act, in which both sides have a role in determining the proceeding and the result of the interview. Secondly Portelli is mainly interested in those cases in which memory (and desire) works to generate errors, inventions, misunderstandings or even lies capable of being adopted and believed by a collective body (Portelli 1991; 2003). Interestingly, Portelli is less interested in a reconstruction of events as they actually happened and more prone to examine the role of collective memory: how, why, for which reasons and for what purposes a collective memory was constructed. The wider point here being, of course, that history is not exhausted by events but contains also memories, interpretations, and so on. Furthermore, it is important to underline that ‘errors’ and falsifications do not only occur at the micro level, but also at the macro one. One obvious example of this is the history of Italian colonialism, something entirely erased or, perhaps more correctly, displaced (Triulzi 2006) from the perceptions and memories of Italians.

Portelli focuses his analysis of the collected data on the narrative and linguistic forms used. This exercise is not seen as an end in itself, but is related to the understanding of how history is interpreted by a single person or, more often, by a community. Portelli, in other words, looks for symbolic motifs recurring in oral narratives and then analyses all their possible implications. It is therefore an analysis that tries to establish how people make own sense of their historical past in the present and that tries to examine which collective imaginaries they use to interpret and explain the past. It is mainly through these images and interpretations that he presents the result of his research, making the voices of the interviewees dialogue with each other and with the historical facts. It is fundamental for an oral historian that the interpretation of the researcher always be accompanied by the living voices of the informants, who, in turn, relate to the voice of the researcher (and among themselves) in a dialogic way. The idea of multiple voices building a text of oral history research is a wonderful way, I think, to deal with the ethical problems of interpretation. Constructing the text through multiple voices (that of the researcher and those of the informants),

“our work has gained an intrinsic dialogic dimension, in which our (explicit) interpretations and explanations coexist with the interpretations embedded in the quoted words of our sources, as well as with our readers’ interpretations of them. […] So what we create is a dialogic text of multiple voices and multiple interpretations […]” (Portelli 1997: 65)
How are all these considerations important for my research and more specifically for my data analysis? The ambition of my research is to understand a postcolonial relation inside the political organisation and activity of Eritreans in Milan. In more general terms, I want to understand how the events of the past are “origins of subjectivity, a power of collective imagination that invests the future” (Negri 2012). I investigate, amongst other things, what role the colonial past has played in the agency of Eritrean migrants, therefore investigating the relation between past and present and between how the historical past is elaborated and how it is enacted in the present. But how can this kind of analyses be carried on in practice? As I have already pointed out, the reading of oral history methodology literature suggests that this method, rather than being grounded in a fixed set of established guidelines, mostly consists in a body of experiments and attempts carried on by oral historians (see Perks and Thomson 1998). Only an *a posteriori* reading of these experiments can tell us something about the options that an oral historian finds in front of her when it comes to analysing the contents of the interviews. A deep understanding of the interviews passes through so many different levels that some of them can be lost if we try to codify them in a fixed methodology. Instead, a continuous reflection done by the researcher can guarantee a more attentive and sensitive interpretation. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the method I followed was characterized mostly by creativity, invention, experimentation, and adaptability to context and content, it is still possible to outline a few general methodological guidelines.

First of all: what is an interview? Is it a narrative, a collection of data, an individual account, an historical source, a literary text? Paul Thompson, in his *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (1978), explains the need to evaluate interviews in three ways: as texts; as types of content; and as evidence. The interview is in fact always a narrative, even if it can’t be thought of as literature from my point of view, since it is primarily an oral source and it has not been created as a deliberate literary act, but as an interaction between interviewee and the interviewer who has stimulated the respondent to speak about specific topics. For this reason I agree with Portelli’s advice that “Written form should always remind the reader about the oral origins of the text” (1997: 5). Nonetheless the interview is a text from the moment that it has a narrative, it has meanings and recurring comments and images. It is a text because it says something in a verbal form. The interview is also characterised not only by its form but also by its content, so when analysing an interview you need to disentangle different types of contents and see the relations between them and between the contents of one interview and those of another. Finally, for an oral historian the interview has to be

---

35 My translation
evaluated as evidence, therefore its reliability must be evaluated. This can be done in three ways: looking for internal (in)consistency, cross-checking with other sources and placing the interview in a wider historical context. The evaluation of consistency is not meant to be done in order to separate historically correct interviews as reliable sources from historically incorrect ones. Instead, the purpose is that of understanding, in case of inconsistencies, or falsities, why and how they have been generated; or also, in a case of complete consistency, to understand why a narrative has been so standardised, for example. In that sense, the special value of oral history, as historiography, lies in the capacity of going beyond the (supposed) facts and their importance and interpreting the relation between facts, social and political life and subjectivity through memory.

Thompson (2000: 269-286) describes a set of possible ways of interpreting or analysing oral sources. There are, for him, broadly four ways in which oral history data can be analysed and presented to the reader. These options are not exclusive alternatives but can be complementary. Narrating a single life-story narrative is one possibility; collecting stories, grouping them around common themes or organising them as a collection of whole lives is a second option. Thirdly, Thompson proposes a narrative analysis, where the focus is on the interview itself as an oral text: here, the focus is on what can be learnt from its language, its themes and repetitions, and its silences. This type of analysis is above all concerned with how the narrator experienced, remembered and retold his or her life-story. It evaluates the interview as a genre, which can shed a light both on how the story is told and on how the forms in which it is told may shape its contents – as Passerini (1998) brilliantly showed in her work on the ambiguities of subjectivity among the working class between fascism and antifascism. This approach gives space also to the analysis of the interview as a whole, that is, not simply as the story of the teller, but as the outcome of the interaction of interviewer and interviewee (Thompson 2000: 275). Finally a reconstructive cross-analysis can be done, in which the oral evidence is treated as a source from which to construct an argument about patterns of behaviour or events in the past. The objective is to use life-story interviews to reconstruct in detail how a social context or element works and changes (Thompson 2000: 281). This last option is the form of interpretation that I decided to follow in my analysis, reconstructive cross-analysis, since I want to speak about how the Eritrean community worked and how it was organised.

At the same time, analysing my interviews only through this lens would be reductive and would exclude possibilities of expansion and reduce the intensity of the research itself. Inside the interviews and related to the interviews there are several different levels that can be analysed and written about. Interviews have a story in themselves: how
did you get to interview this person?; how did you arrange the interview?; which relation was established?; and so on. And interviews are full of stories, those that informants decide to tell to the researcher. These stories are bound to an historical context that must be acknowledged. Equally, the interview is shaped by the approach of the researcher: which are her thoughts?; which are the theories that inform her questioning ?; which are the outcomes she expects from the interview? All these levels need to be somehow acknowledged by the analysis of the data.

The relation between theory and data has been particularly challenging to understand for me. I went into the field having done much work on theories and literature that could inform my research questions. I have nonetheless let the interviews include more than what my research questions asked and sometimes that ‘more’ took centre stage in the interviews. I found myself in front of very rich and varied data that I didn’t want to waste simply because they didn’t directly answer my research questions. In other words, since the richness of oral history lies in its capacity of being factual but of also going beyond facts and giving cultural, political and subjective accounts of history, I wanted to take advantage of that. Moreover, studies using memories for understanding changes in organisations have highlighted how:

“Individuals sometimes fail to explicitly acknowledge and name changes when invoking memories. Rather their recurrent narratives about the past often implicitly contain elements to track changes” (Cruz 2014: 449)

The analysis of the interviews and the writing process have gone together in my experience. It seems pretty clear that in oral history the form of analysis and form of the writing go together. The choice of the analysis and the choice of the form of presentation of the contents are in fact connected and can’t be thought of separately. So how we analyse and how we write, how we present the analysis, are two related tasks that influence each other:

“Perceiving a passage depends on the way we hear it, and the way we hear it and interpret it shapes the way we represent it on the written page” (Portelli 1997: 22)

Writing when working with oral sources first of all entails transcribing. In the case of my research transcription was complicated by language(s) and the need for translation. Because the interviews were done in Italian, after I transcribed them all and after I analysed them and selected the parts I wanted to use, I had to translate them into English. This caused me problems relative to how it is possible to render in the written form the expressions, the feelings and the uncertainties expressed in the interviews. If this is a general problem for
oral history, it becomes even more complex when translation is added to transcription. In the case of my interviews I found particularly frustrating the impossibility of retaining the ‘incorrect’ Italian that some of my respondents spoke and their construction of sentences, which reflected in many cases the construction of thoughts and feelings. In the passage from oral to written and from Italian to English many nuances and subtleties were inevitably lost. This is a problem not only because we are missing important elements useful to understand more deeply the stories of my respondents, but also because in the act of translating I am making an intervention and an erasure of the ways in which postcolonial subjects appropriate in different ways ‘colonial languages’ – in this case Eritreans appropriating or struggling with Italian. Language and colonialism are in fact strongly connected and a postcolonial approach needs to question the formation and use of language among other things:

“Language is intimately connected to governmentality. The association of European languages with rational thinking, the values of civilisation and intelligence is part and parcel of the long routes of colonisation that make our postcolonial times today.” (Puwar 2004: 109)

These considerations around language and translation open up questions around the ethics of my research and in particular around the relation between me and the people I have interviewed and their community. Ethical issues in oral history are discussed in the next section.

3.4 Oral History, an Experiment in Equality

“[…] we must place our professional and technical ethics in the framework of broader personal civil and political responsibilities. […] Ultimately, in fact ethical and legal guidelines only make sense if they are the outward manifestation of a broader and deeper sense of personal and political commitment to honesty and to truth.” (Portelli 1997: 55)

The discussion in social sciences about the ethical problems of doing research has produced different points of view about the problem of the relation between researcher and researched and, more widely, about ethics in social research (Brewis and Wray-Bliss 2008). It is a question that has been raised in particular by anthropological research due to its necessity of doing research with people of different cultures. Many of these concerns are born from the fact that the researcher, embodied mainly by an academic from an Occidental university, is conventionally seen as a single person who wants to study a group
and, while the group is supposed to be ‘defenceless’ and representing a social realm, the researcher is seen as an individual separated from the social realm, belonging only to the scientific community, with instruments that would permit him or her to be detached. From here the problems of how it is possible to safeguard the groups studied and to impose fair behaviour from the researcher towards the participants arises. But things have gone further and discussions of ethics have started to revolve around not only how it is possible to safeguard people during the research, but also before and after. Therefore questions such as for whom is the research undertaken, to whom researchers are accountable and who should conduct the research in certain groups – in particular indigenous group who preserved themselves from colonization and globalization – have also arisen (Fox 2003; Bishop 2008; Christians 2008; Clark 2008; Smith 2008; Brownlie 2009). All these concerns are underpinned by the problem of inequalities and disparities in the social world. The problem therefore is that the different social positions (and backgrounds and experiences) between scholar and ‘object’ of their study involve relations of power. These can either favour or hinder the researcher.

Far from believing that it is possible to erase those disparities during the research by, for example, either trying to be as detached as possible, trying to pander to the people interviewed, or by avoiding possible conflicts, it is instead useful to make these differences clear in the relation and ground the possibility of an exchange on the honest acknowledgment of these differences. We have to be, in other words, aware but not afraid of the possible limits and problems of doing research on and with migrants. The words of the Italian writer Wu Ming 2, who wrote in his recent book Timira – co-authored by Antar Mohamed – on the life of an Italian-Somali woman, explain this point clearly:

“we could say that the only way not to be a colonialist is to not even land on the others’ land, to not even interfere in their life: but it is a short step, from this, to sustain that everyone has to remain at her/his place, and it is a step that my leg refuses.”36 (Wu Ming 2 and Mohamed 2012: 241)

The presence of the researcher is a value that must be recognised. Assuming that in the very practice of being there and interviewing we are acting politically, we have to “consider the changes that our presence may cause as some of the most important results of our field work” (Portelli 1991: 44). Portelli stresses the relational nature of oral history, underlining first that the researcher wants to speak to some specific people because he/she wants to learn something from them (rather than study them). Second he suggests that in the relation

36 My translation
that is established during the interview, the interviewee has an agency: he or she decides what to tell us and what not to tell us, and studies us trying to figure out who we are, what we think, if we are to be trusted or not etc. On the basis of this approach we can think of research as an experiment in equality based on difference.

But if ethics is not simply a set of rules to follow, then how can we deal with it? A methodology that stresses the importance of the encounter of differences and the need for the construction of more equality in interviewing practices in order to reach a more open communication (Portelli 1991: 29-44) is an excellent approach to the problem. Far from trying to hide problems, this approach nevertheless doesn’t want to ‘overcharge’ the research with possible problems and with a sense of guilt. Portelli seems to tell us to believe in the human will to interact and to not be afraid of taking positions openly. This means, in his terms, thinking about “research as an experiment in equality” (Portelli 1991: 29-44). Exchange is possible only in difference. It is not simply similarity that permits an exchange; by definition, Portelli tells us, an exchange of knowledge makes sense only if this knowledge isn’t shared a priori. He goes on to affirm that, if it is common ground that makes communication possible, it is difference that makes it meaningful. Further, common ground doesn’t consist in a common identity (of class, gender, ideology etc.) but can and should be delimitated by a willingness to engage in reciprocal listening and reciprocal acceptance, although always critically (Portelli 2010: 128). Recognition and respect of the value of individuals is fundamental. An ethically correct relation can be established only if there is a reciprocal recognition as individuals who are interacting with each other, and therefore a respect for difference. This means recognition of difference and recognition of equality, without which difference becomes hierarchy. Facing the fact that “in the essentially unequal societies in which we live and work, most of our interviews will not take place with persons who are truly on an equal plane with us” (Portelli 1997: 60), we must accept that “the field of interview cannot create an equality which does not exist, but demands it” (Portelli 1991: 32), raising in both parties an “awareness for the need for more equality in order to reach a more open communication”.

As I have suggested then, the presence of the researcher is a value that must be recognised. In the very practice of being there and interviewing we are acting politically and we have to “consider the changes that our presence may cause as some of the most important results of our field work” (Portelli 1991: 44). What we as researchers can give back to the informants should be an opportunity for change in self-awareness, a time and space in which they can “organize their knowledge more articulately, […] structure what they already know” (Portelli 1997: 68, emphasis added). This time starts with the interview and
continues from the moment in which they are given our conclusions. Finally, we have to take responsibility for interpreting and interfering in a community’s cultural history – “restitution is meaningless unless it changes the previous image of the community. Restitution is not a neutral act, but always an intervention” (Ibid.: 69). Interpretation therefore is necessary and the researcher has to take the responsibility for it.\footnote{I am thinking to continue the project of a research on the Eritrean community in Milan doing something that can be a restitution to the community. I am thinking in particular of an exhibition in Milan made of visual and audio materials.}
Chapter 4
The Postcolonial Condition of the Eritrean Diaspora

This chapter focuses on the double fracture—colonialism and migration—that has shaped the experiences of my respondents, Eritrean people living in Milan. The encounter between Eritreans and Italians happened in the context of these historical fractures, which shaped the Eritreans’ experiences and memories. Moving from the colonial period to the postcolonial one, mixing experiences of colonization and of migration—two conditions that always coexist in the experiences of my respondents—I want to explore the postcolonial condition of the Eritrean diaspora; that is, how the (post)colonial encounter is lived and enacted by Eritrean migrants. In the first section, mixing primary data—six interviewees who were born in Eritrea in the 1950s and who moved to Italy in the 1970s narrate their memories—and historical accounts, I explore the encounter between colonisers and colonised in Eritrea and the legacies of Italian colonialism in the country. In the second section I use my primary data to find out what the colonial and the migration fractures have produced in terms of belonging in the lives of second generations, daughters and sons of migrants. This, I do through the stories of three young Italian-Eritrean women narrating their trips to Eritrea when they were teenagers, elaborating their impressions and memories of these trips. In the third section I mix my primary data with discussion of novels by Erminia dell'Oro, an Italian-Eritrean writer, and I ‘travel’ between past and present looking for strategies used by Eritrean people to live and resist their (post)colonial condition.

4.1 Eritrean-Italian Relations in Eritrea

During the interviews with older migrants I always asked them for stories about their life back in Eritrea, before moving to Italy, and in particular about the presence of Italians in Eritrea. I asked them if they had family stories or personal memories. My intention was, firstly, to get to know how they remembered and told that past. Secondly, this was a way for me to try to imagine how life was in the 1950s in Eritrea and who were the Italians that were living there. What were they doing? What kind of relation did Eritreans have with them? This I think is particularly important for more than one reason. On the one hand, accounts of the Italian presence in the colonies, especially after the official colonial period ended, are rare. On the other hand, it was important to understand the impression the people I was interviewing had of Italians and Italy before moving to Italy. I subsequently understood, moreover, that this impression might have had a role to play in the forms of organizing of Eritreans in Italy and, in particular, in deciding whether to create alliances.
with Italians or not. Here I am following the example of Sabrina Marchetti (2010) who in her interviews with Eritrean women working as domestic workers in Rome paid attention to the relations these women had had with Italy and Italians before coming to Italy, therefore understanding their accounts through the colonial and post-colonial experience in Eritrea.

What I collected is a ‘double account’ of this past. On one side there is the story of the good cohabitation, the positivity of the presence of the Italians who, after the end of colonialism, remained in Eritrea and who are seen as hard-working and ‘integrated’. On the other side is a story of conflict, separation and of great economic difference between Italians and Eritreans, a situation of systematic exploitation. It is quite relevant that the people who gave me narratives of conflict are those who have always been involved in the organization of the EPLF, who have a strong political stance, and who are now in the opposition to Isaias Afwerki. On the other side, those who provided accounts in terms of good cohabitation with Italians in Eritrea are either people who were not activists in the EPLF and were instead connected to the church of Padre Marino – an Eritrean priest in Milan who was a central actor in the Eritrean community – or people who were in the EPLF and who now support Afwerki’s government. Sennait gives an account of good cohabitation between Italians and Eritreans in Eritrea:

MARTINA: Did you, growing up in Eritrea, know some Italians?
SENNAIT: Yes, I knew many families. Because in Asmara there were many. We as population are not many and there were many Italians, at the time there were many Italians in Eritrea, everywhere. And they were doing well. If there was no war, they would have lived always there, generations after generations, they would have been good there because there were no difficulties with the Eritrean people.
MARTINA: So how did the relationship work?
SENNAIT: Relationships were very good. We were also neighbours: maybe I live here, and on my side an Italian, there was a beautiful relation.
MARTINA: There were no disparities?
SENNAIT: No no no, they were good, they were good. Us too, we were good. There were no difficulties because sixty years are sixty years, not two!

Sennait’s narrative is completely positive. She doesn’t speak about tensions or disparities, she underlines the long history – ‘sixty years are sixty years’ – that connects Eritreans to Italians. Those sixty years of colonialism are not presented as years of exploitation and invasion, and the result is that, from her point of view, there was a good relation, Italians and Eritreans were living next to each other and there were no problems. This kind of narrative is particularly related to the postcolonial and post-World War II situation. Many Italians who were not soldiers and/or fascists moved to Eritrea either during colonialism or
shortly after it ended. They did so mainly for economic reasons, either to make significant investments and take advantage of the colonial situation to make money or, in the case of poorer people, in order to migrate and start a new life there. Accounts like Sennait’s are also underpinned by the propaganda that the Italian government disseminated from the beginning of the colonial enterprise. Therefore in such narratives there is often the attempt to make a distinction between the fascists and the ‘normal people’ who moved to Eritrea to work. And therefore there is a distinction between the colonial period and the non-colonial period, in terms of relations between Italians and Eritreans. Thus, when I asked Saare what the relation between Eritreans and Italians was like, he answered:

SAARE: OK if we go back to when there was fascism, well there were some streets in which the blacks couldn’t enter, but this has changed. What I remember, after fascism, the English came, for ten-twelve years, they fought against the Italians, the Italians left, the English won. But the Italians, those who were living there, they stayed. Before with fascism it was blacks on one side, whites on the other side, there were borders that the Eritreans couldn’t cross. Afterwards it changed, after the Italians helped, with all the factories, the businesses there were. For example the Melotti brewery, owned by the Melotti family, it was one of the best beers in Africa. There was a factory making bottles, matches, shoes. Afterwards we became as if we were a family, even if they came to occupy, then, once fascism ended, those who stayed, they gave jobs to everybody, everything changed.

While the fascist period was a period of racial segregation, immediately after the end of the fascist period – Saare says – Italians were transformed into those who offer employment, those who bring wealth to Eritrea; ‘everything changed’. The fact that Italians were richer and they were all owners of businesses is from Saare’s point of view a positive thing: “because you know Europeans were a bit more ahead, one arrived there with money, with a business, and gave work to the indigenous people let’s say, but it is a positive thing.” Awate also recognises that there were strong economic differences between Italians and Eritreans but again he doesn’t see in that a problem or a reason for conflict:

AWATE: The Italians in Eritrea were all rich. Danadai [a man who lived near his family] was extremely rich. He sent all the fruit to Italy. When I was born he already had three ships. They were people capable of working and who lived well.

Similarly Awate wants to underline a difference between the fascist period and the period afterwards. Even more, he wants to distinguish between the leaders of fascism in Eritrea and the soldiers, who in his eyes are not guilty but only patriots, something he considers noble, since it is a value he would like Eritreans to share:
AWATE: The relation with Italians was great. Because the war had ended. People who go to fight in the wars, they go to die for an ideal, for patriotism, they give their life for others. They were not the guilty; guilty were those who ordered them to do wrong things. People started creating jobs, and stayed with us. First they [the Italian government] sent them [to Eritrea] saying that there were beautiful women. Then they got married and with racial laws they were obliged to leave their kids. When I was a child I said: “why were my cousins left by their dad?” [...] But afterwards those who stayed were hard-working people, they created jobs.

Awate describes the Italians as ‘good people’ and he imputes all the negative aspects of their presence in Eritrea to the heads of the Italian fascist government, in particular in terms of Italian men having relations with Eritrean women and afterwards abandoning them. For Awate only the government that introduced racial laws is guilty in this respect.

But the impact of Italian colonialism on Eritreans’ organisational forms should not be assessed exclusively in terms of direct colonial policies for, as Labanca (2002: 381) suggests, such policies can’t be understood as a simple emanation of European métropoles, but must be seen as resulting from compromise and struggle with local populations. Colonial institutions are therefore the product of the incorporation of external and autochthonous elements (Frenkel and Shenhav 2006). The impact of the acts of the colonial power, moreover, also had, so to speak, ‘indirect’ effects on the structures and the internal relations of natives’ groups. One effect for example was the movement of families – especially women and children – towards cities. This happened because, as I explained in Chapter 2, once the initial attempt to make Eritrea a settlement colony had failed, it became mainly a reserve for soldiers, with Eritrean men being extensively used as Italian colonial troops. This produced a lack of men in the native societies, which caused a reduction in local food production and the migration of women (and their children) toward the cities in order to look for work. The jobs available to these women were of two kinds: sex and domestic work, with an overlap in forms of common-law marriage known among the Italians as madamato. This migration, and the consequent encounter of Eritrean women with Italian men, was a consequence of the presence of Italians in Eritrea and is one of the aspects that has interested historians who have recently focused on these intimate relations and the construction of racism therein (Sòrgoni 1998; Stefani 2007; Poidimani 2009; Marchetti 2011). The main question these studies explore is: how did the Italian colonial government manage the encounter of differences?

The colonial project was continuously characterized by the will to define how and why human groups were characterised by cultural and physical differences. A lot of energy was spent in order to determine where Eritreans exactly came from, in order for anthropologists to determine to which race Eritreans should be assigned and to
conclusively establish their hierarchical relation to Italians. Because division in races was, and remains, a construction, the definitions regarding Eritreans could and did vary a lot during the colonial period. Barbara Sòrgoni (1998) describes the anthropological and juridical discourses that both preceded and accompanied the Italian colonial project in Eritrea. Through an analysis of the anthropological and juridical discourses on sexuality, coloniser-colonised unions and hybridity, she explores the changes in the forms of control of colonized bodies. Her question is: where does the ‘line of colour’ pass and how does it move through time? Sòrgoni shows that the forms of organisation of coloniser-colonised relations undergo significant changes through the history of Italian colonialism in Eritrea (the period she takes for analysis is 1890-1941).

Italian anthropological discourse of the liberal period (i.e. prior to the fascist one) focused on establishing the racial origins of Ethiopians and Eritreans and the main hypothesis taken into consideration was the ‘Camitic hypothesis’. It basically created a distinction between the Egyptians and the populations considered the ‘real blacks’ of the rest of Africa, stating that Egypt was populated by the Camitics, descending from Cam, son of Noah. This distinction was taken over and developed by some Italian anthropologists, in particular by Giuseppe Sergi, who wanted to affirm that Ethiopians and Eritreans also belonged to this race and who connected the Mediterranean people to the Camitic people, creating an autonomy of the Mediterranean type and therefore disqualifying the Aryan option. However, the Camitic hypothesis became unsustainable in the late period of colonisation of Eritrea, which was characterised by the fascist racial laws and the alignment of Italy with the politics of Nazi Germany and of Aryan superiority, as suggested in footnote 40.

During the liberal period, until 1922, the colonial government didn’t have a predetermined idea of how to manage the encounter between Italians and natives;

---

38 Following the analytical approach proposed by Ann Laura Stoler (2002), an important point Sòrgoni makes is that the line of colour is not fixed but is continuously invented and reshaped on the basis both of the changes inside the anthropological discourses and on the basis of political necessities. The ways of introduction and modification of racial differences operated mainly through everyday life and the intimate relationship between colonisers and colonised, that is to say through sexual matters, understood “not as a metaphor for colonial inequities but as foundational to the material terms in which colonial projects were carried out” (Stoler 2002: 14). Racial discourses and practices were not static features but were introduced and modified for and to benefit the installation and maintenance of ‘white prestige’ in the colonies.

39 As an anthropological hypothesis that started with the invasion of Egypt by the Napoleonic troops (1798-1801), the Camitic hypothesis tried to explain how it was possible that Egyptians, a group of African origin, had been able to create an advanced society – something that in the racist view of Europeans was not possible.

40 At that moment Italians therefore were not univocally considered as an Arian population, as would be the case during fascism, when the political and military alliance with Germany meant also an ideological alignment to Nazi racial theories.
therefore the creation and establishment of legislation regarding racial relations developed in parallel to the interactions between Italians and Eritreans. The kind of encounters that worried the colonial government were intimate ones, and in particular the relations between Italian men and Eritrean women and the offspring of these encounters. Sexual relations therefore became the object of legislation, while the birth of ‘mixed race children’ posed questions around citizenship, which the government answered differently through time. The first set of laws regarding the administration of the Eritrean territory, Law 857 of 5th July 1882, declared that Italian citizens living in the colony remained subject to Italian legislation, while the natives were subject to ‘local right and common laws’, apart from those habits that could go against ‘universal morality’ and ‘public order’. The civil code of 1905 inserted an explicit division between citizens and subjects; in 1909 a code for the Eritrean colony introduced the necessity of asking for authorization from the governor for an ‘inter-racial’ marriage; and in 1914 the town plan of Asmara divided the city into four zones, one of which was reserved for Europeans with locals being forbidden access to it (Labanca 2002).

There was no law forbidding relations or marriage between Italians and natives and the children of these unions were considered Italian citizens. But what was the materiality of the relations between Italians and Eritreans? As I have already mentioned the main type of contacts between Italian men and Eritrean women was through sexual relations – prostitution – or through forms of relations based on cohabitation, a form that prevented men from marrying local women and that was known by the term madamato. The birth and quasi-institutionalisation of this common habit among Italians in the colonies shows a way of manipulating the ‘others’ and their habits in order to make them functional to the colonialists, in order to make them legal colonial instruments. In other words the liberal Italian government in Eritrea didn’t aim at the cancellation of local norms regarding private rights, but instead strove to adapt and use them. Such is the case of madamato, an institution that was justified as already present among Eritrean populations in a form called demoz. Sòrgoni (1998) underlines how the equation of madamato and demoz was a leitmotif of the whole colonial period and that colonials presented madamato as the ‘interracial version’ of demoz. But an analysis of what demoz was among Eritreans shows that this was far from true. Among some populations of Eritrea, in particular the Tigrinya living on the highlands, demoz was a kind of temporary marriage, recognised and legitimised by the wider social group, that entailed rights and obligations both for the man and the woman and recognised children as legitimate and having the right to participate in paternal inheritance. On the contrary an Eritrean woman tied to an Italian man through madamato, the madama, was not
considered a legitimate partner but a concubine. Whether this came from an ignorance of demoz or a prejudice about Eritrean habits or from conscious deceit, the apparent overlapping of demoz and madamato was in practice a way for Italians to have a partner in a context in which it was impossible to encounter white women, and at the same time to elude marriage and to mislead Eritrean women, putting them in a position of having no rights.

So what is important to underline here is first of all the procedure through which colonial power translated local habits for its own purposes and secondly how this was made possible by the existence on the same territory of different cultures, languages, institutions and obligations. While the Eritrean woman was subject both to local and colonial laws, the Italian man was subject only to the laws of the Italian state. This kind of heterogeneity as I have said was typical of colonial times but is also a crucial element of postcolonial times. It is in the colony indeed that different levels of citizenship, differentiated belongings to the nation-state, discourses on the relation between race and belongingness and so on were designed. Similar differentiations and continuous redefinitions of rights and belonging differentiate today between citizens and migrants, and between people born in the same territory but with different rights.

