

AFTERWORD

THE BLACK BOX OF ERITREAN FUTURITY

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Abstract: In summarising the contributions of the present issue this brief afterword considers our understanding of futurity in Eritrea. It describes how politics both inside and outside of Eritrea are in many ways harnessed by a mode of representationalism that is immersed in discarding and signifying particular historical events, and marking notable political struggles as improper, seemingly with an oddly foreclosed future in mind. Secondly, it highlights the institutional apparatus of the Eritrean president Isaias Afewerki as something of a black box. While the internal workings of the regime remain opaque, it is increasingly generative for the longevity of his leadership and an exclusive framing of “Eritreanness.” Yet, this afterword suggests that futurity in Eritrea is contingent on those illegible events and subjects that remain unaccounted for – nevertheless, perhaps contained somewhere in that “black box” of contemporary Eritrean governance.

Keywords: *Eritrean opposition, social media, activism, human rights, civic society*

ዘይ ስንኻ ሓዳ ቆርጥመሉ ።

zey senka hutsa qortmelu

(Chewing sand with someone else’s teeth is painless) – Tigrinya saying

“Nothing is not my business in this country: everything is my business, everything. The state of education, the state of our economy, the state of our agriculture, the state of our transport, everything is my business.” – Hastings Banda, 1972 (Quoted in Bratton and Van de Walle 1997: 63)

In April 2022 a Twitter user (@WediWelWel) asked his followers on the social media platform to share visions of their Eritrean dream:

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What's your Eritrean dream? Assuming we had the right environment, what would you love to do in Eritrea? Filmmaking? Education? Health? Writing? What's your passion? Let's hear it. Use #EritreanDream. Let's keep it positive [author of tweet added a smiley] – (@WediWelWel, 25 April 2022)

Within two days his tweet had been retweeted 57 times, quoted 38 times, liked 243 times, and had received 129 replies.¹ While the circulation of this tweet did not in any way go viral, it resonated with a number of current initiatives, the eerie potentials of the 2018 peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia (Mohamed 2019), as well as the outline of the present special issue. Most answers to his question circled around three topics and the reconstruction thereof: education, infrastructure, and the end of incarceration in Eritrea. There are many political and civic society initiatives within the Eritrean diaspora that envision what a future post-Isaias Afewerki (Eritrea's president since 1994) could entail, and a program of social reconstruction and infrastructural investment (see for example *Eritrea: State of the Nation report*, 2019). These anticipated futures of an Afewerki-afterlife are usually fostered with a greater sense of urgency by people critical of the current government in Asmara. It's important to note that the vocal voices of critique are often situated within the diaspora outside Eritrea. Within the country itself, criticism has been famously uttered “by foot,” that is, the mass exodus of an Eritrean youth (Wabwire 2019; Kibreab 2017; International Crisis Group 2014; Hirt and Mohammad 2013).

These anticipated future scenarios are especially fostered among three groups. First, those who have recently fled the country and are often denied a return to Eritrea unless they sign a formal “letter of regret” (Tigrinya, Tg.: ናይ ጣዕና ወረቀት *nay ta 'isa wereqet*)² with the Eritrean embassy of their new host country. The second group, the so called “old guard,” is broadly comprised by those who are exiled and affiliated with the Eritrean Liberation Front movement (short: ELF), former fighters, and those (both members of the ELF and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front alike) who have worked, sacrificed and been disappointed by the promise of the Eritrean revolution to bring not only independence (ናጽነት *natsenet*; or ሓርነት *harnet* as in liberation), but also democracy to Eritrea. The third group, those interested in future planning, mostly second-generation diaspora, locates itself in opposition to the Eritrean government. Their perception of what needs to be done often differs from the

1 The author would like to thank David O'Kane, Magnus Treiber, and Scott MacLochlainn for their comments on an earlier version of this afterword.

2 All translations and transcriptions are from Tigrinya into English (or English into Tigrinya) unless otherwise indicated.

“old guard” as it is also informed through their life experience in the diaspora, and less by the independence struggle.

