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Title: An Exploration of Information and Communication Technology Use on the Part of Eritrean Refugees in Rome, Italy

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David A. McMurray

This thesis explores the ways in which Information and Communication Technology (ICT) use, specifically that of telephones and the Internet, impacts the lives of Eritrean refugees in Rome, Italy. Informal interviews, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation were carried out in a 'center of second reception.' Results show that information obtained through the use of ICT acts on the imaginations of refugees, encouraging or discouraging movement to alternative locations. ICT use can help maintain a sense of emotional "closeness" to family members abroad for some, but not for others. Limitations in access to ICT exist for the refugees and their families in Eritrea that crosscut multiple socio-demographic categories. Finally, surveillance, enacted through ICT use, negotiates power between the Eritrean state and its subjects in the diaspora.

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An Exploration of Information and Communication Technology Use on the Part of
Eritrean Refugees in Rome, Italy

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Matthew E. Opas

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APPROVED:

Major Professor, representing Applied Anthropology

Chair of the Department of Anthropology

Dean of the Graduate School

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Matthew E. Opas, Author

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DEDICATION

In the memory of my grandparents, Norman E. Opas, Lillian Lee Cohen, and John V. DeLuca, and all those who have lost their lives in the Sahara Desert and Mediterranean Sea.

An Exploration of Information and Communication Technology Use on the Part of Eritrean Refugees in Rome, Italy

Chapter 1: Introduction

While living in Rome, Italy from 2006-2010, I often felt appreciation for the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) that was available to me. Using the Internet, I was able to make low-cost calls to my parents and siblings in the United States whenever I missed them. I visited social media sites to see photos and messages that friends and relatives had posted and catch a glimpse at what was happening in their lives. I used other websites to stay abreast of various American media and felt that I temporally transcended space to be in my country for those moments. When I moved to Oregon in order to continue my education, my girlfriend stayed in Rome. However, being able to see and hear each other in real time created the sensation that the other person was not so far away.

Not having Internet access in my Roman apartment, I spent many hours in an Internet Point a couple of blocks from my home. I would often see and overhear several tourists come in, check their e-mail, and book the next hotel room on their Italian vacation. However, I also began to recognize the faces of the foreign residents that frequented that Internet Point, who would use the phone booths and computers to

call spouses and children abroad or would read websites in Arabic, Bangladeshi, Tigrinya, Spanish or whatever the language of their homeland happened to be. I began to wonder if other immigrants had similar feelings and experiences associated with the use of ICT as me.

From this initial curiosity, I have set out to conduct an exploration of ICT use on the part of refugees. I have chosen Eritrean refugees because they represent one of the largest refugee flows to Italy and because of the colonial ties between the former Italian Empire and Eritrea (Saggion & Fabbri 2010). While it is easy to observe that cellular phones and the Internet have influenced aspects of many people's lives – migrants and non-migrants – special attention should be paid to the ways in which ICT affect the lives of refugees. Much has been written on the interactions between voluntary migrants and ICT, but little work has been done on how refugees are utilizing the technology. This type of migrant should not be overlooked because they are people who cannot return to their homelands and family reunification is made difficult because of financial and legal restrictions. Therefore, the only way to maintain contact with loved ones at home is through ICT use or the nearly completely disused practice of sending letters. Additionally, as great numbers of Eritrean peers and relatives seek asylum in other destinations, it would be easy to lose track of them without having ICT available.

Being able to maintain contact with the Eritrean people and media is important because refugees often feel isolation and distress in their new environment. They face

discrimination and other challenges during their processes of resettlement and integration. The use of ICT may help refugees cope with these things. It is commonly accepted that technology is not evenly distributed and accessible to every segment of the human species, especially many of the citizens of lesser developed countries, like Eritrea. Therefore, it is important to recognize if there are some limits on the access to ICT among Eritrean refugees and the people they are attempting to contact so that they will not be excluded from any benefits that the use of ICT entails. However, I do not take the benefits of ICT use for granted. I also wish to shed light on ways in which access to the technology can be harmful.

In this research, I ask if Eritrean refugees in Rome are able to use the Internet and phones to maintain a ‘closeness’ with Eritreans in the homeland and the diaspora; thereby assuaging feelings of homesickness. I also ask if there are any limitations on refugees’ access to the technology in Rome, and to a lesser extent, in Eritrea. Are Eritrean refugees in Rome using the Internet to communicate, access Eritrean media, or engage in political discussion? Can the Internet be used as a tool of integration? Finally, how may the use of ICT be harmful to the Eritrean refugees or their friends and relatives?

Chapter 2 provides an overview of Eritrean history, from its beginning as an Italian colony to a British protectorate to an Ethiopian province to an independent nation. We will see that even after a 30-year war for independence, the Eritrean people live in a country in which their freedoms are greatly limited. Forced labor in

the name of the National Service, religious persecution, poverty, famine, continued violence over border disputes, and an oppressive government have created a country in which 3.7% of the population have fled as refugees, a relatively high proportion compared to most refugee-producing African nations today (UNHCR 2011; CIA: The World Factbook 2012).

Chapter 3 introduces the reader to Italy as a nation that has been transformed from a country of emigration to immigration. The relatively long history of Eritrean migration to Italy, and in particular Rome, is discussed; from migrants who followed Italian colonizers back to the homeland to the waves of refugees that have come in more recent years. The route that many Eritrean refugees take through Sudan, Libya, and across the Mediterranean to the Italian island of Lampedusa is traced. In Lampedusa, they and many other migrants ask for asylum and then enter a refugee reception system that has been hampered by a high number of requests and controversial EU policy.

Chapter 4 reviews some of the scholarly literature that has been written on transnational migration; the advancements in Information and Communication Technology and how migrants have used the technology to communicate across borders for the benefit and, at times, detriment of their lives and lives of those in the sending countries. We will see how the utilization of ICT has the potential for creating transnational civic spaces for the Eritrean diaspora as it has done for other diasporas. Because the Eritrean government has been known to monitor phone calls

and Internet activity, it is worth taking a look at some of the research that has been done in surveillance studies. Finally, ICT use as an instrument of integration for migrants will be considered.

Chapter 5 introduces the reader to the field site for the current research, Centro Elena, and describes the methodological approach of the study.

Chapters 6-10 present the results of the ethnography accompanied by an analytical discussion of each chapter. Chapter 6 describes the precarious journey that the participants in this study took in order to finally arrive in Rome. In Chapter 7, we will explore the role of ICT in forming imaginaries of life in Italy and other destinations in the West. In Chapter 8, the reader will be given a look at the ways in which the Eritrean refugees of Centro Elena utilize ICT in their attempts to stay in touch with Eritreans in the homeland and in the diaspora. Chapter 9 focuses on their use of the World Wide Web as a platform for maintaining cultural ties and engaging in a transnational social field; and explores the Internet as a tool of integration. Chapter 10 will explain that even though ICT are used for surveillance by the Eritrean state, the diaspora is able to use the same technology to turn the gaze back on the actions of the government.

Finally, in Chapter 11, conclusions are presented and some recommendations are offered based on what was learned from the study.

Chapter 2: A Historical Overview of Eritrea from 1869-2011

Throughout the past century and a half, the key-shaped state which rests between northern Ethiopia and the Red Sea has undergone many turbulent political changes. Eritrea has gone from an Italian colony to a British protectorate to an Ethiopian province to an independent nation. These transitions have been marked by violence and tyrannical rule from both European and African leaders. Even this latest period of independence has proven a difficult one for many Eritreans. A 1998-2000 border dispute with Ethiopia disrupted a relatively peaceful era and a one-party oppressive government continues to limit the freedoms of Eritrea's citizens. Forced labor, religious persecution, and famine are some of the leading factors that have driven hundreds of thousands to flee the country. This chapter will provide an overview of the events that have led up to this flight.

The Italian Colonization of Eritrea

The historical paths of Italy and Eritrea first crossed in the late 19th century. The Scramble for Africa had snatched up most of the continent by that time; however the Horn of Africa was still open for potential European conquest. In 1869, a Genoese ship-owner purchased a seaboard strip in the Bay of Assab, which lies on the coastline of the Red Sea (Davidson as cited in Kibreab 2002). This marked the beginning of the Italian presence in the country which is now Eritrea. The Italians saw the land as a

source for raw materials, a market for Italian goods, and a place for Italy to settle its surplus population. Italians settled as large landholders on most of the fertile land and used the Eritrean peasantry for labor (Mayotte 1992). Through various military expeditions, Italy expanded its rule and by 1885, Italian forces had occupied the port of Massawa (Kibreab 2002). Eritrea was officially declared an Italian colony in 1886. The colonists went to work, or rather used cheap Eritrean labor, to develop an industrial base in the cities. The city of Asmara, set up as the capital, was heavily modeled architecturally after other Italian cities. Roads were constructed, as were railroads for internal linkage and access to the Red Sea ports of Assab and Massawa (Mayotte 1992).

The Italian colonists devised a number of strategies in order to solidify their power within the new colony. First, education of the Eritrean people was restricted and Italian language and history were stressed within the educational system. Before and after colonization, the territory was inhabited by multiple ethnic groups. Italy was able to exploit these natural divisions to create numerous alliances. At times, Eritreans were allowed to play a role in government affairs, but were only offered the lowest of government positions. Christianity had existed in Eritrea long before Italian Christians set foot there. This worked towards the advantage of the colonists because the already established indigenous Christian institutions could be used to facilitate interactions between Eritreans and Italians (Riley and Emigh 2002). Additionally, a large portion of the Eritrean population was conscripted into the colonial army for military campaigns in Libya, Somalia, and Ethiopia. Finally, the Italo-Eritrean society

was a strictly segregated one. All of these factors worked together to strengthen the Italian hold on the colony.

That hold lasted for roughly half a century, during which time Italy made two attempts to expand its empire into Ethiopia. After the Ethiopian victory in the Battle of Adowa of 1896, the Italians were forced to retreat back to Eritrea. However, in 1935, Mussolini and his fascist forces sought to reclaim Italian honor and successfully defeated the Ethiopian army. At that time, if we consider the inclusion of Italian Somaliland, Italy briefly controlled most of the Horn of Africa. The conquest was short-lived, for in 1941, British invasion forces from Sudan, Kenya, and India expelled the Italians from the so called *Africa Orientale Italiana* (Mayotte 1992).

Eritrea's Annexation to Ethiopia

Eritrea remained under British protectorate until the end of World War II. The Four Powers (the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain, and France) could not agree about what should be done with Eritrea, besides the resolution that it should not be partitioned. The decision was left to the United Nations Commission of Enquiry on Eritrea. At the end of 1950, it was finally decided that Eritrea was to be federated to Ethiopia under an arrangement that left considerable local autonomy (Bernal 2004). Eritrea was able to control domestic affairs, but Haile Selassie's Ethiopian regency controlled all federal and foreign matters, including currency and finance, defense, foreign affairs, and interstate commerce, including control of the ports (Mayotte 1992). Access to the Red Sea was of considerable importance to Ethiopia given that

the country had no maritime borders. However, in 1962, Emperor Selassie violated the terms of the federation and annexed Eritrea as the fourteenth province of Ethiopia. Almost immediately, the Ethiopian government began to undermine the rights that the UN resolution had accorded Eritreans (Mayotte 1992).

Interestingly, Mayotte (1992) notes that an unintended consequence of the period of Italian colonization was the unity it accorded Eritrea. Along this line, I may add that an imaginary of Eritrean nationalism was also engendered at that time in the minds of those who lived in the colony. The region was (and still is) inhabited by several linguistic and ethnic groups that had no real reason to think of themselves as a unified people until colonists began to carve out the territories.¹ Under Italian colonization, roads and railways were built which linked urban and rural areas. When peasants were forced from their land by Italian landowners or refused to live a life of feudal serfdom, they often moved to the cities in search of work. Roads, railways and internal migration brought “Eritreans” from different parts of the colony in contact with each other. People from various parts of the country had the opportunity to meet urban workers who were discontent with the menial positions they were allotted by the colonizers. Meanwhile, peasant bands in the countryside linked in rebellion (Mayotte 1992). The unity and solidarity created during Italian colonization laid a foundation for later resistance against Ethiopian control.

¹ Tigrinya is the most common linguistic and ethnic group.

Thirty-Year War for Independence

After the annexation of Eritrea to Ethiopia, many Eritreans desired autonomy from Ethiopia and resisted the imperial forces. This resistance was answered with the destruction of land and livestock, imprisonment, beatings, and executions. Seeing armed resistance as their only recourse, many wished to form a united front against Ethiopia (Mayotte 1992). However, this was no simple task in an area inhabited by people without common ethnic, religious, or linguistic bonds. Multiple Eritrean fronts eventually combined into two: the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). The ELF had first been formed in 1960 as an armed rebel movement largely concentrated in the Muslim-dominated western lowlands while the EPLF came into being in 1970 after factions of the ELF broke away (Hepner 2008). Due to extreme differences in their approaches to revolution, these fronts fought in a civil war against each other while fighting a mutual battle against the forces of Haile Selassie and later against the Soviet-fortified troops of Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam (Mayotte 1992).

During the fighting several thousand Eritreans were taken prisoner and villages were massacred. In 1967, a series of attacks by the ELF resulted in the killing of some Ethiopian officials. Ethiopian forces responded by looting villages and killing people by the hundreds. Aerial raids destroyed herds and crops. This offensive generated the first large mass of refugees as more than twenty thousand Eritreans fled to neighboring Sudan (Mayotte 1992). However, smaller refugee flows from western Eritrea had

already been entering Sudan since the early 1960s (Hepner 2008). In spite of the large-scale violence, Eritreans were determined to be liberated from Ethiopia. They fought on for twelve more years of war. Hundreds of thousands – mostly women, children, and old men – were killed or fled to Sudan, increasing the refugee population to the limit of that country's ability to receive them (Mayotte 1992). The ELF and EPLF were not alone in their fight for greater autonomy. The Oromo Liberation Front, Western Somali Liberation Front, and Tigrayan People's Liberation Front also battled against Selassie and later Mengistu.

Unrest and violence continued into the 1970s. In addition to Eritreans, many Ethiopians were also very unhappy with Selassie's governance. The emperor was no longer able to silence oppositions when it became known that a famine in 1974 killed from 200,000-300,000 Ethiopians; a famine which Haile Selassie had denied. In fact, he had used food as a weapon by denying food access to civilians who lived in areas of strong resistance (Mayotte 1992). Dissatisfaction grew among civilians throughout many Ethiopian provinces, but not only civilians were dissatisfied. The events raised disaffection among Ethiopian troops and on September 12, 1974, the emperor was deposed by junior officers of the imperial army (Mayotte 1992).

A central committee of the military government, known as the Dergue, then came into power; chaired by a native Eritrean, General Aman Michael Andom. Eritreans were hopeful because he favored negotiations with the ELF and EPLF and the return of Eritrea to its federal, autonomous status was possible. However, this

possibility was shattered with Andom's execution within two months of his appointment. This brought into power, Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, who had no intentions for an independent Eritrea or a decentralized nation (Mayotte 1992). The new government insisted on total control and in 1976, the Dergue initiated the "red terror," in which thousands of suspected political opponents were imprisoned, tortured, and often killed without trial. Warfare ensued throughout the Horn of Africa.

East Africa became a chessboard on which to fight out greater international Cold War tensions. Cuban troops and Soviet military equipment strengthened Mengistu's army. At the same time the United States sold military equipment to Somalia (Mayotte 1992). Eritreans fought on for independence as new refugees continued to cross over into Sudan while others sought asylum in Europe.

Through the civil war of the early 1970s, the EPLF eventually emerged as the primary liberation movement in Eritrea. They led Eritrea's struggle for nationhood from 1974 until the eventual victory over the Dergue's forces in May 1991 (Bernal 2004). Thirty years of armed violence had come to an end (at least, temporarily) and official independence was declared in 1993, after an internationally supervised national referendum, in which the vast majority of Eritreans voted in favor of independence (Bernal 2004). The EPLF became the PFDJ (People's Front for Democracy and Justice) and is still the ruling party of a one-party state. The leader of the party, Isaias Afewerki, has been Eritrea's President since independence.

Factors Leading to Flight

The war with Ethiopia (1961-91) and ELF-EPLF civil war (1972-81) forced over half a million people to flee the region as refugees. The migration has continued until today with the current diaspora estimated to comprise one-quarter to one-third of Eritrea's total population (Hepner 2008). In 2011, the country was estimated to have a total population of approximately six million (CIA World Factbook 2012). Mass outmigration was further driven by events which followed a violent border dispute with Ethiopia between May 1998 and December 2000.² Besides causing some 100,000 people to lose their lives and shattering the political, geographic and moral economy of Eritrea and Ethiopia, the Border War precipitated the party-state's 2001 violent crackdown on students, journalists, government reformers, minority religious groups and all other 'dissidents,' all in the name of "national security" (Triulzi 2006; Hepner 2008). The consequences of the crisis have included the PFDJ's cancellation of elections indefinitely and the closing of all independent presses. All media is state-owned and several journalists have been jailed for writing in opposition to the government. In 2009, thirty journalists were said to be in prison at that time (Chyrum 2009). There has also been a ban on the formation of political parties and people are forbidden from gathering in groups larger than seven in public or private. Those who fit the broad profile of a dissident are detained and arrested without due process

² Interestingly, the borderline in contestation was the boundary that had been drawn by Italian colonial officials. After independence, Eritrea's provisional government assumed that this would be the borderline based on the Cairo Declaration of 1964 which resolved to uphold the sanctity of colonial borders (Iyob 2000).

(Hepner 2008). Furthermore, there has been a shut-down on all non-approved religious groups.

Eritrea can be seen as a half Muslim/ half Christian country. The approved religions in Eritrea are Catholicism, Muslim, and the Orthodox and Evangelical Churches. In 2002, the Eritrean government introduced a registration system for religions in order to have a record of who was permitted to worship (Fisher 2004). People who wish to practice a “minority religion” often face harassment. Fisher (2004), a BBC reporter, interviewed Pentecostals and Jehovah Witnesses who told him stories of being beaten and imprisoned until they agreed to sign a document in which they promised to return to one of the four state-approved religions.

In addition to religious persecution, others are fleeing the country because of the open-ended National Service (NS) and the cruel punishment that is used to ensure compliance. All Eritreans, men and women, between the age of eighteen and forty years are required to perform active military service (Kibreab 2009). The original duration of this service was 18 months, but since the Border War broke out in May 1998 the service duration has had no limits. At that time the government remobilized those that had already been demobilized and most citizens who were mobilized since May 1998 have still not been relieved of duty (Kibreab 2009). Since May 2002, this indefinite National Service has been relabeled the WYDC (Warsai-Yikaalo Development Campaign).³

³ It will be referred to as the National Service throughout the text.

In November 2009, Chyrum gave a speech at a conference calling for the joining of the EU and US policy towards Eritrea and the Horn for the promotion of democracy and human rights. She lamented that the Eritrean education system had been completely militarized. Students are required to finish their last year of high school in a military camp. Vocational colleges double as boot camps and the only university in the nation, the University of Asmara, has been closed to “pre-empt any potential dissent from students.” My visit to the university website (www.uoa.edu.er) suggests this is true. I found a link to the *last* commencement ceremony, held in July 2006.

In addition to the more ordinary military activity, conscripts are made to do public works projects, such as road building, or have been involved in activities intended to benefit the government, the ruling party, or high-ranking army officers. The government has also hired out conscripts to the private sector (Kibreab 2009). The people are unpaid for the difficult labor and only receive a small allowance to live on. Consequently, many try to flee the open-ended military service or attempt to leave the country as they approach the age of conscription. They may also hide within the country. In these cases, parents are detained or fined heavily. Furthermore, the military police detain those who have not completed their service (Kibreab 2009). There is also a “shoot to kill” policy at the Ethiopian and Sudanese borders for those that attempt to escape (Martell as cited in Kibreab 2009).