This is even more evident when we look at the legislation around ‘mixed race children’ in the colony. The children of the relations between white men and black women were one of the main concerns of the Italian government in Eritrea (Barrera 2005). The attitude and legislation towards them changed through time – similarly to the changes in the legislation around coloniser-colonised relations – as did the ideas around the goals and the values of the colonial project. During the liberal period ‘mixed race children’ born of a ‘regular’ marriage were recognised as citizens, since the father was an Italian citizen. The number of marriages legally recognised by Italian laws being very low, these cases however represented a minority. The majority of ‘mixed children’ indeed were born of temporary relations – madamato – and remained ‘illegitimate’. However the Italian liberal state pushed the fathers to recognise them without the need to get married. The idea behind this was that it was necessary to take the children away from maternal education and educate them in the Italian culture. On the basis of this, it seems that, in the eyes of the Italian administrators, the colour of these children’s skin was not decisive for granting Italian citizenship; what mattered was their lineage. At the same time however the 1909 code of laws for Eritrea introduced the idea of the connection between Italian citizenship and race. Regarding children without declared parents the law established that the person born in the colony was a subject unless the anthropological evidence suggested otherwise. As such:
“It is decided by law therefore for the first time the principle according to which citizenship is granted on the basis of the ‘quantity’ of genetic contribution/share/supply of the white race to the hybrid individual” (Sòrgoni 1998: 109)

The legislation around coloniser-colonised relations and ‘mixed race children’ changed noticeably first with the fascist administration and subsequently following the conquest of Ethiopia and the institution of the Empire in 1935. After a long period in which the image of the black woman was eroticised (Iyob 2005; Ponzanesi 2005; Sabelli 2010), the fascist regime made many efforts to inculcate another image of African women as dirty, ugly and carriers of disease.

“That radical overturning of the representation was contemporary with the intensification of the fight against mixed race children. The sexual discipline of Italian soldiers and settlers needed, with the empire, a deconstruction of the erotic imaginary of conquest, which had become dangerous for the purity of the ‘race’. The process of deconstruction, necessary for the development of the ‘imperial consciousness’, clashed with the rootedness in the previous years of sexually signified images of the conquest”\textsuperscript{41} (Poidimani 2009: 118)

The deconstruction of the erotic imaginary was not an easy task. The Fascist regime in fact decided to focus more on repression and censorship. In 1937 it prohibited relations between colonisers and colonised and in 1938 the law for the ‘defence of the race’ – valid also in Italy and directed mainly against Jewish people – prohibited marriages, not between two juridically different individuals (citizens and subjects) but between different races. The control of sexual relations between Italians and Africans was enhanced also by the control of prostitution\textsuperscript{42}. With law number 822 of the 13\textsuperscript{th} May 1940, the Fascist government regulated the life of metici, children born from an Italian and an African. ‘Mixed raced children’ were defined by fascism as children only of the native African parent and therefore were completely denied the possibility of being Italian citizens and of being recognised by their fathers. They couldn’t go to schools for Italians and special schools for ‘mixed race children’ were banned. The regime wanted to affirm a supposed superiority, or ‘prestige’ as it was said (Poidimani 2009: 19-24), of the Italian race – expressed in ‘the

\textsuperscript{41} My translation

\textsuperscript{42} In 1936 the requirement of an official document for sex workers was introduced and regulated brothels were opened. Simultaneously the government pushed for the presence of white women in the colony and the removal of black women from many relations and activities with white men: not only marriages and cohabitation, but also breast-feeding and, to some extent, prostitution.
defence of the race’ legislation – and couldn’t tolerate any form of miscegenation in the colony or in the Italian territory.

Wegatha’s memories recall the will of Italians to keep Eritreans and Italians separated in society. When I asked her about the Italian presence in Eritrea, she became very harsh and didn’t leave any space for indulgence or different interpretations.

MARTINA: Were there still Italians when you were born?
WEGATHA: Yes, they were even friends of mine, of my age. They were growing up with me and they had Italian dads and Eritrean mums, and their dads didn’t give them a name, they ran away, like that.

They ran away, they were not forced because of the laws, they just left, abandoning behind them their children, not giving them a name, not recognising them; here Wegatha wants to underline the fact that Italians exploited Eritreans. Her account of the colonial past, through the memories of her parents, made me think that it was impossible for her to have a good impression of the Italians in Eritrea, even those ‘hard-working Italians’ who stayed after the end of colonialism and fascism:

WEGATHA: I was not born at the time of the Italians. But when my parents told me about it: they treated [Eritreans] as animals. OK, the Italians did many things for the Eritreans; they built streets but they built these with our people, without paying them, and many Eritreans died doing this. So the Italians say “we built the streets”, this and that. No, engineering yes, architecture yes, they did that, but with the life of Eritreans who built the buildings, the streets. So for me you did nothing. And then the streets they built for themselves first of all, for their comfort because they didn’t treat our parents well. For example my mom told me, when she was young, on the bus, if they allowed Eritreans on the bus, they put them at the back of the bus, in a corner with a chain. And they didn’t want to give them shoes. OK, in the first period they were all barefoot, but when they entered they built a shoe factory, but the shoes were only for Italians, [Eritreans] didn’t have the right to shoes. Really they didn’t build schools, and then they say they did a lot for Eritreans. No, they didn’t. For sure they didn’t build schools. First, second year of school, then it stopped. The English later built schools for Eritreans, at least that is what our parents say, the English opened the schools. People who wanted to study could go on, but the Italians were criminals for our parents.

The rhetoric of the ‘good Italian’ who brought wealth, infrastructure and modernity to Eritrea is challenged here by Wegatha. They built the streets but they built them for themselves, for their own businesses, and they built them by exploiting and killing Eritrean workers. A strong consciousness is perceptible in Wegatha’s words. She is a woman who has had a politically active life and who openly resists the current president of Eritrea; she
is a woman who is recognised among the diaspora community for fighting the government. Maybe it is for this reason that she has such a different account of the colonial past.

That the Italian state, even before fascism, was not interested in assimilating colonial subjects but on the contrary was interested in creating a sharp division and in maintaining in that way the ‘prestige of the white race’, is also quite evident when we take into consideration the educational system that Italy created in Eritrea (Negash 2005). This was characterised by a very low level of education for natives and a tendency to overlap education and colonial propaganda (Palumbo 2005). Indeed:

“Unlike the major colonial powers, Italian policy makers perceived education merely as an instrument for enhancing colonial rule. Italian educational policy attempted, and with considerable success, to prevent the evolution of an Eritrean intellectual elite.” (Negash 1987: 70-84)

Indeed the idea was that it was unlikely and also undesirable that natives ‘elevated’ themselves to become ‘civilized’ people. The Italian government did not intend to ‘create Italian citizens’ out of natives (Sòrgoni 1998) and education reflected this intention. Schools, to start with, were not open to natives, for fear that this would make colonial domination more difficult. When a special three-year programme for native children was finally established, it was dominated by practical and technical subjects. Finally, the Italian state withdrew completely from the educational enterprise, leaving it in the hands of the Catholic Church in 1923 (Negash 1987; Betti 1989; Ciampi 1989). This attitude of the Italian state towards the education of the local population opens up questions around the impact of Italian presence in Eritrea. Did Italian colonialism merely use the colony, with no intention to ever have an impact on the levels of education and on the political structure of Eritrean society? The historian Tekeste Negash wrote that, on a more general level:

“Contrary to what some historians and political scientists believe, colonialism was not a contradictory phenomenon that simultaneously exploited while laying down the basis for the modernization of the colony. Contrary to what Karl Marx once believed, colonialism was not engaged in the process of creating a world after its own image.” (Negash 1987: 179)

Negash’s analysis of the impact of the encounter between Italian capitalism and non-capitalist Eritrea is a critique of the Marxist reading of colonialism as a possibility for creating the revolutionary working class to come outside Europe. His perspective not only echoes the reading provided by Moulier Boutang (1998) on the non-necessity of free labour
for capitalism and the reiteration in time of primitive accumulation, but it also gives us a practical example of what Fanon (1961) meant by the ‘protean space’. As such:

“The capitalist mode was superimposed on Eritrean societies for the purpose of primitive accumulation. It is this process of development and the stage of primitive accumulation that distinguishes the colonial economic system from the capitalist system, indigenously developed in Europe. […] Without restructuring the basis of the indigenous system, colonial capital attempted to integrate the indigenous economic system to that of Italy and then to the world capitalist system. In order to increase primitive accumulation Eritrean workers were offered precarious jobs and invariably low wages, thus compelling them to rely for survival on the pre-capitalist economic system. Capital was organised and distributed in such a manner that Eritreans were excluded from making full use of it. […] The economic role of Eritreans was to perpetually supply labour for Italian capital. […] From the structural analysis of colonialism, we can draw the conclusion that the function of the economy was primarily concerned with the expansion of primitive accumulation.” (Negash 1987: 47-48)

The co-existence in fact of different work regimes – capitalist Italian factories and the pre-capitalist economic system in Eritrea – is one aspect – together with the different grades of citizenship present in the same territory and the translation of laws as I described before – of the colonial protean space. Negassi confirms, with his words, the statement of Negash that “the economic role of Eritreans was to perpetually supply labour for Italian capital”.

MARTINA: How was the Italian presence in Eritrea characterised when you lived there [until the end of the 1970s]? Tell me about your experience: in work, in school, or in general. How did you perceive it?
NEGASSI: When I was there, they [the Italians] were the big capitalists, they had money and they ruled. So Eritrean people, those who worked for them knew what kind of life they had. When you work for someone, they give you the wage and ask you to work and you work. Although I am Eritrean, there are some positive things that I could see in [Italian] people. For example there were people who did something good, who helped Eritrean people. They helped me as well. These are positive people. Because some have a soul, some are let’s say Christians. Then there are the greedy ones. I saw [Eritrean] people dying for no reason, and they have not even been recognised. […] We didn’t have the union, you got what they gave you, and there were no claims. The system at the time was corrupted as well. You just had to corrupt a state employee, he would sell you for money; so if you had problems at work, if you had a fight with the boss, he would give the employee some money and you ended up in the middle of the street […]
MARTINA: It seems to me that relations were difficult, that the positive people were an exception, am I right?
NEGASSI: Because the Italian was the owner, so what kind of relation can I have [with him]? If I am on his level [fine], otherwise he is the master and I am the slave, that’s it. But there were some owners who were humane; you could seat and eat with them for example. Most of the people with money don’t look to the poor people, it is the same here [in Italy], isn’t it? […]
MARTINA: Are you saying that the relevant thing is economic difference?
NEGASSI: Yes, sure. Because this is what influence people. I remember that in Teseney there was an Italian society, the Italian Society for Oriental Africa, it was a big concessionaire business, now the Eritrean government owns it. There were up to 10,000 people working there. The owner name was Casciani. He had a concession on a land where he grew cotton. He was like a king, he moved with the helicopter or the airplane from Asmara. When he was coming there it was as if the king was coming: the streets paved, the cars in line… because he was the owner, you know?

Negassi underlines the fact that the Italians in Eritrea were the capitalists, those with money to invest, those who wanted to make money and who did not care about the Eritrean people. He wants to underline the fact that there were exceptions, or better that the Italians were ‘the master’ but that there were some masters who were humane, who for example allowed Eritreans to eat with them. However the majority of the people with money, and this he says is true everywhere, did not really acknowledge poor people. Negassi’s words echo Negash’s position, underlining the importance of the economic and work situation in shaping the relation between Italians and Eritreans in Eritrea, even after the end of the colonial period. At the same time Negassi’s words re-stage the duality between the bad and the good Italian that we saw earlier.

How is it possible to make sense of these very different perceptions and memories of the relations between Italians and Eritreans? Eden, a second-generation girl who grew up in Milan, gives her explanation:

EDEN: Many people ask themselves why in general the memory of the Italians is positive in Eritrea. Quite simply because the Italians created jobs and so they allowed a minimum of social mobility that gave serenity and the possibility of living a normal life. And there wasn’t such a diffusion of information and of political ideology, or of political formation – political, cultural, educational – that ensures that on the basis of the history that you study in school, of the information in the newspapers and what you see every day, you reflect and connect and you say: “wait a moment, I am here in a given territory, you arrived, without asking permission, what you do is exploitation”. That is, only those who studied had the capacity of connecting all these things, because they had the keys to read what was going on. Otherwise you are a simple person who has a job, who has a wage and the possibility of making a family, until they don’t come and disturb you directly.

Eden describes synthetically a complex colonial relation. At the same time, as I showed before, not all Eritreans have a good memory of the Italians. As I underlined, those who do not have a good memory are also those who have been involved in the organisation of resistance for independence, those who have, for different reasons, developed a political understanding of their past and present. These are not necessarily people who have received a formal education, but probably they have gone through a process of political
education throughout their EPLF militancy. Not only memories are conflictual and contradictory rather than shared memories, but also the interpretation of history, and therefore the production of memories, is based on the different political experiences of my interviewees. In the next section I continue the exploration of the effects, memories and belongings that the encounter between Italians and Eritreans created, presenting the accounts of three second-generation young women in Milan.

4.2 Postcolonial Belongings in Second Generations

The European space is cluttered with personal and collective stories of making sense of belongings. These experiences are a, so to speak, perpetual battleground that constantly produces new belongings. They should be interpreted as a coexistence between inseparable elements, elements that live together in people’s lives and bodies and not as a forcing together “of bits of this and that, here and there” (Jazeel 2012: 66). These belongings are new, and often unique, as everybody tries to make sense of their own life in a very personal way. These personal experiences and the process of making sense of them are both a consequence of and are reflected in a series of precise decisions concerning which organisational forms better mirror individuality and postcolonial subjectivity. I am using the terms ‘individuality’ and ‘personal’ because I have found in my primary data that, although the second generation women I interviewed have had very similar familiar, social, and economic experiences, they all developed different ways to practically relate their lives to their mixed belonging. Sometimes these ways clash with each other, though they appear all reasonable and legitimate to the interviewees. The way in which a second-generation Eritrean girl decides to see herself in relation to her ‘mixed/hybrid’ belonging is reflected also in how she takes part in forms of organization of the community or in local politics. And at the same time the lived experiences of belonging to forms of organization – mostly through family and society – have a role to play in how she constructs the definition of herself.

The histories of second generation Eritreans are particularly important for the way in which they displace time, imaginaries and spaces. There is no answer to the question Freweini asked herself while she was talking to me: “I am Eritrean, I know I am Eritrean, right? On which basis though?”. The question came in the middle of the interview, arose from her reasoning around the dissolution of the unity of the Eritrean community in Milan, and remained suspended, without an answer. Arsema during her interview said “for me the Eritrean community existed only when I saw it”. There is a sense and a need for belonging (both to Eritrean history and culture and to Italian society, but also to something beyond
these two dimensions: to the Eritrean diaspora, to the African diaspora in Europe, to a postcolonial Europe) that is always put in tension, put on trial. They mostly do not need to define themselves but they feel compelled to do it. This is how Arsema started her interview:

ARSEMA: I was born Eritrean in Italy and not Italian in Italy because I was not recognised as a citizen until I was 16 years old. Therefore it was a forced relation to be more on the Eritrean side than the Italian one, due to the institutions though. Also because when I was a child I felt Italian in everything.

Toward the end of the interview I wanted to ask Arsema about this definition she gave of herself, since I did not ask her any direct questions about her belonging. So I asked:

MARTINA: Do you feel the need to say, “I feel Italian”, to say it to yourself, to define yourself in a way; or is it something that you feel as an imposition, that you have to define yourself in a way?

ARSEMA: I feel the need to define myself because often the question asked of second generations is whether we feel more from the country where we were born and grew up, where you have always been, or from the country of your origins, what an absurdity! So as not to have this question asked, I say it directly: “look I am Italian, I am Italian with a strong Eritrean consciousness”. We have to educate people, because they are ignorant and they have to be educated. So if sometimes someone asks me “where are you from?” and they refer to my skin colour, before I used to say: “yes, yes, Africa”. Now, even if I don’t want to, I impose myself to underline always that I am Italian, because they have to be educated, they have to realise that I am Italian and that if they want to understand why I have a different skin colour then they have to ask: “what are your origins?” And it is a matter of education, I can’t pretend that it happens in a day, I have to put something of mine in as well and instead of saying “yes you are right”, explain the difference to each person.

Arsema feels a duty; she is not saying “I am Italian” because she wants to underline her belonging to a nation, rather because she wants to educate people about the fact that Italy, like other European countries, is a postcolonial space, and that this fact should be accepted. I don’t think there is any point in asking a direct question about belonging (and in fact I never did) since the answers would reflect more what my respondents want to say to others rather than reflecting their own reasoning about themselves. Instead I could find important reasonings about their own path of making sense of themselves as postcolonial subjects through indirect narratives, and in particular through their narratives about their trips to Eritrea. These stories of travels to Eritrea are rich with tropes that made me think about the presence/absence of different places and historical times at the same time. In a way their narratives are postcolonial narratives in that they continuously transpose spaces and times creating a necessary heterogeneity. In these short stories there is the encounter with
the ‘mother land’, Eritrea, and the feeling of being a stranger even there; there is the meeting with other Eritreans, those who didn’t migrate, who are different from the Eritreans living in Milan; there is the comparison with their life in Italy and the encounter with the Eritrean diaspora in Europe and North America. There is a sense of community but at the same time a sense of distance, of not belonging completely to the world of the Eritrean diaspora.

FEVEN: Regarding my second trip to Eritrea […] when I was 13-14 years old, I remember the loneliness, the fact of being unable to go around alone, because I couldn’t even take the bus alone, I couldn’t communicate, it was dangerous. I couldn’t communicate, my brother didn’t want to bring me to the centre. I was 13 and I felt a big nostalgia for Italy.

ARSEMA: [In Milan] I didn’t socialize with any Eritreans outside of my family circle, and so when I went to Eritrea when I was a bit grown up, when I was 13 years old, it seemed strange to me in the street because here in Italy I was convinced that all the Eritreans were relatives of mine and therefore I was sure that they all loved me and they all considered me a cousin. Remembering that now makes me laugh.

A sense of displacement of feelings and belongings infuses the life of these young girls. There is an expectation of belonging (to Eritrea) that is then partially negated in the facts – Feven feels nostalgia for Italy, Arsema has a strange feeling in recognising that she is not related to all the other Eritreans. The movement, the crossing of the boundary from the ‘Italian’ world to the ‘Eritrean’ world, forces them to face their complicated belonging and resolve it in one way or another – or just accept it as it is. For example there is no sense of contradiction or of incoherence in the following account from Arsema about her memories of a trip to Eritrea in 1998, when she was 13 years old:

ARSEMA: I remember that hotel where we used to go for lunch, asking for lasagne, because it looked like a western hotel, and I was asking myself why it was not full of hotels like in Liguria [Italy], look how much sea there is! Massawa was still half destroyed and it had as a symbol of the past war a huge rusty tanker that caused me such anguish, and it really looked like the images I watched on the news in Milan about Sarajevo.

The imaginary Arsema has of war is exactly the same one I have: Yugoslavia, the first war witnessed by my generation, the first encounter with horror, death and bombs, broadcasted on television. But Arsema actually experienced war before me because her family was

---

43 The definition of family for Arsema is not the ‘strict’ family based on blood relations. Family for her and for Eritreans in general refers to people you know, with whom you have a relation; they become uncles and aunts even if they are not the brothers and sisters of your parents.
involved, in different ways, in the war of the EPLF against the Ethiopian army for the liberation of their country. Her mother left Eritrea when the war started in Asmara, her parents participated actively in the EPLF in Milan and she even experienced a family bereavement the same year she went back to Eritrea:

ARSEMA: In 1998 when I went back my brother⁴⁴ wasn’t there any more. He died when he was 16 years old in Keren; my brother from Keren died in the war.

Despite this proximity to the war in Eritrea, when she sees the old rusty tanker in Massawa Arsema thinks of Sarajevo, of that war that, for Italians, was at the same time very near and very distant; though just a few kilometres from Italy, we could not, nonetheless, imagine that those bombs could ever fall onto our heads. Therefore Arsema is making sense of the Eritrean war experience that played such an important role in the history of her family through the experience of a teenager growing up in Italy, born in 1985, and through an image of tanks in Yugoslavia. This image is at the same time very familiar to her because she saw it many times on television but very distant, because it belongs to a world that, for her, cannot actually occur in her everyday experiences. In that sense Arsema feels a sense of estrangement toward that object in Massawa that she spontaneously ‘filters’ through her experience of being an Italian girl, as if it is strange for her experiencing the image of the war inside a space that is for her home, in a kind of continuity with Italy. She is beyond the acknowledgement of hybridity, because she doesn’t need to explain to herself the coexistence of bits of different histories and belongings, as they live inside her and cannot be broken apart.

In the account of another Italian-Eritrean girl, Aster, about her trip to Eritrea immediately after the liberation, we can find the strict relation she makes between defining herself, defining her politics and therefore defining her political belonging and form of organizing. As a politically active young Italian-Eritrean girl she was introduced to the Eritrean Community in Milan and invited to take part in the youth section and collaborate with it. But as she explains, that Community was no longer her own community, because she had taken some steps that other members hadn’t taken. These steps, undertaken during a visit to Eritrea, made sure that Aster later understood that the right space for her politics was the Rete G2 (Second Generations’ Network). Here is her account:

ASTER: During the years of adolescence I took some steps so that I didn’t need any more to recognise myself as the daughter of immigrants coming from Eritrea or

⁴⁴ A son Arsema’s father had from a previous relationship.
Ethiopia, I needed something different. We can have this in common but it is not sufficient. It is a certain way of thinking, a certain way of relating, a certain way of living as a citizen that I am interested in. And this is what I found in the Second Generation Network. But I am a person who had the myth of Eritrea. Although I was happy here [in Italy], I really wanted to go [to Eritrea]. I had idealised it, maybe because of the stories of the guerrilla women, but also because as a child I felt the physical, visual difference. “Now I’ll go there and I will find everybody like me and it will be wonderful”, I thought. I went in 1992, the year of independence, a year in which many children of Eritreans returned for holidays, but also many of our parents who hadn’t been to the country for many years. I remember on the plane, people as soon as they saw [the land] they started singing. It was a very strong emotion. When we arrived at the airport it was full of people waiting for us. There were so many European Eritreans and American Eritreans. Those from there could recognise us immediately, not from how you dress, but from how you move, you grew up somewhere else, you have different movements and gestures. I was OK, but this thing of again being recognised as someone from outside for me was… OK, when I went back to Italy, from there my path started. I decide what I am. You can say what you want, think what you want, perceive what you want, but if you have two minutes to ask me I will say it to you and it can even change from one day to another, it is my own business!

The encounter with Eritrea made Aster experience the feeling of not being fully accepted there, as she had grown up somewhere else and she was embodying the experience of being a European – while at the same time, because of her skin colour, she was perceived as African in Italy. Confronted by this identity dilemma, she chooses the path of autonomy and self-definition, and consequently joins the Second Generation Network, where she feels comfortable in an environment characterized by difference and the multiplication of possibilities of belonging and being. This need for multiple belongings is exemplified in this episode, from Aster’s trip to Eritrea:

ASTER: In Eritrea I was well, even better, really home-home, when I went to the village of my father in the mountains, among shepherds, houses, animals, land. There, among those people, who are probably all my relatives. We walked there and I arrived before everybody and on the street we met an old man who looked at me and touched my face and he decided on the basis of measuring my ears that I was related to him. And he was right, he guessed right! It was wonderful, also because I am an only child, and I found the fact of recognising myself in someone else in the most strange places. In the nearby town, Segheniti, there was a bar, I don’t know if it is still there, managed by a very old Italian lady. Well, Italian: now I explain. She was white, Caucasian. I arrived and asked for a sandwich, I spoke in Italian and she answered in Tigrigna, a Tigrigna of that area, with that accent. And really there, even if we were different we were the same, because we were each the negative of the other. She was very old, I was very young; she was white, I am black; she spoke Tigrigna, it was her language – because probably they forgot her there from colonialism! – I found it easier to speak Italian. Those small encounters, those small steps, made me understand what it means being in between: look how many different possibilities, how many different cases there are.
Aster’s comments, “even if we were different we were the same”, and “I found the fact of
recognising myself in someone else in the most strange places”, appear quite significant.
She needed to recognise herself in someone else, because she grew up in a society where
she was always ‘different’. Only when she went to the summer camp organised by the
church of Padre Marino (see Chapter 5), she was together with children who looked the
same as her, but she could always see the gaze of the Italians seeing this group of black
children on the beach, and she understood they looked different. But she recognises herself
in what she calls her negative, her opposite. Aster has the capacity of recognising a link, a
relation in the encounter with the white Italian woman, and therefore of recognising herself
in a person very distant from her. They are each the negative of the other, two opposite
products of the same phenomena: colonialism and migration. Difference here is
understood in a way that doesn’t create distance, but proximity and relation. In the next
section I will move through these two phenomena and look at the relation between
Eritreans and Italians through the relation visibility/invisibility.

4.3 (In)Visibility: Migrations, Subalternity and Agency in the Postcolonial
Condition
As the previous sections should have shown, crossing borders, moving and migrating are
acts that unveil relations, past and present, as well as conflicts. This can be true for a
personal experience: Marchetti’s (2010) work shows how the perception and the relations
between Italians and Eritreans changed completely when Eritreans moved from Eritrea to
Italy, the same people who were friends in Eritrea became strangers in Italy. Similarly
travelling to Eritrea for second generation Italians unveils existing conflicts in their
personal history and belonging. But these personal conflicts are entangled with common
social histories. In that sense in my research I could see how migrations render visible what
was invisible.

There are at least three kinds of conflicts that the migration of Eritreans to Italy
unveils. The first one is obviously the history of the colonial past. Suddenly those people
coming from a former Italian colony present themselves with their bodies in Italian cities
and claim their right to live there and claim the responsibilities of Italy towards their
country. It was in the 1970s that Italians, for the first time, had to start thinking about that
ignored, erased past. Secondly, with the first arrival of migrants in Italy – not only Eritrean,
but from many other African countries – in the late 1970s and 1980s, newspapers,
intellectuals and the wider public began discussing the racism of Italians, aided by serious
episodes of racism occurring in the 1980s all through the peninsula (see Chapter 3). Similarly when migrants started having children in Italy, their presence questioned the belonging and the identity of what is supposed to be Italian and what is not. It was, of course, the second generations who first seriously challenged those boundaries. Finally, the arrival, starting in the 1990s, of people escaping from the Eritrean government of Isaias Afwerki increasingly made it difficult for the Eritrean community to maintain unity and to avoid a split and a conflict around the Eritrean government and the forms of democracy in Eritrea. The arrival of young Eritreans started creating confusion among the Eritrean community in Milan. At first the official Eritrean Community treated them as traitors, but they were inevitably bringing their own testimony of how life was in Eritrea after independence. Therefore the mobility, the border crossing of those migrants, necessarily made visible to Eritreans in Milan what was invisible before. They arrive and live in Milan, you can see them and speak with them; they are the visual, material testimony of what is happening in Eritrea, and it becomes increasingly more difficult to avoid grasping the situation back in the homeland. Here I am speaking of migrations as bearers of change and about crossing borders as an act of creation. In this section I tackle this argument from the angle of the passage from invisibility to visibility and vice versa.

The way in which I have presented (in)visibility until this point is quite univocal: invisibility pertains to the sphere of the unknown and visibility to the one of the known. What is visible has possibilities, what is invisible none. Invisibility indeed, or imperceptibility, is often considered a condition of lack of power and of incapacity or impossibility to reclaim rights, voice, space in life and in public discourse. Invisibility is often understood as synonymous with subalternity. Often migrants are invisible, and this condition goes along with the exploitation into which they are forced. But on the other side – and here the idea of invisibility starts becoming complicated – for some of them it is exactly invisibility which makes their life possible. Just think about a migrant entering a country ‘illegally’ and without documents, her only hope not to be deported laying in not being recognized, in remaining unknown to the relevant institutions. Moreover invisibility is evidently determined from one’s point of view: what is invisible to me can instead be visible to someone else. So if migrants are invisible to institutions and public discourse, they are not invisible to their communities, and their activities – outside paid work mostly – though they might be not visible to Italians, constitute to them their private and political lives.

Especially inside the debate around the autonomy of migrations (see Chapter 5), different points of view problematize the relation visibility/invisibility and complicate its
meaning (Moulier Boutang 1998; Mezzadra 2006; Papadopoulos et al. 2008; Mezzadra 2011; Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013). From the point of view of the autonomy of migrations, migrants are political actors, moving and challenging, through their bodies, frontiers – physical and cultural, national and internal – and creating through their movement new transnational spaces, putting into question the ideas of nation and culture. But migrants have their own specificities that distinguish them from other political and social actors, especially the status of irregularity and of precarity in which they are often forced to live. Being irregular implies on the one hand exploitation and subalternity and on the other the possibility to keep moving outside the constraints of regularization. Invisibility thus has two sides, and consequently opens up two practical possibilities for migrants: either to step outside invisibility, or to make the most of it. These two alternatives should not be seen as exclusive, since they often coexist in the lives and practices of migrants. Nonetheless, the distinction is useful because it opens up a discussion on which elements should be further investigated, both in theory and in political practice. Moreover, invisibility also involves a certain amount of reduction of perceived differences: to be invisible is in some ways to be ‘the same as others’ or ‘not distinguishable’ from them, and thus implies not being recognised and identified as a migrant. In the meaning of ‘being the same as others’, invisibility is interpreted as both a tool and a sign of freedom and power (Puwar 2004: 55-76). Underlining the autonomy of migrants helps us not only to render more complex the topic of (in)visibility. It also helps to understand the concept of subalternity not as a fixed system of power between control and subordination, but as a relation and a process, inside which it is possible to look for the autonomy of the subalterns (Arnold 2008), not only in the form of a visible emergence but also as an imperceptible and silent phenomenon.

In what is to follow the relation between Eritreans and Italians, both in Eritrea and in Italy, will be ‘discovered’ through the ambivalences of (in)visibility in the attempt to understand the agency of Eritreans, that is to say understanding some of the strategies through which Eritreans deal with the postcolonial condition. To do so I want to leave open the ambivalences of the concept of (in)visibility, describing it inside both present and past relations between Italians and Eritreans. In this section – in which I mix my primary data with the analysis of some novels by the Italian-Eritrean author Erminia dell’Oro (1988; 1991; 1999) – Eritreans appear visible to Italians only when they are present in the domestic space, invisible as soon as they leave it. They are visible when they die, invisible when they live. They are visible when Italy moves into their lands, invisible when they move to Italy. Since, as I said, (in)visibility depends on the position from which we ‘look’,
wherever Eritreans are not visible to those who are not part of their community, they become instead visible to ‘themselves’. So, for example, they have separated lives while they work inside Italian families’ homes, but when they leave them they move inside their collective space, where they are visible, recognized, with a name, a face, an origin, many relations.