The meaning of an Eritrean future emerging from these broadly construed groups differs not only in historical/life experience, and a politics of belonging, but also varies in what could be understood as having the right and the authority to speak on behalf of Eritreans and to plan a future for and in the country. The sheer multiplicity of how future making is defined both inside and outside of Eritrea (from a generational, gendered, political, religious, local situatedness as well as through the eyes of the diaspora) points not only to potential fragmentation, but also to an urgency in accounting for the unaccounted. In this afterword, and reflecting on the wonderful thought-provoking contributions to this special issue, I want to briefly touch on the historical contingencies of political struggles in Eritrea, the omission of events, as well as the formation of illegible subject formations (such as the minoritised ethnic Afar and Kunama communities) in order to trace the emergence of past and present future scenarios. While I am interested in understanding the production of the unaccounted or silenced (events and subject formations), I am not suggesting that there is an “authentic other” to be salvaged and substituted for. In thinking about different types of futures, including the future of this special issue and a crucial and emergent scholarship on Eritrea, I rather gesture to how we might critically attend to the management of multiplicities in Eritrea and how these structural conjunctures might define scenarios of a future to come.

Although facing international isolation and internal instability in 2017, Eritrea entered a new phase in 2018 when the new Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed formally reached out to Eritrea to broker peace after a two-decade long stand-off. Ending the “no peace, no war” situation after the bloody border war in 2000 earned Isaias Afewerki political power, financial investment (including the European Union and China) and reanimated international support (from the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, United Nations to the EU more broadly). Thus, with this wonderful special issue, we are compelled to engage a conversation about the politics of the unaccounted and the “black box,” as I call the unknown but concrete workings of the political apparatus of Isaias Afewerki’s regime. The latter, I argue, is an important factor in understanding an impasse in Eritrea’s political life and the lack of institutionalism. The task of unpacking what this black box entails becomes even more pressing as there are currently rumors of yet another violent war along the Eritrean and Ethiopian border, that is, between the Tigrayan Defence Forces (TDF) and the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) on the one hand and the Eritrean military on the other (the time of writing is June 2022).

What does it mean to think about potential futures in Eritrea?

The authors of this special issue have reflected on their deep and ongoing research inside and outside Eritrea, as well as considering the historical contingencies and potential futures of the country. The remarkable coherence of these papers engage in a thoroughly compelling way the intricacies of transition and future making in Eritrea and its diaspora, by attending to the interior as well as exterior life of events, objects, and subjects. These explorations of possible futures span forensic justice methodologies (Redeker Hepner and Mekonnen in the present issue) to social remittances and diasporic finance (Belloni, Fusari and Massa in the present issue), the invocation of refugees as the most marginal and volatile, yet a crucial group (Poole and Riggan in the present issue) to the politics of land reform and the importance of co-operation and autonomy on the local level (Cameron in the present issue).

If we aim to understand the trajectories of a potential transition and what the peace process between Eritrea and Ethiopia has meant, and might mean, we need to look at the most marginalised and vulnerable populations – for example, the Eritrean refugees currently dislocated in camps in northern Ethiopia. Amanda Poole and Jennifer Riggan have taken up this challenge regarding the vulnerability of belonging in their article on “Oscillating Imaginaries.” In doing so, they describe “the slipperiness of formal citizenship status and other categories of political belonging for Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia.” Their in-depth research in northern Ethiopia in 2019, conducted just after the signing of the 2018 peace treaty, has highlighted the multiple layers of belonging and imaginaries of Eritrea and Eritreans in Ethiopia (one prominent example is the unresolved border issue between both countries), and how these competing imaginaries of “Eritrea” ultimately shape the modalities available for citizenship and the disposability of (refugee) life. Poole and Riggan push us to rethink the category of the national subject and to pay attention to the “constant slippage” involved in the building of national subjectivities, which in turn reveal a more nuanced picture of existent multiple identities. If we accept that there is no singular identity, one question would be: should we begin to reconsider the nature of democratic participation and its attendant definitions of citizenship and belonging?