Kibreab (2009) argues that the NS or WYDC amounts to forced labor or a modern form of slavery for three reasons. First, the works or services are not voluntary. Second, the labor or services are performed under the threat of punishment. Third, the forced labor is used for political education, mobilization, economic development, and instilling discipline.

Famine and drought have compounded the difficult living conditions within Eritrea. The Horn of Africa has been hit by the worst drought in 60 years (*IRIN* 2011). The delayed demobilization of agriculturalists from the military has interfered with agricultural production as well (*CIA World Factbook* 2011). The UN expects that 19 million people in that region will need food aid. However, Eritrea has turned down external aid. The government has opted to solve the problem itself by confiscating food from farms in parts of the country unaffected by the drought. Some farmers have reported that the government has “seized” their harvest and paid them as little as 8% of the market value (Harter 2011). Food is rationed and expensive. The only food outlets where food can be legally purchased are run by the government (Chyrum 2009). Consequently, a black (illegal) food market has emerged. A former Eritrean ministry of health official has confirmed that two-thirds of the population is malnourished, especially those in rural areas. However, John Holmes, the UN’s undersecretary general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief says there is no evidence of acute malnutrition “on a large scale”, but that “malnourishment as a broader concept is prevalent” (Harter 2011). Whatever the reality, the Eritrean

government has admitted to fining and imprisoning the families of those who leave the country without permission (Harter 2011).

The supposed reason that the PFDJ has refused international aid is that it is attempting to secure “national sovereignty, rights and boundaries against Northern/Western imperialism, globalization and the Ethiopian Other” (Hepner 2008). Therefore, the government has forced out or rebuffed private investors and curtailed or kicked out NGOs and other development agencies (including USAID). USAID was providing most of the food needed by the country until they were asked to cease their operations. The World Food Programme has also been forced to stop their aid (Chyrum 2009).

Conclusion

The long-fought struggle for autonomy against European and African imperialists has left most Eritreans anything but free. It seems many have little choice in the way they work, how they worship, and what they can say. Widespread poverty, famine, and fear of an oppressive government have become intolerable to the point that many young Eritreans have chosen to leave their loved ones and country behind and head towards destinations around the globe.

The lives of Eritrean refugees merit a closer look because of the relatively high proportion of Eritrean citizens that are classified as refugees: 3.7% (UNHCR 2011a; CIA: The World Factbook 2012). Among African countries with the highest numbers of refugees, Eritrea ranks third when viewed as a percentage of the total population.

The first is Western Sahara with 22.3% and the second is Somalia with 7.7% of the total population (UNHCR 2011b; UNHCR 2011c; CIA: The World Factbook 2012).

The following chapters will explore the lives of some of those in the Eritrean refugee flow that have found themselves in Rome, Italy.

Chapter 3: An Overview of Eritrean Migration to Rome, Italy

It has often been stated by scholars of migration in southern Europe that in the late 20th century, Italy shifted from a country of emigration to immigration (Angel-Ajani 2000; Colombo and Sciortino 2004; Knights 1996; Maher 1996; Tacoli 1999). While that may be true, this chapter will explain that the Eritrean migratory flows to Italy began much sooner. This chapter will also explain that a significant number of refugees make up those migratory flows, especially in more recent years. Given that economic immigration and the influx of refugees are relatively new phenomena in Italy, the “reception system” of the country has struggled to keep up with the demand.

From a Country of Emigration to Immigration

Colombo and Sciortino (2004) mark the oil crisis of 1973 as the moment when immigration into Italy boomed. The explanation is that the crisis led European countries that traditionally imported foreign labor to adopt more restrictive immigration policies. Italy, which continued to have more liberal policies, became the fallback choice for immigrants coming from developing countries. Knights (1996) writes that “the restrictive immigration policies of west European countries acted as a catalyst for a rapid transition of southern Europe as an area of emigration to one of immigration” (106). She states that Italy was the first Mediterranean country to acquire a positive migration balance (in 1972). This trend continued throughout the remainder of 1970s.

By the 1980s, factors such as high population growth in lesser developed countries (LDCs) and widening economic inequality between the world's richest and poorest countries pushed many migrants towards southern Europe (Knights 1996: 106). Lack of immigration policy in Mediterranean Europe and extensive maritime borders made Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Greece easy points of entry into Europe.

Italy is no longer considered merely an area of transit for migrants wishing to go to Northern Europe or overseas. It has become a stable destination. This is evidenced by the increasing length of residence of foreign nationals and the number of immigrants who have bought their own house in Italy (more than one tenth of the total) (*Dossier Statistico Immigrazione* 2011). Most migrants choose to settle in Northern Italy because of perceptions of higher wages and increased employment opportunity. However, cost of housing tends to be higher in the North. Additionally, the informal economy and its role in everyday livelihood are also greater in Rome and the South (King and Mai 2008). Therefore, many migrants who are able to find opportunity within the informal economy choose to live in the central and southern regions of the country.

Currently, the largest foreign presence in Italy is Romanian, with about one million residents. This is followed by Albanians and Moroccans with nearly half a million residents each (*Dossier Statistico Immigrazione* 2011). On average, one person in 13 is a foreign citizen in Italy.

Rome has both the largest number of foreign residents- 268, 996 in 2009 - and a greater variety of immigrant nationalities than any other part of Italy (*Caritas di Roma* 2010; King and Mai 2008). The three countries which accounted for the largest numbers of foreign citizens in the capital in 2009 were Romania, the Philippines, and Poland (*Caritas di Roma* 2010). While Eritreans in Rome are not among the largest groups of foreigners, theirs represents one of the oldest migratory flows to Italy since unification.

Historical Migration to Italy from Eritrea

Emigration from Eritrea to Italy can be said to have begun in the late 1800s during the earlier days of Italian colonization. The first to arrive were mostly male sailors that came to coastal cities, such as Genoa and Bari, and decided to remain to live near the ports (Marchetti and Sgueglia 2008). Other Eritrean migrants that followed the Italians back to Italy included the *ascari*, indigenous Eritreans that had fought with the Fascist Italian army in Ethiopia and Libya (Marchetti and Sgueglia 2008).

As in many other European countries, the post-WWII era was characterized by the return of colonists and their descendents to Europe. Bade (2000) reports that from 1940-1960, between 550,000 and 850,000 Italians returned to Italy from the former colonies and other regions of Africa (Colombo and Sciortino 2004). Returning Italian entrepreneurs, officials and executives brought back with them their Eritrean service personnel, who were mostly women. A minor flow of immigrants from Eritrea had

noticeably opened up by the 1960s, following the 1961 annexation of Eritrea to Ethiopia. This flow was characterized by people who had served under the colonial government, had maintained ties with Italian families, or had followed the families of Italian professionals, executives, or businessmen (*ibid.*).

The number of Eritreans in Italy continued to climb during the post-oil crisis years. Hornziel (1986) found that in 1970, the number of Ethiopians, who held an Italian *permesso di soggiorno* (permit to stay) was only 376, the majority of whom were probably Eritrean. By 1976, 2,345 Eritrean/Ethiopians had permits (Riley & Emigh 2002).⁴ King (1985) found that by 1985, 7,200 Eritrean/Ethiopian immigrants had been documented in Italy; in 1990, there were 11,900 Eritrean/Ethiopian immigrants (Riley and Emigh 2002). 12,249 Eritrean/Ethiopians resided in Italy in 1991; and *Caritas di Roma* (1995) recorded 14,016 Eritrean/Ethiopians in 1993 (Riley and Emigh 2002). Jumping forward in time to 2009 (after Eritrean independence), there were 12,967 registered Eritrean residents living in Italy. Women accounted for forty-four (44) percent of them (*Dossier Statistico Immigrazione* 2010).

Eritrean Immigrants in Rome: 1970-1990

Since the 1970s, Rome has had the largest Eritrean presence in all of Italy. The beginnings of an Eritrean community were first seen near the Termini railway station, the central transportation hub of the city. A documentary from that era stated

⁴ Two things should be noted about this data. First, from 1952-1991, Eritrea was an Ethiopian province. Therefore immigrants from Eritrea would have been registered as Ethiopian nationals during this period. Second, these figures are all underestimates due to the difficulty in estimating numbers of undocumented migrants.

that at least 2,000 Eritreans lived in Rome alone during the mid-1970s (Marchetti and Sgueglia 2008). An interview with Ali Mussa, a member of the Association of Eritrean Workers (1986) confirms that between 2,000 and 2,500 Eritreans lived in Rome in 1979 (Birindelli et al. 1993). Many came to the capital after being forced to leave their country as a result of the violence of the 30-Year War. Although the population statistics for the conflated Eritrean/Ethiopian category continued to increase until 1993, Birindelli et al. (1993) found that the actual number of Eritreans in Italy dropped in the early 1980s to nearly half the figures of 1979. Many went to work in the United States, Canada, Australia, Switzerland, Germany, and Sweden. Others went to study in such countries as Australia and Kuwait (ibid.). By the mid-80s, Italy had become more of a point of transit for Eritreans wishing to move on towards other Western countries. One of the principle reasons that residence in Italy became less permanent was that it became difficult to work and live in Italy in a manner that met the needs of Eritrean immigrants (conditions that have not changed much to this day). This situation discouraged many Eritreans from coming to Italy. With more Eritreans leaving Italy and fewer entering the country, the Eritrean presence diminished (ibid.).

During the mid-80s, eighty percent of Eritreans in Italy were women. The city with the highest percentage of men was, in fact, Rome (ibid.). The reason for the high proportion of females to males can be explained by the fact that many of the men remained in Eritrea to fight in the war, while the women migrated in order to send remittances back to their families in Eritrea. In Rome, the work and living conditions were more difficult compared to smaller cities like Bari, Catania, Potenza, Salerno,

and Florence. The women, who usually worked as domestic servants, typically worked longer hours and earned less in Rome. In regards to how much free time they had, women often felt like “prisoners in the houses of others” (ibid.). Often husbands and wives would work in different houses and could only see each other on days off. However, sometimes they would have off different days and, consequently, were rarely able to spend time together. Children would often have to live in boarding schools because the employers did not want the children to stay with the parents in the same house (ibid.). Besides the emotional difficulties of not being able to live with one’s children, the parents could barely afford to pay the expensive costs of the boarding schools.

Eritrean Immigrants in Rome: 1990-Present

The 1998-2000 border conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia sent a new wave of Eritreans out of the country; some of which found their ways to Rome. The difficult current conditions as described in Chapter 2 have sent thousands more towards the shores of Italy; some of those have settled either temporarily or more permanently in Rome. In 2005, there were 1,441 documented Eritrean residents in Rome (*Caritas di Roma* 2007). In 2009, the number of Eritreans in Rome had increased to 4,580 residents (*Caritas di Roma* 2010). These figures pale in comparison to the 67,366 documented Romanian residents; 32,932 Filipino residents; and 14,674 Polish residents found in Rome in 2009 (ibid.). In 2009, Eritreans only

accounted for 1.7% of foreign residents in Rome (ibid.). Therefore, the Eritrean presence in the capital is less visible compared to other migrant communities.

Above all, the female portion of the community has been very discrete due to the nature of the jobs that many of them hold. Those hired to work as domestic servants spend a lot of their time in the houses of their employers. This has been seen, or rather “unseen,” in high-class quarters of Rome, such as Parioli, EUR, and Casal Palocco. In Parioli, Eritrean women typically live in small rooms hidden within the service wings of large apartments (Marchetti and Sgueglia 2008). These service wings were originally constructed to accommodate Italian migrants coming from Sardinia, Abruzzo, and Umbria (ibid.).

In the newer quarter of Casal Palocco, the domestic help is housed in villas a large distance from the city center and are thus quite isolated from other members of the Eritrean community. Typically, Thursday afternoon and Sunday morning are the times when these women have their breaks from work (ibid.). They take advantage of these times to head to the city center to congregate with their compatriots, often times in the cafés and restaurants near Termini.

The area near Termini, more specifically between Via Volturno and Castro Pretorio, is where the highest concentration of the Eritrean community can be found. Since the 1970s, immigrants from Eritrea have opened many cafés and restaurants in this neighborhood. In addition to restaurants and cafés, a small food market, “ethnic” souvenir shop, call center, and East African travel agency have opened under the

management of Eritrean migrants. These have served as important meeting points where Eritreans can discuss everything from the tense political situation in the Horn of Africa to the challenges and triumphs of negotiating a livelihood in Rome. In years past, the community organized courses to teach Italian and Tigrinya, the most spoken language of Eritrea. It also organized cultural festivals and politically-orientated meetings in cooperation with CGIL (a prominent left-wing Italian trade union), PCI (the Italian Communist Party) and PSI (the Italian Socialist Party) (ibid.).

Marchetti and Sgueglia (2008) have observed that the women tend to be the most active in the political arena. For example, women organized manifestations in favor of Eritrean independence. They have also created the Eritrean Women's Union of Rome and of Latium (Lazio), which have organized events of solidarity for Eritrean women. However, this political involvement is less visible today due to divergent political views on the current developments within Eritrea (ibid.).

About half of Eritreans are considered Christian, with most of them following the Eritrean/Ethiopian Orthodox faith (Swift 2009). Eritrean immigrants have translocated their religious practices to Rome and have established an important religious center for themselves within the city, namely *San Tommaso Apostolo* on Via del Parione. Since the 1970s, the church has acted as the religious hub for many Eritrean and Ethiopian Christians. Here the Ethiopian/Eritrean Orthodox ceremony is practiced in Gheez, the royal language of Abyssinia, Amharic (the principle language of Ethiopia), and Tigrinya (Marchetti and Sgueglia 2008). Both Eritrean and

Ethiopian migrants come together to worship at *San Tommaso Apostolo* and other churches throughout the city.

Practicing religion acts as a way to continue cultural traditions and to maintain ethnic and religious identities, which are important for migrants who find themselves outside of their countries of origin. Migrants of every country strive to find a balance between holding onto their original cultural identity while trying to adapt themselves to the new culture and traditions of the host society.

For many transnational migrants, religion is an important cultural link to both the local and diasporic ethnic community. This is because social interaction centered on religion, whether inside a place of worship or outside, creates social networks. In turn, these social networks enhance social cohesion within the local and homeland communities (McLellan 2004). Therefore, when members of the Eritrean community gather for religious ceremonies or times of worship, social bonds between members of the ethnic community are strengthened. At the same time, religious and linguistic identities are being (re)created. Fresnoza-Flot (2010) writes that “religious sites play a key role in the structuring of migrant populations and the reinforcement of community ties, serving as a place of social interactions and exchanges, notably for pioneer migrants, refugees and exiles; as such, they embody the memory and linguistic identity of migrants” (348). Additionally, migrants that feel alienated or marginalized by parts of the dominant society, can feel a sense of belonging within the church (ibid.).

Refugees in Italy

Moving from a discussion of the general Eritrean community in Rome, I will now turn the focus towards the refugee reception system in Italy and Eritrean refugees' place within it. A *refugee* is defined as a person who has fled from their country and is unwilling or unable to return because of well-founded fear of political, racial, religious, ethnic, or other types of persecution, or to avoid warfare and other types of violence (Bariagaber 2001). "An *asylum seeker* is an individual who has sought international protection and whose claim for refugee status has not yet been determined. However, a person is a *refugee* from the moment he or she fulfils the criteria set out in the 1951 *Convention relating to the Status of Refugees*. The formal recognition of someone, for instance through individual refugee status determination, does not establish refugee status, but confirms it" (UNHCR 2009: Np.).

During the 1980s, the number of claims for asylum in Italy was rather low compared to other industrialized countries. They fluctuated between 2,000 and 3,000 requests annually. Until 1990, only citizens from the Soviet bloc were accepted as asylum-seekers, with the minor exception of a group of Chileans in 1973 (Colombo and Sciortino 2004: 59). The UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) (1999) data reveal an increase in numbers towards the end of the 1990s with 33,000 requests in 1999 (Colombo and Sciortino 2004: 59). During that time, many of the asylum-seekers were from Balkan states (such as Romania, Kosovo, and Albania) or were Kurds from Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

Since the late 1990s, there has also been a noteworthy migratory flow from North Africa to Southern Italy. Not only North Africans, but also many sub-Saharan Africans (Eritreans included), have been found within these flows, which consist of undocumented migrants and many asylum-seekers. They often travel in overcrowded boats from Libya to Lampedusa, a small Italian island about 200 km south of Sicily and 300 km north of Libya, but only 130 km east of Tunisia.

Crossing Desert and Sea

Monzini (2007) has done important research which has revealed what the journey must have been like for many of the participants in the current trek from Eritrea to Italy. It is not easy to have a clear picture of the journey across the desert and sea because of the hidden and illegal nature of these crossings. Monzini creates a picture of the journey from reviewing official records of law enforcement, interviews with public officers and local experts, migrants, NGO representatives and human rights activists. She found that most of the migrants who choose this dangerous route are those that cannot afford to pay for forged documents and a safer journey. Her estimate puts the cost of the journey from an African point of transit to a European airport using forged documents to be around \$7,000. The same journey overland and ending with the crossing of the Sicily channel costs about \$3,000.

Libya replaced Tunisia as the main point of departure, in 1998, after Tunisia and Libya signed an extradition treaty and Tunisian authorities increased their level of

control. Several networks of traffickers of Libyan, Tunisian, Egyptian, and Somali origin are involved in the business (ibid.).

Migrants from Eritrea and other sub-Saharan countries would, of course, need to cross the Saharan Desert to reach Libya. Several towns in the desert have grown substantially from the flow of migrants who stop there for a period and work low-paying jobs in order to save up money for their trip. In the towns, travel agencies collect up to 100 people at a time for desert crossings in trucks. Payments to corrupt border officials are routine. Beside the natural dangers, migrants may face well-organized groups of bandits along the way (ibid.).

If they reach the outskirts of Tripoli, they must stay in crowded houses in the countryside for days or weeks, until the time that they can embark. The houses are patrolled by armed guards to keep order. When the conditions are right, they are taken to the coast at night in small buses that have been emptied of seats in order to carry 50 to 60 persons at one time. The passengers are then loaded into small boats or lifeboats and transferred to fishing boats waiting at anchor, or they are taken directly on board in small ports (ibid.).

Monzini (2007) interviewed a worker in the Lampedusa Prosecution Office, who told her that in the spring and summer months there are frequent cases of small boats that need to be 'rescued at sea.' The boats are *carrette di mare*, made in North Africa, often without flag or name. In all cases, the boats are without documents and their owners are never identified. Often times, the boats are captained by migrants

with no seafaring experience who have taken on the role in exchange for a free ride (Lucht 2012). In only a few cases are the boats ever taken back to base. In fact, 90 percent are abandoned. The risk of shipwreck is very high and often the boats are not even supplied with enough fuel to make it to the Italian coast. The traffickers rely on the fact that the Italian authorities will tow the vessels found at sea into port in Lampedusa (Monzini 2007).