The strategies of (in)visibility of the colonised Eritreans will be explored through the analysis of some parts of Erminia dell'Oro’s novels, which take place in the postcolonial period. After the end of the Italian colonisation that lasted formally until 1943, Eritrea ‘hosted’ many Italians for a long period. The Italians present in Eritrea after the end of colonisation were involved different types of economic activities: from tailors and hairdressers to industrialists and landowners. Certainly, even if some of them came from situations of misery in Italy, in Eritrea they had a wealthy life; as many interviewees told me, ‘they were doing well’. All the Italians used to have Eritrean women and men working as servants, people with whom Italians shared domestic space and time (Sòrgoni 1998). This relation then continued in Italy where Eritrean migrants worked and still today work as domestics for Italian families (Marchetti 2010). So the domestic relation, typical of the colonial situation (Stoler 2002), has remained central in the relationship between Italians and Eritreans.

I move now into the sphere of literary fiction – and I will go back to my primary data later in this section. These two ‘genres’ are surely different, and there is perhaps even a conflict between the two forms. While interviews are oral narratives – to be considered a discourse in becoming in the very moment in which they are taken and frozen – literature is a written form accomplished by the author – although it is constantly changing and transforming when it is read and used by others:

“As the Jesuit scholar Walter J. Ong said, orality never produces texts, but performances: in orality we are not confronted by an accomplished discourse, but of the becoming of the discourse (moreover in the dialogic form in the case of an interview). When we speak about oral sources then, we should use not substantives but verbs – not memory, but remembering; not tale but telling. It is also in this way that we can think of the oral source not as a document of the past but as an act of the present.”45 (Portelli 2010: 9)

This conflict – between orality and writing – lives inside the use of oral sources, since the historian has to transcribe the sources and use them in a written text. In this sense, in the moment in which we encounter a written text, oral sources and literary fiction, although

45 My translation.
they retain differences given by their genesis and their goal, assume a similar formal status, that of the fiction, of the written narrative.

Going back to the relationship between Eritrean domestic workers and Italians in Eritrea, Erminia Dell’Oro (1988; 1991; 1999) often writes about this, and describes it as a relation of affectivity, especially with the children of Italians, and as a relation of trust, even on an equal level in some cases. But if inside the domestic space a certain balance exists, it is outside of these boundaries, outside of that shared world, that distances emerge. In fact it seems impossible for Erminia dell’Oro’s Italian characters to know completely the people who live in their houses every day. An air of mystery and distance surrounds these characters, who slip away and disappear. The Eritreans disappear from the sight and the awareness of Italians. For example, Turù and Mahasciò in *Asmara Addio* [*Farewell Asmara*] disappear; maybe they are dead but no one knows that for sure and especially no one knows where to look for them because outside the city of Asmara, since the places where Eritreans come from are unknown to Italians. They, the Eritreans, arrive every day from outside, enter Asmara and then leave again. Their world and that of Italians never meet, but they, the domestic workers, move across these two worlds.

“Turù, the washer woman at Conti’s house, fed my child’s imagination which gave her a perennial place in my memory. For decades she used to come to the house of my grandparents three times a week and she washed mountains of linen in the courtyard, inside concrete tanks. She came from Ardaroba, a tiny village ten kilometres distant from Asmara, she left at dawn and went back at dusk. […] She was different from everybody else and, being surely a sorceress coming from who knows which crossroads in the bowels of the mountains, her age couldn’t be counted like that of common mortals. […] “Where do you live?” I asked her. She asked to repeat this three times because she was deaf and finally she answered: “Ardaroba” – she said to me – “far away, there” and she pointed at the horizon with her hand. She dried her hands, she bent down to pick up a baby who was crying sitting on some clothes, she tied him with a fabric strap onto her back. A white woman, Linda Conti, observed her from the doorstep: “Come early the day after tomorrow” – she said to her in Tigrinya – “and don’t bring the baby because he is ill.” Turù headed towards Ardaroba. Then Turù never came again to do laundry. “Perhaps she died” said my aunt Claudia, but I couldn’t believe it. She went back to her mountains and, in mysterious hideaway, sat in front of the fire. She started again her life as a sorceress, so I imagined her, and I dreamt of reaching her one day in Ardaroba to figure out finally the secret of her life”. (De ll’Oro 1988: 24-34)

Similarly Mahasciò “one morning didn’t come to work and from that day no one saw him any more. We didn’t know where to look for him. His small room, in one of the buildings where he worked, was empty and someone said that on Sunday, as usual, he went to the

---

46 All translations from Erminia Dell’Oro’s novels are mine.
village, but no one knew exactly where this was, the small village near Adi Ugri where Mahasciò had a wife, dead for a long time, and some children now scattered across Eritrea.” (Dell’Oro 1988: 34-35). The characters of domestics are the only ones who draw a line of connection between the two worlds, otherwise invisible to each other: the world of Italians in the city and the world of Eritreans in the villages. And the route that connects these two worlds is dangerous, so much so that often someone doesn’t come back, or is even killed en route, as happens to Bri in *La gola del diavolo* [*The Canyon of the Devil*]:

> “Bri also disappeared suddenly. Lu’s mother ordered her few belongings to be quickly removed from the room where she used to sleep. Another girl came, Chidan, and, although everybody loved her, we didn’t speak any more about Bri.” (Dell’Oro 1999: 65)

The beloved Rigbé in *Asmara Addio* is also killed by Ethiopian soldiers on the street she travels between the house where she works and the house where she lives. These are two worlds that do not really know each other, even when from the side of the Italians there is the certainty of belonging to that land, as in the case of the young protagonist of *La gola del diavolo*, Lù. She affirms herself as coming from Eritrea and not from Italy, because she was born there, but then as soon as she is outside Asmara she can’t even communicate with an Eritrean boy, because she doesn’t know the language.

> “A little black boy advanced on the pathway, pushing a donkey with a full water bag. He was carrying a stick and looked at them, surprised. It was not usual to meet white guys in those places. He stopped near them. Lù wanted to ask him information about the Canyon of the Devil but she couldn't explain herself. The boy smiled, said something in his language. Lù and Davide didn’t understand. They looked at each other in silence for some seconds. The boy kept smiling, observing them. Lù made gestures, but she understood it was pointless. She smiled as well. The boy, after a move with his head, encouraged the donkey to hit the road again. Lù felt a weight on her heart. She ran after him, looking for words to tell him, any word, among the few she had learnt. But he had disappeared.” (Dell’Oro 1999: 103-104)

Therefore, Eritreans’ world is not visible to Italians, but even this invisibility marks, in some moments, a voluntary assumption of distance and maintenance of identity and relations with their own land and people by Eritreans. This is evident in Erminia Dell’Oro’s writing when her characters confront strong differences in relation to the care of their body. In two cases, when Rigbé is pregnant and when Mafrasc has to have a cyst removed from under her tongue, the Eritrean domestics reclaim the will to stay at a distance from Italian, or western, practices of healing, and they are nursed by an Eritrean.
Mafrasc asked for a permit to go to her village, Macallé, knowing that her parents and siblings were living in desperate times after the failed harvest. Moreover she had a small lump under her tongue that she wanted to be healed by an old man of her village. My mom suggested to her to go to an Italian doctor but Mafrasc didn’t trust the doctor. Zegai who retained a lot of respect had always healed everybody in the village. I couldn’t convince her either; Mafrasc was smart and evolved but she would have never abandoned some traditions, they had grown up with her and with her people in the small village on the Tigrai upland and she brought them with her not to forget that part of her life, as far away as a star from the small things she learned to love in the city. […] After some days a crying little girl, accompanied by Rigbé, showed up. […]

“She is the sister of Mafrasc” – Rigbé said with the sad tone and the cold expression typical of sad moments – “she comes from the village and she travelled a lot to find this house. Our neighbours accompanied her here.”

“What about Mafrasc?” mum asked with impatience. Rigbé looked at me and we had to resign ourselves to one of her long pauses. Then she decided that nothing should be hidden from me.

“She died” – she said – “the doctor of the village operated on her under her tongue and she died the day after.”

“Because of that stupid lump?” – mum was indignant – “She should have come with me, it was nothing, a cyst.”

“What an idiot” – said my father – “letting herself be killed by a savage!” Then he remembered I was there. “I am very sorry” – he added – “she was a good girl.” (Dell’Oro 1988: 122-126)

In both cases Erminia dell’Oro describes this choice as an error, showing cultural difference – through the words of Italian characters – as the cultural backwardness of Eritreans, and showing a moment of strong incommunicability. The distance between the two worlds and even racism and prejudice – “letting herself be killed by a savage!” – of Italians toward Eritreans are manifested in this dialogue. But this incommunicability, instead of being interpreted as the impossibility or incapacity for the subalterns to speak, should be understood as a silent practice of resistance and defence of a space of freedom from the colonial power. In that way, inside a relation of power and subalternity, the practices of invisibility are not devalued, but they assume a role in the production of autonomy of the colonised from the coloniser.

Mafrasc is another character that dies while she is away, in an unknown place, with unknown people. The passage between visibility and invisibility, between known and unknown, is here demarcated by life and death. On the contrary, today, Eritrean migrants arriving at Lampedusa in boats seem to become visible only when they die. Only at that moment do we – perhaps – stop and reflect on who they are and where they come from. Instead, when they disembark on Italian coasts and their images are screened on television, we tend to see already-seen faces, blurred images, a substantial imperceptibility of their bodies, an invisibility, or better a homogenising of all the faces we saw over the years that
ultimately make the faces of individual people invisible. Habte – while he was narrating his life, as he said, ‘from clandestine to citizen’ – renders this concept perfectly when he tells me that when he arrived in Italy in 1981, the story of the foreigner started:

HABTE: Here the story of the foreigner is really real, I was one, no one and one hundred thousand. I had only the weekly ticket for the bus, it cost 7,000 lire, I remember, I had this in my pocket and for the rest I didn’t have any documents.

Habte was born and raised in Eritrea, where he studied in Italian schools. He knows Italian literature and, in order to describe his status of ‘clandestine’, of ‘sans papiers’ just arrived in Italy, he uses the image of the Italian novelist Pirandello: Uno, nessuno e centomila [One, None and a Hundred Thousand] (Pirandello 1983). Like Vitangelo, the protagonist of the novel, at the moment in which he flew with fake documents and arrived in Milan to study at university, Habte became one: Habte; no one: an invisible clandestine; one hundred thousand: a migrant among other migrants, an anybody. Invisible because he didn’t exist, but visible because he was alive, thinking and with needs to satisfy. Those needs couldn’t be satisfied though as long as Habte had no documents. For example he could not register at the university without documents and he could not even obtain the documents from the embassy of the country – Ethiopia – that controlled his country – Eritrea – after he left illegally crossing the border with Sudan.

EYOB: Many of my compatriots who didn’t have documents were in prison. We were always in terror of the bus driver. Life was terrifying because it was: ‘beware there is the police, the police have arrived!’

But obtaining documents, as much as it can bring tranquillity, does not bring a way out of invisibility. Haben seems invisible when, after having finished her studies with many sacrifices, she takes her certificates everywhere in Milan looking for a job. What is invisible is what she brings with her: her knowledge, her capacities. They are hidden by her appearance and by her documents saying she is not Italian. She is, on the one hand, ignored, but on the other she is too recognizable, the visibility of the colour of her skin renders everything else about her invisible. Similarly to Haben, many Eritreans, although they struggle to escape forced invisibility, are often compelled to work inside the houses of Italians, work and even live there, inside the domestic space. Yet as soon as they leave it they become invisible to Italian eyes. Where do they go on Thursday and Sunday afternoons, when they are free from work? They don’t have houses, because they live with their employers; they don’t have friends to visit at their homes, because they are all in the
same situation. They self-organise, they help each other. They meet in the church of an Eritrean priest, Padre Marino, (Arnone 2010) or they meet inside the Leoncavallo, a squatted space in Milan, where they have a space for their political meetings to support the fight for Eritrean independence (Ambroso 1987). These spaces for meeting are largely not visible to Milanese citizens, mainly because Eritreans from there do not claim rights as migrants or ‘new citizens’. But they self-organise for their country whose political situation is largely unknown and ignored in Italy, despite the past colonial relation.

Their political activity becomes very visible as does their presence in Italy however when the Eritreans of the diaspora from all over the world gather in Bologna for their annual meeting (Poidimani and Tabacco 2001)⁴⁷. It is therefore in a collective dimension, and a political one, that Eritreans build a space of autonomy and of exit from invisibility. Occupying a public space through participation in Eritrean politics, they achieved the possibility of being visible and even of making public the problems that they have to suffer as migrants and domestic workers in Italy – although this was not their main objective. So for example, an article from 1979 in the newspaper l’Unità described them in this way:

“More than 1500 young Eritreans arrived in Bologna from all over Europe, but mainly from Italy, to discuss the Eritrean revolution, the actual dramatic situation of their country. A five-day congress in a congress building given by the municipality. These days have been, like every year, an occasion to meet, to live ancient traditions, to feel, once a year, men and women like all the others. This is because, all the rest of the time, the youngster or the Eritrean girl who has left their country because of famine or for political reasons, are considered only ‘servants’. There are more than 4,000, in Italy, mainly in Rome, Milan and Turin. Almost all of them do a job that euphemistically is called ‘domestic collaboration’.” (l’Unità, 24th August 1979)

Exploring the tension between visibility and invisibility in this section, I have also problematized the concept of subalternity, showing that invisibility is not synonymous with subalternity. Eritrean migrants, as the colonised Eritreans, are considered subaltern subjects because they are obliged to move inside very tight spaces of freedom. Migrants’ invisibility is often considered as a form of subalternity. The autonomy of migration approach helps to problematize this correspondence in two ways. On the one hand it moves us closer to a different perception of invisibility. As in the previous ‘scenes’, the so-called subalterns use both their invisibility and visibility as tools to escape control and open spaces of freedom. This ambivalence, always present in the forms of resistance and autonomy of the subalterns, not only makes us understand that from the point of view of the subalterns the two strategies are not in contradiction, but it also challenges Spivak’s (1999) famous question

⁴⁷ These events were discussed extensively in the national press, in particular in l’Unità.
about whether the subaltern can speak. Spivak’s question, in fact, seems to imply that the exit (even if only temporary) from subalternity has to happen through the capacity of speaking outside of yourself, to be heard. The experiences of the Eritreans narrated here tell us instead that even the possibility of not being seen, recognised and heard, the possibility of escaping visibility, are tools of achievement of autonomy from subalternity. Habte entering Italy with a fake passport or Eritrean women disappearing from the sight of their Italian masters and moving invisibly among their compatriots are some examples of that. Retrieving the importance of the perspective ‘of who is looking’ – or listening – in evaluating what or whom is (in)visible or (in)capable of speaking, it is possible to glimpse the role of the autonomous practices of migrants in undermining a subaltern position.

On the other hand the autonomy of migrations approach underlines aspects of mobility of subalterns, helping us to interpret the concept of subalternity not as absolutely static in nature, and subalterns as subdued by a totalising hegemony, but, instead, as a term in a relation in which subalterns have a role. If therefore it is necessary to recognise that invisibility is not synonymous with subalternity but on the contrary can be a tool of autonomy from it, we should not fall into the trap of disempowering the role of mechanisms of emergence and visibility. Instead we should train our senses to perceive the autonomous practices of subalterns as experiments in (in)visibility. The autonomy of Eritreans in fact derives largely from everyday experiences, from living together and cooperation, in connection with both migrants’ conditions and the political effort for Eritrea. These aspects will be the focus of the next chapter.
Chapter 5
Autonomous Self-Organising in Migration

In this chapter I focus on the autonomous politics of self-organising of the Eritreans in Milan. These are understood as everyday practices, acts, and ways of lives that contribute to the creation of community and directly build new spaces of freedom and equality. These, I argue, are also the terrains on which political encounter among differences becomes possible and, in some cases, disruptive. As suggested by Avtar Brah (1996), the ‘diaspora space’, constituted both by those who migrate and by those who stay put, is where we can look to see what the encounter produces and, more generally, the impact of migrants’ lives and politics on society. Here I analyse the diaspora space of Milan through the autonomous practices of self-organising of Eritreans and in order to outline how Eritreans have had, through such everyday practices, an impact on Milan.

Following my data, I have organized the Eritreans’ everyday practices in Milan into the following sub-themes: community organising, literacy, housing, childcare, documents, and work. These were the themes that my interviewees felt the necessity to speak the most about. Having adopted a historical approach, the data I have collected focuses on the period between the end of the 1960s and the present, in the attempt of both tracing a history of the Eritrean community in Milan and of having a perception of how the relation between past and present is lived. In this chapter I will focus on the practices of self-organisation that the Eritrean community of Milan has experimented with, and I will mainly outline three of their features: first, the relevance of everyday practices in building a community and its politics, second, the element of autonomy produced through these practices, and, thirdly, the role played by Eritrea, viewed not only as the country of origin, but also as a space of ‘storage’ of imagination and hope, i.e not only as a memory of the past, but also as a repository of the future. The structure of the present chapter, as mentioned above, is divided into five themes, followed by a conclusion. Each theme is developed from the point of view of migrants and of their sons and daughters. Moreover, to give a strong connection between past and present migrations of Eritreans to Italy, I sometimes introduce in the sections the voice of Medhane, a migrant who arrived in Italy in 2004. Finally, I have included the experiences I have gathered through participation in recent demonstrations of Eritreans in Italy opposing the government of Isaias Afwerki and asking both Italy and Europe to end the death of migrants in the Mediterranean Sea.
5.1 Community Organising

It is extremely warm in Bologna on the 4th of July 2014. It is 10am and there are about 100 Eritreans gathered in the street; ‘all the others are travelling, they are arriving from Northern Europe’, they tell me. Outside the side gates of the city’s Arena Parco Nord there are Eritreans coming from Bologna, Milan, Rome and Genoa, waiting for hundreds arriving from Sweden, Switzerland, England and Germany; but there are also activists from Bologna’s social centres/squats, journalists, and policemen. Other Eritreans from all over Europe are using the main entrance to participate in the 30th Eritrean Festival of Bologna. Eritrean bodyguards check every person and every car in order to make sure they are not opponents of Isaias Afwerki’s government trying to sneak into the Festival. An Italian girl distributes a leaflet and a flower to all the people joining the Festival. The bodyguards throw away any leaflet they can grab. The Italian police observes, not quite understanding what is going on.

On the 20th of June, three weeks before the Festival in Bologna started, an online petition promoted by the Coordination for Democratic Eritrea asked the Bologna municipality and the Emilia-Romagna region to not concede the space of the Arena Parco Nord to the Eritrean Festival and to withdraw the institutional support granted to the event, organised by the Eritrean government and its only existing political party, the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). The Festival, it was explained in the petition, is no longer the same one Bologna used to host in the past, when the Eritrean community was united and fighting for Eritrean independence. The Festival, according to the petition, has become the expression of the Eritrean government, a non-democratic state oppressing Eritrean people and forcing them to escape. The Eritrean community in Italy, as can be guessed, is not a united one. There is, in fact, no longer a single Eritrean community, but instead there are many, built around the political cleavage of support to Afwerki’s government. Thus the Eritrean community is split into two camps: those supporting and those opposing the government; those having fun at the Festival in Bologna, and those shouting outside the gates of the Festival, remembering those who died in the Mediterranean sea trying to reach Lampedusa’s coast while leaving Eritrea behind.

A few days before the start of the Festival, the Bologna municipality, embarrassed by the situation but unable to backtrack on the assignation of the Arena Parco Nord, nonetheless withdrew its institutional support to the Festival and sided with its opponents, allowing them to hold a demonstration in Bologna’s main square. However, the desired interlocutors of the protesters were the Eritreans participating in the Festival. For this reason they are standing, with a loudspeaker and two microphones, outside the Festival
entrance. The microphones go from hand to hand, with each speaker uttering the same words: “there is a dictatorship in Eritrea”. The tension grows until the police decide to shut the loudspeakers down, in order, the police say, to protect them and to avoid clashes between the protesters and the Festival bodyguards, who are wearing black t-shirts with a red fist and the slogan ‘Eriblood’. And so, people who have been travelling an entire day to be here and protest against Afwerki’s government are told to be silent. The position of the Italian police is ambiguous. In a climate of tension and in the impossibility of voicing their dissent to their fellow Eritreans, the demonstrators begin to march towards the centre of Bologna, where other activists await them in order to show their support and to mourn the dead in the Mediterranean.

The organizers of the 2014 Bologna Festival, as we can see, tried to frame the event as in continuity with the history of the Eritrean diaspora, and set up the event as the latest edition of the Festival held each year since 1974 in Bologna. As we have seen, the event was not only an occasion for coordinating the struggle for Eritrean independence, but also functioned as wider meeting moment for Eritrean migrants in Europe. This continuity however appears artificial, since the unity of the past is no longer existent and has been replaced by internal conflict. Though tensions had always been part of the life of the Eritrean Milanese community, the common goal of Eritrean independence had smoothed them out, and had pushed people to stick together and to organise politically for that endeavour. This feeling of strength and of unity is well described by Freweini, a second generation woman living in Milan:

FREWEINI: When I was born, in 1979, my parents were both very young and they were living in Italy, in Milan. But when I was born my father was exactly at the Festival of Bologna. And my mum went to Rome a few days before my birth – because my grandma and my auntie lived there – to have her mum nearby at the moment of giving birth. So I would say that my life was marked since the beginning by the community if you think about it. Even my very name is a name that is strongly tied to the fight for Eritrean independence. That gives you an idea of my parents, who even if they were very young were participating in community life, the political one as well; and by the way the vast majority of the Milanese community, and surely in other cities as well, was very active in that thing, although they were in Italy for a few years. Maybe they didn’t speak Italian very well, even now it hasn’t become perfect, and they had very heavy jobs. But one thing that strikes me still today when I think about them […] is that they could find the strength and the energy, probably even the necessity of gathering, and of building a real movement as well. Cause they sustained by any means, besides political meetings in which they spoke of the situation of our country – that at the time wasn’t recognised as a country – by organising here … so, something that always struck me […] was the capacity these youngsters and the older people who arrived here had of self-organising, but overall of involving the Italian community as well […].”
There was, according to Freweini, the capacity to overcome cultural and economic limitations; out of necessity, the Eritreans managed to gather, self-organise and involve Italians as well.

Since the 1970s the Eritrean community in Milan has been organised by two institutions: the Catholic and the Orthodox churches and the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF or Front from now):

HABEN: There were two things at the time; when I arrived in Milan [in 1981] there were two fundamental things: one side following Padre Marino, who was an Ethiopian-Eritrean chaplain, a religious man. It was a place in which we used to meet especially on Thursday when we were free from work in the afternoon: domestics, baby-sitters and carers. At the time there were “the mums”; we call them the mums because often their marriage didn’t work well and so they emigrated to grow up, while my generation was obliged to leave its country, we hadn’t even finished school, therefore the majority left to save their life [...]. So there was a welcoming place where all the women of my age¹ and the mums used to meet [...]. Then there was another place where those movements ... this group was helping the Eritrean Front. All their seminars, every Sunday they gathered, they had something like ... I don’t know, I have never been to their assemblies. If there were big events, a big seminar in which we debated because someone coming from where they were fighting arrived, then I would participate, not for the rest though. But I know that they, most of them were affiliated to politics, and this division was called: ‘the political’ and ‘the religious’. They, as well, if they could find jobs, find solutions, they would do. Therefore there were two groups. Then if there was a particularly big occasion such as the Festival of Bologna, then we all used to go, even from all over the world. These groups helped a lot of people. One was radically Eritrean, the other religious: yes, you speak about God but in the meantime you are in a foreign land, you are with your people, at least during those two afternoons you speak.

These two organisations polarised participation, dividing those who were political and those who were religious, although there were overlaps: Padre Marino supported the fight for independence, and some of the people who gravitated around the church were also attending the major EPLF events. The religious space – on which I will speak here only briefly, giving instead more space to the political organisation, and for which I refer to the work of Anna Arnone (2010) – looked for comfort and sociability, often sought by those people, mainly women, who had suffered too much and didn’t want to be involved in a political fight that was also strongly influenced by ideologies. The church was a safe space for Eritrean people to gather, but also a place for finding help relating to jobs, housing, etc. Asking Sennait how she had participated in the life of the community, she made it immediately clear that she never participated in the meetings of Eritreans, but that she

¹ Almaz was about 17 year old.
attended the church:

SENNAIT: Yes, in the church, but for the rest I rarely attend the political events because I have lost all my brothers so I don’t even want to know about it, because they died for nothing.
MARTINA: Because your brothers stayed in Eritrea?
SENNAIT: And they died. Four are dead in the war.
MARTINA: Did they fight with the Front?
SENNAIT: Yes. Therefore I can’t say I am involved the Community and the movement, no, I’ve never done those things because they only let me down. I do not attend many of the meetings of the Eritreans, no.
MARTINA: Did you go to the church of Padre Marino instead?
SENNAIT: Yes, before Padre Marino there was another priest called Padre Stefano, and they, when Eritreans started arriving, asked their brothers to give a small space for the Eritrean people cause we didn’t have houses. And the priests from Viale Piave [the church of Padre Marino] welcomed us a lot, a lot. They gave us everything. We got married there. They had some free rooms to stay after the mass to have a reception. Therefore yes, I give my help even now in the church when it is needed, yes, I do attend and help a lot in the church. Because I am Catholic.

The EPLF, the other organisation Eritreans created and attended in Milan, was a political space highly organised at the international level. Its aim was that of creating a link between the Eritreans fighting for independence at home and the Eritreans who had left the country. The diaspora, through the EPLF, was able to sustain the struggle in different ways and at the same time to make the distance more bearable to the migrants. Gathering, discussing and organising made the Eritreans of Milan feel useful and even meaningful. Participating in the Eritrean community and its main organisation, the EPLF, was also their way to give a meaning to their migration and their position as migrants. As Feven, a young second generation woman, told me speaking about her mother and her participation in the women’s section of the EPLF: “For her there was no choice, that was the only choice for putting her effort into the topic of migration, that is how to make her migration not only about her, but a sacrifice for the community.”

The EPLF in Milan was organised in sections, replicating the division existing inside the EPLF in Eritrea. Gebre, who explained this organisation to me in his interview, was one of the key figures of the EPLF in Milan. He was educated in Eritrea and Ethiopia, where he participated in the student movement and then he had to leave the country for political reasons. Once he arrived in Europe he started his ‘career’ as political head of the Eritrean diaspora. Today Gebre is one of the opponents of Isaias Afwerki, the former leader of the EPLF.
GEBRE: Here the Front had set up three types of organisations: one was the union of the Eritrean workers in Europe and in the world; another one was the women’s organisation and the other was the organisation of youngsters.

MARTINA: Can you tell me what the activities of the Front were? What did you do and how were you organised?

GEBRE: For what concerns the organisations of the Front, they were directly created by the Front. We wanted to institute these organisations based on class and social groups (students, youngsters, women, workers). These groups were structured at the level of the city and then of the country and at an international level. There was a section in Milan; there was a section in all the other Italian cities, and then at the national level, and then to the European level and then to the international level. The activities were political, cultural and to do with literacy. At the end of the 1970s we used to do literacy courses, using some books that were written in the liberated zones of Eritrea. As the majority of the immigrants in Italy at the time were illiterate women who didn’t have the possibility to study, we saw the necessity to organise some literacy classes. Beyond that, we did political education. The Front published some political brochures of analysis of the international political situation, about Marxist-Leninist theories, since the Front at the time followed the line of Marxism-Leninism, so we used to teach that stuff. We did that on Thursday and Sunday afternoon when people had the day free. In via Pisacane where there was a school they gave us and we could use it every evening. We held the political meetings in Viale Monza 140, where there was a small ARCI\(^2\) circle, that they gave us more or less for free. Then at a point when we didn’t have that space any more, we had a space at the Leoncavallo\(^3\) that was squatted and we had that space for five or six years. There we had our own hall, it was very useful. On Saturday night we rented movies about struggle, liberation, of different kinds, from all over the world: Cuba, the Soviet Union, China, the Second World War. We rented them in a place that had all these things and during the dinner we watched the movies and then we had a debate.

The activities of the EPLF were basic political activities: holding meetings, distributing leaflets, collecting money, collecting goods to send to Eritrea, organising public events to create awareness of the political situation of Eritrea. Awate, Wegatha, and Negassi told me about their experience inside the Front.

AWATE: In any part of the world we used to have a meeting each week, on Sunday we had the meeting, the news arrived from the Front through telephone, telegraph and fax. We read the news and then we discussed, we spoke about how to organise ourselves, we organised demonstrations, money raising, participation with Italian organisations to inform people about what we wanted: we were not separatist but we wanted independence. We were another story from the Ethiopians, we have nothing against the Ethiopians but we wanted, like other countries, independence after colonialism.

MARTINA: Did you have some specific responsibilities?

AWATE: No, all of us who were abroad, we were the organisation.

WEGATHA: Here in Milan I have found my compatriots who were already

\(^2\) Associazione Ricreativa Culturale Italiana – Italian Recreational and Cultural Association

\(^3\) Space squatted by groups of the extra-parliamentary left
collaborating together to help. They were connecting all the Eritreans together, they worked all over Italy, cause we were helping those who were fighting in Eritrea, from our wages we pay, each of us what he or she can, we look for medications and drugs from pharmacists and what has not expired we send it to Eritrea, also underwear and clothes. We have been good, we have been united.

MARTINA: How was the Front organised here in Milan?

WEGATHA: We used to gather, we didn’t have the possibility of having fun, I was young but I didn’t have fun in Italy, I entered the politics of my country immediately. During our free day, Thursday afternoon and Sunday afternoon, we always met in via Monza, near Pasteur [metro station] I think. Before, when we were united, we collaborated with Italian political parties that gave us the possibility to have rooms to meet [...]. We didn’t have other things to think about, we were always involved Thursday and Sunday to work for our country and for that reason I went on, for that reason we worked united, in the world and in Italy. For example in Italy we held a meeting every year of all the Italian Eritreans, from all the cities: Firenze, Roma, Bologna. We were united. Once a year, for one week, we held the meeting of Eritreans from the entire world in Bologna. We speak about our country, our politics, in Bologna. This possibility to do all these things, the authorisations, the place, we have been helped by the Italian parties.