Futurity in Eritrea is inevitably entangled with its diaspora and the different kinds of remittances (financial, social, and political). In Eritrea, and for Eritreans abroad, the act of receiving and sending money is a ubiquitous practice. Yet as Milena Belloni, Valentina Fusari and Aurora Massa show, remittances are much more than money transactions and rather “social

practices conveying affection and reciprocity as well as a sense of duty and obligation.” They describe how remittances are not only embedded in a global flow of money, but foster ties to “one’s nation, community, family, and peers.” One is compelled here to reflect on Marcel Mauss’ seminal work on the gift (2002 [1925]), where he traces reciprocal gift-giving practices and forms of exchange in non-European societies. What if we focused on the reciprocity of gift giving in remittances instead of viewing them through the lens of blunt economic transactionalism? On the one hand, remittances are evidently attached to reciprocity (emerging out of forms of familial indebtedness) and on the other hand gifts have a “spirit” (the notion of *hau*). If the gift were to be returned, it must be imbued with subjective power. To situate Mauss’ proposition within the practice of remittances pushes us to ask further questions about the forms of reciprocity that are attached to finance and, more importantly, about the fragmentation and ordering of an Eritrean society that is globally dispersed as well as widely heterogeneous. In times of transition, what will these sorts of obligation, invariably flowing through extended kinship networks, imply for transitional outcomes at national and diasporic levels?

In his contribution to the present special issue Greg Cameron has detected the quotidian work of transition in the process of village level development. Cameron suggests returning to the villages as a social institution that “could bolster the social cohesion required of vertical rural co-operation on *dēsa* land.” His article is important as it forces us to think about futurity in terms of land distribution and forms of co-operation such as in the ማህበር *mahber*, the village’s social organisation. These modes of co-operatives, from community self-help networks to horizontal co-operation and collective ownership, posits an infrastructure of economic exchange and relationality, in many ways beyond the gaze of Asmara.

It is not only the living who are involved in shaping the future. In order to engage with “justice futures,” Tricia Redeker Hepner and Daniel Rezene Mekonnen seek out the dead. Their exercise is a promising one, as they propose to take account of what they call the “landscapes and diasporas of the dead” through the methods of forensic investigations of human remains. What stories and narratives will appear when we follow the traces of the dead, and in what way will this contribute to imagining the future and a just transition? For Redeker Hepner and Mekonnen, forensic and just futures need to reckon with the “diaspora of the dead,” and the often-fatal violence that befell them. To do so is to prepare for a putative post-necropolitical future.

These thought-provoking pieces share a particular perspective, in that they oscillate between past and present events. In so doing, they consider the potential futures, counter-futures, and political imaginaries of an Eritrea to come. Similarly, Reinhart Koselleck (2004: 3) wrote that “in differentiating past and future or (in anthropological terms) experience and expectation, it is possible to grasp something like historical time.” For the authors of the present special issue, the tension between *experience* (the government and the life post-liberation in Eritrea) and *expectation* (of a post-revolutionary time as well as an era post-Isaias Afewerki) stands as a productive temporal space to envision modes of transition. Futurity is informed not only by engaging the temporal aspect of inevitable change (an affective stance), but also infrastructures that inform quotidian practices. For example, Redeker Hepner’s and Mekonnen’s work show that the politics of language (for example, the language of sacrifice and martyrdom) are not only connected to the making of martyr certificates, but also point to a future that could essentially be forensic in nature. Another compelling aspect that unites all papers is the “force of the in-between.” While Eritrea has proven to be increasingly regulated and controlled, the authors have focused on the important fugitive spaces and modes of escape – from refugees to alternative economies such as remittances and local small-scale collectives.

Transition, Reconciliation, and Diversity

To this end, the present special issue serves as a calling statement for emerging global conversations and scholarship on Eritrea and, as noted above, the possibilities and futures that hang in paused potentiality, always with at least some desire for reconciliation. With this in mind, let me digress and briefly explore some of the politics and ideological moves that have led us here, faced with mostly fragmentation and partiality. In particular, the fragmentation of the ELF movement into various political parties is a crucial factor in understanding the trajectory of reconciliation, transition, and diversity in contemporary Eritrea. Many critical voices as well as former members of the ELF (founded in 1960 in Cairo) have been denied a return to Eritrea ever since the Eritrean independence in 1993 – living either in nearby neighboring refugee camps and cities such as Kassala in Sudan, Cairo, or farther away in Europe, North America, Saudi Arabia, and Australia. This split within the Eritrean diaspora community, which is often inherited by generations of young people of Eritrean descent growing up in the diaspora, preceded Eritrea’s liberation. Such a split was already beginning as early