A Boom in Refugee Arrivals in Italy

In 2008, Italy recorded 31,200 asylum applications, which was more than double the figure of the previous year. This number made Italy the fourth most important destination in the industrialized world and was the second highest on record in the country. This high number is mostly attributed to the number of irregular arrivals by sea, especially to Lampedusa⁵. An estimation of 36,000 people arrived on the island in 2008. Most of the arrivals applied for asylum, and more than half were indeed found to be in need of international protection (UNHCR 2009). It is especially useful to look at the statistics for 2008 because that is the year in which many of the participants in the current research arrived in Italy. In that year, the 44 industrialized countries which share their data with UNHCR received 12,309 asylum applications from Eritrea. 2,739 of those applications were to Italy (ibid.). In 2008, Eritrea represented the country with the third most applications made to Italy, following

⁵ Even though the arrival of undocumented migrants by sea attracts the most media attention, the number of migrants that come this route is relatively small compared to the number of migrants entering into northern Italy, especially the Italian-Slovenian border (Lucht 2012).

Nigeria (5,333) and Somalia (4,473) (ibid.). In sum, the participants in this research belong to a significant wave of refugees in Italy in 2008.

After an agreement in 2009 between Italy and Libya to turn boats back towards Libya, the number of people requesting international protection dropped significantly. However, the unrest in Northern Africa of the so-called “Arab Spring” of 2011 has caused those numbers to shoot back up. In the first half of 2011 alone, 10,860 applications for protection (originating from all countries) were made to Italy. One would expect the annual statistics to reach even greater numbers considering that the optimal conditions for crossing the sea are June through September. Although the annual totals had not been released by UNHCR at the time of this writing “La Repubblica,” the primary newspaper of Italy, printed data from SPRAR (the system of protection for asylum seekers) (Polchi 2011). These numbers suggest that over 62,000 people landed on the shores of Italy during 2011! Most of those entering the country by sea were Tunisian citizens (about 25,000). It is left to be seen how many of the 62,000 will be requesting asylum. The top four countries of origin for asylum-seekers to Italy during the second quarter of 2011 were Nigeria, Ghana, Côte d’Ivoire, and Tunisia. This had changed somewhat from 2010, in which the top four countries were Nigeria, Pakistan, Turkey, and Afghanistan. During all of 2010, 163 Eritreans applied for asylum in Italy and 120 had already applied during the first half of 2011 (UNHCR 2011d; 2011e). As of January 2011, the UNHCR estimates that there are 236,059 Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers worldwide (UNHCR 2012). The real need for international protection for Eritrean refugees is evidenced by an approximate 80%

total recognition rate for Eritrean asylum applicants in 2010 (UNHCR Statistical Yearbook 2010).

Italy's management of irregular migrants and asylum-seekers coming from North Africa has been criticized over the years. Prior to 2005, incidents of abuse of immigrants and refugees were reported, while the UNHCR, Amnesty International, and members of the Italian parliament were denied access to inspect the center at Lampedusa (Lucht 2012). In 2004, Italian authorities implemented detention and large-scale expulsion schemes that had some detrimental consequences for all types of migrants arriving on the island (Andrijasevic 2009:165). Italy collaborated with Libya by signing a readmission agreement to refurbish several detention facilities and fund a repatriation scheme for irregular migrants in Libya. In return, Libya increased internal checks, especially on migrants originating from sub-Saharan Africa. This practice resulted in arbitrary detentions and unsafe repatriations in which more than one hundred people lost their lives (ibid.). The problem with sending irregular migrants back to Libya is that Libya does not recognize the mandate of the UNHCR, has no asylum system, and is not a signatory of the Geneva Convention. NGOs have documented that irregular migrants and asylum-seekers are at risk of arbitrary detentions, unfair trials, disappearances and torture while in detention (ibid.). Therefore, sending refugees back to Libya is akin to *non-refoulement* that prohibits the forcible return of anyone to a territory where they might be at risk of serious human rights violations.

In holding centers, or CPTAs (Center for Temporary Permanence and Acceptance), one finds those who have been served an expulsion, have had their asylum application denied, or migrants who have been arrested for entering the country or residing in Italy illegally. The CPTAs were established under the “Turco-Napolitano” law of 1998. The 2002 “Bossi-Fini” law doubled the maximum detention time from thirty to sixty days. According to the law, the CPTAs should offer lodging, basic medical assistance, clothing and personal hygiene items, laundry, telephones, and groceries (IntegraRef 2008).

In 2004 and 2005, the CPTA in Lampedusa was denounced by NGOs and the European Parliament for not providing detainees with information about the possibility to claim asylum and not conducting interviews extensive enough to assess an asylum-seeker’s individual circumstances. Often there was no access to qualified interpreters and improvised identification procedures were used in which a migrant’s identity was determined based on the color of their skin and facial characteristics. The centers were said to be permanently crowded and lacking in adequate health service and hygiene (Andrijasevic 2009). Italian authorities admitted to overcrowding during the summer months but report that people were never held longer than four or five days. They stated that the majority of the migrants were Egyptian nationals and their identification was based on physical characteristics, accent, and a short interview, to which everyone was entitled. The authorities went on to say that if migrants do not come forward to request asylum, they are immediately repatriated back to Libya or

their country of origin. Those who *do* request asylum are transferred to a facility on the mainland (ibid.).

Fortunately for the participants of the current research, all of them made it past this stage of the asylum-seeking process. Otherwise, I would not have met them in a refugee center in which all residents had been granted some form of protection. But, surely, a practice of identifying people based on accents and physical characteristics is not an accurate one for determining the origin of a person. Not giving asylum-seekers an opportunity to make an asylum claim, not allowing migrants access to qualified interpreters, or not conducting in-depth interviews have the real potential of sending people in dire need of international protection back to situations in which they could be tortured or killed. Even those who do not qualify for asylum should be treated in a manner that does not violate their human rights or puts their safety in jeopardy. According to Amnesty International (2006), in cases where Eritreans are deported to Libya, their repatriation can put them at risk of torture or the death penalty (Klepp 2010). A government change in May 2006, put an end to the policy of returning third country nationals to Libya. However, cooperation in terms of border security and financing deportation flights and detention centers in Libya were not stopped (ibid.). Italian authorities have also been permitted to enter into Libyan waters in order to send boats back to the Libyan shore. This practice has the potential of denying potential refugees access to the asylum procedures (ibid.). In fact, even as late as the summer of 2009, UNHCR believed that Italy sent back some nine hundred immigrants and

asylum-seekers who were picked up at sea, without screening for legitimate refugee claims (cited in Lucht 2012).

Asylum-seekers fortunate enough to be allowed access to the asylum procedure are summoned to a hearing in which the candidate can obtain the services of a translator and a lawyer. The candidate may be granted one of three types of protection: political asylum, subsidiary protection, or humanitarian protection. Those with political asylum have the right to stay in the country for five years before renewal. Those with subsidiary protection have their *permesso di soggiorno* valid for three years before renewal. The permit will be renewed if it has been decided that the conditions present at the time of the original recognition of status have persisted (i.e. the person is still at risk of imprisonment, torture, death, or persecution if they were to return to their country). Humanitarian protection is valid for one year before renewal and is granted to those that do not fall within the first two types of protection but, regardless, have serious reasons for seeking protection. If the request for asylum is refused, a candidate has the possibility to appeal two times. If the response remains negative, the person is required to leave the country within five days (IntegraRef 2008).

In Italy, the most represented nationalities to be granted these three types of protection are Eritrea, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Eritrea, in fact, was the most represented country of those who stayed within the refugee centers in Rome as of June 2010 (Saggion and Fabbri 2010). Among the 1,332 who were staying within the

refugee shelters in Rome (as of June 30, 2010), 313 were documented as coming from Eritrea. Many among them were those young adults who had left the country due to indefinite mandatory national service, religious persecution, or famine.

Consequences of the Dublin Regulation

Upon their entry into Italy, refugees are identified and fingerprinted. The moment refugees are fingerprinted is a very significant moment in their lives. Being fingerprinted and requesting asylum in Italy means that they cannot request asylum, or legally work, in any other country in Europe. This is the policy set forth in the Dublin II Regulation of 2003, which replaced the provisions of the 1990 Dublin Convention (put into effect in Italy in 1997).

The Dublin Regulation (also known as the Dublin Convention) seeks to prevent “asylum shopping” in which political refugees move from one country to another, seeking the best conditions for themselves. It also ensures that each asylum applicant’s case is processed by only one European member state. Furthermore, it seeks to prevent “asylum seeker in orbit,” in which an asylum-seeker is transferred between states with no state willing to take responsibility for examining their claim (*Irish Refugee Council* 2011). The regulations prevent countries in northern Europe, such as England or the Netherlands, from being flooded with asylum seekers. Many refugees and other type of migrants would prefer to go to these countries where the work opportunities and standards of living are typically better than southern Europe. Italy’s geographic position and extensive coastline often makes the country the first

port of entry into Europe. This puts a large strain on the Italian “system of reception” to accommodate so many newcomers. This is partly the result of the domination of core European countries during the establishment of the Dublin II Regulation. Italy and other border countries were given most of the responsibility for conducting the asylum claims of landing migrants (Klepp 2010:19).

The Dublin Convention is not only controversial from the state’s perspective but also from the point of view of the asylum-seekers. Many feel trapped in a country where they have difficulties finding work and may have friends and relatives in other countries that could better help them to become established faster. Some Eritreans, who have studied using the English language all of their lives, would like to continue their studies in an English-speaking country (e.g. England). Familiarity with a country’s principle language is also key to finding work and those Eritreans who have a good proficiency in English may have greater success finding work in England or other northern European countries where English is often used in the workplace.

The guidelines of the Dublin Regulation have also been responsible for breaking up families. There are refugees, frustrated with the lack of job opportunities in Italy, who choose to cross the borders and search for work illegally in other European countries. They may work without documents for several years before being discovered by the authorities. Within those years, they may have found a partner and started a family. When authorities discover that they had already received political asylum in Italy, they are sent back, leaving their loved ones behind.

Forced vs. Voluntary Migration

In contrast to voluntary migration, those who are forced to migrate are often at a greater disadvantage. People who choose to migrate for economic reasons can often decide when and where they migrate. They often choose a particular place based on the presence of friends or relatives that are already there. Even a person who does not personally know anybody in the destination city can choose a place where there is a community of their compatriots already sufficiently established. Migrants from a common country of origin often follow the model of chain immigration, which is based on informal networks, or interpersonal ties connecting immigrants, former immigrants, and non-immigrants in the place of origin and destination. These networks are able to assist potential migrants to find work and housing, deal with the psychological cost of the move, and even offer money for a ticket. Sometimes these networks are crucial for potential migrants. Other times, they have little or no importance (Colombo and Sciortino 2004).

Various foreign communities carve out niches in the labor market. From personal observation, I have seen that Romanian men in Rome, for example, often work in construction; while the women are domestic workers. Bangladeshis in Rome have opened and managed a large number of Call Centers throughout the city or can be found selling goods on the street. Belonging to a nationality with an already established economic niche can make finding employment easier.

Refugees, who often flee their countries to avoid imprisonment, torture, or death, do not have the time or resources to plan to go to a location that would provide them with the best support network. Where they end up depends upon geography, chances of obtaining asylum, and luck. If a person wishes accommodation within a refugee shelter, their location will depend on where there is available space.

The Refugee Reception System in Italy

Upon arrival in Italy, a person who wishes a form of protection must apply in the place where they have entered the country and is then housed in a CDA (Center of Reception). They may stay there until their request is processed and it is determined which type of protection they will receive, if any. The length of time for the examination varies from case to case, depending on which city the person is filing the request. Cities in southern Italy, which typically have a larger volume of asylum requests, generally take longer to issue the *permesso di soggiorno*. A person may not always stay in the same CDA for the entire time they are waiting for their claim to be examined. They may be sent to a shelter where there is space in another city of Italy. Once the *permesso* is received, a person is typically sent out to find their own lodging. They may then file a request for a place in a “center of first reception.” Typically, the more sensitive cases, such as women, children, and people with psychological problems, are given priority for places within a shelter under the management of SPRAR (system of protection for asylum seekers and refugees). SPRAR is composed of a network of local reception and integration entities that offer services to migrants

who have been granted protection or asylum. They work in collaboration with prefectures, employment agencies, local health services, language schools, law offices, and so on (IntegraRef 2008). The time needed to fulfill this request for a shelter varies depending on the speed of the bureaucratic process and the availability of space within the shelters. Until then, they are left to strike it out on their own in the streets.

Some of the more fortunate refugees may have friends or family that they can stay with. However, that friend or family member must have the means to accommodate the new arrival. Many immigrants in Rome live in crowded apartments with several other compatriots. This allows them to afford the high rents of the capital on usually low wages. In a case like this, it would be difficult to support the newcomer who has not yet established some type of income. Some are forced to sleep on the street. Since 2005 there has been a makeshift refugee camp at Ostiense train station. With little room available in the formal refugee shelters, many refugees, (mostly from Afghanistan) have transformed the outside of the station into a city of tents. The *Comune di Roma* responded by opening a shelter in the Pietralata quarter of the city. However, the station has continued to serve as an informal camp and in July 2009, there were about 150 inhabitants there. City administration opened three more shelters in 2010, but the situation at the station persists (Saggion and Fabbri 2010).

The Casa Occupata

Another strategy for coping with homelessness is living in a *casa occupata* (what may be referred to as “squatting” in English). These are abandoned buildings in

the city where people, mostly immigrants, have made their homes in less than desirable conditions. People often sleep on the floor and do not have electricity, nor running water. The two most infamous structures of this type are found on Via Collatina, and more recently, in the Romanina quarter (Saggion and Fabbri 2010). These are inhabited by young migrants and political refugees who may be waiting for places in centers of reception. Most of these *case occupate* have been occupied by Eritreans and Ethiopians since the 1980s. At that time, during a housing crisis in Rome and the rest of Italy, Eritreans and Ethiopians lived alongside Italians. The structure on Via Collatina has been dubbed *Naznet* Center⁶. Along with young adults, families with young children are also found there. Those who were vacated from “Hotel Africa” (near Tiburtina station) and other smaller *case occupate* have also made residence there. *Naznet* Center even has a place of worship and is self-managed by the residents, from the meals to the prohibition of alcohol. There are also guards who patrol the Center during various shifts (Marchetti and Sgueglia 2008).

Conclusions

Since the 1970s, Italy has become the destination or point of transit for many migratory flows. The Eternal City has been transformed into the most multinational city in the nation. Long before Italy’s shift from a country of emigration to immigration, Eritreans have been coming to the country, especially to Rome. The first

⁶ *Naznet* is the Tigrinya word for “freedom”

Eritrean migrants represented the aftermath of Italy's East African colonial efforts. In more recent years, the influx of Eritreans has become characterized by men and women searching for political asylum from violence, famine, and an oppressive government. The most common route into the country seems to be across the Mediterranean alongside tens of thousands of other migrants from North and sub-Saharan Africa. Those requesting asylum become involved in a refugee reception system that is strained to keep up with the large demand of asylum applications following the unrest in North Africa. Some are given places to sleep within refugee shelters while others must find other alternatives. One illegal alternative has been to leave Italy for other European destinations. Others choose makeshift tent cities or abandoned buildings for shelter as they strive to establish themselves in Italy.

Chapter 4: A Literature Review of ICT Use on the Part of Migrants

The current research explores several different aspects of Information and Technology use on the part of Eritrean refugees in Rome. Consequently, the literature reviewed must encompass several different aspects related to the use of ICT on the part of migrants. Much literature has been produced in recent years by scholars from many different disciplines. In this chapter, I provide some of the more important ideas that have emerged from that literature. I begin with a general discussion of transnational migration. I then explain what the advancements in the communication technology have meant for some migrants and their loved ones in the countries of origin. Later in the chapter, the role of ICT in diasporic social spaces is discussed, followed by implications of ICT being used as a tool of surveillance by the Eritrean government and others. The chapter ends with a brief discussion of how the Internet may be perceived as a tool of integration.

An Introduction to Transnational Migration

In the past 20 years or so, many migration scholars have explored various aspects of transnational lives. Transnationalism involves people living and interacting in more than one nation-state. Even though a person may be living in one country, they have not necessarily severed social, emotional, economic, and political ties with their country of origin. Simultaneously, they are forging new ties within their country of settlement. Appadurai (1999) observes that “we are functioning in a world that is

fundamentally characterized by objects in motion...ideas and ideologies, people and goods, images and messages, technologies and techniques” (230). Additionally, transnationalism is coupled with deterritorialization, by which “production, consumption, communities, politics, and identities become detached from local places” (Kearney 1995).

Schiller et al. (1995) define transnational migration as the process by which immigrants forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. They note three principal forces in the global economy that have led contemporary immigrants to settle in countries that are centers of global capitalism but live lives that transcend international borders: “a global restructuring of capital based on changing forms of capital accumulation has lead to deteriorating social and economic conditions in both labor sending and labor receiving countries with no location a secure terrain of settlement; racism in both the U.S. and Europe contributes to the economic and political insecurity of the newcomers and their descendants; and the nation building projects of both home and host society build political loyalties among immigrants to each nation-state in which they maintain social ties” (ibid.).

Portes (2001) agrees with Schiller et al. that immigrant transnationalism is driven by the logic of global capitalism. However, he also notes that there is little novelty in the cross-border activities of contemporary immigrants. Foner (1997) offers the example that in the beginning of the 1900s, European immigrants in the

United States would invest in land and businesses in the “old country.” They would make trips across the ocean to visit their families and sponsor political causes favoring independence or regime changes. However, in those earlier years, migrants’ transnational communication was constrained by means of long, difficult, and expensive physical trips home; slow and uncertain delivery of letters; and oral news brought by way of chain migration (Senyurekli and Detzner 2009). Now, the same global capitalism that has encouraged transnational migration has encouraged the advances in transportation and communication technology that facilitate the creation and maintenance of transnational ideologies and practices. “While, with the wisdom of hindsight, it is possible to identify and study the ‘transnational’ ventures of earlier Italian, Polish, and Russian immigrants, such activities could never have acquired the density, real-time character, and flexibility made possible by today’s technologies” (Portes 2001: 188). The current research shows to what extent transnational activities have been- or have not been- facilitated by information and communication technologies (ICT), specifically landline telephones, cellular phones, and the Internet.

Advancements in Information and Communication Technology

Vertovec (2004) argues that nothing has facilitated processes of global linkage more than the boom in ordinary, cheap international calls, especially among non-elite social groups such as migrants. Beginning in the 1980s, the advancements in telecommunication technology have facilitated the ease, efficiency and cost-effectiveness of providing for millions of telephone connections simultaneously. In

the 1990s, driven by highly competitive markets, the costs of international calling dropped from several dollars a minute to a few cents per minute. The development and spread of prepaid international phone cards has also contributed largely to the expansion of international calling (ibid.).

Advancements in communication technology have driven higher connectivity between migrants and people in their homelands. This relationship can also be viewed in the opposite way. Deterritorialization, of which migrants are heavily involved, has created new markets for film companies, art impresarios, and travel agencies, which “thrive on the need of the deterritorialized population for contact with its homeland” (Appadurai 1996: 38). Telecommunication companies can also be seen as having responded to this need.

The first decade of the twenty-first century witnessed tremendous advances in Internet technology. This has provided transnational migrants with an additional, extremely versatile, tool of communication. Panagakos and Horst (2006) say that newer modes of communication technology, such as teleconferencing (e.g. Skype), provide a visual and real time medium that has the potential to amplify emotional connections and may in some ways decrease the need to physically visit home, which is often difficult for financial and legal reasons. This is an important idea to consider within the context of the current research because the participants, who have fled from their country illegally, run great risks should they decide to visit home.