MARTINA: Were you inside the Front?

NEGASSI: Yes, I was. [...] When I arrived I used to be part of the students’ organisation, but in that moment, the Eritrean student movement was not as strong as it used to be [...]. In Milan we used to share the work among the different organisations: four months the workers, four months the women and four months the students. We helped each other to arrive at independence.

MARTINA: Which responsibilities were shared in those four months?

NEGASSI: For example the organisation of what concerned the parties, the seminars. Since in the beginning the workers were those who managed everything, it was almost a monopoly, there were some claims and therefore creating this system we tried to reduce the frictions. [...] MAR

MARTINA: Which responsibilities did you have?

NEGASSI: I taught people who couldn’t read or write; we organised parties, we organised concerts, we had a musical band that played in Milan and in the surroundings to collect some money. Then with that money we managed to buy a bus and send it to Eritrea ... then we tried to sensitise the youngsters to be more active in the struggle for independence of Eritrea, we organised seminars, as all the students do. There was me, then a friend of mine named Angelo; I was the president, but that didn’t last long.

MARTINA: When did you arrive in Milan?

NEGASSI: I arrived in the 1980s. I used to go to do leafleting. I received leaflets, brochures from Eritrea; I photocopied them with my money. Then I used to go around and sell the brochures to the students and the workers and try to collect some money for the Front, that’s all.

Not only did adults participate in the meetings and events of the EPLF, but their sons and daughters as well, especially on Sundays, when they were not in school. Their accounts of the meetings are useful to gain a different perspective on these events: what was happening outside that room in the Leoncavallo, while the adults were discussing the news from Eritrea? Freweini, who was born in 1979, has a good memory of such meetings,
that for the children were occasions to get to know and recognise each other, but also a way to get a sense of what their parents were concerned about:

FREWEINI: For what concerns the meetings, clearly being a child I could grasp only something of what happened. But let’s say that the events were divided into two types fundamentally: the meetings in which parents stayed in those rooms where they spoke about the political situation, of the progress, of the clashes between the guerrillas and the government of Menghistu and maybe they made proposals and they spoke of the political lines of the liberation groups. Beyond that money was collected to send there to help. And at that moment we kids used to go up and ask for some money for a snack, but the rest of the time we spent it in the courtyard, playing a bit like free dogs, cause our parents were busy upstairs. Even that was a moment of coming together for us kids. Almost all the kids of our generation and those older ones, who went to the meetings and the parties, have a memory of all the other kids. Eventually we meet after many, many years, and maybe after a bit we understand that that person is the girl or the boy with whom you played or with whom you argued. For what concerns the other type of gatherings, the parties were linked to our culture and they were also linked to the fund raising, in which women used to cook, men had to rent the spaces and prepare them. And then everybody paid for the food and the drinks and this was a way to raise funding to send. I think that there were many things that we couldn’t grasp because we were kids, but you could feel it, you could ‘breath the environment’.

From the testimonies of my interviewees it is quite clear that the EPLF in Milan was not merely an organisation supporting the fight for liberation in Eritrea, but instead it organised also social activities: organising parties and gatherings, giving information about residency permits, work, rights, creating an environment, a community. This is a fundamental aspect of the organisation, as was underlined in some of the interviews.

EYOB: There was a group for the Eritrean politics in Europe, for liberation. We discuss from here [from Milan], everybody has a group in his city: Milan, Bologna, Rome. There is a coordination centre of Italy and of Europe. This is because not only were we fighting for our country, but also there were people who were more informed, who could go and speak with the police [about permits], who tell you about the situation for the severance pay, your rights, for these reasons, there were three or four persons who know and inform you. So you do the political and you do the social, both of them. We, as Eritreans our reason was the political question, but we were working for the social [side] as well.

MARTINA: Did the organisation do something for those who were living here?
AWATE: We helped each other, especially for the documents. Those who spoke Italian helped those who didn’t know Italian, there were many illiterates.
MARTINA: So, how did you help each other?
AWATE: One found a job and then called another one, it is a chain. We gathered in

---

4 Menghistu was the most prominent officer of the DERG, the Communist military junta that governed Ethiopia from 1974 to 1987, and the President of the People’s Democratic Republic of Ethiopia from 1987 to 1991.
the church of Viale Piave as well. There were Catholic priests, they gave us a space and they didn’t make distinctions between Muslims, Protestants and Catholics. Everybody was getting married there, they were very democratic, and they helped us in looking for jobs. They didn’t make distinctions. And it is for that that we used to all stay in Porta Venezia, as for Bologna it was Piazza Maggiore and for Rome Piazza Indipendenza, especially on Sunday after work. Some were crying for their dead and we were giving strength to each other. We were few; it was not as it is now with globalisation, before leaving your country was staying far away.

This social aspect, the knowing each other and helping each other, was perceived as fundamental to create a united community of Eritreans in Milan. The two organisations here described, the Catholic Church and the EPLF, were not able to gather all the Eritreans, because they had different ‘ideological’ positions and this created frictions among the community. Although the two institutions recognised themselves reciprocally, at the beginning of the 1980s some Eritreans felt the need to create a sphere that was neither political nor religious, but the expression of and the reference point for their community life. For this reason at the beginning of the 1980s some Eritreans thought of creating another organisation, a space going beyond this division, the Eritrean Community of Milan (ECM from now). This institution worked primarily as a social space for Eritreans, but also as representative of the Eritreans in Milan, in particular through the involvement in the City Board for Immigration instituted by the council of Milan in 1986 (see Chapter 6).

GEBRE: Starting from 1981 and 1982 there was the necessity of organising the Eritrean community in general, beyond any political and religious distinction. A small part of us was supporting the EPLF, a very small part was supporting the ELF and then there was the majority ... We wanted to organise the community as a community, beyond political divisions. [...] The Community constituted itself in 1983-1984. We rented a headquarters big enough to have a room where we could have meetings, we organised cultural demonstrations as well, we had musical bands and we organised nights when people danced, ate, had fun. That place was big enough, a bit uncomfortable and among houses where we couldn’t make noise, but it became a social centre, where we had billiards, there was a bar, people came and spent their time there. Even when someone died, we have this tradition in which people go to console the relatives. We used the community space even for social activities and pastimes, playing billiards, chatting. All the Eritreans were involved in it. The Community had this principle of gathering everybody without political distinction. This decision was taken with wisdom by the Front. The rise of the EPLF had to create a feeling of the nation, instead of splitting it tried to create a moment of interaction of everybody. It worked I would say, although differentiating politically. A lighter atmosphere was created, while in the past there were very strong frictions, people didn’t say hello to each other because they were of different fronts.

---

5 The Eritrean Liberation Front was an organisation for Eritrean liberation. It was minoritarian confronted to the EPLF and it also had contrasts with it.
6 Meaning that it didn’t have the same political function as the EPLF.
Although the ECM was thought of as a separate sphere from the political one, it was still linked with the EPLF, and this relation was the main reason for its end, because the Front, that was managing things rigidly, as Gebre said, tried to ‘grab the Community’:

GEBRE: Then in 1999 there was the eviction [from the headquarters] and we looked for another place. But it came out that the committee that was leading the Community was trying to detach itself from the Front because the Front always wanted to control everything and everybody. So we had to close the centre with a banal excuse and the Community disintegrated because it didn’t have a place where to gather in good and bad times. Afterward the embassy rented a space next to the embassy and reorganised the Community, but this Community belongs only to those who support the government. Now it is dominated by the embassy.

In the description offered by Gebre of the ECM, the past is closely linked to the present. He draws a history in which he immediately jumps to the end of this experience because he wants to underline that today this experience doesn’t exist any more. Moreover he wants to underline that the reason for that lies in the EPLF, from his point of view, not being able to make the step from an organisation concerned with armed struggle to one capable of organising the democratic life of Eritreans. The EPLF tried to ‘grab’ the Community, tried always to control it, and today it continues, having opened a new space of the ECM next to the Eritrean embassy, the place of the followers of Afwerki’s government in Milan. When speaking about the history of the Community therefore, Gebre can’t avoid speaking of the political situation of Eritrea today as well. The presence of the present in the narratives of the past is a strong element inside the interviews I have collected; they continuously compare the past with the present and vice versa.

The other reflection that comes with an analysis of the histories of the ECM is that we can’t properly speak of an Eritrean community simply because there are Eritreans in Milan. We can speak about a community instead when there is a unity and an organisation. In other words, if in the past the Eritrean Community was easily associated to the social space instituted in 1983 that tried to be as inclusive as possible and that achieved the objective of creating a space for the people to gather, as Gebre said, ‘in good and bad times’, when speaking of the community today, people don’t know what to refer to. Is it the Community that opened a new space next to the Eritrean Embassy, or an identity of Eritreans living in Milan? This is not clear and creates problems of belonging among my respondents.

Beyond the formal organisation of the Community there are communitarian practices through which the community was constituted. These were able to survive until the end of the Community itself in 1999. But the political divisions among Eritreans are
partly undermining these practices as well, or at least are not reinforcing them. Moreover, as Eritreans are facing new and emergent phenomena – in particular the arrival of many Eritreans in Italy – those divisions are preventing the invention and the adaptation of the old communitarian practices to address these new problems. The young second generation Eritreans, who grew up with the imaginary of the political engagement of their parents, and who find themselves alone today in creating networks of support for the new Eritrean migrants, are aware of this in a particularly strong way. The communitarian practices that characterised and built the life of the Eritrean community in Milan are the object of the next sections. The object of my discussion is how they managed to overcome obstacles they found and the importance of self-organisation, before institutional and public support, in doing that.

Looking at these practices from an autonomy of migration point of view I am concerned in fact with opening up political possibilities from the migrants’ point of view. I think of research around migration as strictly linked with the struggles of migrants for freedom of movement and rights in the sense that the research is ‘fed’ by collective theoretical and political practices, and at the same time undertaken in order to open up viable possibilities and exploit them. For this reason, politics of migrations should always be seen from the point of view of migrants’ agency and not as the representation of it by others. Equally, migrants shouldn’t be invested from outside with the role of an avant-garde, a new revolutionary subject (Mezzadra 2006: 26; Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2012). Moreover I think of political practice not only as the moment of visibility and claim, as event and rupture – voice – but also as the moment of flight and subtraction, of ‘invisible’, slow and continuous temporality – exit. This political act then is not only the one classically recognised as such, but daily micro-resistances and invisibility are here valorised as political acts per se. Migrants act out a political role in any case, moving and challenging with their bodies borders – physical and cultural – creating through their movement new

---

7 Scholars theorising the autonomy of migration approach have been and are involved in several projects around migrations or social movements which thematise also the issue of migration: the experience of the European Social Forum, the Frassanito Network and the NoBorder collectives are three examples. Moreover the autonomy of migration informs the political activities of many collectives all around the world.

8 The voice/exit relation is theorised by Albert Hirschman (Florida 2004) who argues that the reaction of people when they perceive that an organisation to which they belong is demonstrating a decrease in quality or benefit for them can be double: contestation and organised action to propose a change (voice) or withdrawal from the relationship (exit). These two possibilities under a political point of view have been interpreted as the direct and political action (voice) and the everyday resistances, often not considered political, often singular, that try to escape or overcome individually the problem faced (exit). In particular the interpretation here proposed reads this two possibilities not as opposed but as two moments of resistance that coexist and that reinforce each other.
transnational spaces, questioning the ideas of nation and culture. Through the words of my interviewees in the next sections I develop an history of Eritreans’ self-organised practices concerning: learning a new language and maintaining the original one; finding a house; organising childcare; obtaining documents and finding a job.

5.2 Literacy

According to my data, language fluency and literacy were key reasons for gathering and self-organising among Eritrean people settling in Milan. This is because of the availability of courses both in the Tigrinya language and in the Italian language for Eritreans, mainly women, arriving in Italy as domestic workers. These courses were organised by different people inside different organisations: the city council, the Catholic Church and the EPLF. Young Eritrean migrants who had knowledge of Italian because they attended Italian schools in Eritrea or because they studied it in Italy where they attended university taught Italian in most cases. In Florence, for example, from the late 1970s “young Eritreans were meeting women from their country working as domestics for wealthy Florentine families, to teach them Italian, and often to read and write as well”.

In June 1980 the Italian state created literacy courses for adults. Many migrants in Milan attended these courses that started at a school on Via Crocefisso. Negassi, who attended Italian schools in Eritrea, used to teach at this school: “I have done teaching activity with Eritreans with the Milan City Council. I used to teach Italian to Eritreans”. But most Eritrean people represented in my data attended Italian and Tigrinya language courses self-organised by Eritreans, either by the church or by the EPLF. The church of Padre Marino in Viale Piave was a reference point, among other things, for the language classes.

HABEN: There was a comfy place where we used to meet, all the women of my age and the mummies. It was a place where you could communicate in your language with your people. [...] And then who wanted to go to school, cause there was also a kind of Italian class, literacy class. There were many mummies who we helped writing letters to the homeland, or they received a letter and we read it for them.

MARTINA: So let’s say that the Italian lessons were your initiative?
SAARE: More than mine, it was a friar, Andemariam, a friend of mine, we were classmates in boarding school, and then we met again here. You know, they meet so many people in the church. He said to me: ‘look, we have the school of Sister Cesarina’ – because she used to run a school from the first primary class to high school. ‘On Thursdays and Sundays there is a class, can you help me?’ I accepted. It

---

was his initiative, this friar. There were many Eritreans, mainly women, who were illiterate. Being domestic workers their free day was half day on Sunday and half day on Thursday. There was a sister; she is still there, now she is around ninety years old or so, Sister Cesarina. There was a school and she gave us a room and I started, and for three years I taught with the help of another Capuchin friar. We taught many women who could neither read nor write. We did that for three years. [...] At the time women who used to work all day long, domestic workers, once they knew they just started to come to read and write, older women as well, even fifty, sixty years old, there were those of twenty-five, thirty years old as well. Even now, when they meet me they thank me because they can read and write. We did something big.

ARSEMA: When I was five years old I used to attend the Orthodox church of Viale Piave in Milan where there was Padre Marino, an Eritrean who celebrated Mass there but he was also responsible for creating events for kids, for after school, teaching Tigrinya, organising plays for Christmas, and there I really felt like at home, even in these contexts, among Eritreans.

The other organisation through which it was possible to find Italian classes and Tigrinya classes was the EPLF.

AMAN: We used to help the organisation, while we worked we organised political gatherings, and we organised for those people who don’t know, those who are illiterate”

MARTINA: Which kind of responsibilities did you have inside the EPLF?
NEGASSI: I have taught people who couldn’t read or write.

GEBRE: At the end of the 1970s we used to run literacy courses with some books that were written in the liberated zones of Eritrea. As the majority of the immigrants in Italy at the time were illiterate women who didn’t have the possibility to study, we saw the necessity of organising some literacy courses and we used to do up to the 4th primary school class.

In contrast to the church, the EPLF had a focus on teaching Tigrinya, since many migrants couldn’t write or read it, and used books and materials directly connected with its political struggle. The relations between the Eritreans who took part in the church activities and

---

10 Gebre showed me some of these books. He has kept them in his flat in Melzo, outside Milan. They are all written in Tigrinya and Gebre translated the titles for me and explained their content: “these are school texts for adults, about geography and science. This for example is, as the title says, a kind of civic education. [...] This is the ‘red booklet’, the title says: ‘General Political Education for the Fighters’. It starts from the geographical position of Eritrea, the history of the Eritrean people, from the anthropological point of view, the origin of the Eritrean people, the political history, the economic resources, the social composition of Eritrea and the history of the Eritrean fight. This is the first chapter. In the second chapter there is the necessity of the political education, the objectives of the Eritrean revolution; who are the enemies, who are the friends. All that is about the goals, the why and the how of the fight. Which are the goals, which is the strategy and how to resolve the contradictions inside. In Marxist theory contradictions are posed at different levels – primary, secondary and so on – therefore you have to understand which is the main contradiction. For us Eritreans at that moment it was between the Eritrean people and Ethiopian colonialism.
those who took part in the EPLF activities were not always easy. The literacy classes were one reason for this conflict.

SAARE: Why didn’t we continue? Because they infiltrated. Then there was the organisation to help the guerrillas in Eritrea. And they were jealous. Instead of saying to us ‘well done’ – we didn’t ask for money, everything was free, we were teaching them to read – no, what did they do? They came there, they waited outside the school and they accompanied them to their classes. At the time it was really a communist system. Once they started menacing me, whatever, they didn’t scare me, but the women [attending the classes] went with them, you know, for Eritrea, they didn’t let us work calmly.

MARTINA: This competition with those from the Front was because there were only those two afternoons available per week in which you could do activities and so the activities overlapped or was it also for other reasons?

SAARE: Look, we could have shared. For example one hour we could do an Italian lesson, and then the rest, it was sufficient to find an agreement. Instead they were jealous, since I have been from the beginning … why have I been always against [the EPLF]? In my region we are all Catholics. For example the church of Viale Piave, there is the church of friars, opposite to it there was a bar, at the time it was called Bar Carlo. From there these people used to watch us and took pictures of us in order to say, you know with communists, communism, ‘you don’t have to go to church’. Are you kidding? If you start from now to ban, we were just at the beginning of the guerrillas, now they start doing things like that, what freedom will we have in the future? And in fact what happened? For that reason I have always been against [the Front]. Therefore since we didn’t go, the Capuchin friar and me, then they were jealous.

MARTINA: Because you didn’t go to the meetings of the Front?

SAARE: I didn’t go, it was for that reason, do you understand? Because otherwise, ‘he is one of us, we are doing that’ and instead no. They invited me many times but I didn’t go and this was heavy for them, you know? It was for this reason.

According to my data, one of the consequences of the divisions inside the Eritrean community is that today there are no more self-organised literacy classes for those who have arrived more recently, since the 1990s. Medhane, who arrived in Italy in 2003, learned Italian on his own:

MARTINA: How did you learn Italian?

MEDHANE: I really like watching movies, watching makes you learn lot of stuff, I think. If you have a little base, from there on you practise. I like speaking with my colleagues, when I have started my job, even if I make mistakes it doesn’t matter.

MARTINA: So you learned on your own?

MEDHANE: On my own, yes.

Language is an important aspect for the second generation as well, which struggles

Therefore, although amongst the Eritrean people there could be several contradictions, they had to be put on a second level and resolved through dialogue, while for the main contradiction there is no dialogue, there is armed conflict. Therefore this book speaks about all these things. […]’
to maintain the knowledge of the language of their parents in a country like Italy that doesn’t help in this task. Children of migrants experienced problems in schools from this point of view. A survey on the presence of migrants in Rome in 1979-1980 pointed out a lack of language classes for migrants and a very low interest from the public schools in the difficulties of migrant children. Schools, it was said, were not flexible and didn’t care at all about the culture of origin of the child\(^\text{11}\). Activities promoted by associations in several cities – Milan, Rome and Florence – tried to cope with this lack, promoting classes in Tigrinya\(^\text{12}\) requested by Eritrean parents who didn’t want their children to completely lose contact with their mother language:

EDEN: [...] the Community had a cultural centre that had organised a Tigrinya school for a very large age range, from kids to adolescents. It was both in the headquarters, in Via Friuli, and in a church the year after and then in the current headquarters of the consulate. But I attended only the first two seasons, those at the cultural centre of Via Friuli and the school in the church.

FREWEINI: Another amazing thing they used to do when we were kids, although I think that project stopped, [...] they did the Tigrinya school. There was one during the summer camp holidays, but it was organised in Milan as well. On Saturday afternoon, I think it was Saturday, whoever wished could bring their children to take Tigrinya classes. [...] I don’t remember exactly the place, but a flash I had is that it was not only a moment of meeting for kids, but also kids and adults, that is, among people who managed the school and the holiday summer camp as well – because the more active people were present in all the things, they are also the people that when you meet them they recognise you and you recognise them. I realise that if before I used to say ‘we all know each other in Milan’ and I meant we Eritreans, now instead I know that it is no longer like that. Not only because of the new incomers, but also because of the new-borns who haven’t lived these intertwined relations.

ARSEMA: I remember I didn’t attend Tigrinya lessons [...] because they were during the week and they were in Viale Piave while we lived in south Milan and my mum finishing work and coming to pick us up didn’t have enough time to bring us. And this is something that my Tigrinya mates made me remember recently, a couple of years ago, because I had completely removed that thing, and they instead – and then I understood why they knew each other that well – they had attended that school when they were little. And therefore even there the Eritreans have created community, links.

Language was a means to sustain culture more broadly and the community organisations – the church and the ECM – took charge of its transfer from one generation

\(^{11}\) l’Unità 27th June 1981, Immigrazione: tante cifre contro i pregiudizi [Immigration, many numbers against prejudices].
to another. In my data, language is perceived as a basic and important way of building community. Knowledge of a language and the process of learning it make people aware of their origins and of the fact of being members of a same community. When this element is missing, because the language is forgotten, substituted by the one of the country where they have grown up, or because the community has lost its unity and its function as bearer of culture, there is a feeling of losing not only the knowledge of a language but the very possibility of communicating in a meaningful way with the people from the community and with relatives living either in Eritrea or in other countries in the Eritrean diaspora:

FREWEINI: For me it is sad being illiterate. I have tried to restart the study of our language, [...] and then I stopped [...]. I was determined, I repeated the alphabet on the metro before going to work, it was not heavy, it enriched my days, beyond the fact that it was something I wanted to keep. I got lost in a difficult period of my life [...]. There you understand the effort of our parents in order not to make us lose our culture, not to make us forget, to make us understand why they were here. When I was a kid my father used to tell me: “if you study you can become a teacher, you will teach in Massawa”. Every time I go to Massawa this thing always comes into my mind. Then well, the dream was not that easy to realise. There was this strong hope in our parents to return, to rebuild the country, to reappropriate it. The hope then has been deluded by many situations, either because you don’t agree with what is there or because even if you agree there is little dynamism of the economy, of everything, the opposite: people have hard times. So I surely regret those moments because they gave me a lot but I know that they have been interrupted. And at a point, enough: I am Eritrean, I know I am Eritrean, on the basis of what though?

Also regarding the transmission of a language there is the idea that this is a process people in a diaspora undergo differently. Being a second generation Eritrean in Italy and in the UK is not the same thing. These societies have a different relation with postcoloniality and different policies regarding multiculturalism. While my data indicate that Italy doesn’t have any specific policy and doesn’t encourage and help the multiplication of experiences of language or cultural gatherings of non-Italian people, in the UK as in other (north) European countries it is different. Arsema tells of the experience of part of her family living in London:

ARSEMA: For example my little cousin, who turned 18 years old a few days ago, used to learn Tigrinya on Saturday afternoon at his primary school. It was a Catholic school, private, that in the afternoon offered classes to do courses organised by anybody and in any case recognised maybe by the City Council with monetary help, and therefore my uncle taught Tigrinya in this school, on Saturday afternoon, for payment.

13 Massawa is a harbour city of Eritrea, the second most important city after Asmara, the capital of Eritrea.
In Italy instead everything is left to community self-organisation. This sometimes generated problems for Eritrean people when a deep division started between supporters and opponents of the Eritrean government. Since the only gathering for the Eritrean community is the embassy, those who are against the government have no place to go:

ARSEMA: In Canada, they told me, in England, in Sweden and in Germany – I am speaking of the realities which they told me about and that I saw – there are also associations and events organised by non pro-government people. So for example the teaching of Tigrinya for primary school kids in London is done by both the Eritrean embassy and by another hundred schools, associations and clubs. There is simply more choice, it seems that there isn’t a unique party, while here in Italy it seems that there is a unique party, a unique community that either you are inside it or you stay outside of it. My parents have decided to stay outside of it and I have lived that exile. I am happy that they have always spoken to me in Tigrinya.

When the community is not capable of transmitting the Tigrinya language, then the full responsibility for this falls on the families. Therefore, it depends on the decisions of parents if second generations can speak, understand and write Tigrinya, which is a difficult language to learn. For example Gebre decided to stop speaking Tigrinya to his son when the teachers in his son’s primary school told him his child had problems speaking Italian. Feeling responsible and being afraid of putting his son in a difficult position, Gebre and his wife decided to stop speaking Tigrinya at home and started speaking Italian, losing in that way the possibility of transmitting their language. But that was not always the case. Freweini and Arsema for example learned Tigrinya in their houses and are particularly attached to the language:

FREWEINI: I speak Tigrinya, I surely make mistakes but I can speak it quite fluently and I understand almost everything, not everything, but almost. But when I was little I had my father who spoke to me in my language, even if he wasn’t one who didn’t want to speak Italian. To exhaustion, like: ‘daddy can you pass me a glass of water?’ ‘How do you say it in Tigrinya?’ So much that sometimes my mother said: ‘leave her alone!’ When we went on vacation in Eritrea when we were 13 years old we used to say: ‘who is the best at speaking Tigrinya?’ Normally it was the Germans or the Swedish, those who come from countries whose language is very difficult to learn and therefore whose parents didn’t even try to, and therefore the kids always spoke Tigrinya at home until they go to school. I surely watched the television, I had a lot of friends in the courtyard [where Italian was spoken], but I had effectively that strong push, and I remember even the moments in which my father helped me doing Tigrinya homework, so it was a moment of sharing, he really cared about that.

ARSEMA: Luckily my mum tried to keep me tied as much as possible to my country of origin, always speaking to me in Tigrinya, always teaching me Tigrinya in order to
make me feel tied in any case, so that any time I wished to see some relative or I decided to go to Eritrea alone, I could have got by and I could have discovered or re-discovered my origins thanks to the language. I am very grateful to her for this because I realise that many Eritreans of my age, the majority of the second generation Eritreans of my age, don’t know Tigrinya at all, even if they go back every summer. [...] Speaking with some friends of mine, Eritrean mates from the university, I felt bad hearing people who go annually to Eritrea and who have parents who decided finally to move there, referring to Tigrinya saying: ‘oh no, I don’t understand that language’. When that happens I feel bad. Also because, seen from outside, who is more tied to Eritrea? An Arsema who hasn’t been there since 1998 or one person who goes there every year?

Some members of the second generation feel the need to ‘catch up’ with their family’s original language and they try to do it thanks to Saare, who never stopped having a vocation for teaching, and never stopped doing it for free, for the good of the community. The conditions in which he teaches his classes have changed dramatically however. If classes before were organised in the rooms of the church, of public Milanese schools or of the ECM, now Saare has to teach in a bar. Since he is an opposer of the Eritrean government he doesn’t have access to the new ECM spaces, and the Eritreans in Milan don’t have any other organisation.

ARSEMA: When I did my Tigrinya course here with Saare we used to do it in a bar whose owner was a friend of his, so he left us the room of the slot machines, where in any case people could come to play the slot machine. But we had a place and a roof, with a table, and in any case without obligations, except that of always ordering something from the bar. And there is always the fact that Saare did it for passion and therefore he didn’t ask for money. Everything seems more difficult in Italy, more demanding, more arduous.

SAARE: Last year, for two years I taught the guys who were born and raised here, they are Italians. Not knowing the language of Eritrea, they wanted to learn to speak Tigrinya. For two years, among them there is also my daughter. Many of them can also write, not that much, but enough, they speak and write rather well in Tigrinya. This year I stopped because I don’t have enough time but next year I will start again.

MARTINA: Are they interested?

SAARE: Yes, they are curious, they go to Eritrea, when they were little maybe they didn’t think about it, but now for example in the family if someone arrives who speaks Tigrinya, not understanding what they say bothers them. But now the majority of them know it. It would be something really beautiful, because I didn’t have a room, a school, it was a bar.

Literacy has been a powerful means through which Eritreans in Milan have self-organised and created community. Learning a language – Italian or Tigrinya – has always been important in different ways for Eritreans. If learning Italian for migrants who didn’t learn it at school in Eritrea can be easily explained by the necessity of making a new life in a new
country, the learning of Tigrinya, for the older migrants who could speak but not read nor write it and for the second generations, has something more particular that needs to be examined more closely.

The feeling I gathered from my data is that Eritrea – the land, the relations that pass through it and its diasporic imagination – has a central role in creating self-organisation around literacy courses. The EPLF in Milan was giving Tigrinya classes to educate people, because this is what the EPLF in Eritrea in the liberated zones was doing, since they were thinking of the future of their country and they wanted to build an Eritrea in which people could read and write. It is therefore inside this always present will of going back that Tigrinya classes are inscribed. Eritrea, as a cultural and social symbol, is also at the centre of the efforts of parents who migrated in teaching Tigrinya to their children; and also in the efforts some second generations put into learning, once they are grown up, the language of their parents. They do it for different reasons, as Arsema explained to me, but all these reasons are related to the diaspora of Eritrean people and to the power of an imagined Eritrea.

At the same time the stories around practices of literacy show the importance of self-organisation for Eritreans in their everyday life in Milan. These practices moreover challenge the concepts of integration and assimilation, wanting to affirm instead the creation of new hybrid compositions. The concept of integration implies the existence of a ‘subject of reception’, a homogenous and close-knit subject that should receive and welcome ‘the other’; it implies therefore the existence of a strong idea of nation, exactly what migrations, as a social movement, are instead slowly destroying. Indeed many authors have highlighted how contemporary migrations are characterised by the creation of complex identities, often represented as multiple, fractured and inhabiting borderlands (Anzaldúa 1987; Gilroy 1993; Bhabha 1994; Appadurai 1996). Using different perspectives and images (e.g. borderland, diaspora, double space, in-between, third space), they all represent the fact that migrations create transnational networks and subjectivities, which are not willing to ‘adhere’ to one single identity.

5.3 Housing

MEDHANE: And then I arrived in Milan to look for a job. I didn’t have housing. Not only me, many of my compatriots were in the same situation. We squatted one, how do you say? I don’t know, something abandoned. And then we squatted a building in Viale Tunisia. Do you know where the cinema is? Just in front of it, now they are constructing a new building I think. We entered and we occupied it. From there the police of Milan arrived, the council of Milan, and they gave me a place in a
dormitory, in Viale Fulvio Testi, others in Viale Novara; and I slowly started working, I stayed two months in Viale Fulvio Testi, it was 2006-2007. And you slowly better things, you know? Until now.