as 1970 when the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) departed from the mother movement, the ELF. Both armed rebel movements were Marxist-Leninist in political orientation, yet their differences were concerned with internal coherence and leadership. Many have written about the dominance of lowland pastoralists and Muslim Eritreans in the ELF movement vis-à-vis a dominance of highland communities and Christian Eritreans in the EPLF (see for example, Tekle Woldemikael 1991, who avoided these binary classifications). Yet these binary religious and ethnic cleavages were largely mobilised by both sides in order to portray a certain image of self and other. However, the EPLF movement grew more popular as it had set itself up as a more participatory, dynamic, and inclusive urban movement that attempted to incorporate people across ethnic and religious lines of difference, and was rooted within the Eritrean geography as well as a slowly emerging diaspora (in Euro-America), whereas the ELF movement was often perceived as a movement that was rural and "part of the Arab world" (Campbell 1970: 544) and thus foreign.

Indeed, the ELF was supported by pan-Arab, religious, socialist, secular movements, as well as postcolonial leaders such as Egypt's leader Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Ba'athists in Syria and Iraq (Weldemichael 2012; Markakis 1987), but it also emerged in a time of decolonization and Pan-Africanism on the continent. Many, sometimes even conflicting influences, as well as the fact that the leadership of the ELF, organised in cell structures and more secretive (Halliday 1971), mainly resided outside of Eritrea in Sudan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Cairo, eventually explained the split that occurred within the ELF.

While much scholarship has framed the idea of the Eritrean liberation within nationalism and the politics of self-determination, the formation of the ELF was arguably not only part of a global imaginary and situated within the moment of decolonisation on the African continent, but fundamentally one of futurity, although at the cost of any real influence inside Eritrea itself.³ Adom Getachew, in her book *Worldmaking After Empire* (2019), reframes our understanding of the politics of decolonisation on the African continent

3 Much of Eritrea scholarship has drawn on and reworked Arjun Appadurai's (2006; 1996) work on the spatial and social "scapes" of globalisation (such as *mediascapes* and *ideoscapes*) as well as on the dangers inherent in nation-state formations and their conditions of purity (here, there is also much reliance on Mary Douglas's seminal work on *Purity and Danger* (2003 [1966])). Andreas Wimmer and Nina-Glick Schiller's (2003) work on transnationalism and boundary-making beyond the national frame has also been influential, as have the works of Michel Foucault (2003 [1975–1976]) on biopolitics and technologies of governmentality, Achille Mbembe (2019) on *necropolitics*, and Victor Turner (1967) on *liminality*.

and argues that, rather than a nation-building project in the name of self-determination, African and Caribbean intellectuals such as Kwame Nkrumah, C.L.R. James, and Michael Manley were concerned with rethinking a new global order. However, Eritrean subjectivities and their struggle for recognition have occupied a problematic double bind. Eritrea's armed resistance against the "black coloniser" (Ethiopia) has divided many pan-Africanist intellectuals and activists who elevated Ethiopia to a quasi-utopian space of decolonisation of having defeated colonisation by European forces (Mohamed 2021). Such internal, regional, and global schisms of thought, desire, and affiliation have long formed the sediment upon which a contemporary and future Eritrean politics stands.