Communication across Borders

Mahler (2001) observes that much of the literature on transnational migration before 2001 assumed migrants were easily able to maintain ties to people back home. Later literature began to highlight that maintenance of these ties, through ICTs or otherwise, should not be taken for granted. It was soon realized that a digital divide exists in which some people in the world have more access to digital technology than others. Some have focused on how geography limits access to ICT; for example, access is much less in rural regions and developing countries (Horst 2006; Mahler 2001; Parreñas 2005). This problem has been ameliorated to a certain degree by the diffusion and adaptation of cellular phones that do not require the same infrastructure as older telecommunication technology (Horst 2006). However, the digital divide is not only based on geography. Castells (2001) writes that the digital divide among diasporic communities implies not only disparities of income level, gender, ethnicity, education, language, generation, and geographical location, but also social distribution of knowledge, power, and network capacity in the information society. Weiskopf and Kissau (2008) add that the “actual and more comprehensive concept of the digital divide goes beyond access itself and encompasses the relevance of the Internet to the individual user to indicate how digital and societal divides are related...as more of society’s processes are transferred to the Internet, its use will increasingly become a bottleneck for the participation and integration into society” (97). Crack (2007) observes that the digital divide usually affects those groups of people that are already socially marginalized. She says that “country specific studies have revealed that the

pattern of marginalization correlates with groups that suffer broad disadvantages, such as women, ethnic minorities, rural people, and the poorly educated” (347). On the other hand, when marginalized groups are able to overcome the barriers of access, awareness, and capacity; they are able to empower themselves through the acquisition of information to which they were once not privy (Siddiquee and Kagan 2006).

Letter-sending has clearly fallen out of favor and most literature has found phone calls to be the dominant method of communication (Wilding 2006). Part of the reason is related to the familiarity with the telephone and for the preference to hear a relative’s voice. More recently, the Internet has begun to be incorporated into the repertoire of transnational communication, but this is mostly used among younger migrants and their siblings (Senyurekli and Detzner 2009). The current research offers some more insight on the advantages and disadvantages of each tool of communication (i.e. phone versus Internet use) and explores with whom Eritreans are communicating.

Many migrants report that the increased ability to communicate across borders has been beneficial for maintaining social ties across borders (Benitez 2006; Horst 2006; Parreñas 2005; Senyurekli and Detzner 2009). For example, Filipino children “left behind” by migrant mothers viewed calls and text messages as evidence of love and care (Parreñas 2005). One Turkish migrant in the US said that, through video calls on the Internet, she was able to interact with her relatives in a way that she could not even do when visiting Turkey (Senyurekli and Detzner 2009).

One of the questions that this research addresses is whether there is a relation between ICT use and the degree to which refugees feel a “closeness” with people in Eritrea. “Feeling close” to friends and relatives at home can help migrants to overcome feelings of homesickness. The literature shows that homesickness, as a consequence of migration, is a problem for the well-being of some migrants. Paul Green’s (2011) study of Brazilian migrants in Japan, found that the most potent source of *saudades* (i.e. homesickness, nostalgia, longing, loneliness) related to important social and kin ties. The absence of enduring ties made people feel like “partial versions of their selves” and like “strangers in their own bodies.” A study of Thai migrant workers in Israel suggests that workers who were homesick were more distressed compared to those who were infrequently homesick (Griffin and Soskolne 2003). Therefore, finding ways in which refugees can reduce homesickness would be beneficial to their lives.

Tartakovsky (2007) found that two factors accounted for low levels of homesickness in Russian and Ukrainian adolescents who moved to Israel without their parents. First, before migrating, they had high motivation for immigration, a positive attitude towards the host country, and awareness about the conditions in Israel. Second, their new social environment was organized in a way that buffered homesickness; “adolescents lived in large groups of their compatriots, they were encouraged to preserve their culture (celebrating holidays, using their native language in daily conversations, watching TV and reading newspapers in their native language), and they were encouraged to be in contact (through telephone and internet) with their

parents and friends at home” (491). Like Tartakovsky, Ryan (2008) found that an association with a network of compatriots can transform the new place into a “knowable, familiar space” which alleviates feelings of homesickness.

Besides the benefits of ICT utilization, negative consequences of the increased use of ICT within transnational families have also been observed. Horst (2006) and Mahler (2001) saw that problems can be exacerbated between spouses or partners through the communication technology. Some wives in El Salvador became more insecure with inconsistent and unreliable means of communication. Surveillance, often related to accusations of infidelity, represented an unanticipated side effect of increased communication among Jamaican transnational couples. In both these cases, we see that transnational communication technology did not change the dynamics of power within the social field (Horst 2006). Furthermore, the use of new communication technology does not necessary provide for perfect communication between parties. “Family members sometimes censored or delayed relaying important information to one another. They did not want to worry each other, or knew there was nothing that could be done to solve the problem by a distant relative. The censorship was practiced on both sides of the ocean, creating a certain degree of frustration, anger, and distrust across generations” (Senyurekli and Detzner 2009: 816).

In spite of the negative consequences to the increased dispersal and use of ICT, the assessment of many scholars has been that this technology is mostly beneficial to transnational families and the disparities of the digital divide should be equalized so

that more families can benefit from their use. The approach of this research seeks to recognize the benefits associated with increased ICT use, but strives not to ignore the ways in which increased ICT use can be socially and even physically harmful.

The Relation between ICT Use and Remittance-sending

The ability of relatives in sending countries to reach family members abroad more easily also has implications that go beyond mere communication. The acts of communicating via ICT and sending remittances are often intertwined. Regular communication sustains a sense of obligation to the family left behind. Once done principally through letter writing, ICTs have provided faster modes to request money, at times, when it is desperately needed (Wilding 2006). Spouses and children left in the countries of origin often cannot pay the day to day expenses without money being sent from family members working abroad (Mahler 2001). Furthermore, sending remittances is arguably a common strategy for engendering intimacy (Pessar and Mahler 2003). “[Jamaican] parents and children ‘read’ the receipt of money in a birthday card, payment of school fees or sending barrels of goods and other forms of provisioning as an authentic demonstration of love and care” (Horst 2006: 151). Filipino mothers and children also feel that a certain level of intimacy is achieved through the receipt of boxes containing clothes, goods, and toiletries (Parreñas 2005). Migrants often feel satisfaction in being able to fulfill their familial obligation to support their relatives. However, at times, family members living abroad feel pressure and even “burdened by love and the compunction to give” (Horst 2006: 155).

Migrants, who often struggle financially in their countries of settlement, may not wish to receive so many calls requesting money that they themselves do not have.

It is important to note that remittance sending does not only benefit the family that receives them. Binford (2003) reviews remittance studies of rural Mexico and explains that remittances can improve a local economy. However, they also have the potential to increase economic inequality between sending regions with many migrants abroad and those with little outmigration.

In the case of Eritrea, “besides social obligations based on kinship, another motivation for many respondents to send home remittances is related to social status. For most public projects in Eritrea, members of the local community, or other direct beneficiaries, are required to contribute, and they in turn often turn to relatives abroad for support in meeting their payments. By making contributions, Eritreans in the diaspora can raise their status both within the community in which they live and in their ‘home’ communities” (Al-Ali et al. 2001: 592).

ICT Use among Refugees in contrast to Voluntary Migrants

Most of the research that has been done on transnational communication focuses on economic or other kinds of voluntary migrants. However, refugees face different sets of issues than other types of migrants and differences and similarities in their use of ICTs should not be ignored. Boyle and Ali (2009), for instance, have said that analysis of migrant families should be distinguished between voluntary and migratory refugees. There are unique barriers that block refugee home country

transnationalism. For example, in the case of Vietnam, refugees could be viewed as traitors and transnational communication would be forbidden. Also, unlike voluntary migrants, return visits or cyclical migration is not possible. The Somalis in the US of Boyle and Ali's study were still obligated to send remittances but the traditional support of extended family was largely missing. Some refugees turn to the state to fill in the missing support, while others turn to the diasporic community (ibid.). The current research is a small contribution to the paucity in scholarly literature on ICT use on the part of refugees.

ICT in Diaspora

In addition to the analysis of transnational communication between refugees and their families and friends, the current research also explores which ways Eritrean refugees may or may not be connected, on a larger scale, to the Eritrean diaspora through Information and Communication Technology. There is a vast body of literature on the ways that the Internet has facilitated the formation of a transnational social space for immigrants of various diasporas (Adams and Ghose 2003; Al-Ali et al. 2001; Alinejad 2010; Kang 2009; Parham 2004; Stephen 2007; Thompson 2002). In thinking about how these transnational social spaces are imagined, it is helpful to look towards the work of Anderson (1983) and Appadurai (1996). Anderson (1983) wrote of the importance of the newspaper for the formation of 'imagined communities'. The reading of the newspaper "is performed in silent privacy...yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated

simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion” (ibid. 35). Internet media and communication act in a similar, yet more complex and multi-directional, way. In part, the Internet has played an influential role for members of diasporic groups to come to think of themselves as being a part of local and transnational cultural ‘imagined communities’.

Drawing, in part, from Anderson, Appadurai (1996) analyzes the imagination in a transnational context. He speaks of *mediascapes*, which “refer both to the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information...and to the images of the world created by these media” (35). He lists newspapers, magazines, television stations, and film-production studios as examples of these mediascapes. I believe that we can add the Internet to this list, given that online media encompasses the previously mentioned media and beyond. The mediascapes act on the imaginations of people. Appadurai writes that there is a “peculiar new force to the imagination in social life today. More persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before” (ibid. 53). In addition to the media, “contacts with, news of, and rumors about one’s social neighborhoods who have become inhabitants of these faraway worlds” also have an important impact on people’s imaginations (ibid. 53).

Bernal (2006) and Hepner (2008) have made important contributions to the literature on the Internet and the Eritrean diaspora. They have both analyzed the ways

in which cyberspace has facilitated the participation of the diaspora in the formation of Eritrea's national institutions and political culture. Bernal says that interaction on Dehai, an Eritrean web forum: creates community across the displaced; constructs a shared national and virtual history; and serves as an arena for civic engagement and dissent. Hepner also notes civic engagement from her observations that organizations advocating human and civil rights have been able to join forces across great distance (facilitated by the Internet) to stage coordinated actions and have begun building linkages with international organizations within and across countries of settlement and with local groups that provide rights-based legal assistance or advice. She saw that refugees, at the time of her study (2000-2002), were also engaging with the transnational state and social field. The current research will see if that is still the case nearly a decade later.

Because the Eritrean state has prohibited independent press and only dispenses entertainment programs and news that flatters the government, the Internet has become one of the only platforms available to communicate, raise, and debate issues. It is the Eritreans in the diaspora that have been able to use the Internet for blogging, radio, video, music, chat rooms, polling, campaigning, information sharing, and organizing events and demonstrations in "democratic" countries (CIMA 2011). Eritreans abroad speak for those that cannot speak for themselves within the country. "The diaspora, who are beyond the direct control of the government, can play an important part, disseminating information and alternative analyses to Eritreans in

Eritrea, and offering to the Eritrean government a window on dissent” (Bernal 2006: 175).

Al-Ali et al. (2001) write that, historically, the struggle for independence and the border conflict with Ethiopia played a large role in Eritrean transnational activities because the state looked towards its diaspora to contribute to the war effort. This promoted the creation of a systematic transnational network of organizations. Interestingly, the authors found less evidence of ‘transnationalism’ among refugees of the more recent border conflict compared to earlier refugees. They suggest that the more recent arrivals, which did not flee Eritrea during the “struggle for independence,” had not been inculcated with a ‘culture’ of contributing. Is this the case with more recent asylum seekers in Italy?

The political context in Eritrea seems to have also had a significant influence on the transnational activities among Eritreans (ibid.). The state has consistently taken steps to include the diaspora. For example, members of the diaspora were counted in the vote for independence; were asked to make suggestions and revisions when the constitution was being drafted; and are requested to pay two percent of their annual income to the state.

While the state has made efforts to include the diaspora in some ways, it has attempted to block out the voice of the diaspora in other ways.

ICT and Surveillance

There is substantial evidence from the literature which suggests that the Eritrean government is surveying those in the country and within the diaspora (Bernal 2006; CIMA 2011; Hepner 2008; Human Rights Watch 2012). During their research, Bernal (2006) and Hepner (2008) observed surveillance and interference by the Eritrean government in the lives, on- and offline, of Eritrean exiles. For example, Bernal notes that members of the government monitor and may even disguise themselves under pseudonyms while participating on the Dehai online newsgroups. She writes that “there is no reason to doubt that online discussions are monitored by the Eritrean government because the government goes to great lengths to retain the diaspora’s support, for example, sending party officials and important office-holders to the USA and other places to brief Eritreans abroad on key issues” (173). Hepner found that in Germany and South Africa, government (PFDJ) party members were maintaining watch-lists, photographing or videotaping dissidents at protests or in opposition meetings, and turning their findings over to embassies and consulates. Additionally, the Eritrean government’s active network of secret services monitors e-mails and other communications (CIMA 2011). Human Rights Watch (2012) has also reported that Internet users are closely monitored by the government. They write that some users were reportedly arrested in early 2011. Considering these examples of surveillance on the part of the Eritrean state, an analysis of the consequences of using ICT for surveillance seems merited.

In *Discipline and Punishment: the Birth of the Prison* (1977), Foucault introduces Bentham's panopticon as an example of the shift in mechanisms of societal control. The panopticon was a design for a prison, composed of an annular building circling a tower. Prisoners are held in individual cells in the peripheral building. Each cell is backlit so that an observer in the tower can observe each prisoner's movements. "The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately" (ibid. 200). However, the central tower is constructed in a manner so that the prisoners cannot see if the tower is occupied or not. The possibility that the inmate is being watched is enough to exert control over the inmate's actions. They monitor their own actions under the possibility that a guard could be watching at any time. "Surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary;...the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they themselves are the bearers" (ibid. 201). Therefore, under the threat of surveillance, bodies become self-disciplined, or docile. Foucault's analysis has been drawn upon by many surveillance study scholars in describing postmodern society. Such an analysis can also be useful when considering to what extent ICTs, like the Internet, can be used for surveillance.

Bunyavejchewin (2010), for instance, writes that "Thai Internet users are no different from prisoners in panopticon prison; they are becoming docile bodies" (71). In Thailand, websites that satirize the palace are blocked. It is thought that social networking websites and political blogs are also heavily surveyed. This is a case that

goes beyond government surveillance; ordinary Internet users observe each other. There are social sanctions (e.g. stigmatization via forwarded e-mails and Facebook posts) to users whose comments do not conform to the mainstream political ideology (ibid.).

Lim (2002), however, sees the Internet as playing a more liberating role in an Indonesian society that is heavily controlled by the state. “The Internet can be seen as a potential civic space in which civil society can flourish independently from the state and the corporate economy, and can also engage in political action” (385). The Internet provides a space in which people are beyond the overt control of the state. Through the Internet, people can gain and share information that had previously been controlled by the state and its infamous Ministry of Information. The Internet connects Indonesians at home with Indonesians abroad and also links Indonesian society to broader global sources of information and social movement (ibid.).

Green (1999) also writes of the Internet’s role as a catalyst for social movement when noting that the Internet provides a forum for protest groups and publicity for resistance movements. Additionally, the Internet also is being employed as a powerful tool to link local surveillance with global audiences. “The Net, by providing linkages and space for information flows, has become a surveillance infrastructure...It disintermediates the norms employed by global media and often systematically evades the information blankets that national governments attempt to wrap dissident movements up in” (ibid. 39).

In contrast to Bunyavejchewin (2010) and Lim (2002), Green partially rejects panopticism by saying that it tends to undermine surveillance analysis and obscures the complex networks of power relations and resistances that the social implementation of surveillance technologies allow. In lieu of panopticism, he reintroduces Foucault's model of 'plague management' as an alternative to how we should conceive of surveillance. Within this framework, surveillance within a social setting is operated by multiple agents who themselves are open to the gaze of those surveyed. "This form of surveillance is messier, the gaze less pure, the information less clear" (Green 1999: 32).

The Internet as a Tool of Integration

Integration into a society is a vast and complex concept to study, especially since the concept of what it means to belong in a country is always shifting. As Grillo (2010) explains, our conception of integration, diversity, and difference is an ongoing process. It is beyond the scope of the current research to determine to what extent Eritrean refugees are integrated into Italian society. However, this research wishes to consider if the use of the Internet on the part of immigrants is involved in the process of integration into the host society. Heckman (2005) has offered a synthesis of immigrant integration processes within the European context. He divides integration into four types: structural, cultural, interactive, and identificational. I believe that the use of the Internet is most involved in 'cultural integration,' which concerns the

transmission and acquisition of knowledge, cultural standards, language competence, and behavior and attitudinal changes.

There is not a great deal of literature on the relationship between acculturation and Internet usage patterns of immigrants. One example is Chen (2010), who focused his study on the amount of time Chinese migrants in Singapore spent on websites of their home and host country and what this meant in terms of cultural adaptation. He found that spending more time on the websites of the home country had negative impacts on cultural adaptation. However, spending more time on the websites of the host country had no significant effect on adaptation. It was also found that immigrants who preferred to use English (the language of business in Singapore) on the Internet were more adaptive in terms of overall cultural adaptation. Although these are interesting findings, Chen does not determine the causal relationship between time spent on websites of the home and host countries and cultural adaptation. Are migrants more adapted because they access the host country's websites more often or do they access these websites more often because they are more adapted?

Weiskopf and Kissau (2008) studied the ways in which Russian immigrants in Germany and Israel used the Internet. They found that depending on immigrants' intentions and ways in which they use the Internet, its use can aid integration into the host society by supplying information, facilitating intercultural contact, and providing a means to take part in public life. On the other hand, it "can also hinder integration

when the Internet is used to ‘virtually’ live in the country of origin reducing the necessity to engage in real surroundings” (ibid. 112).

Thompson (2002) argues that having a more readily available connection to the ethnic language and culture of the home country via the Internet does not necessarily hinder acculturation. He cites revised theories of acculturation that suggest that the sense of replacing ethnic culture with the dominant culture of the host country is not a precondition for social assimilation.

In the case of refugees, resettlement - the process by which a refugee gradually re-establishes the feeling of control over their life - occurs in tandem with cultural integration. Siddiquee and Kagan’s (2006) study of African refugee women in the UK revealed that “in order to cope with the emotional and pragmatic constraints associated with settling in an asylum country, the refugee women technologically engaged in ways which were meaningful for them” (198). They did this by obtaining local community information from the Internet; using e-mail as a tool to communicate with formal services (e.g. housing associations); and searching for information to increase their employment prospects (in the form of training opportunities in the area).

Conclusions

The literature has shown that many migrants live transnational lives in which they sustain links between their countries of origin and country of settlement. This

practice is not new, but the advancements in transportation and communication technology since the late-20th century have increased the intensity and flexibility of these transnational links. Like most technologies, ICT is not equally accessible across the globe. Marginalized societies and individuals continue to be the last to receive access to ICT, like telephones and the Internet. This is neither necessarily good, nor bad because along with the benefits that access to ICT provides, there are also negative consequences. The increased connectivity provided by ICT allows some migrants to express love and concern for their families and friends at home. Transnational families can play a more interactive role in each other's lives thanks, in part, to ICT. However, the ease with which a loved one can be reached may also create problems, such as creating suspicions of infidelity and burdening migrants with requests for money that they do not always want or are able to give.

On the scale of diaspora, the literature has revealed that ICT has influenced the ways in which a diaspora imagines itself and the homeland. Transnational interactions between the homeland and the diaspora would exist even without the use of ICT. However, like communication across borders, the speed and possibilities of these interactions are increased when ICT enters the picture. Cyberspace has facilitated the participation of the diaspora with its nation-state and vice versa. In the case of Eritrea, Eritreans in diaspora have been able to contribute to the formation of a new nation. However, the Eritrean state has used the same cyberspace to survey its diaspora.