MARTINA: Who squatted the houses? Were you all Eritreans or were there people from other countries?

MEDHANE: There were Sudanese, a few of them, seven or eight, also ... two or five, but the majority, 95%, it was us.

MARTINA: How did you decide, how did you organise?

MEDHANE: There was an abandoned house, where bus number 73 passes towards Linate, the house was abandoned and we were sleeping there. Everything was closed and we dug a window, we, you enter, you enter like that [he mimes crawling to pass through a small window] from the window. Slowly slowly more houses, because in the beginning there were only 10 people, then others arrived from Sicily and they didn’t have housing. And then we thought to enter Viale Tunisia. We looked, no one was there, it was abandoned, and we entered, we broke in. There were Italians with us as well, they did not sleep in there, but they helped us. They were from NAGA14. Then the Milan City Council arrived, the police and they threw us out.

MARTINA: How many were there of you?

MEDHANE: 120-130, something like that

MARTINA: How long did you stay?

MEDHANE: Almost fifteen days. Then they evicted us, we went out and we did a demo on Piazza Duomo [...] 

MARTINA: When did that happen?


MARTINA: If an Eritrean arrives today in Milan, what does he/she do? Is there a way through which someone who has been here longer helps them? For example, if I was an Eritrean who arrives in Milan today and I don’t know where to live, I don’t have a job, who can I turn to? Is there a form of organisation thanks to which people who arrive now find help?

MEDHANE: No, not for the moment. If someone arrives and doesn’t have a house, maybe if he has friends or relatives they help you. If he doesn’t know anybody, he goes to the Caritas15 and eats and sleeps there. Now you can’t find a job. Slowly slowly, you look for a job, as we used to do, find a job, sleep in Corso Lodi [Caritas] or in other abandoned places, and then slowly slowly after three months you take a wage. Everyone does his own path, there is no organisation, this is a mistake from our side. Not a mistake, the problem is also what there is here. How can I say?, now we are starting to communicate, to do stuff, before it was not like that, it is starting now16. Maybe we will have an organised community. Up to now there isn’t one. Everybody has to think for himself.

On the streets’ walls of the Porta Venezia neighbourhood in Milan, where all the economic activities and the places for gathering for Eritreans are, some murals in pink paint speak –

---

14 Naga is a non-party and non-religious association of volunteers constituted in Milan in 1987 to foster and defend the rights of all foreign citizens and gipsies without any discrimination. Naga recognises in health a inalienable right of the person. (From the website http://www.naga.it/index.php/Chi_Siamo.html)

15 Caritas Italiana is a pastoral organisation constituted in 1971 by the Italian Episcopal Conference.

16 Medhane refers to the organisation of the opposition.
in English – about Eritrea and migration. One of them says: “Didn’t cross the desert to live in a square”.

What these words suggest is that since migrants decided to escape from Eritrea and cross the desert because they want dignity in their life, they don’t accept being obliged to sleep in the squares or parks of Milan and they are ready to squat. The practice of squatting empty buildings is not something new. In Medhane’s description of his experience of occupying a house with other people lies a heritage of past experiences of his community. For generations, from the late 1970s up to nowadays, Eritreans have been squatting houses in Milan to find a solution to their housing problem. Reasons for migrating, documents available to and social conditions of Eritrean migrants have all changed in those thirty years but the practice of occupying houses is an element that we can find in the experience of all the different generations of Eritreans living in Milan.

Although the practice is what connects these diverse periods, the situation Medhane describes in 2000s is different from what was happening in Milan in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when hundreds of Eritreans were living in squatted houses. At that moment there was a level of organisation that allowed people to find a house when they needed it. Instead, as Medhane is suggesting, today occupations happen in a more contingent way. This has surely to do with a different political environment, for in the 1980s squatting was not criminalised by the state as it is today and political activism was generally more widespread than it is today. At the same time, these differences intertwine with a shift in the history of the Eritrean community itself. Again, in the past, here narrated in the words of my interviewees, two organisations – the religious and the political – were
points of reference for the housing problem, while today there is not an institution able to answer this request and the practice is left to the contingent self-organisation of those in need. In this section I will describe the problems related to housing which Eritreans experienced, the practice of squatting and how this had an impact on the politics of the Milan City Council.

MARTINA: Before you touched on the problem of housing. Did you have trouble finding a house?

SENNAIT: Yes, we had lots, lots of problems. Because they didn’t want to rent to foreigners, but also to those from the South [of Italy]. I am speaking of 1978-1980; it was difficult finding a house. I had to pay under the table to have a ‘di ringhiera’17 house with toilets outside. And this happened thanks to Padre Marino who managed to speak with the owner. And we managed to go and live in that house, ten of us Eritreans. But it was difficult, they just had to see you and they would say: no no, to foreigners no.

MARTINA: So you lived in this house and then?

SENNAIT: Then I had a City Council house.

AMAN: There was a relative of mine who lived and worked here. I had the occasion to find her; she hosted and helped me, paid for a boarding house until I had a job. Because before there was no housing for Eritreans, we all worked for families or in hotels, we worked and lived there. We didn’t rent houses. I used to work in a restaurant and sleep above it, they gave me the accommodation.

HABEN: Because the majority at the time, twenty-five, twenty-seven years ago, didn’t have the house, we all worked and lived in the employers’ house. People who had an aunt or other relatives [could stay with them], but you don’t want to go always to your relatives, you want your own autonomy. At the time it was a dream. Nowadays most of the youngsters take a house and they live four or five together without being a burden or a problem for others. At the time instead we were thinking, who knows why, that if you had a family you had to stay with the family, and then you went back working and that’s it.

In 1978, only 10-15% of Eritreans had a private flat to live in; the rest used to live with compatriots or in boarding houses, religious communities, and public dormitories. A very common situation for domestic workers was living in the house in which they worked. This created several problems for Eritrean women: they didn’t have their own private space and time; they could meet other people only outside and they couldn’t keep their children with them.

EYOB: There were people, we couldn’t find housing and slept in the public gardens. The only thing we have done has been helping each other. I remember that I had a room, when you see it you get scared by how many people lived in that room! The entire floor was mattresses and blankets. I used to go to the church and bring stuff;

17 expression to indicate a typical working-class flat in Milan
we cook and eat all together. Someone lucky found a job as a porter. Luckily I have found job as sacristan in the church and that gave me the possibility to start my life and to have my family. Because when there isn’t that possibility you can’t make a family, when there isn’t a house.

SAARE: In 1973 when I arrived I met a guy in the dormitory of Viale Ortles, we took a room, we paid very little. From there we used to walk to ‘the house of the student’ [student accommodation], we had a meal there and then walked back. This was for a year at least, in 1973. Then in 1974 I met Teresa, my wife. I didn’t have documents; she came from Eritrea with a contract as domestic worker. [...] I met her and we started working as a couple, two in a family. When we worked there we started renting a house. At the time what did they use to do? They used to squat houses, not them alone, with the extremist groups who occupied empty houses. And then since the houses were unstable, the City Council sent them to a hotel and then gave them houses. We instead, I said: ‘how can you occupy someone else’s house?’ I can’t. It depends also on how you were raised. I wanted rather live in a small studio flat, but I pay for it!

Indeed many Eritreans used to live in squatted houses located in different parts of the city. Around 30-40% of Eritreans in 1982 lived in squats (Ambroso 1987). These were about eleven old buildings in different parts of the city and were inhabited by Eritreans as well as by Italians, though initially Eritreans were the only foreign migrants squatting. The occupations were made possible by the collaboration between Eritreans and Italians, in particular activist ‘groups of the left’, as my respondents described them.

EYOB: There was this possibility thanks to the groups of the left. We found these occupied houses, we entered with force. I had a house near Giuseppe Verdi. [...] We entered many houses in Milan, occupied houses, thousands of Eritreans, for about ten years, and thanks to the Socialist Party we were transferred to City Council houses. And that remained, mayors changed, even the Northern League18 arrived, but the City Council housing remained, until now, even those who arrived later found a house.

Starting from 1984 in fact, Eritreans were able to access case popolari (council houses). In 1983 a City Council resolution allowed that some City Council house properties could be also given to migrants – without Italian citizenship – resident in Milan. The practice of squatting houses made evident the existence of a housing problem for those people and, once the City Council introduced the possibility for migrants to access council houses, the mechanism became quite recognised: squatting in order to have a council house assigned. Negassi for example lived in a squatted flat near Porta Venezia and then obtained a council house, where he still lives now with his family.

---

18 A political party, characterized by its anti-immigrants rhetoric and politics.
NEGASSI: I had found a house, a house that an Italian left me, I still remember his name: Michele Terranova, from Sicily. It was an occupied house. At the time they occupied houses and he left it to me, I lived there for some years.

MARTINA: And how did it happen that he left it to you?

NEGASSI: Yes, he was with me in a boarding school called Ferrari, we were together, he was a student in Philosophy. He was a very capable guy, very good, but he went back to Sicily and he left the house to me without asking for any money. When I entered this house there was nothing, nothing. [...] There were some Italian neighbours, very good Milanese people who helped me because I had nothing.

MARTINA: Was all the building squatted?

NEGASSI: No, there were about ten flats squatted. [...] We united with other Italians, twenty-twenty five people and we asked for eviction, the regular eviction from the owner who told us: 'either you buy it or I'll ask for the eviction'. We said we couldn't buy it and that he could evict us. He evicted us and then the City Council gave us a house.

Having access to housing is a crucial passage in the life of Eritreans in Milan, and especially in the building of a community. Having a house also implied the possibility of having children.

MARTINA: Most of the Eritreans lived in Porta Venezia?

AWATE: It depended on the possibility and the occasion. Then there were those who occupied the houses and gave us the houses to live in.

MARTINA: Who did occupy the houses?

AWATE: Those of the left. They resolved many problems. Because before we couldn't get married. Because if you didn't have a house you lived where you worked 24 hours. While in that way we could get married. Especially women, they couldn't get married for this reason, they remained without kids. They were scared people wouldn't give them a house to rent, and it was expensive, and those who were giving you domestic work they wanted you there. Instead slowly with the occupied houses things changed. The City Council understood as well that when we squatted we did it for necessity and they put electricity and gas in the squatted houses and then they gave us the City Council houses. The occupied houses were dangerous. With the access to housing, the first Italian Eritreans were born. The second generations.

Frewini, born in 1979, was one of the first Italian-Eritreans in Milan. Her parents decided to live in a squatted house to start their independent life in Milan.

FREWEINI: [My parents] when they arrived they lived in the house of the people they worked for. Then they went to live in a squatted building, I can't tell you the exact year but I know that it happened before my birth. Maybe they looked for that exactly when my mum got pregnant, but my mum took up residency after I was born and for this reason I still don't have Italian citizenship. The house was a flat made up of a kitchen, a bedroom, a living room and a small toilet where they managed to build a shower. And now I think that ‘wow, we already had a shower at home!’ It was not taken for granted. Because I have a memory of public showers.
Independence meant living outside the workplace, not living with your relatives, being free to have a family, being free in case of a separation, as in the case of Feven’s mum, who divorced her husband and found herself without a house and two children.

FEVEN: My mother remained without a house at a moment in which foreigners couldn’t have access to City Council housing. Therefore the first years of my life have been marked by the problem of housing. I have moved house four times in a few years. [...] and I lived all that period in which houses have been squatted. My mum lived in those houses of Piazzale Dateo, near Porta Venezia. But we couldn’t live in those conditions so my mum put us in a boarding school, and this is a story that you will hear from other people as well [...]. That year when houses were squatted, I remember the journalists who came and I remember these destroyed houses: there were not even stairs, but masses of sand; there wasn’t any heating, and so luckily they evicted us and after about one year in a hotel, they gave access to foreigners to council houses and I think that the first to obtain them were the Eritreans.

FREWEINI: In my building there were five Eritrean families and all the rest were Italians from the South, recently migrated. The whole building was squatted [...]. When we were children, before going to school, I remember there was Lalla’s mum who took care of me and of Aster [a friend]. There was this trust, because they were all in the same situation, people who worked eight-ten hours per day, all having kids [...]. It was a different period, in which more people understood that we were starting from the bottom, or better: more people started from the bottom, beyond understanding it or not. I don’t know, this can be a reading key.

Freweinì wants to suggest that cooperation among Eritreans and Italians and a sort of political reciprocal interest happened thanks to everyday practices and to the fact that people had similar needs.

FREWEINI: That made the difference as well, because maybe the people who mixed with our community and contributed also to our political struggles, I don’t say they were the same but there was a higher identification with many Italians who in those years were changing their lives, they were also arriving and squatting houses in Milan. And sometimes they were seen as strangers as well, so you can’t say that at the time the foreigners were not foreigners, but maybe the foreigner could feel a bit more like an Italian [...]

The aspect that both Freweinì and Eden articulate in their interviews is that these political practices, that were at the same time opening an important space for the right to housing for migrants and creating practices of cooperation between Italians and Eritreans, arrived before (and without) a political consciousness. Freweinì expresses this concept saying that when she was a child “people started from the bottom, beyond understanding it or not”; and Eden expresses it in the following way, while describing her mother’s experience.
EDEN: My mum lived in a squatted house in Piazza del Risorgimento and it was surely a relief, in the sense that Italians didn’t rent and didn’t sell to Eritreans and when you could find a job that didn’t require your permanent presence in the families’ houses you needed a roof over your head, and it was a big hurdle, therefore luckily there were these occupations that allowed living there. There was not the intellectual capacity to understand that you were living in a squatted house, if it was right or wrong, or to reclaim the right to a house because you were a worker, or in any case this was never transmitted to me. What they always tell me is how beautiful it was living next to friends, in houses that were cold and not legal, but the happiness of having a place; my mum was lucky, she happened to be next to her friends in the same building. “We were happy, we used to talk until late at night, we were young, men used to play [cards or other games] together”. A beautiful period of their youth and with the sensation of being slowly building something and always with the hope that now everything will end and we will go back [to Eritrea] and in the meantime here it is better.

The housing problem was, according to my data, a crucial question for the Eritrean community. Necessity compelled many Eritreans to squat – although not everybody agreed and felt comfortable with this. The political links with some ‘groups of the left’, as they were called in the interviews – mainly the Leoncavallo squatters – made this practice easier for Eritreans. But the creation of new relations between Italians and Eritreans passed more through the everyday life inside the squatted buildings than in political thinking, deciding and acting around the practice of squatting. At the same time this practice, once it started to be done by non-Italians, posed a new problem for the administration of the city that was forced to rethink the rules around the assignment of City Council houses. Although Eritreans weren’t making claims directly to the City Council, but were acting out of necessity, their actions forced the City Council to answer with a change in the legislation. Indeed:

“migration is not primarily a movement that is defined and acts by making claims to institutional power. It rather means that the very movement itself becomes a political movement and a social movement.” (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013: 184)

Migrant mobility is a political movement in itself that subsequently forces constituted power to reorganize itself. In this sense we can understand migration as a constituent moment able to defy present political practices and organisations.
5.4 Childcare

As we have seen, housing was central especially for having children. Following my data, childcare was another point around which self-organising was produced among Eritreans in Milan.

FEVEN: My parents both worked as domestics in a family of very rich people, [...] they worked for them doing a bit of everything because my father was the driver and raised their two kids. Let’s say that our first education was that of [...] the upper-class children of domestics. My father gave us the clothes they had; he used to buy us the same food he used to give them. I have been in these houses and I have a vague memory of a holiday in Switzerland in a super house. For example my brother went to the Leone XIII swimming pool that we couldn’t afford, but for my father that was the best he could offer us. Exactly in those years my parents entered a crisis, the crisis was present for many years and my mother decided to leave him, because our and her survival were at risk. She remained homeless in a moment in which foreigners couldn’t access council houses. Therefore the first years of my life have been marked by this problem of housing [...]. My mum lived in one of the [squatted] houses in Piazzale Dateo, porta Venezia, that area. But we couldn’t live in those conditions so my mum put us in a boarding school, and this is a story you will hear from other guys as well. One year of boarding school while my mother was trying to understand where to put us. In this year of boarding school I was not in Milan, so my mum had to head out on a journey and bring us home on Saturday and Sunday. A shitty year. I did the first year of primary school with the nuns of Legnano¹⁹, who were terrible. My brother was separated from me, in a male boarding school, he was doing better. It was a very hard time but as a kid I have still very unclear memories of that moment.

Childcare problems for Eritreans were related mainly to two aspects: housing and working hours. Most Eritreans – as I have showed in the previous section – had difficulties in finding a flat to live in. This was a serious problem for all foreign women working as housemaids and living in the house of their employer, not only Eritreans. L’Unità in 1985 denounced that these women often had to have an abortion because of their work and housing situation²⁰. When they had a child they often had to rely on boarding schools, as in the case of Feven, or on nannies²¹. The story of these children is still to be written; it would be important to understand the consequences of the life they were forced to live. An

¹⁹ Legnano is a small town just outside Milan.
²⁰ L’Unità 3rd January 1985, Tra le “colf” straniere un giovedì a Roma [Among foreign housemaids on a Thursday in Rome].
²¹ Another article showed how much things changed over time: “once, 100 or 50 years ago, the middle-class women of Rome used to go to choose the nannies in the villages of the Frosinone [a rural country area outside Rome]. Now, if you go to those villages, you can see a woman from there surrounded by six or seven children with more or less dark skin: they are the children of the domestic workers who work in the city. In order to leave their kids they pay 200 thousand lire per month: often this is their entire wage. If the children are a little older they manage to accommodate them in boarding schools with priests and nuns” (28th February 1982, l’Unità, Una vita da clandestine per lavorare da noi [A life as ‘clandestines’ to work for us]).
extreme story, of a son of an Eritrean woman who grew up in an Italian family and who at the age of 16 refused to go back to live with his natural mother, makes us imagine the complexity of the phenomenon.

MARTINA: How was for you being a mum here? Did it constrain you to change the way you mothered your kids? Did you have to adapt something starting from giving birth passing through education?
HABEN: Before coming here [to my house for the interview] I was making a comparison with my sister who lives in Eritrea with nine children. From her point of view I would be the lucky one, instead no, I am not. I was saying that before to my mum, my sister who lives in Eritrea is the lucky one; because in the end she has a beautiful big house, she breathes clean air, she eats good food, she has many children, and she also has a helper. She goes out with her friends, she can visit them, something that we can’t do here for a thousand reasons. I would like to prepare homemade tagliatelle for my daughters. In fact sometimes when I couldn’t work, I couldn’t find a job, I liked cooking. Because having them find a clean, tidy house, it pleases. Instead if I go all day to work, where do I find the time to feel the breath, the dream, everything? Because it is important; we don’t have to fill children only with material things, because now you need to listen to them, stay near them, what there is in their mind, what there isn’t, look at them, hear them. I really missed that because both being at work, what can you do? I didn’t even breastfeed, I didn’t even stay six months with my daughters, I had to work. One thing is if you worked, you have some money and you can have one or two years to dedicate to the kids, no for me what I earned I sent it home. [...] Sometimes Sara [her daughter] wonders: ‘mum, how could you make it? You worked and the evening you went to school ... I imagine mum that you at my age were already married, you had emigrated, you worked, but how did you make it mum?’ Eh, they were other times, if there is will, determination.

When they couldn’t combine their job with childcare or when they didn’t have a proper flat where they could live with small children, these Eritrean mothers had to resort to private institutions, mostly Catholic boarding schools, which in Italian are called ‘collegio’.

ASTER: I remember having been in boarding school because our parents worked all day, mothers often even lived in the families’ homes. I know I have spent some periods with other relatives, around Lake Maggiore, and for a period in some boarding school [...]. I was calm, I was so silent that you couldn’t understand what I was thinking, so I was a possible bullying target but once they approached me, really they never tried again after the first time. I always had the thing of self-defence.

MARTINA: Did many people have to put their children in a boarding school?
SAARE: Yes, especially if one is alone, what is she to do? Thanks to the nuns, to the priests, you could find these boarding schools, which you paid for; they were not for free, but still. Then at the weekend you brought them home. Instead when I came

---

22 l’Unità 12th December 1992, “E’ nera, voglio divorziare da mia madre”. Sedicenne eritreo sceglie la nuova famiglia, [She is black, I want to divorce my mother. A sixteen year old Eritrean boy chooses a new family].
back I took her out of the boarding school, she was seven months old, she doesn’t even remember, luckily.

WEGATHA: When I had my son, at three months old I left him in a boarding school because I had to work. Think about it, a mum leaves her three-month-old baby in a boarding school because we couldn’t find a nursery. We wrote to everybody but he stayed one year in the boarding school, but it was expensive. Because of that fact that we pay a lot of money he stayed there only a few days a week. Do you know how? So my husband instead of resting from work on Sunday he changed his free day to Friday. So I take my son on Thursday evening, Friday, Saturday and Sunday he stays with us because I rest on Saturday and Sunday, on Friday my husband stays with me and on Monday morning at 9am I bring him there. Tuesday and Wednesday I go to see him, only Wednesday I don’t see him because on Thursday evening I bring him home. Life was hard.

FEVEN: I ended up there because my mum [...] didn’t have any possibility of having a welcoming enough house for us. Temporary, because probably I was there less than one year. [...] I have a horrible memory because I had been separated from my brother so inside there I didn’t have the possibility of communicating with someone. I had two unlucky friends like me, one was named Dante and the other Antonio. [...] My mother used to tell me always not to speak to the nuns. There was this nun, she was the head nun who was the worst and I have a memory, but very vague, of punches, I am not sure I underwent them though. I am sure of having been treated as a small adult, as it was typical there; so we had to make our beds, we had to clean, I have learned there to do all these kind of things, taking care of personal hygiene, which is good, but maybe for a kid of that age was a bit too much. [...] I don’t remember lively moments in that period.

Sometimes these problems were solved at a community level. In Milan, squatting created communities of Eritreans and Italians – mainly migrants from Southern Italy – helping each other. Squatting, as I underlined in the previous section, was also a way through which women could free their time, not being forced any more to work and live in the same place. They could afford a flat and therefore a private life with their children.

FREWEINI: [...] they took care of us, in the afternoon or before going to school. In my building there were five Eritrean families and all the rest were families from Southern Italy, recently migrated. [...] When we were little, before going to school, I remember that there was Lalla’s mum who took care of me, she took care of Aster. There was also this kind of trust, because they were all in the same situation, people who worked from eight to ten hours per day, they were all having children because they were of ‘the old school’. They had children when they were young, despite the conditions – now you wait to have everything perfect, the house perfect, instead it was not like that, life was going on and probably, maybe there was some ignorance, there were incomprehension that I don’t remember either, but in the end they were all in the same boat. [...] And then even when we were grown up, I remember many times when I would come back home from school with the mum of an Eritrean friend, because maybe the one who came back home before brought all the kids, there was much collaboration, they didn’t even have the money for baby-sitters, those things didn’t even exist. Then I don’t know if they passed some money to
whoever was keeping the kids at home all day, but everything was really homemade, it was a courtyard but also a big family.

Solidarity created thanks to political actions could be also found inside the ECM, the church and the EPLF. All these community spaces provided moments of gathering that also facilitated community childcare. A particularly difficult period for families was the summer, when school was closed and three long months of child-care were impossible to arrange when working long hours, as suggested by my data. The main way which Eritrean families used to keep their children busy and cared for were holiday camps. Beyond the holiday camps organised by Milan City Council, Eritrean children living in Milan used to go to two other kinds of holiday camps. One was run by Sister Cesarina, organised by the church attended by the Eritrean people in Milan.

ASTER: I participated in all the holiday camps. I have never been on holiday with my parents apart from two times when I was ten that I went to the beach with my father. [...] I was at all the available summer camps in Milan. One in particular that I went to every year was the one run by our community, we were the only ones, and we were all black. Where they brought us, Lignano Sabbiadoro\textsuperscript{23} we were the only ones. And going around in a group like that with all these kids who looked like you was particular because people on the beach were taking pictures of us, they were looking at us as if we were a kind of little show. On one side we found each other, because it was a moment to look ourselves in our faces. From the outside, I could notice the external eye, the effect we kids had on the Italians of the mid-1980s. That was a particular experience, different from other summer camps, and I think that the educators were Italian university students.

SAARE: Yes, yes, they used to go to Igea Marina, then once to Bolzaneto, once near Bergamo\textsuperscript{24}. Because we couldn’t go to the sea, we had to work. So kids with the nun, Sister Cesarina... We didn’t pay that much, we left them there as long as two months, or one month. We used to do it like that. However it was not easy, even now it is not easy.

FEVEN: I always went to the summer camp of the Milan municipality, only one year I went to ’the Sister Cesarina’ camp, and it marked me!

The other type of holiday camp was organised by the EPLF. This one was particular because it was organised on a national level, therefore Eritrean children born and growing up in Italy had the opportunity to meet and know each other, creating a strong sense of community, as Freweini recalls.

FREWEINI: But there is no longer something like the summer camp, which was

\textsuperscript{23} Lignano Sabbiadoro is a well-known vacation place on the north-eastern coast of Italy.

\textsuperscript{24} Places in different regions of North Italy.
something great. A group of parents together with other people, who were willing to
do that, made the commitment for all the others who maybe were working all July –
so they could rest only in August – to bring all the kids of the community. And it was
not only kids from Milan. There were kids who were coming from Rome, Milan,
Florence and Turin. And this allowed many of us to meet each other when we were
kids, and still now we have people who we remember from childhood, who in reality
grew up in other cities and who therefore you don’t really know from all your life,
but when we meet again, it is as if we knew them for all the life, and I think that in
that sense they were really forward. Now I think that a project like that would be
unfeasible, me first [I probably wouldn’t do it].

Similarly, Bologna Festival provided childcare:

FREWEINI: [...] our parents used to come to take us from the holiday camp and
bring us to the festival in Bologna, about which I have marvellous memories. [...] There
was the camping with the tents, it was very well organised: there was the
canteen, the showers, and a space where we stayed all day, apart from some moments
when we went to the meeting. [...] your parents were on the other side of the city,
and you were in the field running, you stayed with the friend you wanted to stay with,
there was the uncle who was offering you the ice-cream, maybe there was a auntie
distributing food at the canteen – well, everybody you know pretends to be called
auntie even if they are not relatives! Therefore it was fantastic, for kids it was really
marvellous.

Particularly in relation to childcare, the role and importance of a community in sustaining
everyday life is evident. Because of the particular work and economic situation they were
forced to live in, they had to face different problems from those of most Italian families.
Political and religious spaces became therefore places where community childcare was
organized. Wanting to solve a material problem, this way of organizing in turn created a
sense of community, belonging and shared experience among Italian-Eritrean children. In
this context, solidarity is reinvented through everyday practices.

5.5 Routes, Documents, Work and Social Status

MEDHANE: I left from Sudan in 2003, then Sahara. From Sahara I arrived in
Tripoli, I spent four months in Tripoli, I tried to leave on the ship, the ship was not
going well, we almost arrived in Sicily [...]. Then in the evening the sea started rising,
the waves started. All night we stayed with the engine off, everything, everything, the
mobile phones as well were off, we couldn’t communicate with the Coast Guard, and
then all night we were going back. [...] Then during the night we took a cloth and
put fuel from the engine on it, we lit it, and they found us. Then there was a big ship,
it was going toward Tunisia, they communicated with them and they sent us back to
Tunisia and then they left us at the border of Tunisia and Libya. Some arrived in the
city, Tripoli, others were arrested by Libyans. I was arrested. I spent 4-5 months in
jail in Libya. And then I came out. [...] The second day after I came out my brother
sent me some money from Canada and I bought a ticket – $1,200. I tried a second
time; we try like that. Thank God I arrived in Lampedusa.
The reasons that brought Eritrean people to leave Africa and reach Europe are various but all related to the political and economic instability that characterised – and still characterises today – the country in the post-colonial period. The routes through which they left Eritrea and arrived in Milan were different. Some did it through a regular contract to work as domestic workers in Italy; others had connections with the church and left to continue their studies; others left with a tourist visa or a false passport and then stayed in Italy; some left to study thanks to the connections that the EPLF had for example with the Soviet Union and then moved to different countries in Europe where they assumed roles of leadership in the diasporic organisation. Therefore, although connected to the same problem – the instability created in Eritrea by Italian colonialism and the consequent post-colonial developments – the specific reasons and routes followed were different and in some cases unique. This already makes us think of the variety that characterizes migration flows and the importance of acknowledging the specificities of life histories in them. The autonomous element in migrations is also visible in the fact that migrations are organised by migrants, their families and communities, and seldom by institutions (Rodriguez 1996). Migrants, from being named as ‘foreigner workers’ are subsequently being defined simply as ‘immigrants’. Briefly, migrations should not only be seen as an answer to a critical situation – poverty, famine, political crises, unemployment – or as a phenomenon to be treated from the humanitarian point of view or as a social problem. Keeping in mind the importance of the specificities of life histories – and trying to valorise the element of uniqueness thanks to oral history – in this section I want also to identify some common aspects inside the histories of migration of Eritreans to Italy.

One aspect is the postcolonial relation, the link with Italy that remained and persisted after the official end of colonialism in 1941. The central question is: why did these Eritreans choose to move to Italy and how did that happen? As I have described in Chapters 2 and 4, there are many elements connecting Eritrea and Italy: Italian schools in Eritrea; the Catholic church; the Italian language; Italian families who lived in Eritrea and then moved back to Italy; the colonial relation inside the domestic sphere; the existence of an Eritrean community in Milan. A second aspect I want to underline is the element of self-organising inside the practices and experiences of leaving the country, arriving and making a living in Italy. The first step, taking the decision and organising to leave, often happens at an individual or family level – although sometimes informed by the experience of others who already left. It often involves a kind of institution – schools, church, the EPLF, or an employment agency – working as mediator and facilitator for obtaining a visa.
and a job. Once Eritreans arrive in Milan they encounter a number of community self-organising practices around issues such as obtaining a permit to stay, regularising the migratory position, making a life without a regular permit to stay and finding a job, based on the others’ experience.