Eventually in 1981, the EPLF militarily defeated the ELF, which had, in any case, already split into three more separate groups. The armed wing of the EPLF pushed the ELF fighters altogether out of the Eritrean liberated zone (Sahel) and back into Sudan and Egypt. A little later, in 1987, followed a *Second and Unity Congress of the EPLF* in the liberated Sahel zone (present-day Northern Red Sea region in Eritrea), which included a few selected ELF Central Command members. This congress cemented the dominance not only of the EPLF party, but also allowed for new actors to emerge (importantly, often new actors not associated with the older figures who had assumed leadership of the fronts) (Burgess and Cliffe 1987; Connell 2001). For example, this reshuffling of who could arise to political leadership during the 1987 congress, had placed Romodan Mohammed Nur as only a second in command. Mohammed Nur was a student from the lowlands, who had joined the ELF in 1963. Once in the newly formed EPLF, he quickly emerged as the strategic mastermind of the new movement, and the favoured candidate for its leadership: he was even deemed the father of the EPLF. However, instead of Romodan Mohammed Nur, who was the chairman of the EPLF from 1977 until 1987, Isaias Afewerki was voted at the congress into the position of General Secretary of the EPLF movement in 1987. The slow demotion of Romodan Mohammed Nur was a fate shared by many intellectuals and potential leaders who have been removed from powerful positions. Richard Reid adds that Isaias Afewerki's "contempt toward the educated, urban middle classes" (2009: 215) dated back to the early days of the EPLF. In 1994 Afewerki renamed the EPLF the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) and became the president not only of the party, but of Eritrea as a whole. In the absence of national elections, he is still in power at the time of writing.

Transition and Futurity in Eritrea

This brief departure into the politics of the armed guerilla movements in the 1970s in Eritrea, especially concerning the split within the ELF, the formation of the EPLF movement (that later became the PFDJ, the governing party in the post-independence, one-party state of Eritrea), is critical to our understanding of transition and futurity in Eritrea. First, it indicates the internal diversity of the movements and the struggle for Eritrean independence (1961-1991), much of which has been outlawed from public memory. Second, it is necessary to remember that the resolution of these important differences between both Eritrean movements were only resolved through military means. This “fratricide,” as human rights lawyer and activist Paulos Tesfagiorgis has pointed out, has haunted “Eritrea’s political transition and development until this day. The causes of the conflict, its resolution and process of reconciliation remain unaddressed to this day” (Tefagiorgis 2015: 8–9).

Already as early as the 1970s, multiple versions existed of the armed struggle, as well as varying forms of exclusion, and differentiated degrees of access to the historical narrative of the liberation movement. This was only complicated by the fact that the armed wing of the EPLF collaborated with the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) against the ELF, which resulted in the successful defeat of the other Eritrean front. Anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot highlighted the process through which such historical silences are produced, and demonstrated how power can silence certain voices from being historically accounted for (Trouillot 1995). For Trouillot (1995: 27), “any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process.” He alerts us to look at the silences that these archives and narrations create, an assertion that resonates with the context I highlight here, especially when considering the nature and liminality of transitions.

In the diaspora many propositions for a transition have reached from the creation of *baitos* (Tigrinya: ባይቶ council in Tigrinya, here: exile parliament with elected representatives), advisory expert boards (preparing for day x), to social movements, such as the transnational ይላክል (*yiakl* enough in Tigrinya) movement, One Day Seyoum in the UK, and United 4 Eritrea in Germany), to numerous political opposition parties or former guerilla fighters who used to be stationed in the northern Ethiopian province of Tigray, to online platforms such as *Asena*, *Awate*, Erisat TV, *Mestyat Betyana*, and *Smerr* Room (on Paltalk) as well as social media. Each are anticipating and

working at different scales of action on constituting an Eritrea after Isaias Afewerki. We find in their diverse work the fragmentation, not only of planned futures, but also of mutual fragmentation and tethering of national and diasporic desire.

While many diasporic propositions share a common goal, that is, the recognition that there needs to be a plan post-Isaias Afewerki, the movements from which they have sprung remain unstable. This especially concerns the pragmatic aspect of how a post-transition condition could be anticipated and how to come to terms with the manifold historical erasures and grievances of now generation after generation. For example, some of the initiatives are often accused of failing to be inclusive (by, for example, refusing to integrate Muslim, ethnic minoritised Afar or Kunama communities), of over-emphasising the Tigrinya-speaking population (thus downplaying the linguistic and ethnic heterogeneity of Eritrea), inadvertently remaining within old lines of division, that is, newer movements reproduce the old factional split between the EPLF (also known as ሻዕብያ ሻላ'biya) and the ELF. Moreover, these proposals often fail to bridge a generational gap between the fighter generation (ተጋደል፣ *tegadelti*), second generation diaspora Eritreans (those born between the 1970s and 1990s), and the newer wave of Eritrean refugees who left the country after 2000. Gender imbalances are obvious in the movements making these proposals, as is their geographical boundedness, determined by their locations of formation (such as in Europe, North America, the Middle East, or Australia). These lines of fragmentation and contestation are already evident within the heterogenous diaspora, and the glaring gap between the diaspora and its missing political counterpart in Eritrea often pose serious questions of political legitimacy.