Finally, ICT use is not only involved in sustaining links between migrants and their home countries. The technology is also involved in the processes of integration or resettlement into the host country. In some cases ICT encourages these complex processes, in other cases, these processes may be hindered.

Chapter 5: Research Methods

In this chapter, I describe the site of the current research and then move on to a description of the various ethnographic methods used for the collection and analysis of the data.

Description of the Field Site: “Centro Elena”

The field site for this research is what I have called Centro Elena, in Rome, Italy. Centro Elena is a ‘center of second reception’⁷ which is the home of roughly 400 asylum-seekers who have all been granted some type of asylum. Housed in a former Catholic convent, Centro Elena became a refugee shelter in October 2007. Residents come from a variety of countries, with most residents coming from Afghanistan, Eritrea, and Somalia. The functioning of different centers of reception in Rome varies. Centro Elena allows residents to stay on the premises 24 hours a day and provides three meals a day. Only single men and women (i.e. those in Italy without spouses or children) are given residence in the Center. Other shelters in the city exclusively house families or women and may not permit residents to stay on the premises all day.

This experimental development in refugee care is Italy’s first ‘center of *second* reception’. In comparison to a ‘center of *first* reception,’ this type of center was

⁷ *centro di accoglienza* translates in English as ‘center of reception.’ In the US, these institutions would be more commonly referred to as refugee shelters.

designed to provide asylum-recipients with closer personal assistance than is typically offered at a center of first reception. The Center is under the authority of the *Comune di Roma* and the Ministry of the Interior. In addition to food and lodging, Centro Elena provides psychological and legal assistance. There are linguistic courses available, which the residents are strongly encouraged to participate in. The Center also provides other types of courses intended to facilitate the integration process, including a computing skills course and driver's license test preparation. On staff, are 'tutors' who closely follow the progress of the residents and attempt to guide each one towards autonomy. There is a "Back End" office, where the staff assists residents in finding work, internships, and housing. All of the staff of the Center work to give the residents assistance and orientation, however, it is largely the responsibility of the individual resident to take the steps necessary towards integration into Italian society (e.g. learning Italian, pursuing an internship, getting a job interview, passing the driver's exam, etc.). Other facilities in the structure include an Internet café, TV room, and dining hall.

Methodology

In addition to a review of scholarly literature related to my thesis questions, my analysis is founded on the results of three ethnographic techniques: informal interviews, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation. The data collection was conducted from July to September 2011. My access to the premises and residents who lived there was facilitated by an internship I did concurrently with

my research. Some of my duties as an assistant *operatore sociale* (social worker) included reading and writing notes in log books containing noteworthy events and happenings in the daily lives of the residents; checking sign-in sheets to see if residents had spent the night in the Center; accompanying security guards during periodic room inspection; and providing assistance to the residents in miscellaneous ways. For example, I gave an impromptu English lesson to a Russian woman and Afghan man and assisted an Eritrean woman to complete an online job CV. While my position as an assistant social worker provided me with a great deal of access to the world within Centro Elena, this role as an authority figure may have made some participants more guarded with their interview responses, knowing that I was in communication with various staff members. Nevertheless, I felt that most of the participants spoke to me rather openly.

I chose to interview Eritreans as a matter of both intellectual curiosity and convenience. Interviewing Eritreans was convenient because their numbers were high with respect to other nationalities at the Center. There were also an adequate number of both female and male potential participants. Afghanis represented the most numerous nationality at the Center, but this representation was exclusively male.

With the assistance of other social workers, I compiled a list of potential Eritrean interviewees. The list was limited to those that had a high enough proficiency in Italian or English (in the estimation of the social workers) so that an interview could be successfully conducted without too many linguistic constraints. Many refugees

have lived very traumatic and psychologically-damaging experiences and so great sensitivity had to be exercised when conducting interviews. In order to reduce psychological and emotional stress to the participants I first visited the ‘tutors.’

Tutors work closely with the residents in order to help them achieve their goals of eventual autonomy. They are trained in psychology or counseling and come to know the residents fairly well. For this reason, I first presented my interview questions to a tutor who advised me as to whether or not any of the questions might have caused unwanted stress to the participants. The tutor also helped me change some of the wording in the Italian version of the questionnaire in order to make the questions more comprehensible. Once my questionnaire was approved, I went to each tutor with my list of potential interviewees. I was advised against approaching some residents for interviews in cases when the tutor felt that such an interview would cause too much stress for the individual. Consequently, I only requested interviews from residents who had been approved by the tutors.

With my list of approved potential interviewees in hand, I went to find those individuals. The social workers assisted me in identifying the people I was searching for. Some were identified in the hallways, but many were found in the dining hall during lunch or dinner. Once identified, I explained the purpose of my research to the individual and requested an interview.

A semi-structured interview was utilized so that participants could expand on any topic they felt was relevant, yet followed a preconceived set of interview

questions (Bernard 2002). Interviews began with background questions relating to education, work of their parents, whether they grew up in a rural or urban setting, their work experience before coming to Italy, other countries lived in prior to coming to Italy, and the route that they took in order to arrive at Centro Elena. I asked all participants if they felt close to people in Eritrea in order to gain some insight on whether or not a “closeness” could be achieved or maintained through the use of ICT. Later questions asked about the types of ICT they utilized, frequency of this use, who they were communicating with, and difficulties encountered while using the various technology. I also asked questions regarding Internet use. Finally, some questions were asked about courses they had taken since coming to Italy (computer or other types) and if they ever sent money to Eritrea.

Prior to beginning the interviews, I asked participants if I could record the interviews with a digital recorder so that I could review them later for my analysis. Most, but not all, consented to be recorded. I ensured the participants that I would protect their identities and so pseudonyms are always used throughout this text. Interviews typically lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours. They were conducted in English or Italian depending on the preference of the interviewee. Some of the participants spoke English because it is the language of instruction in Eritrean schools. At times participants would switch between Italian and English, even within the same sentence.

In total, 14 males and 7 females were interviewed. They ranged in age from 22 to 38 years old. They had been away from their families from 2.5 to 9 years with an

average of 4 years. Participants had been in Italy from 2 to 6 years with an average of 3.4 years.⁸ They had been at Centro Elena from 1 month to 4 years with an average of 18.8 months.⁹ Further background on the participants will be explained in later chapters and presented in Table 1.

Recorded interviews were later transcribed and coded in accordance with grounded theory which is used to identify categories and concepts that emerge from the text. These concepts are then linked into substantive and formal theories (Bernard 2002). In cases where recording was not consented, field notes were coded in a similar fashion to transcribed interviews. Once the data was coded, I created a spreadsheet in which various themes and categories of information were written in columns headed by the name of each participant. This allowed for easier comparison between individuals and reference to the data.

Because of my interest in knowing how the participants were utilizing the Internet, I thought it would be informative to observe some of the interviewees while they were on the computer. With their consent, I sat next to them as they used the Internet. The Centro Elena Internet Point provided an excellent location for this observation. A couple of the observation sessions were also done while participants used personal laptops. A total of ten observations were done which lasted from 15

⁸ I make the distinction between time away from their families and time in Italy because often months, or even years, pass from the time the refugees leave home to the time they arrive in Italy.

⁹ When asylum-seekers first come to Centro Elena, they are projected to stay no longer than 10 months. However, according to Centro Elena staff, few leave the Center in less than 10 months.

Table 1: Participants of Study (July-September 2011)

Name	Age, Sex	From	Education	In Italy since	Time at Centro Elena	Language of Interview
Abraham	27, M	Debarwa (Eritrean city)	3 yrs univ. (Meteorology)	2008	3 months	Italian
Berhan	32, M	Asmara	BA (History)	2008	1 month	English
Brei	27, M	Asmara	3 yrs univ. (Nursing)	2008	6 months	English
Dawit	24, M	Keren (Eritrean city), then Sudan	Graduated secondary school	2007	8 months	Italian (some English)
Firezgi	26, M	Countryside of Eritrea	Until 11 th year of school	2007	2 months	Italian
Daniel	34, M	Asmara	Diploma in Automechanics	2008	3 years	Italian
Fatima	26, F	Small town in Eritrea, then Sudan	No formal education	2008	3 years	Italian
Getet	25, F	Khartoum	Until 11 yrs old	2008	2 years	Italian
Lehem	22, F	Born Addis Ababa, then Asmara	Until 9 th year of school	2008	1+ year	Italian
Sara	28, F	Born Asmara, then Addis Ababa, then Eritrea	Until 12 th year of school (no diploma)	2007	4 years	Italian (some English)
Selam	28, F	Town outside Asmara	Diploma in Tailory	2008	2 years	Italian
Joy	29, M	Countryside of Eritrea	Univ. (Applied Biology)	2008	2 years	English
Kifle	31, M	Asmara	Graduated secondary school	2008	3 years	English (some Italian)

Name	Age, Sex	From	Education	In Italy since	Time at Centro Elena	Language of Interview
Michael	33, M	Countryside of Eritrea, then Sudan, then Eritrea	BS (Geology)	2009	1 year 2 months	English
Pietros	38, M	Keren, then Asmara	BS (Mathematics)	2008	1 year	English
Semere	38, M	Keren, then Addis Ababa, then Khartoum	Diploma in Metal Grinding	2005	1 year	Italian
Simon	27, M	Asmara	Diploma in Surveying	2008	1 year 3 months	Italian
Zion	28, F	Asmara	Finished secondary school (no diploma)	2006	2 years 3 months	Italian
Tesfalem	26, M	Mendefera (Eritrean city)	Univ. (Mathematics)	2006	2 years	English
Walitta	24, F	Addis Ababa, then Sudan	Finished 7 th year of school	2008	8 months	Italian
Yusef	25, M	Countryside of Eritrea	Finished 11 th year of school	2009	2 years	Italian

minutes to 1.5 hours. I allowed the participants to use the Internet with little interference from myself. At times, I would ask about who they were communicating with while using an online Messenger. A limitation of such an observation is that my presence could have changed their online behavior in some cases.

Participant observation was also practiced during the many hours that I spent in various settings within Centro Elena; from the hallways and dining hall to the social workers' offices and Internet Point. Informal interviews with residents and staff (e.g.

language teachers, tutors, social workers, supervisors, and Back End office workers) also informed my study.

Finally, a note about interviewees' quotations found in the following chapters: many of the quotes have been translated from Italian to English. Quotes originally spoken in English have been left relatively unaltered, with minor changes in grammar to allow for easier readability. When translating from Italian to English, I made every attempt to preserve (what I perceived as) the intended meaning of the phrase. I must make the caveat that during some interviews, one party was not speaking their mother-tongue language and during other interviews, both parties were not speaking their mother-tongue languages. Therefore, it is possible that questions and answers had been misinterpreted at times. For this reason, I used several follow up questions in order to reduce the occurrence of linguistic misunderstandings.

Chapter 6: The Flight towards Italy

Before I begin my discussion of the use of ICT on the part of Eritrean refugees in Centro Elena, it would be informative to describe how they came to find themselves in Rome. The chapter begins with accounts of the Eritrean National Service, one of the principal reasons why so many young Eritreans leave the country. This is followed by a description of the refugees' journey through Sudan and Libya. From that point, I will relate what it was like for some of the participants to cross the sea towards Italian shores. It will be made clear that the entire journey is a perilous one. Once in Italy, the refugees enter into the asylum reception process, which is slow and uncertain. The chapter concludes with an analytical discussion, which makes some more sense of the data and brings to light a darker side of Information and Communication Technology.

Most of the participants of this research come from an urban area of Eritrea, especially Asmara. Only four came from the Eritrean countryside. Others lived in Khartoum, Sudan and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The history of violence and political tension between Ethiopia and Eritrea caused some of the participants and their families to move between Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Sudan. For example, Lehem, the youngest of the participants, was born in Ethiopia but she and her family moved to Asmara because of the Border Conflict. Sara, on the other hand was born in Eritrea and later moved to Ethiopia. However, when the Border Conflict broke out, her

family was deported back to Eritrea. When Michael was four years old, his family moved to Sudan in order to escape the violence of the 30-Year War. Later, they were able to return to Eritrea.

The National Service

In order to avoid causing unnecessary stress, I did not ask the participants their reasons for leaving their homes. However, some of the reasons were divulged voluntarily during the course of the interviews. A little over half of those interviewed made some mention of the National Service (NS) or military during their interviews. Abraham, Berhan, Firezgi, Joy, Kifle, Michael, Simon, and Yusef all told me explicitly that they were in the military and I expect that others were as well. None of the respondents had anything positive to say about their experiences in the NS. They were obligated to enter military training after their 11th year of secondary school or before receiving their degree from the university. A few were not given their academic credentials because they had not completed the mandatory service.

Kifle served in the military for two years before escaping. Surprisingly, he did not leave the country immediately and worked in a metal workshop for some time before leaving Eritrea for Sudan. Zion went to Sudan preemptively in order to avoid going into the military.

Zion: I didn't want to go into the military.

MO: Why didn't you want to go?

Z: Because in my country, the military is a little difficult. They never let you leave to go to work. You never get to see your family. I didn't want a life like this; [to stay in the military] for all my life.

Berhan also said that there was no opportunity for young people to have a career because they had to stay in the military. Following his military training, he taught middle school and high school History and Geography as part of his Service.

Berhan: There is not a possibility of going to work actually because people are forced to work within the government; forced labor, unpaid labor in the name of the National Service.

Brei told me that people were given some type of pay but it depended on the type of work that you did for the government. He had training in nursing and was able to work as a nurse for his NS.

MO: What type of work did you do for the NS?

B: Just I was working in nursing.

MO: Do they pay you?

B: Yeah, of course.

MO: Because somebody told me that when you do work for the NS, they don't pay you.

B: No. There are so many...there are so different types of NS. Just if you are in the...for example, like me...they pay you a little bit of money. It's not much. A little bit. Because you are facing [working] with human beings.

MO: So it depends on the job.

B: Yeah. It depends on the job.

It seemed that the more fortunate ones were able to serve out their National Service doing a job related to what they had trained for or been educated in. Michael was not as fortunate as his work assignment was only vaguely related to his studies in Geology.

MO: And then, after you got your degree, did you work?

Michael: Yeah. Actually before I finished studying...the usual thing you have to make is National Service. So they have assigned me to work with a company which constructs roads and bridges and

makes cement walls and asphalt works. So I was working with this for three years and a half...then I have made military training also in SAWA for six months like all Eritreans do.¹⁰

MO: It's mandatory?

M: Yeah. But all these years I was not working. What I mean is I was making my service. For about four years I was serving in the country. They pay me pocket money for the service. I was actually working but I was paid with service money.

MO: Did you work before you left Eritrea?

Simon: Yes, I worked but always under the control of the military. Because it's different. If I tell you that I worked, you might think that they paid me...but they didn't pay me anything.

MO: No pay? What type of work do you have to do for the military?

S: It depends. If you are lucky, maybe you will work in what you have taken your degree or diploma in....But you can't say, "I have a degree in this and I want to work doing this." You can't say this.

MO: And in your case?

S: Really, I was fortunate because they found me work in what I had my degree in.

MO: And what was that?

S: Geometry...I did surveying. I designed roads and the houses.

MO: When you left Eritrea, did you have intentions to go to Europe?

S: No. The only thing I was thinking was how I could get out of the military...because I stayed too bad. The military is too difficult. One day they tell you to do this and this and this. Then there is nothing to make you develop your personality [personhood?]. Me, like a man, I have to develop my personality. But under the control of the military, you can't do anything. There's a meeting every day and every month. You're always exhausted. It makes you sick and so many people think about how they can get out of the country.

Yusef was thrown in jail during his time in the military service because he was suspected of helping two men to escape. He says that they did "a lot of things" to him. I wonder if torture or corporal punishment was a part of those "things."

Yusef: I tried to escape from that place. I was there as a guard...everyone has to take their turn as a guard. During my turn, two people escaped. They asked me "Why did you let them escape?" But I didn't see them. They told me that they had to go and pee. I couldn't say "Where are you going?" They [the people in charge] told me that I had helped them escape. For that reason, they did a lot of things to me and so I had to escape myself. But I didn't succeed. They caught me because I didn't

¹⁰ The SAWA military training center is located in the west of Eritrea about 18 miles from the Sudanese border.

know the way for going to Sudan. The border was near and when I tried to escape, they caught me and put me in jail for two weeks and then ten months in another place. Then one day, I managed to escape.

MO: From prison??

Y: Yeah. I escaped from prison and managed to get to Sudan.

From Sudan to Libya

Once in Sudan, the participants stayed anywhere from a few weeks to a few years. During this time, some of them worked while others bided their time, waiting for an opportunity to move on towards Libya. Kifle said that it was difficult to find work in Sudan and he had to live off of the money sent to him by his brother who had been living in Italy for 30 years. Simon told me that there are many Eritrean refugees in Sudan. He requested asylum there in order to get his documents. He said that if an Eritrean is caught without documents, they send you back to Eritrea; “back to the persecution.” Getet also told me about the dangers that Eritreans face in Sudan. She said that the police would raid their home and ask for money. If there was no money, they would take jewelry. Those that had nothing to pay would go to jail.

Like Simon, Tesfalem also said that Eritreans were in danger of being apprehended by the authorities while in Sudan. He also explained that it costs a great deal of money by American standards, let alone Eritrean standards, to cross the borders illegally.

Tesfalem: I just stayed in Sudan for two months because I have to search for a way to go to Libya.

MO: What does that mean, to search for a way to go to Libya?

T: You know, when I leave my country, Sudan is not safe for us, especially for Eritreans because if we stay there our government can take us to our country. So I have to hide. I have to search. Then I have to leave immediately to another safe place. That’s why I got some people who can help me to go to Libya and finally I arrived in Libya.

MO: So you had to find some people to help you? (Yeah.) Are they Eritrean, the other people?

T: Yeah, most of them. They are Eritreans but they are in Sudan. They speak Arabic.

MO: Do you have to pay them to help you?

T: Yeah, of course.

MO: And then you went to Libya for two weeks and then what did you do from Libya?

T: The same process. In Libya, I search for some people to help me to...

MO: And you have to pay them as well?

T: Yeah, of course. I paid them.

MO: Is it expensive to go from Eritrea to Italy?

T: Yeah. It's almost \$5000.

One thing that became clear was that the journey to Europe could not be accomplished without money. One had to pay to cross each border and had to pay traffickers in order to cross the Sahara Desert and finally the Mediterranean Sea. Kifle told me one had to pay \$2000 or more to cross into Sudan and \$1200 more to cross into Libya.

There was always the danger of being robbed along the way. Thieves in Sudan and Libya single out foreigners with the expectation that they must be traveling with money or have a family member abroad that can send money for their release. Selam told me that in the Sahara it is very dangerous to carry money, a phone, or even a list of phone numbers. One should not carry any documents with them. It is important to not provide a way for people to identify you as a foreigner. Even talking on the phone in public can be dangerous because people can hear your language or accent and identify you as a foreigner. Selam said that thieves will go through your pockets and find your phone with contact information for people in other countries. They will

demand that you call the people and ask them for money. Selam had to hide her money in her shoes. She would avoid speaking in public, so as not to reveal her nationality, and limited herself to short conversations in the supermarket or with taxi drivers. Corrupt police will also arrest foreigners and put them in prison until they, or their families, are able to pay for their release.

Fatima, her father, and brothers were captured in Sudan and sent to prison. They slept on the floor and were given little food. During her time there, she was raped and became pregnant. Somehow, she managed to escape and found refuge with her mother's friend during her pregnancy and the birth of her daughter. When her daughter was two years old, Fatima left her in the care of her mother's friend and continued towards Libya. The journey through the Sahara took 21 days during which men in her traveling party were cattle-whipped. She was hit and burnt; others died.