The creation of a federation in 1950, the subsequent annexation of Eritrea by Ethiopia (1962) and the consequent beginning of the resistance of Eritrean people created a situation of permanent conflict, of control by and abuses from the Ethiopian soldiers on the population, and of war. For many young people the choice was either fighting with the EPLF or leaving the country.

SAARE: I was born in a region called Akele Guzai, the village where I was born is called Ad Finne, really small, few inhabitants, not even 150 when I was there. In the entire province everybody is Catholic, for this reason we have relations with Italy through priests. When I was little, when I was three years old, I was sent to a college of Franciscan priests, until the age of 15, from three to fifteen years old. When I was 15 I continued studying, always in the Italian school. An Italian teacher, who was there, helped me obtain visa. At that moment, it was 1961, guerrilla war for independence from Ethiopia had started. Many enlisted and went with the partisans to fight, and many like me went abroad. I came to Italy with the help of this teacher, with a visa for 15 days, a regular visa; I came to Milan by plane.

WEGATHA: I came out of my country without even thinking because I left in February 1975 and at the end of January 1974 they had started the war in the city of Eritrea [Asmara]. This fighting was going on for a long time, almost more than 100 years. Our fathers fought first against the Turkish, then against the Italians and then against the English. After the English, the Ethiopians arrived, and they wanted to take our land. Italy had divided us from Ethiopia and gave us the name Eritrea. Ethiopia doesn’t want us to leave; they want to take our land, Eritrea. War started in 1961 [...]. In 1974 the youth arrived fighting right inside the city. At that point I escaped. I saw the war for one year, from January 1974 to the 28th of February 1975, when I came here. At that time for one year I slept under the bed, it was always war.

The colonial legacy comes to the fore inside the stories of my respondents in different ways: the presence of the church and of Italian schools on the Eritrean territory; the role of Italy in defining Eritrea as a nation; the Italian army as one of the many colonisers Eritreans had to fight against; finally Italy as the country of escape, precisely in virtue of all these relations. An Italian teacher, Italian nuns or an employment agency run by an Italian in Asmara were the means through which Eritreans happened to arrive in Italy. If Wegatha and Saare escaped from a situation of war, others who migrated later escaped from the violence of the Ethiopian army in control of Asmara and the rest of Eritrea. Among the stories I have collected, Haben’s introduces the situation most clearly.
HABEN: [...] since Eritrea was under the dominion of Ethiopia, there was a strong desire for liberation, for independence more than anything else. At a point my father was too sympathetic with Eritrea so this fact, his belonging that he was declaring officially without hiding it, he was at risk. In fact at a point, when I don’t know, I was in middle school, I was 13-14 years old, at a point he dies, he was assassinated. [...] Almost instinctively I wanted to join up with the Eritrean fighters for liberation. But maybe I was not ready for that kind of life, for that enrolment, or maybe I loved myself and I was not ready either to fight, or to die, or to damage a person like me, although I hated them, I hated those who killed my father. [...] With the complicity maybe of my mum because I was too young, the nuns managed to send me with documents, even if I was a minor but they managed to obtain my documents as if I was adult. I was tall, thin, this helped as well. They sent me to Italy. With regular documents, with a passport.

According to my data, it seems that the paths through which Eritrean people in Italy managed to obtain permits to stay were different and left to individual decisions. However there are some recurring stories that make me think of the existence of common practices that have also been handed down from one generation to another. One example is leaving Italy, going to Switzerland, near to Milan, and from there asking for a permit, or coming back as if it was the first time they entered Italy.

EYOB: There was the problem of the permit, when there wasn’t the permit you couldn’t do anything. To have the permit we went to Switzerland and came back as new. Many sacrifices but we didn’t manage because in the end until you don’t find someone who accepts you – ‘this person works with me’ – they don’t give you the permit. However after a lot of strain we took a permit for one year. And we kept looking for a job.

The main problem was the connection between permits and work: documents were and still are strictly tied to job conditions. Analysing the interviews I have done, a strong feeling that work shaped the identities and the social life of Eritrean people living in Milan emerges. This is because the jobs to which they had access were very limited. Being a domestic worker, babysitter, janitor, dishwasher or porter were the only options they had. Some of them, especially women, arrived in Italy through their jobs, that is they got their visa because of their job. In these cases the job they had was always as domestic workers. They were very young, and in some cases younger than they had declared.

ASTER: My mum arrived in 1975 to work and immediately was placed in a family to work as a carer. She was probably 14 years old but she declared more to be employed because if they were too young they didn’t take them to work. This fact of birth dates has now become something which we joke about because you never know how old Eritreans are! Indeed I remember that on the documents of both my father and of my mother there was written: 00 00 [instead of the day and month] and an
approximate year.

Others arrived with a student visa or a tourist visa and then stayed. In many cases they tried hard to keep studying at university or in professional schools but at the same time they had to work. Since they had a student visa they had to work illegally. For those who didn’t arrive in Italy with a contract and a job, the beginning of their life in Milan was spent trying to fix these two things: having a job and having the right documents.

NEGASSI: For about eight years, since I had a student visa I couldn’t work, and I used to work illegally: house cleaner, loading and unloading, painting, always the same poor jobs. In the end I found a job with a regular contract, but always as a cleaner by the way.

Eritreans in Milan experienced a collective life not only because of their origins or because of the collective struggle for Eritrean independence in which they were engaged but also because of shared material conditions and life experiences. The stories I have collected around work are generally told as shared stories, as something that is not particular to the experience of one person, but that belongs to everybody and for this reason can be spoken of in the plural, as Sennait does:

SENNAIT: So then I found a job, I settled down here, I stayed in Milan, from 1975 I am here and I found myself pretty ... pretty well. We have two sons, and that’s it. This is the situation. For everybody the same, nothing changes, and this is life, this is the story I have.

Sennait summarises with these few words at the very beginning of her interview a sense of collective immobility that trapped the Eritreans arriving in Milan. In fact, the first comment when the topic of work is introduced – by me or by the interviewees – is the impossibility of choosing a job, the fact that “the only job available at the time was only dishwashing and domestic job, there was no alternative” (Aman). That condition forced solidarity among them and self-organisation was the first source of sustainment. Looking for a job, complaining about a job, taking action against unjust employers and spending free time together were all ways through which their collective life, their life in a network, was established and sustained. Indeed the easiest ways to find a job were asking an Eritrean friend, going to the church of Padre Marino or going to the assemblies of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front.

NEGASSI: [...] I came to Italy without knowing, I thought, Italy was like America for
me, once you are in, you can work, you can study, you can do whatever you want. When you are in Africa you don’t imagine that Europe is so difficult. So I came to Rome, I had money and I went to a hotel. [...] I stayed in a hotel for about two months, then I slowly managed to find Eritrean people and also mixed-Italians who knew Massawa and Asmara and told me: ‘look that there are friends of yours in Milan, why don’t you speak with them?’ I immediately called Milan, there were two friends of mine, they told me: ‘come to Milan! Don’t worry; you’ll see that we’ll manage to put you up’. I took my luggage and I went to Milan.

Wegatha arrived in Milan with a regular contract to work as a domestic for a family. After one year she wanted to leave the family because she asked for a higher wage but they didn’t want to increase it. She recounts that, at that time, it was 1976, it was not difficult to find a job and that you could find it “in the street”, meaning through contact with people, by word of mouth: “The contract is about to finish, a woman who lives in Corso Sempione [a central street in Milan] met a friend of mine in the supermarket in Corso Sempione and asked her if she could find a girl like her and she said ok. Since I was ready, my friend called me”. The only thing they could choose was the family, the house where to work, not the job in itself, which always remained the same: domestics, baby-sitters and carers.

The families that were hiring Eritrean women and men were mostly aristocratic or upper middle class ones, in many cases with relations with the colonies. Two women for whom Haben worked were born or lived in Eritrea – “after I had Ms. De Gasparis, she was there as well when she was little, I wonder why” (Haben). Italian women looking for domestics wanted Eritreans in particular. There is evidence that the colonial bond continued in the experience of Eritrean domestic workers in Italy.

SENNAIT: This countess was very well known in Crema [a town near Milan]. They are a cultured family; they were, we can say, friends of the royal family. Once she was invited to the Mass for Sant’Ambrogio [the patron saint of Milan]. And there she met a friar and asked him if she could have a girl at her service, an Eritrean girl. So since Padre Marino had promised to send me to Italy, he wrote to this friar, who has been a vehicle between this lady and Padre Marino. And I arrived thanks to the friars in other words.

MARTINA: This woman asked explicitly for an Eritrean girl. Why do you think she wasn’t looking for an Italian girl?

SENNAIT: No, because at the time there was an agency in Eritrea, an Italian agency. That I don’t know why many families here asked for that. So, since there was the economic boom, the wellbeing in Italy, the Italian women who worked as domestic workers stopped and went to the factory and the ladies didn’t have any Italian woman to find to work for them. So this agency was very well known in Eritrea, cause it sent many Eritrean girls. […]

MARTINA: This agency was a private one?

SENNAIT: Yes, it was a private agency, it was called Agency Maria. She was an Italian.
The Agency Maria was quite popular at the time; Wegatha was hired through it as well. On the website ilchichingiolo.it, a space for Italians who lived in Eritrea where they share their memories, the agency is listed among the businesses present in Asmara. On a page with ‘useful addresses’ in Asmara we can find: AGENZIA MARIA - Procedures handling - Copy Bureau - Translations - Piazza della Posta 29, tel. 11006 - C.P. 410 ASMARA.

MARTINA: How did you get your job?
WEGATHA: Before there was an Italian agency that did it …
MARTINA: Was it an agency of the church?
WEGATHA: No, it was an agency of a woman, an Italian agency. But when an Eritrean arrived here like me that I found my job through my friend, they say that they see that the Eritreans are very good and they ask to find an Eritrean woman to call to work with the contract. So then they pay the tickets for the flight and everything and it is in that way that the Eritreans arrived, through friends. After they also speak on television, I see for what: first honest people are Eritreans, second Chinese. They only see work, they don’t see anything else. That’s why we are very well known by Italians for our honesty, not for anything else.

Wegatha seems to suggest that when Italians look at an Eritrean they see only a worker, nothing more. She is referring probably to the relation with employers, and also to the fact that in Italy no one considers the present situation of Eritrea; but listening again to her interview I thought she might be referring to me as well. Arsema, her daughter, who was the mediator between Wegatha and me, told me about Wegatha’s resistance to being interviewed. Her main argument was that she thought I wanted to hear how difficult her life was, how difficult being a domestic worker was. She expressed this saying: “What does she want me to say? That I had to clean the floors on my knees?”. Eventually she accepted an interview because her daughter convinced her and also because I explained I was more interested in their forms of self-organising and of resisting and overcoming difficulties. But still, I think Wegatha felt uncomfortable with me and didn’t want to talk very much, especially about working conditions. She wanted to speak more about the current situation in Eritrea since she is involved in the opposition to Afwerki.

On the contrary, in his interview Eyob spoke extensively about working conditions. He repeated that they didn’t have a choice, that they were forced to do these jobs, that the treatment was unfair. He recounted how difficult and shameful it was for him the first time he worked as a domestic. He was not only ashamed because he was doing a traditionally female job, but also because he didn’t recognise it as a proper job: “because the work, I don’t know, it is something that you work”, as if work had a purpose and a usefulness that he couldn’t perceive in his domestic work. This is how he ironically recalled his first experience as a domestic worker:
EYOB: When I started the job for the first time as a domestic I was ... really I felt sick, because the work, I don’t know, it is something that you work. My compatriot what he works as I was not informed about. When the woman says: ‘bring the dog for a walk’, it was the biggest desperation. Me, with the dog? I thought others worked other works [did other kind of jobs]. And then I had a long coat, hat, she gave me a scarf as well and I covered all my face not to see other people, because of shame, but this was the job.

But shame was not the prevalent feeling among my respondents. Tiredness – in relation to the physical demands of the job and to the social immobility it implied – was mentioned much more frequently. There was no correspondence between the physical demands of the job and the wage my respondents earned. For this reason, domestic work was and is still today considered a low status job.

SENNAIT: Heavy, it is heavy. It is a heavy job. It is not that you work standing up, here you have also to throw yourself under to clean the corners, so a very heavy job. [...]
MARTINA: Did you live in their house?
SENNAIT: I lived in their house, then enough. The rest of the time I worked during the day and then come back home. [...]
MARTINA: When you lived in their house did you work more than ten hours a day?
SENNAIT: Oh yes, oh yes. It is heavy.

What my respondents suffered more about was the extreme difficulty, or impossibility, of advancing through their studies or their efforts. This generated in them a sense of social immobility or invisibility – this concept will be developed in the next chapter – and materially a consistently low income for life. Little room was left in this for collective organising and self-organisation. In fact, they didn’t manage to escape the individual, or familiar, way of struggling for a better job. In the interview data I could see two ways of helping each other and self-organising in relation to working and economic conditions. The first one is the relation with the unions, especially the CGIL. With this union Eritrean people in Italy fought for the recognition of their rights as migrant workers non-belonging to the European Community (Law 943, December 1986). Thanks to the relation that the political leaders of EPLF built with CGIL, there was a kind of trust of the union that meant my respondents knew their rights and felt they could ask for help from the union in case of need.

EYOB: Yes, our compatriots who arrived before and who knew the Italian language and who found a studentship, they explained to you how things work, they helped you. Me for example, when I worked in the restaurant I didn’t know that I could
report that woman 25, I was scared, I thought they would send me back to my country. And they said no, it is not like that, you have to report her because she exploited you and she exploited the State as well. The State has to be paid as well. For this reason they help you to confront the problem.

The second form of self-organisation in relation to economic conditions is a mutual bank through which people can access credit without interest – the ‘ekub’ – that Eritreans ‘imported’ from Eritrea and that still functions. Feven describes them as “groups of revolving credit, they are the same ‘tontin’ that they do in every African country, but it is something that has spread across the world. For women the meaning is to meet at least once a month and to save a little money, managing to save they also live a community moment”. The ekub are functioning still today, especially among older Eritrean women in Milan.

EDEN: There is one meeting per month that several women in different groups in respect to their town of origin in Eritrea have. It is called the ekub. Each person gives her own part to a common fund that is then redistributed each month. It is a form of micro-self-credit amongst a group of people. A group of women who refer generally to the original town, meet once a month and give an amount to the common fund and then they will receive proportionally to what they have deposited for one year. Generally your turn happens after one year and they receive in proportion to what they have deposited. It is a form of micro-self-credit because in this way you can afford some expenses instead of waiting on your own, slowly, to reach your quota. You know that once a year you will have this loan, without interest. The opposite, with these beautiful communitarian moments because you see each other, you lunch together, you spend the afternoon together, you speak, you ask advice, you confide.

Although these two forms of mutuality – the union and the ekub – helped, they didn’t have a strong impact on my respondents’ working conditions. So what they regret more about having stayed in Italy is the lack of opportunity for studying and for developing socially: “so I have started to work in a restaurant as a dishwasher but the problem was studying, and in Italy it is a big problem because Italy doesn’t care about you learning the Italian language. Either you learn or you don’t, it is enough that you work” (Eyob).

MARTINA: You told me that you started as a domestic, and after that?

SENNAIT: I always remained a domestic because I wanted to change and be a porter and do other stuff, but they turned us down. ‘You came to be domestic workers and you have to be domestic workers, for you these jobs don’t exist!’ […] They didn’t give us other jobs. […] for me this is racism. […] The Italians who were in Eritrea were well and they worked and they had the possibility to create jobs, they had plenty of freedom. And we, we ask you here if we can change the job position

---

25 Because he was working without a contract.
and you don’t give us the permit? No, that’s unfair. But we had no choice, we accepted and we kept going ahead.

Confronted with a lack of freedom, the feeling of postcolonial betrayal, as expressed by Sennait, comes out. The colonial power lives in the relations between Italians and Eritreans in Italy as soon as it becomes clear to Sennait that she is not free to make choices about her life. Facing that, she ‘plays the card’ of the betrayed colonial relation: ‘we gave you a lot, you are giving us back nothing’.

Although capital and state, in the form of jobs and permits to stay, have been strong actors in the lives of Eritrean migrants, their experiences keep telling us that it is impossible to reduce migratory movements to ‘objective’ explanations. Migrations have been described as a ‘reserve army of labour’ or as a ‘natural’ movement inside labour markets answering the ‘laws’ of supply and demand, inscribing them in economic and demographic models explained by the combined action of the ‘objective’ factors of push and pull – a list of reasons why people leave an area and reasons why people move to a particular area. These descriptions put capital at the centre, as the only motor of movement. Migrations instead always exceed the relation with capital in escaping, struggling and building transnational communities. Exceeding this relation with capital means that the attempt on the part of capital in controlling migration is never completely successful (Moulier Boutang 1998). What capital doesn’t succeed in controlling is a living and productive excess, productive this time not for capital but for migrants’ struggles and freedom.

5.6 Conclusion
If we consider this living excess produced in migration, it is evident that it is difficult, if not impossible, to summarise the richness and the complexity of the data I have presented in this chapter. As I wrote in my methodology, I think that the importance of oral history lies exactly in its capacity of offering narratives that at the same time explain and leave space for complexity and confusion as well. Since I don’t want to underestimate the richness I have encountered in the people I have interviewed, and the richness of their stories, I decided to present the different aspects and the complexities as much as possible. In other words, this chapter deliberately went beyond the borders of my research. First, it would have been impossible to understand something and to gain some knowledge on the topics I am interested in for my thesis (postcoloniality, migrants’ self-organising and organising among differences) without moving broadly in the lives of the people I have interviewed.
Second, for me the importance of the encounter, as I have underlined in the methodology chapter, is central and it is part of the research itself.

The elements I wanted to bring to the front are mainly three, as I have already underlined through the chapter: how practices of organising are created in the everyday life; the autonomy produced by them; and the role of Eritrea as an ‘object’ around which encountering and organising happen. Considering Milan a diaspora space constituted and shared by migrants and non-migrants we can clearly see that the everyday practices of self-organising of Eritreans opened a series of questions and changed the landscape of politics. The element of autonomy produced through the practices of Eritreans is an element that I have highlighted throughout the chapter. The approach that I have presented in this chapter showed in fact how migrants are subjects who don’t simply answer to the control and power they have to face, but who are autonomous creators of organisations (Martignoni and Papadopoulos 2014). The very presence of Eritreans in Italy opened questions on the colonial past, forced Italians to look at their colonial history and face its legacies. Through this, migrants also opened up material questions concerning citizenship and its rights, although, as it is often the case among migrants, this was not a request they gave priority to (Mezzadra 2006: 62). Through their presence and their life they have started questioning who is a citizen and also if and how non-citizens should have access to rights such as housing for example. Through their practices they have forced institutions to face these questions and open the boundaries of this right, giving access to council housing to non-Italian citizens. Whether we see inside citizenship the aspect of exclusion and look beyond it, to the space ‘after citizenship’ (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2012), or we see in citizenship a field of battle (Mezzadra 2006) and look at the possibilities of re-opening the borders of citizenship, considered a space of conflict, which can be opened up by ‘acts of citizenship’ (Isin and Nielsen 2008), migrants are able to challenge this institution through their acts, their lives and their autonomous organising. In this way they also question who is a ‘legitimate’ political actor.

Since they act as people without citizenship rights, they expand the category of the political actor normally considered either as the citizen or as the worker. This in a way connected quite well with the experiences of autonomous politics in Italy in the 1970s and 1980s as those of the Leoncavallo squat, but at the same time we can perceive a sort of uneasiness on both sides (the Leoncavallo activists and the Eritrean activists) because of the substantially different, in spite the many points of contact, problems and political issues they faced. The focus of Eritreans on the politics of Eritrea – the third aspect on which I concentrated – constituted a difference from the activists and the politics of the
Leoncavallo, who at the time were developing a radical critique of the state and practiced forms of radical autonomy. And yet, despite these differences, Eritreans and Leoncavallo activists shared physical and political spaces. Questioning who is a political actor and what is an ‘appropriate’ political object, I argue that ultimately this diaspora space leads to questions of universality and difference, questions with which I will deal in the next chapter.
Chapter 6
Rethinking Difference

This chapter further explores the question of what postcolonial organising looks like, based on the experience of Eritreans in Milan. In the previous chapters I have showed the importance of postcoloniality in shaping belonging among Eritreans. I subsequently focused on their everyday practices that characterised and shaped their social and political life in Milan. In this chapter I will analyse two further elements of organising: the transnational diasporic dimension and the encounter of differences in organising and sharing the political space. But what does difference become in this postcolonial landscape? Based on and inspired by the experience of the Eritreans in Milan, I question what difference is and imagine what it could be in a postcolonial perspective. In the first section I show how the concerns regarding Eritrea are central in triggering the everyday political practices that have made Eritreans active actors in Milan. This is the starting point for my reflection on the meaning of difference. In the following sections I develop my idea in two steps.

First, I affirm that the way in which we think difference generally today is strictly derived from universal and coloniaist thinking. Identities based on racial and cultural belongings do not escape this mode of thinking. The first point I make therefore is about the need of overcoming an idea of difference based on identities. What is the role and meaning of difference in Eritrean self-organising? In the experience of Eritreans I have found that they have never differentiated themselves on the basis of identity. Though they have, indeed, described themselves as Eritreans, this self-description was based on a struggle – once this struggle was over and changed, belongings changed as well. Second, I propose an alternative way of thinking difference, which puts at the centre practices instead of race, culture or identity and that defines difference as divergence. The practices of Eritreans envision a possibility of seeing difference as a positive and mobile tool through which people can put forward their own world, problems and concerns and through them connect with others. Finally, as a consequence of this second point, I will question the position saying that differences divide because they are the contrary of identity, and I will argue instead in favour of an idea of differences as exactly what put people in relation with each other. Thinking of difference as divergence and outside of a universalistic perspective is for me a constitutive element of postcolonial organising.
6.1 Connecting Diaspora and Community Practices

Eritrean migration has often been associated with the word ‘diaspora’. As I have discussed in Chapter 2, diaspora as a conceptual category primarily underlines two aspects: the scattering of a people in many different parts of the world and the strong link of those people to an original common place of departure, a place that remains present in the experience of migration. At the same time, as I have shown earlier, diaspora creates two types of spaces. On the one hand it creates the ‘space in-between’ (Gilroy 1993; Clifford 1994), made by the network and the circulation of the narratives of diaspora and of the lives of people migrating. How to inhabit this ‘diaspora space’ is not defined, it is something that people keep reinventing and struggling with. The case of the Eritrean diaspora is paradigmatic in that sense. This diaspora moved from being a homogenous space of struggle for Eritrean independence against the domination of Ethiopia to being a highly contested space in which different points of view and contrasting stories about what Eritrea is today and what it should be in the future are displayed.

On the other hand diaspora space (Brah 1996) is also the space of the local historical experiences of migration, the rooted material experiences of community making in diaspora – in the words of Arsema: “for me the Eritrean community existed only when I saw it”. Distinct communities differentiate how diaspora is experienced from place to place – in the sense that experiencing the Eritrean diaspora in Milan, in London, in Stockholm or in Vancouver is not the same thing. The words of Arsema in a way summarise the strong relation and influence of the different levels of diaspora and their impact on the life of a person: “in England, in Sweden I knew that many second generation girls who had parents, like my parents, who were not supportive of the government, used to fully take part in the Eritrean community, while here in Italy it is an either/or”. In other words, opposition to or support of the Eritrean government determines whether you can participate in community life or not. Rooted experiences of diaspora, thus, are influenced by the relation with the nation and the understanding of the diaspora space. But they are also historically and geographically determined, so that being from an anti-government family in Milan or in London does not necessarily have the same effect on the life of a second generation Eritrean girl. These experiences are different but related and, very importantly, they belong to the same network, to the same diaspora space. In this section I describe these two spaces of diaspora (the space in-between and the rooted space), and their connection, their intertwining, through the narratives of diaspora of my interviewees and through the narration of two demonstrations that occurred in Milan and Rome in October 2013 and that I witnessed. What emerges most evidently, especially looking at transformations in
time of the diasporic experience, is the strong relation between the politics of everyday practices and the politics of the diaspora. In other words, the attention, care and concerns regarding Eritrea have a role in the shaping of everyday life in relation with the rooted community, and vice versa.

Eritreans in Milan have always had a strong relationship with diaspora, in the sense that they have put a lot of energies into the struggle for Eritrean independence, and to do so it was fundamental to live in the diasporic space. As Awate declared: “All the Eritreans who lived abroad, they lived only for the country [Eritrea]”. In Chapter 2, discussing diaspora and nationalism, I have questioned Clifford’s (1994) point of view about diaspora and nationalism, in particular his contention that “diasporas have rarely founded nation-states”. I have contested this because, although I agree that “diasporic cultural forms can never, in practice, be exclusively nationalist” (Clifford 1994: 307), my idea is that in the Eritrean experience the role of the nation was very strong in creating the diasporic space. As I already stated, the object of diaspora for Eritreans was exactly the nation. But this does not mean that the Eritrean diaspora and the movement for independence were nationalist. Exploring this topic in the interviews in fact, the sense I received from my data is that the desire of my respondents in relation to the nation can be described more as anti-colonialist and for independence than as nationalist. Eritrean politics for Eritrea are not nationalistic because they do not stand, in the words of Nira Yuval-Davis (2011), on a naturalisation of belonging but on a politics of belonging, i.e. on the relation to Eritrea as a fight for independence. This is even clearer when the politics of belonging change, as is happening now among Eritreans, showing that belonging is not assumed as natural: today Eritreans do not belong to the Eritrean diaspora but to (opposing) political projects in diaspora about Eritrea, as I will describe later in this section.

The relation between national belonging and anti-colonialism is an important feeling for those who experienced the presence of Ethiopian soldiers in Eritrea, as for Wegatha, who connects different historical periods of her country as all being colonial ones and the fight of her people as anti-colonialism:

WEGATHA: The fighting was going on for a long time, more than 100 years. First our parents fought against the Turkish, then against the Italians and the English. After the English, the Ethiopians arrived, and they wanted to take our land. Italy had divided us from Ethiopia and gave [us] the name Eritrea. But the Ethiopians didn’t want to leave it and wanted to take our land, Eritrea.

My respondents often declared they never hated their Ethiopians neighbours, but wanted freedom from a regime.
AWATE: We weren’t separatist but we wanted independence. We were a different story from Ethiopians; we have nothing against Ethiopians, but we wanted, like the other countries after colonialism, independence.

Among young people who supported Eritrean independence there is even a sense of belonging to a ‘group’ that goes beyond Eritreans and that includes Ethiopians as well. It is the concept of habesha, a word that stands for all the Abyssinians, that is all the people coming from the Horn of Africa.

ASTER: since I was a child I used the word habesha and I still use it. Someone is against that because [it] says that we are two separate states and we have two different histories. But we have histories that intertwine very much so I feel better saying habesha.

Hatred against Ethiopians is absent in the Eritrean struggle for independence and against colonialism. But there is the need for justice and for freedom, as Gebre explains well:

GEBRE: [My relationship with Eritrea] has always been through the fight. Imagine that I left Eritrea when I was 14 years old. I didn’t even know it. I had never left the village where I was born. Through time both through my older brother and through the relation with Eritreans of my age who lived in Tigray I have developed a certain sense of return to the origins. It became quite natural feeling Eritrean and acting for Eritrea and for Eritrean people. I don’t consider myself a blinded nationalist but I have the sense of Eritrean nationalism, although I am often in conflict with myself on that. There is narrowness [towards non-Eritreans] from some Eritreans, but I say that we have to consider other realities as well. I don’t know how to say it. My relationship with Eritrea is as a person, I try to do things that should be right for others, I don’t want injustice, I don’t like it. Someone tells me I am a rebel by nature. Every time I see some injustices I try to react, so my relationship with Eritrea has always been a relationship of fight, inside the fight.

The ideas of homeland, of freedom and of dignity are strictly connected for my respondents. Two accounts, from Negassi – who arrived in Italy in the 1980s – and from Abel – who arrived in Italy in 2002 – seem to speak at a distance from each other and to speak about the same feeling but in a divergent way. In answering my question about why Eritreans have such a strong relationship with their country, Negassi explained:

NEGASSI: We are very attached to our land; my land is like my mum. My origins are there, in Eritrea I used to see my future because in my place no one asks me for the permit to stay, no one tells me “go here, go there”. This is why a person is attached to his own land. […] Why do I have to suffer and be like a beggar in another country and not be considered like a man?
The story Abel told me is set in Asmara, where he travelled quite recently, in 2010, because his mother was ill and he wanted to assist her.

ABEL: Once I remember I was walking in the city centre [of Asmara] in the morning, there were many people. And there were the billpostings about those who died and their funerals. Another time there was the notice of a guy died in Germany, and they were waiting for the coffin to arrive. And the people were saying: “Poor him! Poor him!” I looked at them and then I asked a guy who was sitting near there: “Why is he poor and the others are not?” and the guy answered: “Yes but he lived in Germany”. And the others? Life is the same God gave us, what’s the difference? No, no, he was free, in the sense that he is free, he can do whatever he wants, he has a democratic country, while there, in Eritrea not only for eating, but even for breathing you need their [the government] permission!

For Negassi the homeland, from the diaspora, is the desired place where you can be free – although he knows this is not possible now – because no one asks you for a permit and no one asks you where you come from. In the story of Abel however, the homeland is the place where no one is free and for this reason lives do not even count. People should be sad only for those who die in freedom, because the others, those living in Eritrea, in the homeland, are already dead, Abel’s story seems to suggest.

But what is the homeland? Isn’t it a piece of land whose borders were traced by Italian colonisers? Isn’t it a contradiction – a postcolonial contradiction we could say – desiring the independence of a country that was ‘invented’ exactly by Italian colonialism? While this is considered a contradiction for some historians (e.g. Negash 1997; Negash and Tronvoll 2000) it is not lived in that sense by my respondents, who recognise the colonial origin of the borders and the name of Eritrea – “Italy gave [us] the name Eritrea, following the suggestion of a great writer who was Prime Minister at the time, Crispi. He gave us the name Eritrea after he occupied it’, Awate told me. But they don’t see this point as a reason not to desire the independence of their country and want it to be recognised internationally. Eritrea for them was the symbol of a just fight and of hope so that the imagination of a democratic Eritrean country was raised as an ‘example for Africa’, as my respondents like to define it.