These include questions such as: who has the right to speak, plan, and to initiate plans for a transition (even potential leaders)? Who has the right to vote members into an exile parliament, how far reaching can such an exile parliament be? Can an exile parliament even work, or does change need to come from within the country? Can a mix of both work? Who inside the country is ready to take over? Can the military be trusted: if they leave the barracks, will they return there? Might there be a civil uprising? Since Eritrea's only internationally accredited tertiary education institution, the University of Asmara, was shut down in 2006, and colleges such as May Nefhi are based at military camps, who is the country's intellectual vanguard? For Marx, an intellectual vanguard could also emerge from social or political elites and lead the proletariat and working classes (see also Spivak 2014 on the general strike), but is this the direction that will be accepted? Or rather, do we need an organic su-

baltern intellectual that (in terms of Gramsci 1971) emerges from the masses (proletarian or subaltern) organically steering a political transition in Eritrea? What if the diaspora, while educated, is seen as another layer of hegemony coming in from the outside? In her classic essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Gayatri Spivak describes the case of 17-year-old Bhuvanewari Bhaduri, who hanged herself in her father’s apartment in North Calcutta in 1926 instead of following through with a political assassination she had been entrusted with as a member of one of the many underground armed groups for Indian independence. Despite her efforts to make it known that this was not an act of desperation because of an “illicit love affair,” or a case of *sati*, widow-suicide, her act “became absurd, a case of delirium rather than sanity” (Spivak 1994: 104). For Spivak, the problem lied in the hegemonic account that her suicide will neither be remembered by the male leaders of the independence movement nor within familial textures (labelled as illicit love).

Spivak’s relevance to my task in this afterword is that she is concerned with the matter of representation (as the subaltern cannot be heard). Salih O. Nur, writing on the matter of diversity and representation in Eritrea, has argued that a “healthy transition will not only require rebuilding shattered state and democratic institutions, but also a full recognition of minority grievances and institutions guaranteeing their representation, participation, and equitable share of national wealth. Only a system of proportional representation devolving power and cultural autonomy to minorities can ensure this” (Nur 2015: 103). Here, Nur is highlighting one crucial aspect that remains unresolved in terms of a potential transition in Eritrea: accounting for the unaccounted.

In post-liberation Eritrea since 1991, the politics of ሓደ ልቢ ሓደ ህዝቢ (*hade libi hade hizbi* one heart, one people) has dominated the social and political landscape. Under Isaias’s leadership, the country was remapped in zones and the association *qua* village and ethnicity was prohibited (meanwhile in neighbouring Ethiopia, the whole country was remapped precisely according to lines of ethno-linguistic difference and a form of governance named “ethnic federalism”). Both countries differed on the question of how to deal with the diversity of their population. Yet, as Leenco Lata (2003) has highlighted, a notable Tigrinisation was already happening in the early 1970s and this has continued under Isaias’s leadership.

Interestingly, the replies to WediWelWel’s tweeted question, with which I began this afterword – a query that centred on socio-economic reconstruction – not only resonate with ongoing efforts in the Eritrean diaspo-

ra but are also reflected in a contemporary scholarship on Eritrea (see the Introduction to the present special issue). We observe a deep and intricate relationship between Eritrea and Eritreans abroad – even a form of a “transnational nationalized governance” (see Redeker Hepner 2008). Scholars have addressed the problem of not having access to Eritrea (due to visa permits and surveillance during research), and the inaccessibility of conducting research on how the political apparatus works inside the country. Research permits are rarely granted and often given only to scholars that are not seen as a threat to the leadership in Asmara. Most scholars who get a chance to conduct research in Eritrea have to be extremely cautious and careful about what they write if they want to retain access, or are aware that they could be denied a return to Eritrea once they publish their work.