Similar dangers come in the form of traffickers that will take their clients halfway into the desert and then demand more money to continue the journey. Lehem was on her way towards Tripoli when her "guide" stopped in Kufra, a particularly isolated Libyan city in the middle of the Sahara, and asked her and her companions for more money in addition to the \$400 she had initially paid. They were closed inside a house in an isolated area until they paid the money to continue. Once they paid, their route was diverted again and they were taken to another house. They arrived there during the night and could not see anything. When they awoke in the morning, they found themselves in a shack with a metal roof and writing on the interior walls. The

messages said things such as: do not pay the men, bury your money, do not go out alone, and do not believe the man in charge. According to Lehem, these messages, written in Arabic, English, Tigrinya, and Amharic, had been left by other refugees. The people hid their money in their hair and under the earth. However, she was then forced to pay another \$400 to continue the journey. Those who did not have the money were in tears as they were left behind. That was not the last time she was asked for more money. In all, she had paid \$1200 to arrive in Tripoli.

Dawit's interview also spoke of the practice of traffickers to demand more money in the middle of the trip.

Dawit: I paid 800 for Sudan. You give it to a person. After one day, you are given to another person. If you don't pay, you are left behind. It's a business. You are afraid and you pay...a lot of money. If you find a good person, you pay 800 and you enter the country immediately. When you find a bad person, you pay 2000, 3000. People are not all the same.

Crossing the Mediterranean Sea

Once in Libya, the participants tried to find a way to cross the sea towards Europe. Their time in this country was also filled with danger and hardships. Kifle told me that 24 hours would not be enough to recount to me how bad Libya was. He was there for three and a half years because he had been captured while beginning his voyage on a boat towards Europe. After 10-15 hours at sea, the boat failed to work properly and the authorities were called. He and the 1,200 other Eritrean passengers

were put in prison.¹¹ He told me of an agreement between the Libyan and Eritrean government to return the refugees back to Eritrea. The prisoners were told, by an Eritrean ambassador, to write their information on a document (possibly an admission of guilt for abandoning the military) so that they could be repatriated. The prisoners believed that returning to Eritrea would mean further imprisonment or death. They refused and called a hunger strike. Afterwards, an Italian delegate from the UNHCR visited the “prison” and improvements were made to the facility, such as more soap, medicine, and satellite TV. Little by little, groups of refugees were flown to Italy, including Kifle.

Kifle could not emphasize enough the horrors of Libya. He said that in Libya, “a knife is as common as a pen in the pocket.” He told me that people were bought and sold “like goods.” People are imprisoned and forced to call loved ones in other countries to beg for money for their release. Those who cannot pay, remain incarcerated.

Most mentioned Tripoli (another former Italian colony) as their launching point towards Europe. They had to stay there for varying lengths of time, from two days to a month and a half. This depended on the time it took to find a trafficker or the time needed to procure the money to pay the trafficker. For example, Firezgi had to wait until his uncle sent him \$400 via Western Union. Simon waited inside a house for two weeks while he waited for the money to arrive from his relatives. The participants reported paying from \$1000 to \$1300 for the crossing.

¹¹ Kifle refers to a prison, although, it may have been a detention center.

Besides the time needed to work out financial issues, people also had to wait for a time when the conditions at sea were right to cross safely. Hamood (2006) reported that boats leave Libya after three basic conditions are met: enough passengers have been gathered to fill the boat; a seaworthy boat has been acquired; and the weather is suitable. For the traffickers, the latter two conditions may be compromised as long as the first is met (cited in Lucht 2012). Dawit told me that he had had to stay in a large house with between 50 and 80 people, waiting for the weather conditions to be right. He said that June or July were good times to cross. Joy explained that he was fortunate because his arrival in Libya was timed well.

Joy: [From Sudan,] it was 10 days journey for me and I arrived in Tripoli. It was a 10-day journey, fortunately! It was June and I have to arrive at my destination...because usually, in the summertime, the sea is a bit calm and in order to cross the sea, you have to arrive on time and I just managed. I don't know how to put it...it was a matter of chance, in fact. And I wasn't faced with that much difficulty and I crossed the Sahara peacefully and I arrived in Tripoli.

The Mediterranean Sea is very calm in the summertime. The waves are calm and for this reason, you have to arrive on time. In order to cross using these small boats, you have to arrive in time.

MO: When is the sea too rough to cross?

J: Too rough? I haven't faced that kind of situation but they used to say it's a bit difficult from September until February. It's very little time the sea is calm, especially in July and August and sometimes they cross in September. That's all they used to say, actually...as for me, I left in June and, fortunately for me, it was very OK.

MO: So you took a small boat and where did you land?

J: I stayed in Tripoli for almost one month and a half. Even in that situation, you have to get someone, the right person...the traffickers. There are many traffickers over there. You have to get someone who is reliable. So fortunately, I got some friends over there and I joined them. And from then, we waited almost one month and a half in order to get the right time and on the 29th we were gathered from the central city and we departed on the 30th of July. It's almost 3 years now...2008, I started my journey in the morning and I arrived here after 22 hours...I arrived in Lampedusa.

Barbara Mulinano, a UNHCR worker on Lampedusa reported that the most landings on the island are from July through October, when the conditions at sea are the best for crossing ("Italy: Surviving the High Seas" 2011).

Some of the participants crossed the sea in small crowded rubber rafts, while others went by bigger boats with two levels. Getet and Selam were on one of the smaller rubber crafts with between 60 and 70 people. Simon, Joy, and Brei told me that there had been between 250 and 370 people aboard their larger boats. Brei told me that most of the people on his boat were Eritrean and Ethiopians. The others were from Somalia and Nigeria. His boat had three captains: two Libyans and one Egyptian. They left Libya early in the morning around 4 AM. After about seven hours at sea, they entered rough seas.

Brei: There were a lot of waves and a big complication. Then we were praying. We are calling to the Italian [authorities]...I don't know, but there are some people...calling to Italy and the Italians told that it's far from the international sea. Please come to the international sea and we come to you. Because there is a border line. If you don't reach to the international border line, no one can get you.

[Brei drew a map of the sea on my notebook]

If you reach the international sea, Italy will come and help you. If you call to Libya, Libya will come and take you back. So we don't like this one. We would have to pay again our money. Actually every person pray, even the Muslims, even the Christians, everybody. We are just praying in our language. So after four hours or six hours, the sea...the waves stopped at that time. When we were crossing the sea...at that time there is the Ramadan, like today¹². The Muslims don't eat all time...the whole day. At that time there was Ramadan. So nobody brings to you water or bread or something. And when we was crossing the sea, there was no water, nothing to eat in the ship. There is almost 15, 16 children on the ship. The children are crying because they wanted water and food. And then...so complicated now. We are almost crossing and then the waves stopped after four hours. And then we are reaching the international sea and we are calling to the Italians...helicopter comes above and they pick us up and it returns back and there is two big ships in the Italian and they brought us.

In other words, the trouble at sea began when they were still in Libyan waters. Apparently, they had to enter international waters before the Italian coast guard could rescue them. They did not want to return to Libya because they had already paid for the trip and did not want to pay again. Although Brei did not mention them, drowning

¹² Interview was done during Ramadan.

at sea or being detained like Kifle had been were likely graver risks than losing the money he had paid.

The time it takes to cross from Tripoli to Lampedusa varies depending on the conditions at sea and the type and condition of the sea vessel. Those that told me said that their voyage lasted from 22 hours to a day and a half. All but two of the participants in this research landed on Lampedusa. Michael and Semere landed in Sicily, which is farther north. Semere told me that his voyage had lasted three days. Reports from other studies provide examples of migrant boats getting lost and drifting about for days and even weeks (Lucht 2012).

Arrival in Italy

Once on Lampedusa, the refugees asked for asylum. To begin the asylum process, people must be fingerprinted. Lehem did not want to give her fingerprints. While in Libya, her brother had told her on the phone that life in Italy was hard and so she told the officials that she wanted to continue on towards England. However, she was forced to give her fingerprints if she wanted to enter Europe. Despite this, Lehem told me that the Italians are “good.”

Some people, like Brei, were immediately given first aid for dehydration and other symptoms. Some reported receiving food, shirts, socks, underwear, soap, and calling cards from the staff of the CPTA (Center for Temporary Permanence and Acceptance). Walitta used her card to call friends in Sudan to tell them that she had arrived safely. Brei had not told his parents that he was going to cross the sea in order

to avoid causing them distress. Instead, he had only told his sister that he would be crossing. When he received his card at Lampedusa, he called his parents and told them that he had successfully made it over the sea. Getet called her mother and children. Daniel called his brother in Saudi Arabia who had warned him not to cross the Mediterranean because it is dangerous and many had died.

Pietros told me that there were “too many refugees” in the CPTA where he was, about 250. I do not know if he meant to emphasize the quantity of people or wanted to tell me that the place was overcrowded. However, none of the people that I talked to complained of inhumane or unsanitary conditions. Just like Lehem, Daniel and Yusef had positive things to say about the Italians that received them in Lampedusa; things like the Italians were “good,” had helped them, and had saved their lives. Yusef stayed in a hotel that had been converted into a space for refugees. He said that they treated the refugees well and put him in a room with three other people (which he considered an adequate arrangement). However, not all refugee “camps” were as hospitable. For instance, after Lampedusa, Joy was sent to a Red Cross camp near Rome. He told me that it was crowded (more than 700 people), disorderly, and there were incidents of fighting.

Joy stayed in Lampedusa for one day and no one reported staying longer than 12 days.¹³ They were then sent to “centers of reception” in various parts of Italy in order to wait for their asylum claims to be processed. All of these centers of reception

¹³ Not all participants told me how long they had been in Lampedusa. Of those who told me, the average time was seven days.

were in central or southern Italy. The time it took for the participants to receive their documents varied from two months to two years. At that time they were granted some type of *permesso di soggiorno*, either for humanitarian protection, subsidiary protection, or political asylum.

After receiving their documents, most were sent out to make a life for themselves. The staff of Centro Elena explained that, after receiving their documents, refugees can make a request for a place in another center of reception. People must sometimes wait until a shelter can be found that has space available. Rome, itself, has several different types of shelters. There are shelters for unaccompanied minors, shelters exclusively for families, shelters exclusively for women, shelters exclusively for single adults, or shelters with a mix of these subsets. Some shelters, like Centro Elena, allow residents to stay all day and provide three meals a day. Others require the residents to leave the shelter during the day and may not serve any meals. There are organizations like Caritas, a Catholic organization that is known for their charity work, which runs “soup kitchens” every day for those that do not have another place to eat. Some of the participants in this research were given a place in a center of reception immediately upon their request. Some were transferred between multiple shelters before finding themselves at Centro Elena. Still some were forced to fend for themselves.

The Casa Occupata

Simon had to wait six months before he was offered a place in another shelter. He may have slept in a *casa occupata* like Firezgi, Semere, and Zion. After leaving the Red Cross camp, Firezgi lived with some Eritreans in a *casa occupata* in the Roman quarter of Anagnina. He told me that they actually had running water and electricity. Later he tried to claim asylum in Norway and when he was sent back to Italy he returned to this place until his request for a center of reception was granted.

After receiving his documents, Semere lived in a *casa occupata* for a month with immigrants from countries such as Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia. He told me that it was an “ugly” place that had once been an office for the railway company. They slept on the floor and did not have running water or electricity. He told me that some of the people had been there for three years. After a month, he was given a place in a shelter in Rieti, a city about 100 km north-east of Rome.

After receiving her documents, Zion had little choice but to stay in a *casa occupata* on Via Prenestina. She told me that there were many Eritreans there, along with Sudanese and other immigrants. She said that it was very disgusting and that she, too, slept on the floor for two or three months. The building did not have electricity or water. She was able to leave after finding a job as a domestic worker in which she lived in her employer’s house.

Discussion

The most often mentioned push factor for this group of refugees was a desire to escape or avoid the National Service. Participants felt that it was exploitative and what amounted to forced labor. They saw it as a never-ending servitude to the state that would deny them a chance to pursue a career of their choosing. As Simon put it, you cannot “develop your personality...like a man, I have to develop my personality...under the control of the military, you can’t do anything.” I interpret this to mean that people like Simon are denied an opportunity to feel realized in some way. A part of their personhood is taken away when people feel that they do not have a choice in how they live and work. Additionally, people are paid a small allowance which, I imagine, also limits their choices for the present and future.

Some of the more fortunate participants in the study were given assignments related to their educational backgrounds while others were delegated to more strenuous labor. Whatever the assignment, it was not voluntary and desertion meant time in prison or, I suspect, corporal punishment. In the end, such conditions seemed to be a major push factor in their decisions to flee the country. It is possible that some of the participants left for other reasons, such as religious persecution, but those reasons did not emerge during the interviews. In Chapter 7, I will explain some of the pull factors that may have incited the participants to head towards Europe.

It became clear early on, that one needed a substantial amount of money to make it to Europe. Corrupt authorities need to be paid at each border and traffickers

need to be paid to make it across the desert and the sea. Considering a GNI per capita of \$340 in Eritrea (The World Bank 2010), the \$1000-1300 needed solely for the sea crossing is an exorbitant sum for the average Eritrean. Therefore, a journey that can potentially cost a few thousand dollars cannot be afforded by most Eritreans. Monzini (2007) estimated that the cost of the journey using forged documents and flying by airplane to be about \$7,000. Therefore, the participants in this study fall somewhere between a person that cannot afford to flee the country and a person that can go a perceivably safer, yet more expensive, route.

It is also interesting to note that most of the participants come from urban areas of the country as opposed to rural areas. I account for this phenomenon with two hypotheses. The first is that people who live in urban areas tend to have more money than rural-dwellers. This goes back to the previous argument about having enough money to pay border guards and traffickers. The second hypothesis is that people in rural areas may not have the same access to social networks which would provide them a means to escape. It is likely that not every village has a person who knows the “right” border guard to pay off. Reyneri (2001) has also found that African immigrants to Europe are not the poorest people from their countries. They may be relatively disadvantaged, but have the material and cultural resources necessary for the costs and hardships presented by emigration (cited in Lucht 2012).

Stringent restrictions on immigration enacted by the EU coupled with the desire of refugees to make the journey have created a large and profitable industry for

human traffickers. Refugees and other types of immigrants provide a demand for the services that the traffickers and corrupt officials readily supply. Rather than deterring people from migrating, legal constraints against leaving and entering countries merely force people to leave and enter those countries in more risky ways. As Monzini (2007) points out, if it becomes too difficult to move people along one route, another will be found. Traffickers do not have to adhere to regulations about how many people can be safely put into a bus or boat. There are no rules about how often people must be allowed water or food. If a person is raped or beaten, there is no authority that can be alerted. According to some of the above testimony, authority figures, like police, sometimes use the same tactics of extortion as the traffickers. Eritreans, who have left their countries illegally, cannot go to the authorities for help; such an action would result in repatriation and probable imprisonment. Therefore, the Eritreans in this research put themselves at great risk. As some of the testimonies above relate, not all of them went through the experience unscathed. However, they fared better than the many that do not make it through the experience alive.

Selam, Lehem, Dawit, and Kifle all mentioned the dangers associated with being captured by traffickers or corrupt police. People are held hostage until their families are able to pay for their release. Other reports support the testimonies of the participants in this study. Father Mussie Zerai, who heads a Rome-based refugee charity, says Eritreans, captured in Egypt's Sinai desert, are tortured and forced to phone relatives for ransoms of up to \$10,000 (BBC News 2011). Two Eritrean women were kidnapped for a ransom of \$40,000 each. Kidnappers would call the

victims' families and let them hear the cries of torture as they demanded money (Yagna 2012). There are additional reports of Eritrean refugees being abducted in Sudan and sold to human traffickers in the Sinai desert. They are then held for months, tortured, and threatened until their relatives manage to pay their ransom (Conrad 2012).

I use these accounts to highlight a darker side of the use of ICT, in this case cellular phones. The connectivity to loved ones afforded by cell phones has the potential to be used as a weapon. Arguably, the kidnappers would not be able to extort money so effectively if it were not for the communication technology that allows people to be connected so easily. A ransom note would be unable to relate the audible cries of a loved one in pain. Even the list of "contacts" saved in people's cell phones offer a faster and easier way for kidnappers to find people who will pay for the victims' release. From this perspective, one can appreciate Selam's reported apprehension about carrying a phone or list of phone numbers in the Sahara.

The testimonies of the participants in this study have supported many of Monzini's (2007) findings about the sea crossing between Libya and Lampedusa. This is the route that almost all of the participants traveled. Some of the participants were able to make the voyage with few problems while others ran into problems in the middle of the sea. It is clear that not all of the boats are in good condition or adequately equipped to reach European shores. According to Melissa Fleming, a UNHCR spokeswoman, one in ten boats sink during the voyage (UNHCR: Boat

Ordeal 2012). Therefore, it is a very risky endeavor. The current research contributes to the literature with first-hand accounts of the journey from those who survived.

Although the CPTAs in Lampedusa have been criticized in the past (Andrijasevic 2009), the sentiments of the participants in this study seemed to be that they were treated well during their time at Lampedusa. However, I recognize that the people that I spoke with are those that made it through the asylum reception process to the point of being granted some type of asylum. I did not have the opportunity to speak to those whose asylum requests were denied or not heard. Therefore, I am unable to draw any general conclusions about the overall conditions in Lampedusa.

What I can conclude from this group of refugees, is that the asylum reception process is slow and uncertain. Again, my participants reported receiving their *permessi di soggiorno* after two months to two years. This may speak to the extent to which the Italian asylum reception system has been taxed by the large influx of asylum-seekers in recent years, as well as the consequences of the Dublin Convention, which makes Italy responsible for all those that enter the EU on its shores. As mentioned in Chapter 3, most of the participants in this study belong to the large wave of Eritrean refugees to Italy in 2008. For someone not familiar with the refugee situation in Italy, it may be somewhat surprising that people who entered at that time are still within the refugee reception system. However, it is also important to note that many factors contribute to how long a person stays within the reception system,

factors both internal and external. Refugees from the wave of 2008 who have not yet achieved autonomy may very well be in the minority.

The asylum reception system is uncertain because those that have been granted asylum cannot always receive a place to stay once they have their documents. It is difficult to know how long one must wait before being granted a place within a center of reception. Refugees, who do not have as much control in their destination, are more vulnerable to homelessness and poverty because they do not have a social network to support them in their new surroundings. While voluntary migrants may choose a city where they have an uncle or cousin that can help them to settle in, refugees do not always have as much say in where they will be sent. Even those who are given a place in a center of reception may be transferred to another center in another city or different region of the same city. This can make finding and keeping work difficult. For example, one of the participants had to give up a job because he was transferred to Centro Elena, which is on the outskirts of the city. His ride to work could no longer come to pick him up in such an out-of-the-way destination. One consequence of the slowness and uncertainty of the asylum reception system has been the need for some to sleep on the street or in a *casa occupata*.

The next chapter will explain the impact of ICT use on the imaginations of refugees both before and after they make the perilous journey described above.

Chapter 7: The Relationship between ICT Use and the Formation of Imaginaries

The way that people imagine the global North is shaped by several things. No doubt that media like film and TV play a large part in forming Eritreans' imaginaries of what life in Europe is like. Additionally, migrants that return to their countries of origins with clothing, electronics, and the other spoils of migration entice others in the country to seek out a similar path. Those in sending countries that see their neighbors prospering financially because of the remittance money that they receive from a loved one abroad begin to imagine that work and wealth are readily found in Europe or North America (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000; Smith 2006; Stephen 2007). Information taken from the use of ICT is also involved in the formation of migrants' ideas about how a place will be. Among some of the participants in this research, their image of what life would be like in Europe was altered once they had lived for some time in Italy.