The moment when independence occurred was lived actively not only inside the country but also in the diaspora, first of all because all the Eritreans in the diaspora were asked to vote and decide between independence and non-independence from Ethiopia. In Italy about 6,500 Eritreans went to vote on the 24th and 25th of April 1993:

“The provisory government organised the polling station to allow the vote on the autonomy of the country to the emigrated people as well. In the capital city [Rome]
2,500 people are inscribed on the electoral lists. They represent the adult Eritreans who are residents in all southern Italy. Two thousand will vote in Florence and just as many in Milan. One million two hundred thousand in Eritrea and five hundred thousand in the rest of the world.” (l’Unità, 24th April 1993)

Gebre describes how people went to vote in Milan:

GEBRE: We asked the municipality for a space. There were some commissions controlling who was going to vote. We voted, all the people who had the right voted. First we did a kind of census, so that people registered and then on the basis of that we went to vote.

After independence was declared the next step was creating a constituent assembly to write the constitution of the country. This process involved the Eritreans in diaspora as well. Delegates of the provisional government were sent to Europe and North America, where the Eritreans in diaspora lived; they organised assemblies in which Eritreans could discuss the future constitution of their country. The pictures below show two versions of the Eritrean constitution, one from 1994 (on the left) and the other from 1996, modified after the diasporic discussion on the constitution.
Gebre, who showed me these booklets, told me about the debate around the Constitution that took place in Milan:

**GEBRE:** We organised an assembly in Piazza Medaglie d’Oro where we elected from Milan three or four people I think – and the same happened in Rome and in other Italian cities and all over the world – who went to Eritrea for the Constitutional Convention. Before, for three years, we discussed with the people and from time to time with someone from the commission [coming from Eritrea] who did the rounds of the world to explain at which point of the writing of the constitution they had arrived. There were some difficult discussions as well, for example about the death penalty. What we experienced is that for example in Eritrea there was a political culture saying that if someone killed somebody he had to be killed, while here we said: “Why should we kill him? What does it change?” This for example was a very fierce discussion. In these years we discussed article by article. And we looked at other constitutions as well to see the differences. Not many people took part in these discussions because they were not easy. After these three years, when we decided that the discussion was ended, we organised the assembly to elect the delegates to send to Eritrea and approve the constitution.

Saare confirmed this account:

**SAARE:** They asked article by article. “We do this, we’ll do that”. And people, if someone had an idea, could raise the hand, ask something and say their advice. A beautiful constitution came out.

But democracy has since struggled to take root in Eritrea. The divisions and cleavages within the Eritrean diaspora first, and inside Eritrea itself later, began tearing the various diasporic communities apart. In the last twenty years this process accelerated as the dictatorship in Eritrea became increasingly violent and strong. The Lampedusa shipwreck in October 2013 broke the silence inside Eritrea, even though the government does not permit political disagreement:

**SAARE:** now even from inside the country they start, especially after the deaths at Lampedusa, especially young people, they are starting, even from inside, they start speaking, putting posters up against the government during the night. Hopefully the government will fall, because the constitution is still there, beautiful!

After the shipwreck in which around 370 people died, most of whom were Eritreans, a big political debate exploded in Italy and across Europe. Among all the voices you could hear, the absence of some voices was evident, those of the protagonists, those who saved themselves. They are detained in the detention centre at Lampedusa. They are ‘without history’ because no one tells their story. We barely know they come from Eritrea, we do not know why they decided to take that ship, to start their travels. We do not even know how they arrived from Eritrea on that boat, we do not know their ages. The images of the
state funerals then are even more meaningful. The coffins, already buried in several cemeteries in Sicily, without names, only numbers to identify them, are not there. The dead people’s families are not there; there are no relatives or friends who were waiting for them in Italy or in other countries of Europe. And the 160 survivors are not allowed to participate in the funerals, because they are trapped on the island of Lampedusa. Facing these events, the Eritreans in Italy and in other European countries decided not to be invisible, decided to speak, to underline their presence inside the European territory and their vicinity to the victims and their families.

The Eritrean community in Milan organised and participated in two different demonstrations. One took place in Rome on the 25th of October 2013 and the other one took place a few weeks before, on the 12th of October 2013, in Milan. The organisation, composition and claims made in these two different events are indicative of the division inside the previously united Eritrean diaspora, that cannot now be defined as one community. But there are also signs of an attempt to overcome these divisions, promoting common values. Overall these two different experiences show us the importance of the relation between routes and roots, between the diaspora space in relation to the lost home and the diaspora spaces of migration. They also show that the space of diaspora politics is important today for ‘old’ and ‘new’ migrants, as much as it was important in the past. The issue under discussion changed – from independence from Ethiopia to freedom from Eritrean dictatorship – but for many these two struggles are in continuity.

The demonstration of the 25th of October in Rome was organised by the opposition to the Eritrean president Isaias Afwerki, who has been in power since 1991, when the war against Ethiopia ended and Eritrea gained independence. The opposition is a diasporic organisation formed by Eritrean people in Europe and North America, composed mostly of three kinds of people. First, there are migrants who left Eritrea in the 1970s and who previously fought for Eritrean independence but who now feel betrayed by the president and his failure to manage the transition to a democratic country. Then there are their sons and daughters, second generation Eritreans who grew up in Italy but with a strong political commitment to the country of origin of their parents. And then there are the migrants who have arrived since 2000, those who crossed the desert and the Mediterranean Sea, who risked their lives to leave a country in which the only prospect for their future is serving in the army. Medhane is one of them. He is a 35-year-old man who lives in Milan and who arrived in Italy from Eritrea in 2004, crossing the Sahara desert and the Mediterranean Sea. He is part of the opposition, a group that has a local branch in Milan and that meets regularly to discuss the situation of Eritrea and organize the
opposition. Organising this diasporic composition today in Milan is not easy, as Medhane explained to me, since the mobility of new Eritrean migrants is very high, especially in Italy, a country seen by migrants as a step towards other destinations in virtue of the absence of welfare and protection:

MEDHANE: From the moment I arrived in Italy I started doing these things [political organisation]. We were many before, but you know Italy is like a route. In 2005-2006 we were many, many; but some went to Switzerland, those who stay here are few, and others arrive and you start again, you know? And then they leave. […] We have a network all over Italy, but it is not that strong. It is starting now. You start but some leave, you become fewer, and then you start again.

Medhane is fighting against Afwerki’s regime; he is involved in diaspora politics because he knows what people who live in Eritrea have to go through and he wants to help them. As other recently arrived migrants explained to me, fighting to make the situation in Eritrea visible is a central aspect of their life in Italy and in Europe. Upon leaving Eritrea, these people are considered traitors by the government and lose the rights connected to their citizenship. They cannot walk inside the Eritrean embassy or consulate in Italy and they can’t ask for documents from their country. They obviously cannot travel back to their country. This situation creates serious problems from the moment that Italy refused to recognize the fact that there is a dictatorship in Eritrea. Amanuel, for example, escaped Eritrea in the early 2000s and told me that he cannot reach his wife who lives in Switzerland because their marriage is not recognised in Europe. They cannot take this bureaucratic step since the Eritrean consulate does not give him the necessary documents. Now Amanuel is stuck in Italy, with no documents and no residence permit.

When thinking about the politics of Eritreans in Italy today we must be able to read different layers of interest and necessity: freedom in Eritrea, where activists say there is a terrible dictatorship, very difficult to smash both from inside and from outside; freedom of movement for migrants, against ‘fortress Europe’ and the laws not permitting people to travel freely to Europe; and recognition of rights of citizenship and freedom in Europe, as arriving in Europe is often merely a first step, with migrants frequently remaining stuck at the borders of European countries without the possibility of reaching the countries that can guarantee them more protection and future. Even when they get into countries such as, for example, the UK or Sweden the process to be recognised as refugees or to get a residence permit is a very long one. Although the organisation of Eritrean diaspora, especially of the opposition against Afwerki, wants to tackle all these issues, the day of the
demonstration in Rome in October 2013 what prevailed was sadness for those who died.

In fact, when I met Medhane and I asked him why he went to the demonstration, he said:

MEDHANE: Because of my compatriots who died, to make the world know about that. Because, why did they die? They had a reason to arrive there by sea. The reason is the [Eritrean] government, a dictatorship, you can’t live as a person, you don’t have the right to live. Not to speak or to do something else, just to live. Everything is under his [Afwerki’s] control. People leave the country. They can’t live in the country, they can only try: win or lose. That’s why they passed through the Sahara, the desert and even the sea. They want to get out.

Arsema, who was born in Milan of Eritrean parents, was also in Rome that day:

ARSEMA: Because I realise that if I didn’t have those parents who decided to stay here despite all the difficulties, to keep going, I would for example have been a young Eritrean today, under a dictatorship, who would have done whatever to escape, maybe through the desert, maybe through the sea, maybe I could have died in the Mediterranean as happened to 300 of my peers at Lampedusa.

In Rome, in front of the Italian parliament building of Palazzo Montecitorio, on the 25th of October there were hundreds of Eritreans from all over Europe. The demonstration was first of all a funeral for those who died at sea. The participants represented this in front of the Italian parliament. After the funeral they formed a circle and started repeating slogans against the Eritrean president, who they define as a dictator, and against Italian laws about ‘illegal’ immigration. They used a mixture of languages: Italian, Tigrigna and English. The priests conducted the funeral ceremony, everybody sang and moved in the small square. The procession was a collective crying. Once the mourning had passed, the Eritreans shouted all their rage and hatred against Isaias Afwerki, who conscripts young Eritreans into the army forcing them to risk a dangerous migration. Their voices are clear and loud – in Italian, in Tigrigna and in English –voices conveying suffering but also a strong desire for justice and revenge:

“Down, down Isaias! Down, down Isaias! Isaias must go! Dictator must go! Dictator must go! Stop human trafficking in Sinai! Enough is enough! Down, down dictator! Yes to democracy! No to dictatorship! We want freedom! Basta dittatura! Basta traffico di organi nel Sinai! Basta alla tragedia di Lampedusa! Aboliamo la legge Bossi-Fini!”

Their voices are heard in the square and they echo in the websites of the Eritrean diaspora, but still they fail to be heard by Italian media. The next day Italian national newspapers did not speak of the event, despite the topic of the shipwreck still being in the headlines,
choosing instead to dedicate space to the political reactions of Italian ministers and EU officials. From the Italian point of view, the only space of visibility is the one within the borders of Europe, while Eritreans through their voices are trying to shift the perspective, to ‘provincialize Europe’ (Chakrabarty 2000a) without relieving it from its responsibilities.

On a black t-shirt that many were wearing on the day of the demonstration, there was written: ‘the only guilty person for the tragedy of Lampedusa is Isaias Afwerki’. Why, I asked myself, in front of Montecitorio, instead of accusing Italian politicians, did Eritreans decide to address their rage towards the Eritrean president? Isn’t it the fault ours, of us Italians and of our laws that do not allow us to save people dying in the sea and that define migrants as criminals? Isn’t it Europe’s fault that its frontiers are fortified to exploit as much as possible the forces wanting to cross them through a process of differential inclusion (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013)? I soon realise, however, that my thinking is completely Eurocentric, and that I can only think: the problem is here, the solution is here. My space of visibility is limited. The voices of the Eritreans force us to make visible what for us is invisible, and that is instead central in the life of Eritrean migrants in Italy: the role of Eritrea in the history of their migration, the relevance of that collective place to think about the future, whether in Eritrea or elsewhere. But the role of Eritrea, as I was suggesting, is not shared among the Eritreans in diaspora. Speaking with some people who went to the demonstration in Rome, I asked them about the demonstration that was organised just a few weeks before in Milan. They told me that this demonstration was limited and was lacking courage because it refused to speak about the situation in Eritrea and to nominate Isaias Afwerki as responsible.

The name of the other demonstration, organized in Milan on the 12th of October was “We are all on that ship/Siamo tutti su quella barca”. It was organised voluntarily and autonomously by a group of young Italian-Eritreans, called Comitato 3.0, who wanted to try to overcome the divisions existing inside the Eritrean community – between those against Isaias Afwerki and those either not against him or straightforwardly in favour of him – and stage a demonstration where as many as possible participated. They successfully organised a crowded demonstration that walked from the centre of Milan to Porta Venezia, the heart of the historical Eritrean neighbourhood. The demonstration was silent; only silence and many people walking. Most of the people were Eritreans or migrants from other parts of Africa (mainly Ethiopian and Somali), some were Italian. Many were young, second generation Eritreans or Eritreans who had recently arrived in Italy. The demonstration ended in Porta Venezia square where people started talking, sharing their pain and asking for justice for those who died at sea. The reasons mentioned as to why these people left
Eritrea and tried to come to Europe were very general and connected to a classic narrative of Africa: famine, absence of jobs, poverty. A lot of recrimination for what happened focused on the role of Europe and Italy in particular as a non-welcoming country, and in particular on the Bossi-Fini law\textsuperscript{73} that regulates migration in Italy.

When I met Aziem, a young second generation Eritrean who was involved in the organisation of the demonstration in Milan, I asked her about the decision not to mention domestic Eritrean politics at the demonstration. She answered:

AZIEM: The thinking has been: it wasn’t a demo that wanted to focus on the countries of origin. We wanted to focus on the responsibilities of Italy and Europe. […] From my side that was a compromise, an initial compromise, in the sense that they [those organising with her, but also the Eritrean Community connected to the Consulate] told me: “either that way or we don’t do it”. We decided that the fact of renouncing discussion of the politics of our country implies first of all the fact that we are not ready to take any position, not regarding what happened, I know the causes perfectly, I know the responsibilities, but I am not part of a political party of the opposition and I don’t do propaganda for the opposition because even the opposition doesn’t satisfy my ideas. […] When we decided not to speak about the politics of our country we did it because we didn’t want to give any justification to anybody not to participate, we didn’t want those people who follow the [pro-government] Community to justify themselves saying: “that is a demo of the opposition”. No, you come as well and you remember why and how those people died as well!”

Here Aziem is explaining how she tried to create an opportunity out of constraints. Comitato 3.0 could not organise an openly anti-government demonstration without being associated with the organised diasporic opposition, with whom they didn’t want to be associated. But this limit created the possibility of opening a new space where all Eritreans could be included. This new space though, far from being neutral, had the capacity of creating some contradictions, forcing people to place themselves in uncomfortable positions, where the borders of their ideologies and beliefs blurred.

In the accounts of the two demonstrations we can see very different approaches to the same problem. These different approaches are rooted in the understandings and beliefs around what the Eritrean nation state is today and how it should be in the future. But both the discussion about the lost home and the space in between that is formed by the idea of the nation itself play a role in the definition of community making, of the rooted

\textsuperscript{73} The Bossi-Fini Law was introduced in 2002 by a centre-right government. Umberto Bossi was the secretary of the Northern League, a xenophobic party. Gianfranco Fini was the representative of the National Alliance, a right wing party. The law established new rules for migrants accessing Italy. Among other things it introduced the practice of the expulsion of ‘illegal’ migrants and their detention, criminalising immigration and weakening the possibility of seeking asylum in Italy.
community of the diaspora – and vice versa. So, while in the past a homogenous idea of nation supported a cohesive diaspora and the existence of similar forms of community self-organisation (changing only on the basis of the country and the relation with it), now different and contrasting ideas of this nation have caused a division inside the diaspora and divided local communities. There is therefore a sense of absence of unity, there is an experience of separation that especially for the young second generations looks like a defeat and a big loss. The breaking up of the Eritrean community, because of the conflicting positions taken in regard to Eritrean politics, shows even more clearly how much the politics of the local community organising the everyday life are intimately connected to the attention towards the politics of diaspora. What Eritrea will be in the future depends not only on what will happen inside the country, but also on what the diaspora will think and will do. Equally, the unity, the working and even the existence of the rooted diaspora in local communities will depend both on what will happen in Eritrea and on what the diaspora in general will look like, i.e. on whether it will continue to be divided or not. This is why when looking to postcolonial forms of organising it is crucial to consider several levels and overlapping of political times and spaces and their intertwining, which is never obvious, linear and homogenous. On the contrary it creates heterogeneity and non-linear times.

6.2 Intertwining lives
Looking at the experience of the Eritreans in Milan, there is a clear sensation reading newspapers, previous studies, listening to my primary data, and analysing the history that Eritrean people entered the social and political life of Milan as protagonists. The feeling, supported by evidence, is that they immediately felt the need and had the capacity to organise and be active and visible. As Freweini said to me, “they were quick to intertwine their lives with the lives of others”. How did that happen? What were the bases for this to happen and in which forms did this intersection develop? Encounters among differences in forms of organization happened both through ‘official bodies’ and through everyday life practices. Based on my primary and secondary data, there are the following elements to consider: first the fact that the Eritrean was one of the very first communities of migrants in Milan; secondly, the role of the colonial link; thirdly, the fact that this activity was informed by a particular political ideology, Marxism-Leninism; and finally the role of their political activism for Eritrea itself – that I will speak about in section 6.3.

Being the first black presence in Milan, and among the first migrants in general (the other main community of migrants living in Milan were Egyptians), Eritreans experienced
many problems, especially when looking for a job and for a house. Italy did not expect to become a country of immigration, as it was historically a country of emigration. For this reason, there was no clear legislation regulating the access of migrants coming to work and live in Italy, which at the end of the 1960s was still considered as a country of emigration. This lack of regulation therefore created troubles for Eritreans in terms of documents, permits, rights etc. But at the same time, there was not yet a stereotyped and highly politicised idea of immigration, as would develop during the 1990s. This probably gave more freedom to Eritreans who, although perceived as strangers, had the possibility to express themselves more freely than migrants can do today, since they are continuously defined and categorised by media, public opinion and institutions. This situation of absence of legislation and of stereotypes around migrations is an element that had a role in the capacity of Eritreans to self-organise and become an important community inside the political life of Milan, being trailblazers of the politics of exchange and participation of migrants in Italy.

Another element that surely had a role in this is the colonial link. As I have described in Chapter 4, the belongings of Eritreans are strongly linked to the Italian colonial experience. The sensation Eritreans had of knowing Italy and Italians even before going there is clear in my primary data – but also in the recent work of Sabrina Marchetti (2010):

HABEN: Since I was born there [in Eritrea], consequently there were Italians. Coming here, seeing an Italian, it was not something new; I already saw white people in Eritrea.

In a sense Eritreans were favoured by this situation, because they didn’t feel complete strangers in the world in which they arrived, in the space of Milan. This was not only because they knew the Italian language, or they knew what to expect from an Italian city, but also because of their awareness of the colonial past, which made them feel they had the right to participate in the life of Milan as protagonists:

HABEN: Eritrean people don’t hold a grudge [against Italians]. If it were so, then most of us wouldn’t have even migrated here. No, there is no bitterness or suffering. I think we overcame it; there is no hate. Yes, there is the pretence, in the sense that we say: “Why did our grandparents fight for you and here we are the slaves?”

SENNAIT: There were no difficulties because sixty years are sixty years, not two! Me as well, if I would go back, we always have the Italian mentality, that is even with food, we use the Italian cuisine a lot in Eritrea – we used to, now everything is ruined. But always, even after the independence, there were many restaurants with
Italian food. We, being an Italian colony, we don’t have any difficulty with the Italian people.

Not only did they feel the right to organise and participate, but also they had the necessity and the urgency to do so, since they were very concerned about the situation of their country. The ways in which they organised for the liberation of Eritrea, as I have described in Chapters 2 and 5, went largely beyond the cause of Eritrean independence and became reasons for creating a community in Milan. The political ideology on which the EPLF based itself, Marxism-Leninism, facilitated a relation with leftist political groups like the Italian Communist Party, the CGIL union and the Leoncavallo squat. Communism and socialism were ideas that had the power to travel and create immediate connections between political organisations of different countries, without the need for translation, because the ideology was at the same time a justification and a basis for political action. Political ideologies and the global situation of the Cold War surely had a role not only in the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, but also in the relations Eritreans were able to create with other organisations outside of Eritrea. Gebre described to me the kind of relations Eritreans in Milan built with other political and social organizations:

GEBRE: With the unions we had a quite strong relationship, a political relationship. We needed their support and we had built a solidarity committee. The activities of the EPLF were on one side with Eritreans about Eritreans, on the other side tried to gain the solidarity from the unions and the political parties, from the left especially. We had quite a strong relationship with the unions; in 1978 they created a delegation that went to visit the liberated zones in Eritrea and after that the relationship consolidated and they were supporting us politically and morally. The same with the Italian Communist Party that used to organise a festival [in Milan] in which we had a space every year, a stand where we used to sell some things and create awareness. Then there were the solidarity committees composed by unionists and groups like the League for the Rights of the People.\textsuperscript{74} It must be understood that the Eritrean situation didn’t have an international acknowledgement; this was surely because of the imperialistic interests of the United States [...] when the regime of Haile Selassie was strongly endorsed by American imperialism that had a strategic interest on the Red Sea. [...] Then when the D\textsuperscript{ERG}\textsuperscript{75} took power, declaring itself socialist, the Soviet Union and all the countries from the East started supporting Ethiopia. Therefore the Eritrean situation remained isolated, since at the time the reasoning was by blocs [the US bloc and USSR bloc]. Given this situation, we had to find the support of the unions, of the political parties, of the non-governmental organisations.

If the communist matrix made it easier to connect all around the world with parties and unions, it also created conflicts inside the logic of the Cold War, and the EPLF had to

\textsuperscript{74} Tribunale permanente dei popoli (1982)
\textsuperscript{75} D\textsuperscript{ERG} is the short name for the Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, Police, and Territorial Army that ruled Ethiopia from 1974 to 1987
look for support and allies beyond the communist and socialist organisations. In Milan this translated into the participation of the EPLF in numerous events, always with the objective of raising awareness around the Eritrean case. Alliances with other organisations were important: they often did not go beyond formal solidarity but they created the possibility, the landscape and background for encounters of different people, of Eritrean and Italian people. In the next section I will discuss how difference has been understood and practiced in the political experience of Eritreans in Milan.

6.3 Difference and Identity in Postcolonial Organising

Following Stuart Hall, who in a lecture at Goldsmiths University in London described his point of view on how racism is constructed and maintained as a ‘discursive position’ on it, “there are all sorts of differences in the world, but what matters are the systems of thought and language we use to make sense of those differences” (Jhally 1997). Certainly these systems of thought are not merely discursive but they are strongly connected to histories and experiences repeated (and contested and changed) for centuries, and that is why they can be so strong as to create chains of thoughts, as Hall explains, able to mix together biological and cultural racism without making it explicit. As a result we have difficulties even to notice that, as Robert Young affirms, “there is an historical stemma between the cultural concepts [of race] of our own day and those of the past from which we tend to assume that we have distanced ourselves” (Young 1995: 25). If we want to acknowledge differences – and how they work in forms of organisation – and at the same time we want to change systems of thoughts that create categories of differences that are used to discriminate and make some groups of people inferior, we need to create other systems of thoughts or, better, other ways to perceive and live differences, in order to think difference differently. Against an idea of difference deriving from a colonial perspective, we need to explore how difference can be thought in a postcolonial theoretical framework, challenging historicism, universality and race.

Modern thought has theorised and practised a view of the world imposing one progressive and linear time of history (Koselleck 1985) – see Chapter 1 for a discussion on this and how it has been challenged. From Hegel, who focused on the role of the modern State in guiding this linearity, to Marx, who instead looked at the development of capitalism and to the revolution against it as the line driving the history of modern humanity, European thought has built the bases for conceptually denying different historical times, dividing people with and without history (Wolf 1982). Colonialism and imperialism represented the violent aspects of this thought. Historicism is a system of thought that
therefore presupposes an idea of the universal. The concepts of different races and
different cultures, I think, can be constructed only assuming the point of view of
universalism. This statement, which might sound like a contradiction, shows instead that
the universal is a concept that comes from a specific time and space and therefore
represents a specific kind of humanity. What has been constructed as the “neutered neutral
body is found wanting as a masculine no(body) which by no means includes every(body)”
(Puwar 2004: 15). Represented by the image of the 1789 French revolutionary in fact, this
humanity therefore becomes the term of comparison for ‘all the rest’. In the search for
the universal, all the differences among humanity have been categorised: first by race, then by
culture (Young 1995). Differences as we conceptualize them today are the heir of
universalism and can be understood only if we presuppose historicism and universalism.

One way to deconstruct this point of view is to stop imposing historicism and to start
seeing the existence of different historical times and spaces. Dipesh Chakrabarty did so in
his Provincializing Europe (2000a), where to the homogenous capitalist view of history he
counterposed the local and the singular and showed a tension existing between the two.
These he names History 1 – “a past posited by capital itself as its precondition” – and
History 2, or History 2s – pasts that do not contribute to the self-reproduction of capital.
Importantly, Chakrabarty sustains (as I have already mentioned in the Chapter 3) that
History 2s “are not pasts separated from capital; they are pasts that inhere in capital and yet
interrupt and punctuate the run of capital’s own logic” (Chakrabarty 2000b: 670). The
emergence of History 2s should not be seen just as a way to deconstruct and to show the
non-linearity or non-homogeneity of History 1 and “to make room for the politics of
human belonging and diversity” (ibid.: 672). It has, in addition, the power to open up a
debate around the constitutive meaning of difference itself. If “postcolonial debates […]
often try to work out a middle ground between the two options of universalism and
relativism” (ibid.: 653), what I am proposing is to overcome these two options as well as
the possibility of a middle ground between them.

How did Eritreans frame their difference in the encounter with others? From the
data I have collected, there is evidence that they never interpreted their politics as identity
politics. For example, they never affirmed their presence in Milan and their identity as black
people. Moreover, in my primary data, the point of view of Eritreans on racism is one that
wants to minimise race differences and that does not want to stress a belonging to
blackness. Saare clearly described his hostility towards identity politics, when telling me
about a trip to Oakland, California he took as part of his studies.
SAARE: Black power, they used to say. What the hell? The important thing is for everybody to live in peace. [...] We must try always to go beyond white and black, these are divisions that we don’t need, what are they for?

Saare is strongly against a politics of blackness, and at the same time he thinks that the best way to face racism is to be proud of his body and origins:

SAARE: Some people as soon as they hear “You are black” are offended, but you are black and you have to be proud of your colour, why are you offended? I’m surprised by football players like [Mario] Balotelli, if I were him I would take off my t-shirt and say: “Look at me, admire me”. It is not an offence, where is the problem?76

Similarly Habte explains his point of view on racism:

HABTE: I am proud of my skin. My daughter once when she was in the primary school told me: “Daddy, someone called me ‘chocolate’.” And I said: “Bring your mum here, put your hand here”. And I put mine on hers and I said: “Daughter, you were born from us, you have to be proud of your skin, when they speak to you like that you have to tell them: mozzarella!” Since then my daughter never spoke about that again.

The approach of my respondents consists largely in minimizing racist behaviours. Although they recognise racist behaviours both in Italian people and in the system in general, giving fewer rights to them than to Italians, and obviously in the history of colonialism, they never wanted to take the ‘line of colour’ as the central or starting point for their politics. The belonging to blackness in fact is never mentioned neither in the interviews, nor in the historical documents.

Similarly, they were not very interested in doing politics as migrants, refusing to be identified and to identify themselves as such. This is exemplified by the case of the City Board for Immigration. In Milan in 1986, for the first time in Italy, the City Council instituted a City Board for Immigration. This Council was formed by fifteen representatives of migrants’ communities of Milan and by seventeen representatives of associations working with migrants – the Eritrean Milanese Community was among them. In a report written after the end of the City Board for Immigration experience, Bruno Murer, who was the secretary of the assemblies and activities, explains why it failed. The main reason he gave, beyond the disorganization of the board, was that the board was thought to satisfy

76 Mario Balotelli, a popular Italian football player, is an object of racism because he is black and he is Italian and he plays in the national team. He often has to face racist comments in the stadiums and often reacts with rage and anger. Saare here wants to oppose pride to anger and rage. Once Balotelli actually showed his body as Saare is suggesting, upon scoring his second goal against Germany in the Euro 2012 semi-finals.
the needs of Italian society more than those of the migrants and to create a form of social mediation between these groups. For this reason, this institution considered migrants as a ‘special part’ of society needing a ‘special board’. As Murer writes in his report:

“The very idea of the board ‘for immigration’ is based on a view of reality that inevitably brings us to these conclusions. It is exactly because immigrants constitute a category aside, distinct from that of the citizens (in an irreducible way), that we consider they should be represented separately. It is a formulation that is functional to the interests of Italians, since it ratifies the non-belonging of the foreigners to the community of citizens (therefore with minor and subordinate rights compared to those of the nationals). And it is also through institutions like the Boards for Immigration that they tend to make that position enduring or even definitive” (Murer 2006: 28)

Facing the limits of the Board for Immigration in Milan, Murer offers an analysis of the functioning of this experiment of political participation of migrants and opposes to a ‘separated representation’ – that he retains as the big error of the Board itself – an idea of ‘integration’:

“Formulating the question considering the immigrated world as a ‘counterpart’ already imposes an heavy precondition: are immigrants intending to integrate themselves or to remain a body aside?” (Murer 2006: 4)

Integration as opposed to the politics of differentiation is the proposed solution by Murer. Both these politics – exclusion and integration – as I have said in Chapter 1, have the same function of reinforcing identities, while the presence of migrants and postcoloniality force them to break down and invent a politics beyond representation (Papadopoulos et al. 2008). The concept of integration – based on a naturalisation of nation, citizenship and borders – implies the existence of a coherent ‘subject of reception’, a homogenous and close-knit social group that should receive, welcome ‘the other’ and potentially integrate ‘otherness’. The idea of the possibility of integration also implies that the subject of reception is able to fully understand ‘the other’ in order to include it inside its own world. Integration finally suggests an idea of homogeneity that, as I have explored, is very distant from the heterogeneity imposed by postcolonial time.