Historically in the scholarship on Eritrea, as in public debates, there is likewise effectively a black box (or at least contestation) enclosing and obscuring how the country is run (beyond Isaias Afewerki). The metaphor of the black box has been taken up by anthropologist Laurence Ralph in his book *Torture Letters* in which he analyses the history of torture in Chicago. Ralph describes torture “black sites” in the heart of the city, their vast networks, and how it became understood as Chicago’s public secret. For Ralph, the black box in Chicago is “the racism that keeps torture hidden” (2020: 40).

Similarly to how the black box functions as an open secret to torture black bodies in Chicago, there is a knowledge gap around how institutions work within Eritrea. Who acts on behalf of whom? Which ministry/official is responsible for this or that area of work, and who, in each case, carries substantial authority?

Since the imprisonment of 15 ministers, politicians, and ambassadors (known as the “G15”) in Eritrea in September 2001 (Connell 2005), who had signed an open letter urging political reform, political institutions in Eritrea have seen an even greater erosion of capacity and legitimacy. The endless postponement of national elections in Eritrea (indeed since the foundation of the Eritrean state in 1993) has made it even more difficult to locate and situate the political and institutional landscape within Eritrea. The only official political party, the PFDJ, has not exercised any significant influence since its last reelection in the 2004 regional elections, when the PFDJ party was the only contender. The PFDJ was convened for the last time in 2002 in the Eritrean National Congress (Weldemichael 2012).

When asked, in a 2014 Eri-TV interview, if there should be another political party besides the PFDJ (shortly called ህዝባዊ ግንባር, *hizbawī ginbar* People’s

Front in Tigrinya), President Isaias Afewerki replied that if anyone in this country was searching for a political ideology other than the PFDJ, they “should look for it in another world” (Eri-TV 2014 Interview). For him, he added, the power of political renewal was situated within the party structure, the institution itself. But as Dan Connell described as far back as 2005:

all significant decisions in Eritrea today are made behind closed doors. Precisely which doors and who sits behind them at what points needs to be elaborated, but the questions of how such a system operates can best be understood by looking at the soil out of which it grew. (Connell 2005: 2)

Scholars and activists alike have written about the incremental corrosion of the PFDJ as an impactful institution and the weakening of other organs of political participation (such as the media, judicial, and the legislative institutions of the country) since the end of the border war in 2000. Unsurprisingly, this process has been accompanied by a mass exodus of the youth, an increase in rates of incarceration, and a massive economic decline in the country.

Gaim Kibreab (2011) has written a whole book on how the dreams of young Eritreans and the Eritrean revolution have been deferred and replaced by the “broken promises” of the Eritrean leadership. On 17 September 2018, the former Finance Minister Berhane Abrehe (2000–2014) was arrested: he has been held incommunicado ever since. Abrehe had published a book in two parts, entitled *ሃገሪይ ኤርትራ*, (*hagerey 'ērtra Eritrea My Country*, 2018), criticised the government, the current political system, and the lack of institutionalisation. His disenchantment with Isaias Afewerki led him to demand the president’s resignation (Younis 2018). His earlier criticism, between 2010 and 2014, had already cost Abrehe’s position as Minister of Finance in 2014. Back then, he had advocated for transparency. It all came to a head when the former Finance Minister demanded the reconvening of the National Assembly in 2018 (Hagenberg 2018). Previously, on 11 September 2018, Berhane Abrehe openly challenged the Eritrean president to a public debate in Asmara in order to discuss the suffering he had caused Eritreans, and urged a democratic reform (Amnesty International 2018; Human Rights Concern Eritrea 2018). This public outcry coincided with the peace treaty that was signed between Eritrean and Ethiopian leadership in June 2018. While the international community celebrated this rapprochement as a milestone (the Ethiopian prime minister was even awarded the Nobel Peace prize in 2019), for Eritreans in Eritrea, Eritreans in refugee camps in northern Ethiopia and

members of the PFDJ party the secrecy of what this peace and the future in Eritrea entailed remained obscure, concealed, again, within the noted black box.