Kifle: Believe me. All the people that escape from Eritrea, who are working in Sudan, they have in their mind that they want to arrive in Europe. They don't want to stay in Sudan. I was living and working in Sudan. It was not different from Eritrea...it was the same.

Pietros: It's difficult. Many people expect that in Rome, in Europe...many people, the Africans, they expect that Europe and foreign countries will automatically...you will have a job, you will get money, then the living system changes automatically. But it is not. In some countries maybe. Because there is a globalization. Europe is not like 30 years back. It is not like this. I mean the European countries. For example, if you see in Italy...many Italians, they don't have a job...many, many. Even the Italians have a problem.

The utilization of ICT informs refugees about the destination, but also about the journey. This was discovered after my interview with Berhan, during which he revealed a use of ICT that I had not considered before. He would use Messenger in order to communicate with friends in Europe who had already fled from Eritrea. Through his online conversations he was able to better plan his route towards Italy. It is reasonable to assume that without the information obtained through ICT use, the journey would have been much more uncertain and problematic.

MO: Did you use the computer before you came to Italy?

Berhan: Yes, since I was in Eritrea. Even I was using it more when I was there, especially Yahoo Messenger. Because you need a lot of information when...you know, life there was very hard. We were under a lot of oppression from the government. And there was economic oppression...so you need to go out of the country. And you have to ask a lot of people, a lot of friends who are out of the country, who live in Sudan, in Libya, Italy, and other parts of Europe. You can become addicted with that kind of Yahoo Messenger most of the time. In my country, most of the time, we use Yahoo Messenger to chat. You always want to [] to survive and chat with them.

MO: You're telling me that to get information about Eritrea, you have to talk to people outside of Eritrea?

B: No. I mean you want to have a picture of how people are living outside of Eritrea. Everyone, most of the time, the young generation, we are always forced to go away outside of the country because of the situation there. So you want a lot of information from people who are outside the country already. In Europe, America, Sudan, Libya. The ways that you have to follow, you have to ask in advance. That's why.

MO: Because you are planning to leave the country, you're asking how things are in other countries?

B: Yeah, how you can go out. For instance, going to Italy, to ask them about the way from Libya, the Sahara...all these things...the travels and these things. And they can give you information. How you can manage and how you can find people to help you to go. For instance, from Sudan to Libya. How you can come. What you can do. The money you need. These things...all these things.

MO: And when you were thinking about leaving your country, did the information that you took online benefit you?

B: Yeah, lots...a lot. Because while you are in your country you have, most of the time, a good picture [positive image] of the life outside the country, but when you consult the people outside of the country, they tell you the real life out there, so you get a lot of information, even in a few minutes. So you have to accept these things and prepare yourself for a lot. It's quite helpful.

MO: Did you plan your escape based on the information that you received?

B: Yeah. Mostly yes, because...for instance, it's hard to meet people who can help you escape from the country. Because to find them within the country is hard. Because they are quite afraid of being caught. So most of the time, you rely on the information, most of the time, how those people who are outside managed to get out. And which people helped them and how you can contact them. And which ways are safer, you can compare. And there are different ways.

When Daniel left Eritrea, he had intentions to go to Europe because "it has everything" and is "humane." When he would communicate with other Eritreans in various countries they would ask him where he was and when he replied "Italy" they said that he was unfortunate because Italy was a bad country. They told him that there was no work there and the people were fascists and racists. With Daniel's comments, we see that communication via ICT can create an alternative image of what life is like in Italy; an alternative to the "land of opportunity" imaginary. These alternative images may encourage migrants or refugees to move to another country. Understanding the constraints that the Dublin Convention put on him and not wanting to risk losing his place in the refugee shelter, Daniel chose not to try his luck in another European country. Joy, on the other hand, was convinced by friends that his life would not be good if he remained in Italy and so he left for France.

Joy: You know...when you are coming here, you have some information from your friends and they used to tell you that about the situation over here [in Italy]. It depends on the objectives that you have. Once you get out from your home, you have your destination and in order to reach your destination you have to make some sacrifice. I just left Italy. I went to France.

MO: You heard what the situation was here. What was the situation?

J: Yeah. There were racial issues concerning the job. I told you I studied biology and if I have to realize my study I have to go to a country where I can get English speakers or I can continue my study easily. For that reason I proceed on my way. Not only that. Even if I stay in this country, I have to be a regular person or a person with objectives and watching my friends, I decided not to stay here. Because they told me that in Italy, your destination [destiny] will be a person that can only work physically or related to that. You can't use your talent. It wouldn't be easy to have a good profession. They used to tell me and I just decided to leave.

Like Joy, Michael felt that his knowledge of the English language would take him further if he managed to live in an English-speaking country.

MO: Do you want to stay in Italy for many years?

Michael: If I get a job, yes. If not...

MO: If not, what?

M: I don't choose to stay here because I won't be living. Do you understand my idea?

MO: Where would you go?

M: I choose the English-speaking countries: England, Canada, Australia, and the US. One of these I choose. The best ones for me are these places because I studied all my years English. Not in Italian. Not in other languages. So at least to integrate my study, to develop my study I have to continue to study in English. And the biggest problem for me is that I'm here in Italy. I think about that all the time. The problem is....yeah...I can study the Italian language also but to integrate your study in the Italian language....as you know...the Italian language is not an international language...it's really...I'm thinking about this day and night...about this thing only. Sometimes thoughts come to my mind that I have to go to England...to ask for asylum there. At least to do something about my study or I have to work here in Italy or try to go to America or Canada using illegal ways. So I am in deep problem of thinking about doing this thing. Also the life in Italy is not settled. Because I don't have a job. I am not studying. Because of the language I cannot study. All of these things are creating problems. So what I prefer is, if I had had this refugee status in England the story is finished. Because I speak English, I could do something about my study, I could continue it. But I am in Italy. The main problem for me is this. Or I don't have a job or I couldn't study.

MO: So you think there are more possibilities for you if you go to an English-speaking country?

M: Yeah. At least I can study. And I believe that in England for example, in UK, there are better job opportunities than Italy. Even in Italy, you cannot find a layman job, let alone find the professional jobs. I believe that in the UK, you can at least find the layman jobs. And then the government of the UK can help you to integrate your study and has a better refugee stabilizing processes. They give you all the facilities if you are a refugee. They have a good hospitality process there. When they accept you as a refugee they give you a place to live, some aids to not be hungry. They don't have problems with the social and cultural things of the refugees. There are good human rights there in the UK.

Michael felt that he was losing time in Italy. He felt he could have been continuing in his field of study instead of having to learn Italian first in order to reach a proficiency that would allow him to continue his studies. He talked with me on other occasions about the possibility to study in the United States. Michael also had the additional challenge of obtaining a copy of his academic transcripts. If he were to request a copy, the Eritrean government would learn that he was out of the country

and could go after his parents. Even though Michael was disappointed with his situation in Italy, I noticed that he actively took steps to integrate himself into Italian society. For example, we had to postpone our interview initially because he did not want to miss a study session for the driver's exam. When I saw him in the Internet Point, he was using an online program that had practice tests for the exam. Therefore, it appeared as if Michael was trying to make the best out of a situation that was not his ideal.

Tesfalem also thought that his situation would be better if he were allowed to go to an English-speaking country. I asked him if there were any difficulties in his life beside a lack of money.

Tesfalem: There's too many. Especially at this age. I have to work. I have to study. But I have nothing. I stay in Centro Elena like all the guys...without a job, without anything. It's a difficult thing. Your mind cannot accept it. I'm young, I'm 26. I have to get everything in this age. But I couldn't get the chance. Actually if the English people, they except me and saw my asylum, I should finish something [I would be able to complete something]. But here, I have nothing.

Fatima, who did not speak English, also thought that life in other European countries would be better. In addition, she expressed wanting to live in the United States where, she had been told, there is no racism; "black and white were all treated the same."¹⁴ She would often jokingly ask if I would bring her back to the US with me.

Lehem also found Italy to be different from what she expected. At first, she had told me that she did not feel close to the people in Eritrea. Later in our interview, she told me that she felt closer to Eritrea than Italy because there is nothing for her in

¹⁴ Obviously, Fatima had never lived in the United States.

Italy. She had thought that there would be a lot for her before she had arrived in Italy. However, she “didn’t find anything.”

Through ICT, like Messenger, Getet began to feel that life would be better or easier if she were in another European country. She formed these ideas after communicating with friends, some of whom she had known from Centro Elena, who had gone on to live in other parts of Europe. Generally, she did not like to use Yahoo Messenger very much. However, when she used it, friends would sometimes tell her that they were studying and would say that other countries in Europe offer refugees courses and provide them with jobs after the completion of the courses. Getet seemed bitter that it was not so straightforward in Italy.

Simon was equally dissatisfied with how refugees were received in Italy and felt that the asylum system in other European countries offered asylum seekers more.

Simon: I thought before that the situation in Europe wasn’t the same as in the United States or North America. And it’s not the same thing in Africa. They are different. But, when I arrived in Italy that meant that I had arrived in Europe. But the situation in Italy is different from Germany and other countries. Other countries at least take care of immigrants. But in Italy, if someone enters as an immigrant...there are different types of immigrants. Do you know? Some come with a real need for asylum. Others come to change their lives only...for finding work maybe. So, if you go to the Commission [UNHCR hearing], the documents they give you are different. Like us, we have political asylum. But in what way? Having political asylum doesn’t do anything. Do you understand what I want to say?

What I understood Simon to be saying was that he felt that being a political refugee instead of an economic migrant should entitle you to greater assistance. He felt that Italy had failed to offer asylum seekers that assistance.

Walitta was embarrassed with the realization that life in Europe was not what she expected it to be. In fact, she would hide the reality from her parents when speaking on the phone with them.

Walitta: [My life] is not tranquil. [said with a hint of sadness]

MO: Why do you want your parents to think something else [rather than the reality]?

W: What?

MO: Why don't you want to tell your parents that you haven't found work and that you are still in the Centro?

W: Because I feel ashamed. Because now I am in Europe. When I was in Ethiopia...when I was little...we thought about Europe like something good, where everything is tranquil, everything is just, there's work, everything. Also they thought like this...without problems and tranquil.

Therefore, the fantasy that the Eritreans had about life in Europe, or at least life in Italy, was shattered once they had lived in the country for a while without managing to establish themselves with regular work and an autonomous living situation. Many continued to hold the idea that life in other European countries or North America would be better. Some based these ideas on the reasoning that they could find more economic or educational success in a country that spoke a language they had studied for years, such as the UK or US. These ideas were also based on information from others who told them that life for political refugees was better in northern Europe. This information was largely procured through the use of ICT.

Some saw the prospect of going to another country as too difficult given the legal restrictions that prevented "asylum shopping." Seven of the participants in this research felt the risk would be worth it and tried their luck farther north.

Requesting Asylum in another Country

Abraham, Dawit, Joy, and Yusef all spent some time living in Switzerland. After being homeless for two weeks in the streets of Milan, Dawit decided to go to Switzerland. While his request for asylum was being processed, he was given a house, in which he shared a room with another person, and 400 Swiss Francs a month for food. He also used the money to call his family four times during his time in Switzerland. However, after nine months, the authorities found his fingerprints on record and in accordance with the Dublin Convention, he was denied asylum. He was put on a plane and sent back to Italy. He went to Sicily and worked sporadically for eight months doing agricultural work. He was paid 25 Euros for eight hours of work. Frustrated from not being able to find steady work, he decided to return to Switzerland. He stayed in a big refugee camp for two weeks and was again given a place in a house while his asylum request was being processed. And like before, his fingerprints were found on record and he was told that he had to return to Italy. Not wanting to go voluntarily, he was put in a detention center for two days and then flown back to Rome. He was then given a place in Centro Elena. He lived at the Center for five months as a *transitorio*, and then his status was changed to *progettario*.¹⁵

Wishing to try his luck in another city, Yusef left Rome for Milan. He found friends there that told him that there was nothing for him there. So, he and his friends

¹⁵ Before my arrival at Centro Elena, it had housed refugees that were classified as *transitorio*. This meant that they were in transition and were only staying at the Center temporarily until another shelter was found for them. Often these *transitori* were refugees that had attempted to go to other European countries and had been deported back to Italy. A resident at the Center classified as *progettario* was allowed to stay there until they found the means to become autonomous.

went together to Switzerland. He stayed there for three months. Similar to the other stories, the Swiss authorities found his fingerprints and he had to return to Italy. Despite his leaving Italy initially, he told me he was happy to be back in Italy because they had “saved his life.”

As mentioned above, Joy felt that his chances for a decent life would be better in northern Europe and so left for England. He took a train through France until he reached England. All of these border crossings were done illegally, of course. Not wanting to be in a country illegally, he went to declare himself as a refugee to the British authorities. However, they found his fingerprints on file and he was deported back to Italy. He had only been in England for about a month and a half. He knew about the possibility of the authorities finding his fingerprints before leaving Italy but wanted to take the chance. He had known people that had done the same thing and were granted asylum there. He told me that sometimes, they do not find your fingerprints in the records and in cases where a person is under 18 years old, they are granted asylum regardless. He was in Italy for no less than a week before leaving again for Switzerland. He was trying to arrive before the deadline in which Switzerland would become a signatory of the Dublin Convention (December 12, 2008). They had signed the agreement in the morning, but he did not arrive until the evening. In any case, he claimed his asylum after three days in the country and was given a preliminary interview. After the interview, he stayed in a hostel and waited for the decision that he was sure would be a denial of asylum. After three months, he

received a letter telling him that he had to return to Italy and was subsequently sent on a plane back to Rome.

After Lampedusa, Tesfalem went to a refugee camp in Crotona, Italy. From there he made his way by train to France and then to England, where he stayed for two years. He requested asylum but, like the others, his fingerprints were found and he was sent back to Italy. During the two years in England, he did not work but was given a house and a 35 pound a week allowance. He told me that the money was enough to get by on.

Zion was the only female of the group that had attempted to look for asylum outside of Italy. After spending some time homeless in the streets of Rome, she decided to leave for England. She told me that she had wanted to stay in England in order to go to school. However, she was put in a detention center for four months because they had found her fingerprints. After being flown back to Italy, she had nowhere to live and stayed in a *casa occupata* for two months.

Firezgi wanted to leave Italy because the state did not give money or work to refugees. In his opinion, Italy did not care about him. From conversations on the phone with friends in Norway and Germany, he learned that those countries gave refugees money and a place to live. So, he decided to go to Norway and stayed there for a year. He said that he lived comfortably there. They gave him an allowance of 400 Euro a month and a house where he lived alone. He was unable to work, however, because one must be first granted asylum in order to work. Like the others,

his fingerprints told the officials that he had first requested asylum in Italy and he left Norway for Rome.

Discussion

In this chapter, ICT utilization is seen as forming imaginaries of what life is like in other countries. However, we should recognize that it is not only the use of ICT which is responsible for creating these imaginaries. The global media and returning migrants influence how people envision other countries to a great degree. Although it was not mentioned by the participants in this study, the Internet is just another conduit, like TV, film, radio, etc., for the transference of sounds, images, and texts that form imaginaries of what life could be like in the global North. What were mentioned in the interviews at Centro Elena were the communication exchanges between individuals, either online, on the phone or in person. The information gleaned from these conversations affected how refugees came to imagine a certain place. In turn, this imaginary either incited or deterred migration to that place.

Lucht (2012) writes that globalization reaches all corners of the world, “but only as the promise of wealth” (86). The economic and material resources of the world are moving faster and with more intensity among the richer countries of the world. However, poorer countries are often excluded, or disconnected, from obtaining these resources. Cohen (2006) argues that while the media have created “a global consciousness,” the economic forces are far behind the new awareness (cited in Lucht

2012). The disconnected come to “embrace real or imagined Western standards and the expectations that they engender,” but they are often difficult or impossible to realize (Lucht 2012: 86).

From the testimonies of the participants in this research, it seems that the images of Europe and North America are of places where money and jobs come fairly easily. Some mentioned that there was an expectation of finding respect for human rights and an absence of prejudice in these countries. These imaginaries can be thought of as a strong pull factor for what draws Eritreans, and other migrants, towards Europe and North America. However, these refugees, who have come to Italy, have found it difficult to gain inclusion into a society where the “real or imagined Western standards and expectations” are enjoyed (by some).

On the other hand, others learn about the difficult lives the Eritreans face in Europe prior to beginning their journeys. Perhaps the situation in Eritrea is so intolerable that they take their chances. Or maybe the perceived benefits outweigh the potential risks. These benefits may include not only material wealth, but admiration by community members in the homeland, a new role of importance as a remittance-sender to the family, and partial inclusion into a Western society that is hegemonically defined as advanced.

Berhan explained how ICT has become an important tool for planning the flight from Eritrea. By using Messenger or phones, one is able to plot a course across the Sahara and Mediterranean by talking to those that have already made the journey.

After all, there is no travel book that one can read that tells you which border guard to pay off or which trafficker will not leave you in the middle of the desert. Additionally, Hammond (2006) reports that migrants who have successfully made it to Europe, use ICT to call would-be migrants in order to tell them which connection men – those who personally handle the groups of boat passengers waiting to go – are the most trustworthy (cited in Lucht 2012). Having the information that one has obtained via these ICT might make the dangerous journey a little less risky and uncertain.

Does the availability of a tool like Messenger encourage people to flee the country? Would they be more reluctant to go if the road ahead of them was more uncertain? The millions of refugees who have fled their countries before the existence of Messenger would suggest that ICT do not play an essential role in whether or not someone flees their country. However, might the fear of the unknown prevent some from leaving? In some cases, having the knowledge that they will be following a path that a friend or relative has already successfully traveled might be enough to allow them to overcome that fear of the unknown and initiate the flight.

Seen from another perspective, planning the flight using information taken from online conversations might actually help them to avoid the dangers found between Eritrea and Europe. If one is more certain about which people can be trusted, they might be able to avoid the pitfalls that other refugees have encountered along the way.

At times when the reality of Italy is very different from how it was imagined to be, refugees go on to form new imaginaries of how life might be in other countries. Again, these imaginaries are formed from several different sources (e.g. face-to-face conversations with migrants and the media). The conversations online or on the phone feed people's imaginations as well and draw them towards new destinations. They may hear stories about life in Italy being too difficult and life in northern Europe being much better. They may hear about refugee reception systems that offer more assistance to refugees compared to Italy; and, in part this is true. The wealthier countries of northern Europe typically have more money to spend on social services.

I see the role that ICT has in encouraging refugees to travel certain routes and head towards certain destinations as an excellent example of Appadurai's (1996) *mediascapes* acting on the imaginations of people. Through the technology, refugees can more easily have contact with other Eritreans in various parts of the world and "consider a wider set of possibilities than they ever did before." They form imaginaries that life in Italy will be better than Eritrea and at times when the reality differs too greatly from the imaginary, they begin to form imaginaries of the life that can be had in northern Europe or the United States.