Migrants, more clearly and with more consequences than others, live in an ecology of practices that intersect their lives and create layers of multiple concerns, attentions, referents and temporalities. A practice that shows and interprets this very clearly is ethnopsychiatry (Nathan 1993; Zajde 2011; Giordano 2014). Instead of categorising or

---

77 All translations from Murer are mine
suppressing through integration, this particular approach to psychotherapy shows that it is possible to make of intersectionality, and the overlapping of different practices in migrants’ lives a starting point for rethinking psychotherapy. Often it is exactly this confusion that is a source of pain for migrants who need recourse to psychotherapy, as Cristiana Giordano (2014) convincingly shows. Ethnopsychiatry takes into consideration the challenges that the presence of migrants and of ‘globalization’ poses.

In that sense ethnopsychiatry’s premises are quite similar to those of diversity management and multiculturalism. They all pose the same question: what happens when heterogeneity of forms of life becomes the new normality in the Western world? But their premises are not really the same, because while ethnopsychiatry wants to move from indifference to difference, diversity management and multiculturalism want to move from difference to identity. What these practices affirm is that, if we are not the same because we have different cultures/genders/abilities etc., we need to create identities that create order – and hierarchies. Multiculturalism answers in fact by creating identities in relation to origins and culture, while diversity management creates individual identities, affirming that each person is different, so that ultimately everyone is an identity in her/himself. What ethnopsychiatry says instead is that we are not all the same because we have practices, objects, referents that make us express different worlds and also because history has been ‘unfair’ with someone and ‘fair’ with someone else – the anticolonial attitude of ethnopsychiatry must be kept in mind (Beneduce and Martelli 2005). We are different, using an expression by Stuart Hall, because of our roots and our routes. All these things cannot be erased, neither in name of a supposed superiority of one culture over another, nor in the name of equality.

Eritrean people living in Italy have undergone two historical and subjective fractures that strongly characterize them: first colonization, then migration. As Fanon (1952) suggests, there is no real possibility, after these fractures, of a return to origins and traditions. But at the same time symbolic dimensions and practices of the past keep living while they are transformed and resignified in the process of cutting ties with the past and the origins. For this reason, postcolonial migrants translate and live the equivocation.

---

78 I am using the word intersectionality because I want to refer to the approach proposed by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) and propose to reinterpret it in the light of thinking difference as difference of practices. For Crenshaw difference is constituted first by characteristics essentially attached to one’s body (man/woman; black/white) and then by socio-economic division (advantaged/disadvantaged or privileged/non-privileged). In order to have a full comprehension of how discrimination works, for her we cannot focus only on one of these aspects, but must look at their intersections.

79 James Clifford speaks in this regard of ‘contingent articulations and contradictory trends’ (Clifford 2013: 30)
constantly. Here, being in-between doesn’t mean occupying an equidistant space between two poles, supposedly fixed (being Italian/being Eritrean), but it is the capacity and possibility, and also the obligation, to shift between these poles and move through all their possible combinations. In this sense hybridity should not be understood as the formation of another identity but as a positionality changing over time and occasions; in this sense identities can be described as “the positions in which the subject is obliged to take up while always ‘knowing’ that they are representations” (Hall 2013: 6). Stuart Hall recently asked ‘who needs identity?’. The concept of identity indeed has been profoundly debated and deconstructed especially in relation to racial, ethnic and national conceptions of cultural identity (Brah 1992; Gilroy 1993); identities have been redefined as “never unified and […] increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions” (Hall 2013: 4). Nonetheless identity remained a term and a concept central for describing the relation between subjectivity and politics, also because since “there are no other, entirely different concepts with which to replace [it], there is nothing to do but to continue to think with it” (Ibid.: 1).

During my fieldwork, as I described, I noticed that Eritrean people in Milan did not aim to describe themselves through concepts and politics of identity or identification and at the same time did not want to be included in the Italian society through the concept of integration. My effort therefore has been one of resisting the ‘temptation’ of using the concept of identity – although this can be interpreted as ‘in process’ rather than unified and static – in order to describe their positionalities and their politics. In the next section I propose an alternative way to look at how Eritreans posed the question of difference in Milan.

6.4 Difference as Practice, Difference as Divergence

I asked Gebre, an Eritrean man living in Milan who had responsibilities in the organisation of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) in the diaspora, to tell me about the participation of the Eritreans in the City Board for Immigration of Milan and about their relations with other political subjects in Milan. He answered that they were part of the Board but that this experience didn’t give them very much:

GEBRE: Symbolically in that moment, following the matter of immigrants closely, in contact with the councillorship that was following the immigrants’ issue, it was

---

80 I will explain the meaning of ‘equivocation’, a concept that I borrow from Viveiros de Castro, in the next section.
important; but I don’t think that there were any relevant results beyond exchanging ideas, exchanging some things. Then we tried to intervene in order to modify the laws but it didn’t give striking results.

Not only was the experience of the City Board not positive but also, Gebre affirms, Eritreans, and in particular the EPLF, didn’t organise – at least explicitly – activities related to the condition of being migrants. Even with the Leoncavallo, the squatted Milanese social centre where the EPLF had a conference room for their meetings, relations didn’t go much beyond the use of the space:

GEBRE: Sometimes they [activists from Leoncavallo social centre] tried to involve us; some meetings were organised to make some activities together, we went but we were not convinced by the mode. We are not very good in maintaining a relation, we go when we need to. They proposed some activities together, nothing special. There is this rigidity: we are always very determined in doing our stuff, there is a bit of mental and cultural closure. There is no openness, communication, interaction with others; an idea of doing the things you care about but without enlarging.

Gebre underlines, with some regret, the fact that his community, although it is a strong political organiser for what concerns Eritrean politics (in particular he refers to the EPLF and the organisation of the resistance for independence from Ethiopia that lasted 30 years), is not good enough at doing politics with others, connecting experiences and working for their collective situation as migrants, rather than as Eritreans fighting for their country. So the question is how did the Eritreans, apparently ‘closed’ in the politics of their country, become protagonists in the political life of Milan?

In the analysis of the history of the City Board for Immigration in Milan, Murer highlights the contrast between the politics of representation developed in the Board and the politics ‘out there’ of groups of migrants outside of this institutional form. Wanting to show the limits of that institution, Murer brings to the forefront forms of self-organising that do not wait for or need an institutional recognition to be ‘included’. These are examples of everyday politics, as those that I described in Chapter 5. Enacted by migrants outside representative politics, these experiences tell us something about how an autonomous way of doing politics has the power to reshape the political and social space inhabited by migrants. This power is “the excess of the everyday” (Papadopoulos et al. 2008: 143) that materialises itself in multiple ways: altering ‘here and now’ the material conditions of existence and sociability and shaping on a longer term the possible answers of representative politics to the emergence of these new ways of existing.
The importance of everyday practices in creating a space of action and transformation and of encounter between Eritreans and Italians is evident. Squatting houses, creating Italian and Tigrinya language classes, using the spaces of the Leoncavallo, sharing childcare, are all practices of creation of new forms of life in Milanese society. The very fact of being there and acting autonomously had an impact much stronger than the impact that the Board for Immigration instituted by the City Council had. Just as an example based on the everyday politics described in Chapter 5, Eritreans started squatting houses in Milan because they needed places to live and after some years for the first time immigrants were allowed to have access to City Council housing. That happened largely thanks to the autonomous practices of Eritreans. They took neither the route of identity politics, nor the one of migration/integration politics and still they had a capacity to affirm their presence in Milan. What I am suggesting is that, having penetrated with the difference of their practices – practices revolving around Eritrean independence – the Milanese social space, Eritreans have set off a number of consequences that proved beneficial to their lives as migrants. While the politics of representation of differences and of integration did not have a strong role in their experience, the everyday autonomous practices of difference had a role in reshaping the political and social life of differences in Milan.

When we look at the acts of organising of migrants from an autonomous perspective, we notice in fact how these inevitably move the borders inside European cities creating space for differences to keep living. The kind of difference they affirm is not based on identity, nor on subalternity, but on a specificity of attentions, care and problems that they have. It is a difference unlike the one we find in forms of organisation like identity politics, solidarity with migrants, multiculturalism or diversity management, as described in Chapter 1. What the politics of Eritreans in Milan and their ways of organising with others suggest is another way of thinking difference that assumes neither universalism – we are not all the same – nor overcoming relativism – our differences are not measured against a blueprint of reference.

Viveiros de Castro’s thought (2004b; 2004a; 2007; 2011) helps in interpreting relations between differences in a way that overcomes identity, universalism and relativism and that introduces what I see as a postcolonial mode of thinking difference. His central argument about Amerindians is around their understanding of the cosmos, which he calls perspectivism or multinaturalism (versus multiculturalism). It is a conception opposite to the occidental understanding claiming the existence of one nature and many cultures. For Amerindians, Viveiros de Castro says, there is instead one culture and many natures:
“Amerindian conception presumes a spiritual unity and a corporeal diversity. For them, culture or the subject is the form of the universal, while nature or the object is the form of the particular.” (Viveiros de Castro 2004a: 466)

Viveiros de Castro thinks that for Amerindians the universe is “peopled by different types of subjective agencies, human and nonhuman, each endowed with the same generic type of soul, that is the same set of cognitive and volitional capacities” (Viveiros de Castro 2004b: 6). These different agencies possess all similar concepts, meaning that all subjects see things in the same way. But “what changes when passing from one species of subject to another is the ‘objective correlative’, the referent of these concepts” (ibid.: 6). Amerindian perspectivism therefore is not a form of relativism since it does not argue for the existence of different points of view on the same world, rather it affirms the existence of many different worlds, each the expression of one species, or one agent. Each agent indeed does not have a point of view, but is a point of view. What all the agents have in common is the fact that they share representations, meanings, epistemology, but these are in relation with different objects, multiple referents, variable ontologies, that makes the agents expressions of different worlds.

Different worlds, entering in contact with each other since they share the same space and time, can communicate and connect through what Viveiros de Castro calls the ‘process of equivocation’:

“An equivocation is not just a “failure to understand” but a failure to understand that understandings are necessarily not the same, and that they are not related to imaginary ways of ‘seeing the world’ but to the real worlds that are being seen.” (Viveiros de Castro 2004b: 11)

This suggests that we should not look for the same inside the different. What Viveiros de Castro suggests instead is to compare things just in order to create equivocation – a misunderstanding that is not the sign of a failure but quite the opposite81; to identify things as similar but so as to better see the difference. Thinking of comparison in this manner helps me to introduce an understanding of the idea of difference that differs from difference as ‘the relation of non-agreement or non-identity between two or more things’ – see the definition from the Oxford English Dictionary given in Chapter 1. The

81 Similarly in ethnopsychiatry “we can understand culture as a transitional space wherein patients and therapists negotiate their position vis-à-vis symbols and practices. […] Transference can thus be understood as a controlled misunderstanding wherein roles and meanings are unconsciously assigned and produce self-knowledge. In this sense, misunderstanding is not the sign of failed therapy but quite the opposite. It allows an encounter that occurs through various detours and crossings wherein subjectivity is produced and cure unfolds.” (Giordano 2014: 45)
understanding of Amerindian cosmology by Viveiros de Castro in fact introduces another meaning of difference:

“While we tend to conceive the action of relating as a discarding of differences in favour of similarities, indigenous thought sees the process from another angle: the opposite of difference is not identity but indifference. Hence, establishing a relation is to differentiate indifference, to insert a difference where indifference was presumed.” (Viveiros de Castro 2004b: 19)

A very similar understanding of difference, although located in a different geographical and anthropological setting, is by ethnopsychiatric practices. Ethnopsychiatry opposes the widespread idea in psychoanalysis that mental and psychic processes are universal, constituting “a method that allows for different etiologies to be evoked and used in the clinical encounter” (Giordano 2014: 81). A non-racist and humanistic point of view, that recognises the universality of human beings, supposes that there is a substantial indifference for what concerns both our bodies and our mental and affective systems of perception and thought. The assumption is that humans are all the same – since races do not exist or, better, they are an invention – and that differences can be explained on cultural bases. From an ethnopsychiatric point of view instead, it is not that human mental processes are not the same because humans are not the same all over the world, but because people produce different objects and different referents that express – not represent – different worlds. In that sense ethnopsychiatry inserts a difference – through the idea that people produce different object and referents that express different worlds – where indifference was presumed – based on a universalistic idea of human beings – and makes of that a practice of healing that relates differences.

“In other words, if humans are everywhere the same […], on the contrary the objects that the groups of humans make are different. The difference that is worth studying is in the objects, in the ‘things’.” (Nathan 2000: 158)

It is important to underline that ethnopsychiatry does not want to reinforce identities and belongings: it does not affirm that people are related to a fixed identity or culture, but that

---

82 Cristiana Giordano (2014) discussed the risks of using the concept of culture in ethnopsychiatry. Contesting a classic anthropological understanding of culture, she asked in which sense ethnopsychiatrists, in particular in Italy, use it. She thinks that “the concept of culture at play in this kind of therapy is the result of an encounter, or a series of relations, not only between patients’ representations of their experiences and the ethnopsychiatrists’ own interpretations of them but also with homes, spirits, and invisible presences in the here and now of the therapeutic consultation. […] The use of culture is thus political in the sense that it creates an interruption, a disturbance, with the dominant discourse of biomedicine. What is important in ethnopsychiatry is how it recuperates the concept of culture after anthropology’s deconstruction of it and repoliticizes it by
people have relations with objects which are collectively built and that these objects are not the same for everyone. On the contrary there is a great variety of objects and referents among populations in the world. The word object here has a broad meaning: “When I speak of objects, I mean all kinds of objects: theories, prayers, songs, but also things – plants, statuettes, calabashes, skulls, etc.” (Nathan 1999, cited in Zajde 2011: 198). Objects here are better understood as practices, that is the kind of worlds we create when we relate with ‘objects’. What is a practice? Or better, what does a practice do? Following Isabelle Stengers – who discusses the topic of scientific practices, but has lot of resonances with both Nathan and Viveiros de Castro:

“no practice [can] be defined as ‘like any other’, just as no living species is like any other. Approaching a practice then means approaching it as it diverges, that is, feeling its borders, experimenting with the questions which practitioners may accept as relevant, even if they are not their own questions, rather than posing insulting questions that would lead them to mobilise and transform the border into a defence against their outside” (Stengers 2005: 184)

Each practice has its own way of and reason for being; each practice exists inside an environment, a whole world of meanings and of concerns. When approaching a practice from outside, not being a practitioner of it, we must approach it ‘as it diverges’, says Stengers; that is as it exposes its own difference. In a way, the possibility for practices to have a dialogue, Stengers seems to suggest, is to differentiate them, to use difference as a tool of relation. In doing so, we must be careful not to fall into the trap of describing this divergence as divergence from other practices:

“It is crucial here not to read “diverge from others,” as doing so would turn divergence into fuel for comparison. Divergence is not between practices; it is not relational. It is constitutive. A practice does not define itself in terms of its divergence from others. Each does have its own positive and distinct way of paying due attention; that is, of having things and situations matter. Each produces its own line of divergence, as it likewise produces itself.” (Stengers 2011: 59)

Practices then shouldn’t be compared. Instead, they should be seen as living in an ecology, a transversality of practices. Through this approach we come to extend the role that the concept of difference plays for those (people and practices) that are considered as ‘not different’ and reinforce the idea of diaspora space.

showing its potential to create another discourse on difference” (Giordano 2014: 48-49). In other words, reification of culture doesn’t consist here in a reduction of experience to fixed meanings but in a temporary tool or technique to create a therapeutic relationship that goes beyond recognition toward acknowledgment of (incommensurability of) difference (Giordano 2014: 64-70).
Difference in a postcolonial understanding is not determined by a (non)identity, but by practices. Difference does not reside in an essentiality or a belonging (gender, race, origin, religion) but in the repeated experiences of practices that make up one’s own world. This means also that each life can be made up of the co-existence of different practices, a transversality of practices, referring to different worlds and living in an ecology – in this sense hybridity should not be seen as an identity but as an always changing positionality. This is particularly true for postcolonial subjects and postcolonial conditions – though not exclusively. Difference in that way stops being an element of division to become exactly what makes relations. This becomes possible if we approach difference “without necessarily wanting to know it or translate it into something known”, that is acknowledging difference rather than recognising it (Giordano 2014: 240). Finally I am proposing to move from an understanding of the emergence of difference as the moment of break or rupture of a whole, toward grasping the entrance of difference as practice inside situated practices so that these are not only contested but also redefined and reconstituted. I suggest seeing rupture and contestation as a result of an approach to practices as they diverge, not the other way around.

The experience of Eritreans in Milan shows the strength of diverging practices in redefining political practices. Although Eritreans weren’t strongly involved in the politics of migrations – as shown by the case of the City Board for Immigration – having their strong political engagement in the fight for Eritrean independence made them an actor not only in Eritrean politics, but also in the local politics of Milan. As I made clear in the first section of this chapter, the politics of the local community and those of the diaspora are strictly connected and they influence each other. At least at the level of organising the main concern of Eritrean people in Milan was centred on the Eritrean fight for independence and the series of practices evolving around this concern characterised the difference of Eritrean politics in Milan. This difference can’t be defined through the comparison with other practices but simply through itself. At the same time, this strong concern made possible the participation of Eritreans in other political and social forms of organising – around housing, literacy, childcare and workers’ rights – in Milan. Practices in postcoloniality intersect and live in an ecology that is shaped by the emergence of differences and by the encounter of diverging practices.

6.5 Conclusion

Concepts and practices of difference, encounter and hybridity have crossed all my work. Postcolonial studies introduced the importance of the ‘discovery’ and emergence of
difference in historiography, similarly cultural studies has analysed the role of differences in the politics of the contemporary world. The impact of postcolonial studies on organisation studies in fact resides exactly in showing how organisation studies as a discipline has suppressed throughout its history the role of the encounter and clash of differences, hybridisation and discriminations. This voluntary denial continues in how, today, practices of management understand and organise diversity, both in the workplace and in society. A postcolonial perspective allows us to see the limits of managing diversity practices and to criticise their lack of historicisation and their failure to acknowledge the existence of power in relations among differences. The analysis of this understanding of diversity opens questions on what difference means exactly, where this concept comes from and what it entails. In Chapter 1 I have called for the necessity of a rethinking of differences from a postcolonial perspective inside forms of organisation, and I have started building an idea of ‘postcolonial organising’. I have looked for alternative forms of organising among differences in social movements especially involving migrants. Migrations in fact are an essential element to think postcoloniality in the former-métropole of today.

In Chapter 2 I have introduced the historical context in which the histories of Eritrean migrants are placed. Moving from Italian colonialism in Eritrea to the Eritrean diaspora I have delineated some central aspects of the historical encounter between Italians and Eritreans and introduced a fundamental concept in my work, that of diaspora space. Diaspora space allows me not only to understand the diasporic dimension of the Eritrean migration, but also to theorise a postcolonial encounter through migrations, i.e. the introduction inside a previously thought and perceived homogenous space, the city of Milan, of perceivable differences such as the bodies and lives of Eritrean migrants. Their presence and their practices, creating differentiation and heterogeneity, open fractures and questions that interrogate and modify not only the migrants but also the ‘non-migrants’. This is the power of the concept of diaspora space that I used and developed through my primary data in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. I have argued that the best methodology for me to explore the diaspora space of the ‘Eritrean Milan’ was oral history. This is a method of research that can reflect postcoloniality and create the possibility for experiencing forms of encounter between differences, through what Portelli (1997) defined ‘the art of dialogue’. Being based on the relation between present and past and on the role of memories, that is on how past experiences live and are re-elaborated in the present, this methodology breaks with the idea of differences as something without a history, putting at the centre not only the fact that differences have histories, but how these live in the everyday life of people.

Postcoloniality as a condition of life, questioning belonging and affectivity, is the
object of Chapter 4. At the end of that chapter I described the agency of Eritreans as an experiment of (in)visibility, wanting to underline the necessity to look at everyday practices in order to find resistances and the invention of new forms of life. I developed this concept largely in Chapter 5, where I also introduced my way of approaching the topic of migrations, seeing the element of autonomy in these migrations. Through an account of the oral history interviews I have collected, this chapter describes in detail strategies and practices of everyday self-organising among Eritreans in Milan and contributes to the reconstruction of the history of this community. It also populates the concept of diaspora space with concrete elements that show the impact of Eritrean migration in Milan and, together with Chapter 6, it describes the kind of relations they have built with other actors in the urban complex, as well as the challenges they have raised for these actors – the governance of the city, but also Italian activists collaborating with them.

Finally, building on Chapter 5, in the present chapter I answer my main research question about what could be an appropriate framework that considers postcoloniality as a key dimension for emerging organisations in contemporary Europe. I have also translated this research question in other terms such as: what does postcoloniality look like when we look for it in forms of organisation? The history of the Eritrean community of Milan shows that elements of postcoloniality live inside and shape their forms of self-organisation. Everyday practices of community organising and of solidarity are characterised by the co-existence of heterogeneous times and spaces. If everyday practices of self-organising are central in building a community and its politics, the role played by Eritrea is fundamental as well. This space that is far away and yet present, living inside a different temporality from the one of Milan, does not act simply as the country of origin, but also as a space of ‘storage’ of imagination and hope, therefore not only as a memory of the past, but as a repository of the future and a reason for action in the present. It is this fractured and protean space that characterises postcolonial organising. Inside this space, that is at the same time a condition and a result of the activity of organising of the Eritreans in Milan, practices of solidarity and of self-organising are the ones better characterizing the necessities and hopes of the Eritreans. Not refusing the interaction with Italian public and political organisations – like the city council, the unions or the Milanese squats – but instead engaging with them from a specific perspective, the Eritreans had the ability of introducing their difference inside the space of Milan, refusing the politics of integration.

Moreover, what the experience of the Eritreans can show us is the necessity, inside postcolonial organising, of reading difference as divergence, in order to give it the possibility of being a difference in itself, and not a difference from something. In other
words, the experience of the Eritreans in Milan allows us to go beyond a universalistic understanding of differences. Seeing postcoloniality as the multiplication of differences and differentiations in the European space, I focus on an idea of difference based on practices that shape our several ways of living the world and acting in it. More precisely, I suggest that practices make all the different worlds that coexist and we inhabit simultaneously, albeit with different temporalities. An acknowledgment of this type of difference opens up a new understanding of what organising among heterogeneities means: neither inclusion or integration, nor sameness, but divergences that interact and speak to each other, “feeling their borders” as Isabelle Stengers suggests and communicating in equivocation.

Through this thesis I believe I am contributing to several fields of study. Organisation studies first of all can gain from this work an original insight into thinking postcoloniality in forms of organisation and the growing relevance of the postcolonial approach to understand emerging forms of organisation. The concepts of organising, borders, autonomy and difference can all contribute to the definition of a more convincing role for the postcolonial approach in organisation studies, going beyond its role of critique. These concepts in fact can help in building an affirmative way in which postcolonial studies can contribute to organisation studies. The concept of organising, in opposition to organisation and introduced by some scholars in organisation studies drawing on process philosophy, can be reinforced and developed by the concept of borders as theorised from an autonomy of migration point of view. Here borders are not static objects, but continuously shaped and defined by the movement of migrants themselves. Organising, defined as “the transformation of boundary relationships” (Cooper, cited in Spoelstra 2005: 114), echoes as well with an idea of postcolonial time and space as the expansion of a ‘protean space’, where boundaries are continuously contested, broken and redefined. Hybridity, largely deployed in migration studies and introduced and discussed in organisation studies as well, is presented in this thesis as a contradictory and problematic concept. I suggest that organisation studies could go beyond the impasse around the concept of hybridity, moving to an exploration of what difference means – and the composition of differences – and how this concept can be contested and resignified starting from material experiences of organising.

Oral history as well brings to organisation studies the dimension of narratives and memories in organisational practices. At the same time oral history can gain from this encounter the acknowledgment of a need for reflection on the relation between individual narratives and practices of organising. The dimension of everyday politics helps a lot in finding a point of encounter and mediation in which the relevance of individual experience
and contribution to those practices becomes evident. In fact, focusing on everyday practices we see the necessity of looking at the individual forms of contributing to the organisation of a community. Therefore the importance of the individual in relation to the collectivity is evident and at the same time valued. In this way we can see how organisations – that are constituted by individuals, rules, objects, histories and for this reason can’t be reduced to the stories or acts of individuals – are created, sustained, lived, contested and modified in everyday life. I would also like this research to reach the ears of Italian oral historians in particular, who are not always listening enough to the voices of new subjects without history and whose histories are overlooked today in Italy. Oral history in Italy has very much focused on the history of the Second World War, of the Resistance to fascism and on the dimension of the working class or the Italian proletariat. I think it is time for oral history in Italy to turn in a decisive way toward work regarding migrants as the new precarious and exploited subjects, as well as the creators of new forms of life and politics that can be narrated only through their voices as my research has shown.

Diaspora and migration studies is the final field to which my work contributes. If in diaspora studies there is sometimes too much attention to ideas of belonging and homing, with my research I want to reinforce instead an understanding of diaspora as a space of creation of new forms of living in a transnational network, as well as the local, material and historical experiences of diaspora. In other words I look at the transformative and conflictual dimensions of diaspora, rather than at the nostalgic ones. Similarly, my contribution to migration studies looks at the importance of everyday politics of migrants that transform urban spaces, moving their internal borders and therefore questioning positionalities and belongings. Situated and detailed accounts of autonomy in migration contribute in fact to drawing a picture very distant from that of migrants as passive, desperate and without agency. Autonomy of migrations is a specific stream of thought to which my research wants to make a contribution. In particular I think that reflection around the relation between autonomy and differences could benefit and open new questions and challenges for an autonomous perspective on migrations. Autonomy of migration, as I have suggested throughout the thesis, contrasts analyses about migration as a process led by external forces and underlines instead the subjectivities inside this process, interpreting migration as an affirmative practice and stressing the agency of migrants and their possibilities of impacting on the present. Looking at the agency and autonomy of migrants means first of all recognising the fact that migrants and migrations cannot be reduced to a homogenous and undifferentiated phenomenon. In other words, recognising differences inside the lives, routes and struggles of migrants seems to be a necessary
starting point in order to see autonomy in migrations. The living and productive excess that migrations produce is given mainly by the proliferation of differences, gaps and swerves, and it is exactly through the materialisation of differences thanks to the everyday acts of migrants that a contestation of constituted power and political forms of organisation is possible. What is the relation therefore between difference and autonomy in migrations? I see my research going in the future towards an exploration of this question.

There are other ways in which my research could develop. One that I find particularly important is making a contribution to the people I interviewed and their community. Oral history research entails the creation of relations between researcher and informants. In my experience I have built some very good relations with the people I have met in Milan and I feel the necessity, both for me and for them, to share my work. This research could in fact contribute to an understanding of the histories of migration to Italy, speaking about past and present and giving an historical perspective on migrations. At the same time it can constitute a moment for reflexivity inside the Eritrean community itself that is undergoing a strong internal conflict, facing the deaths of many Eritreans in the Mediterranean and their arrival in Milan in extremely difficult social conditions. These are ways through which the present work could have an impact both on the community I worked with and in the wider sphere of Italian public life. Here I am following the idea crafted by Nirmal Puwar and Sanjay Sharma (2012) of a ‘curating sociology’. What they put forward with this term is the possibility of “envisaging and crafting a collaborative, creative, public and event based sociology” (Ibid.: 41). Collaboration and creativity derive from the fact that this methodology entails the collaboration with subjects outside academia who work in fields such as the arts, exhibitions, music production, video making etc. Their idea is to undertake, together with professionals in these fields, a common path that brings to the creation of public events in which different knowledge, communication and public interest work together. Social actors as well, in my case the Eritrean people living in Milan, should contribute to discuss and change the concepts, words and histories through which their stories are told. One goal of a curating sociology is in fact to contest homogenous narratives of the past and the nation and to open up, through postcolonial narratives, alternative meanings of ‘our’ past and the collective construction of memories. The histories of Eritrean people in Milan have the power to contest on the one hand narratives about Italian colonialism and Italian politics around migrations – institutional and activists-led politics – and on the other hand narratives about contemporary Eritrea. But what will be the contents, the forms and the outcomes of such an exhibition is still to be determined, and the answer can only emerge from experimentations carried on together with other
subjects who want to be involved. Already from a preliminary exchange of ideas with some second generations girls I have met during my research and who I would like to involve in this project, it is clear that the several levels of entanglement – familiar, social and political – they have with the Eritrean people, and that I do not have, put them in conflictual positions about the idea of creating an exhibition speaking about ‘their’ community. On one side they want to do something to affirm the existence and importance of the Eritrean people in Milan, on the other side they feel the responsibility of it and they want to avoid the risk of giving a message that might discontent someone or create too many frictions inside the community, that is already living a period of strong divisions. My role in this might be the one of the curator, bringing together different perspectives, not wanting to give back through an exhibition an univocal history of the Eritrean community of Milan, but instead keeping the exhibition open to different interpretations and sparks for ideas. The content of my research, thus, must provide me only a starting point for this process, that needs to be thought as new and unpredictable.

By exploring the politics of self-organising of the Eritreans in Milan I investigated the interconnections between postcoloniality, migration, difference and organising. I argued that postcoloniality should be seen as a crucial time-space for contemporary forms of organising and that there is a need for an exploration about what does it mean to organise in a postcolonial way. I used the concept of postcoloniality as a way to understand the historical environment in which my research is placed and as a tool to interpret forms of organisation that reflect the postcolonial condition and challenges. I examined the history of the Eritrean community in Milan from the vantage point of the lives of Eritrean migrants and second generations and I argued that their politics are profoundly shaped by two interrelated facets: everyday autonomous practices around community, housing, childcare, literacy, documents and work; and the diasporic organization for politics concerning Eritrea. A close analysis of this interrelation, highlighted by the words of my respondents, brought me to discuss what self-organising looks like in postcoloniality and to discuss specifically the concept of difference. I argued that the experience of Eritreans in Milan suggests looking at it as defined not by identities but by practices. Difference comes to be a constituent divergence that rejects relativism and comparison. By thinking the relationship between postcoloniality and organization the thesis contributes to the imagination of new forms of organisation among differences.
Bibliography


184


relazione/ [accessed: 13 June 2012].

Proglio, G. (2011) Memorie Oltre Confini. La Letteratura Postcoloniale Italiana in Prospettiva Storica,
Verona: ombrecorte.