This kind of black box, that obscures the internal and incremental workings of the political apparatus behind Isaias Afewerki, remains ever powerful in generating ties between the diaspora and the Eritrean state, a nationalism that is tethered to a feeling of “Eritreanness.” For example, in a 2002 interview with Yemane Gebreab, a special advisor to the President, emphasised the link between the country’s internal and external mobilisations. He highlighted the example of the border war, and how the Eritrean government was able to mobilise “300,000 people in a population of 3.5 million” and “the fact that we were able to raise something like US \$150 million from Eritreans living abroad in defence of the nation” (The New Humanitarian 2002). But more interestingly, he has been instructive in creating affective bonds between an Eritrean youth abroad and the government by forging in 2004 the diaspora youth party ኤርትራዊ መንግሥት (‘*ertrawi min’isay* in Tigrinya or Young People’s Front for Democracy and Justice, YPFDJ or Young PFDJ in short). In 2015, Yemane Gebreab travelled to Europe to celebrate the 11th anniversary of the YPFDJ wing. Founded in 2004 as a crucial part of the community with the support from the government and embassies, this is the only government youth party in the diaspora (famously the one in the country is defunct). At the 11th anniversary then, Yemane Gebreab asked where the youth organization was headed to (“ናቢይ ገጽና” *nabey getsna*, where are we going?), highlighting migration and human trafficking under the umbrella of enemies “who plot on a daily basis”). On the 2015 YPFDJ congress, Gebreab addressed the shift from the 1990s where the main goal was to succeed militarily, “now our main struggle is economic (ልምዓት *lem’at*).”

According to Yemane Gebreab, the main challenge remains that of how to foster rapid economic development in Eritrea, and how to include the diaspora. In his speech, he said perseverance (ጽኑዓት *tsen’at*) was not enough, but that the YPFDJ needed to foster knowledge of enemies (“What are they plotting against us?”), some of whom “had a toolbox (political, diplomatic, economic, media tools) and were prepared for a psychological warfare. The youth, Eritrean youth in the diaspora had no future abroad: their future was tied to Eritrea” (YPFDJ congress 2015). Whether we detect a simplified understanding of “Eritreanness,” an inaccessible institutional apparatus, the politics of belonging are often tied to representationalism, which often fails to account for those that don’t appear representable. And futures are simply deferred.

Conclusion: Eritrean Futurity

This important special issue has gathered scholars who have been studying the region for decades, and who have asked themselves how their work allows us to think through the pragmatics of everyday practice. Keeping in mind (1) the black box, which is on the one hand the opaque political institutional arrangement that is part of the decision-making process, and (2) the disconnect between Eritrea and its diaspora (Graf 2018; Belloni 2019; Bernal 2017), as well as (3) the pragmatics of how to include a heterogeneous population, their contributions to this special issue seek to resituate the social. In the absence of formal institutions providing welfare, the social life and politics of care have either been relocated in alternative institutions (Belloni, Fusari and Massa on remittances as social institution; Poole and Riggan on citizenship; Cameron on local and agricultural co-operatives) or translated into infrastructure (Redeker Hepner and Mekonnen on forensic investigation, yet Belloni, Fusari and Massa's work could also be interpreted as infrastructure). The authors of the present special issue have shown wonderfully that the contingencies of transition are bound to a broad array of historical, contemporary, and indeed future experiences. Futurity, in Tigri-nya, can be translated (in affective terms) as a future to come (መጻኢ *metsa'i*) or materially as a project (ዕላማ *'ilama*). The contributions here invoke the semiotic layers of future, but they also allow for the unknown (the future yet to come) and its dynamics to unfold. Futurity defined as *'ilama* has often entailed a politics of representation (one only needs to look to the armed liberation movements). Yet, what kind of representation can we make count? How can we include the unaccounted for when we engage with modes of transition and future-making in Eritrea?

Reflecting on the infrastructure of loss and debris, as this special issue does, along with the political imaginaries of vulnerable and disposable populations as alternative "sources" (in terms of heterogeneity and multiplicities), will not only invite us to critically reflect on the production of nationalised histories, but also attend to alternative futures in Eritrea (a future to come መጻኢ *metsa'i*).

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