Although, they seemed grateful to have been granted asylum, several of the participants of this study were unsatisfied with their lives in Italy. They had been unable to find steady work and felt that there would be more opportunity for them in northern Europe or the US. Those that had studied for years using the English

language felt that time in Italy was wasted time and they would be able to find better opportunities for work and study in English-speaking countries. This should be considered when policy makers are examining the effectiveness of the Dublin Convention. They should consider that refugees are often constrained to stay in countries where they do not have the best possibilities for using their skills and competencies. Refugees from Eritrea who speak English or those from the Republic of Congo who speak French, for example, might find integration into England or France easier. Furthermore, refugees may have family or social networks in other countries that could facilitate integration better than the country where they first entered Europe. EU member states argue that allowing asylum seekers to choose where they want to make their claims would lead to an unfair burden on some of the states. However, Europe takes a relatively small percentage of asylum seekers (Schuster 2011). As Christopher Hein, director of the Italian Refugee Council, points out, making integration easier for refugees by allowing them to choose a country would be less costly for the social budgets of EU states (Grant and Domokos 2011).

Despite the current policies restricting asylum-seekers movement within the European Union, there are many refugees that decide to try their luck in those countries which are imagined to be better than Italy. It is difficult to know how many successfully resettle in other countries. Some may slip through the cracks of the fingerprint identification record (Eurodac), but more probably stay in those countries illegally. Others, like the participants of this study, are deported back to Italy. Based on their testimonies, it seems that their experiences in Switzerland, Norway, and

England were preferable to Italy. This preference seemed to be based largely on the assistance that they received in those countries (e.g. private living quarters and monthly allowance for groceries) that they were not receiving in Italy. Unfortunately from their perspectives, the identification of their fingerprints sent them back to the country of their original asylum. Fortunately, they had been given a place to stay in Centro Elena and did not have to sleep on the street or in a *casa occupata* like many other refugees who have been deported back to Italy.

The next chapter will take a look at the transnational communication practices of those refugees that were given a place to stay in the center of second reception on the outskirts of Rome.

Chapter 8: Communicating with Eritreans in the Homeland and the

Diaspora

This chapter presents the results of the study pertaining to the ways in which the Eritreans of Centro Elena used phones and the Internet to communicate with people in Eritrea and abroad. First, we look at whether or not ICT utilization is able to help the participants continue to ‘feel close’ to the people in Eritrea. Then I will describe the social obligation that Eritreans have to send remittances home and the role that ICT has in this practice. We will see that a second economy money transferring system has evolved to meet the needs of Eritreans abroad and their families in the homeland. I will then present evidence that suggests that calling home is important for the participants in this research, and although there may be some financial and technical difficulties in making the contact, most are able to find their ways around these obstacles. It will then be made clear that Eritreans are not only communicating with those in the homeland, but with Eritreans in all areas of the diaspora. Finally, we will see evidence of the digital divide among this group of Eritreans and those who they attempt to contact in Eritrea.

Feeling a ‘Closeness’ to Eritrea?

Of the entire sample, roughly a third (7 of 21) mentioned ICT in reference to ‘feeling close’ to people in or of Eritrea. Slightly less than a third (5 of 21) mentioned

their ‘closeness’ to Eritreans as coming from the Eritrean community in Rome or as owing to a sense of a shared struggle. The remaining participants (8 of 21) felt no ‘closeness’ to the people in Eritrea and made no mention of a ‘closeness’ to Eritreans within the diaspora.¹⁶

Before proceeding further, the concept of feeling a ‘closeness’ should be explained. One of the questions of greater interest for this research was if the utilization of ICT had an effect on whether or not the participants ‘felt close’ to the people in Eritrea. It was hypothesized that, through the use of ICT for communication with loved ones in Eritrea, feelings of homesickness could be alleviated. However, rather than ask a leading question such as: ‘Do you feel less homesick because of your use of Internet or phones for communication?’ I chose to ask the interviewees a non-leading question: ‘Do you feel close to the people in Eritrea?’ Through my own error, in three of the interviews, I asked if the person felt close to the people *of* Eritrea. Using the word ‘of’ instead of ‘in’ leaves the question more open for interpretation. ‘The people *of* Eritrea’ could be living both within and outside of Eritrea, while ‘the people *in* Eritrea’ more accurately defines where the people are located. This question could also be interpreted as asking if the person felt a ‘closeness’ to individuals or the Eritrean people as a whole. Additionally, how a person interprets the meaning of ‘feeling close’ can vary from person to person. For example, on an individual level, a person could say that they do not feel close to their father even if they live in the same

¹⁶ One participant did not talk about whether or not he felt close to the people in Eritrea or the Eritreans abroad.

house. Also, a person may feel close to the Eritrean culture without necessarily feeling close to individual family members or friends. The ambiguity was left so intentionally because I was interested in seeing how individual participants gave meaning to the idea of 'closeness' and how it was (or was not) achieved.

With regards to if the participants 'felt close' to the people *of* Eritrea, all three that were asked the question in this way said that they did. Abraham, who studied meteorology at university, mentions that this 'closeness' was achieved through calling his mother, sister, and friends; and also by using e-mail, Messenger, and Facebook to communicate with friends in Eritrea and other countries.

The other two, Selam and Kifle both 'felt close' to the people of Eritrea, however, this 'closeness' was achieved through interaction with the Eritrean community in Rome. Selam, who has two children still in Eritrea, would meet people in the Eritrean neighborhood near Termini. She explained that when she had first arrived in Rome, she did not know anything and depended on her compatriots to explain to her how to take the bus, where to shop, and other necessary information for settling into a foreign environment. Her initial lack of Italian meant that she could only speak with those who spoke Tigrinya. Therefore, immigrants do not necessarily make personal connections with compatriots because of a shared history, cultural background, or sense of nationalism. The initial interactions could be based on the more pragmatic reason that one needs to find others that speak the same language in order to make the first adaptations in a foreign country.

Kifle, who wears brilliant stone earrings and a gold tooth, felt a ‘closeness’ because he had his brother in Milan, who he visited once in a while, and also through meetings with other Eritreans while attending church every Sunday or when going to the Eritrean neighborhoods.

Kifle: My family is here. My brother lives in Milan. I always go to Milan for a week or two and stay with him. There are many Eritreans in Rome and there are reunions. For example, there’s a church in Piazza Venezia. Every Sunday, I go there. Only for praying. Not for any other reason. Only for praying. But when I am finished praying, I see my friends. They were students with me in Eritrea. They were in the military. I see them in Rome and I speak with them for 30 minutes and then I return to Centro Elena.

MO: So the people you knew in Eritrea, some of them are now in Rome and so you can talk to them?

K: Yeah. I enjoy speaking with them and going to the many Eritrean bars near Termini...and restaurants.

Walitta, an intelligent and devoutly religious young woman, also cited the church as her connection to her compatriots. Walitta has one Eritrean and one Ethiopian parent and was born in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. She and her sisters left their mother and brother in order to go to Sudan because of violence following the Border War. She identified herself as Ethiopian and attended church services with other Ethiopians.

MO: Do you still feel close to the people in Ethiopia?

Walitta: Yes...from church. I grew up in Ethiopia but I put the place behind me...but the people in church are from Ethiopia. We speak our language. Also, I grew up with some of them. They are all of the Ethiopian culture. We speak about Ethiopia. We don’t speak the language of Eritrea. It’s another language. I only know the language of Ethiopia.

Similarly to Kifle, she stressed that she does not go to church for talking to people, but for hearing the words of God.

Attending cultural events does not always create a connectedness to the ethnic community. At times it can exacerbate feelings of longing or homesickness. Firezgi, who had left Italy for Norway in hopes of gaining asylum, sometimes attended Eritrean weddings in Tiburtina, a quarter of Rome.

Firezgi: I go to weddings where there are people from my country, here, in Tiburtina. They always have weddings there. It makes me feel bad. When I see them, I remember when I would go to weddings in my country.

Michael was the only one to mention that his connection to the Eritrean people was rooted in a shared cultural background and through difficult years of struggle, both currently and during the fight for Eritrean independence. He also mentioned that his family escaped to Sudan during the years of violence; an experience shared by other participants in this research.

MO: In general, do you feel close with the people and community in Eritrea?

Michael: With the people in Eritrea. Yeah.

MO: In what way?

M: The people in Eritrea I feel close in the way of culture...and religion...and social norms.

MO: Do you feel like a member of the community there? (Yeah) How so? In what way?

M: In the way that the Eritrean people is facing this difficulty. I am really sorry for the Eritrean people to get this type of experience at this time after passing this 30-year war. All our brothers are dead. For some people their fathers are dead. For others, their sisters and mothers are dead. And this situation happening in Eritrea it is a very very very miserable thing. I never expected such a thing to happen in Eritrea. I never had difficult. As a child I go out because Ethiopians are invading Eritrea. There is struggle. Then we are on the border. Then they came to hunt for us. I escaped through the Sudan. But we are organized with the party that is fighting inside Eritrea. I was small but my brothers were fighting there but all the family were in Sudan. So we were helping our brothers there in the frontline to bring the independence to Eritrea. So I know what the experience of immigration means when I was a child. I [remember] thinking that the Eritrean soil and the Sudan soil was different. I missed really Eritrea. [I wanted] to turn back to Eritrea during that time.

Between the group that felt a 'closeness' through ICT and those that did not 'feel close' to the people in Eritrea, there is no apparent correlation to frequency with

which participants communicated to loved ones abroad. Those that mentioned ICT as providing a 'closeness' typically talked on the phone with their loved ones at least once every three months. Although they were not necessarily communicating with someone every time they used the Internet, their frequency online ranged from once a week to everyday.

Some of those who did *not* feel a 'closeness' actually talked more frequently than those who did feel close to the people in Eritrea. Of those that did not 'feel close' to the people in Eritrea, Semere, Lehem, and Getat had contact fairly often with their loved ones. Semere, who had worked as a metal-turner in Sudan and Italy, talked with his mother on the phone every Sunday and his brothers and sisters a few times during the week. Lehem, an athletic young woman who wore running pants during our interview, talked with her father once a week as well. When Getat was working as a live-in housekeeper and nanny of sorts, she would talk to her son twice a week. On the other hand, Dawit, who had left Italy for Switzerland in hope of gaining asylum, had only talked to his family in Eritrea twice during the past year. He also reported that he did not 'feel close' to the people in Eritrea. In addition to phone calls, the frequency and amount of time spent online did not seem to differ greatly among those that felt or did not 'feel close' to the people in Eritrea or the Eritrean community in Rome.

Among the participants, the length of time away from their families in Africa ranged from 2.5 years to 9 years. For the entire sample, the average length of time

that a person had been away from their family in Africa was approximately 4 years. The duration of time away from their family did not seem to be related to how close the participants felt to the people in Eritrea.

There are a few things that stand out between those who felt a ‘closeness’ to the people in Eritrea because of ICT use and those that do not. For this evaluation, we will temporarily ignore those who said they feel a ‘closeness’ to the ethnic community in Rome because it is not clear whether or not they also feel close to the people in Eritrea. Those who mentioned ICT use as providing a ‘closeness’ to the people in Eritrea are all male, while 63% of those that feel far from the people in Eritrea are female.¹⁷ Do women suffer from homesickness more than men?

It is interesting to note that the majority who mentioned ICT as providing their ‘closeness’ are webcam users while no one of the group that feels far from the people in Eritrea mentioned the use of a webcam.¹⁸ It could be that the ability to see and hear people in real time has the benefit of reducing the psychological or emotional distance between people. Joy, a tall young man from the countryside of Eritrea, often wears a smile well-suited to his self-chosen pseudonym. He explained that using the webcam provided a relief from feelings of homesickness.

¹⁷ The sex distinction becomes more interesting when one considers that there are 33% more males than females in the sample. In fact, five of the seven females in the sample (71%) reported that they do not ‘feel close’ to the people in Eritrea.

¹⁸ Some caution should be taken when evaluating the significance of webcam use. Not everyone was explicitly asked whether or not they used webcams. Among the group that felt a distance from the Eritrean people, only one person explicitly said that they did not use a webcam. However, during all the interviews, participants were asked to name the tools of communication they used online. One could argue that they would have mentioned webcams if they had used them with any regularity.

MO: Do you like using the webcam?

Joy: Yes, I do. Because it's almost real now. If you talk using video, you are talking face to face. It's a way of getting connected with your family and you can have a visual communication. It's the way to...for example, if you are calling video, you are watching your friend or your brother and it's the way to avoid homesickness. Because you have homesickness, of course. If you communicate with a call, you are watching face-to-face. You feel as if you are together.

Selam, who occasionally used a webcam to talk to people, says that she liked it because "you can see life directly." Berhan said that when you see a person's face, "you can tell how the person actually is. When people are in a bad situation, you can see it in their face." Therefore, being able to see a person's face may reveal thoughts and emotions that could be hidden with phone calls or written communication. Knowing that someone is suffering or having some difficulty could either make people more or less aware of the physical distance between them. One may feel closer to the person because more is known about how they are living or feeling. On the other hand, one can feel far upon the realization that they can do relatively little to help their loved one.

It is also interesting to note that the majority of those that feel a 'closeness' make online calls, using programs such as Yahoo Messenger. In contrast, only two of the group that feels far from the people in Eritrea made calls online. The advantage with calling online is that if both parties are using Messenger, the call does not cost anything (except any cost related to Internet service). Therefore, people that have regular access to the Internet are able to talk to their loved ones more frequently and for longer durations than those who are restricted to making costly phone calls. Perhaps, the ability to talk more often to distant loved ones works to close the emotional distance.

Berhan, who holds a Bachelor's in History and spoke English very well, explained that ICT cannot completely fill the absence created by not having loved ones physically near.

MO: Do you still feel close to the people in Eritrea?

Berhan: Yeah, in some ways because of the technology. I manage to call and use the Internet to contact them.

MO: So the technology lets you feel close to people?

B: In some ways.

M: In what ways do you feel far?

B: Well...the love that you can get from your family, you cannot get it when you're here. You don't even feel secure. You don't even feel confident. You're always worried about them and they are always worried about you.

So it would seem there is some comfort or security that cannot be compensated for through ICT use. People continue to worry about each other and feel hopeless because they can do little to help each other from such a distance. When we spoke about the Internet as providing a way to know what was happening in Eritrea, Berhan explained the pros and cons of the technological connectivity.

MO: Does the technology make your worries increase or decrease?

Berhan: I think it has two sides. It has a negative impact and it has a positive impact. But I think it weighs for the positive because most of the time, it's better to have something than nothing. When you are not connected with your family at all, then your worries grow up because you don't hear from them. But as I said, sometimes you see information that makes your worries grow up because, as I told you, you see bad news in the situation which is exaggerated in the websites that are managed by people who are against the government, politically. So there are two sides I think.

Simon told me there are some ways that one can still participate in the celebrations of the family and even shoulder some of the anguish, even though they are separated by thousands of miles.

MO: Is it important for you to talk with [your brothers]?

Simon: Yes, it's important.

MO: Why?

S: Because...you know...in a society there's good things and bad things. By good things, I mean that some days there are holidays. For a holiday, I want to meet them online and want to do something to help them. If someone is sick and is in need of help, I can share [the burden] with them. It's important to call them or find them on the Internet.

MO: For the bad things, you can still help?

S: If it's possible. But I can only help with the thought, or if needed, with money. Because, physically I am far from them.

Simon's comments demonstrate that ICT use can encourage the sending of remittances in order to help out with the "bad things." Sending remittances will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Feeling the Distance

Some said that they could not possibly feel close to the people in Eritrea because they had not seen them for a long time and had little possibility of seeing them in the near future. Lehem says that during the moment of calling, she feels as if she is with her family a little, but in general does not feel close to the people in her country. Sara does not feel close to the people in Eritrea because they do not see her and she does not see them. In fact, she has not seen them for nine years. Semere echoes the sentiment that the emotional distance comes from not being able to see or visit his family.

Semere: I always feel far...because there isn't the possibility to go and see them every year, every two years. It's not possible for them to come here because I need to work, establish myself, get a house.

Getat also expressed feeling far from her family because she could not return. She wanted her son to come to Italy but had to first establish a regular job and living

situation. Semere and Getet's responses point out that for family reunification to be carried out under Italian law, one needs to demonstrate that they have regular work and living accommodations adequate enough to sustain their family members.

Dawit also feels that the physical distance and time away from his family are too much to feel close to them.

Dawit: No. I am too far from them. I feel too far. It's not easy. I went out from Eritrea six years ago. It's too difficult for me.

MO: Why? Because of the time?

D: Because I went away from my family. They haven't seen me in all this time. I left my family and it doesn't feel right...always going around like this. I haven't found work. When I find a small thing, where does my head go? To my family. When I'm missing something, for example, I want shoes, I'm not able to find shoes and I think to my family.

MO: Why?

D: When I was living with my family and wanted something, I found it. Now when I want shoes, who can I talk to? My brother's not here, my sister's not here. There isn't any family here...they are too far away. When I work and have some money, I immediately call my family to talk...with my mother, my sister, my brother. When I don't have money, I'm always remembering my family. In one year, I only called my family two times.

Sending Money Home

Families, the world over, utilize phone calls and online communication as a way to ask for money in times of need (Horst 2006; Mahler 2001). There appeared to be a sense of familial obligation that drove several of the participants to send remittances to support their families in Africa, even when they had little money for themselves in Rome.

MO: Do you send money to people in other countries?

Berhan: Yeah...to my mother and sisters, but even relatives sometimes. When they tell you their troubles...because it is our culture. It's different from Western life. You have to rely on each other to survive. We have a wider connection with a relationship.

Berhan points to the idea that those communities with scarce resources must “rely on each other to survive.” He differentiates this cultural value from values found in Western culture. Even though I would not completely agree with him (see Bourgois & Schonberg 2009:6 for a discussion of the ways in which American homeless in San Francisco share resources within a ‘moral economy’), this value may be more emphasized in Eritrea according to Berhan’s transnational perspective.

Selam, like many transnational parents who have their families in another country, sent money to her husband and two children. When she was working, she could afford to send 500 Euros a month. Even when not working, she managed to send about 100 a month. She would send the money through Western Union or compatriots who were returning to Eritrea.

Some others used Western Union to send their money. However, several among those that sent money utilized the second economy banking system. One advantage of sending money through a second economy banking system is a better exchange rate compared to the official banks. Another advantage is anonymity for those that were worried about the Eritrean government discovering that they had fled the country illegally. As described to me, there were Eritreans in Italy who had established a second economy business based around the need for Eritreans abroad to send money. A person who wishes to send money gives it to an Eritrean “businessman” in Rome. He, in turn, sends an email to his associate in Eritrea, who

then gives the money to the intended recipient. Those in this business make money by asking a small service fee or make a profit off the exchange rate.

Simon: There are many people that have representatives in Eritrea. I give the money to someone here with the name of the person that will receive the money without giving my name. They use the Internet, not the phone, and send a message telling how much money they must give to the person in Eritrea...the person from my family. Their representative calls my family member and invites him to have a coffee.

MO: A coffee?

S: It's a code. This person in Eritrea says "Hello. I am so and so. Can you come to have a coffee?" This person tells the person in my family that money has come from Italy...not from me..only from Italy. And the person in my family understands because I have already written on the Internet that they will receive money and how much they should get. I already wrote to my brother that if somebody calls him, he has to go.

MO: How much does this service cost?

S: It depends...maybe five percent.

Simon's explanation demonstrates that ICT are essential for this transaction to function. Other methods of sending money included giving money to an Eritrean who was physically returning to the country or giving money to an Eritrean in need of money in Rome. Instead of paying the lender back, they would ask their family in Eritrea to pay back the loan directly to the lender's family.

The Importance of Calling Home

Regardless of whether or not ICT use was involved in providing a sense of closeness, Dawit, and others, demonstrated that calling home was something very important to them. As soon as he earned some money from work, he would use it to call home. Getet also said that when she found money, the first thing she used it for was to call home. Most were without work or regular jobs so it can be assumed that

they did not have much money.¹⁹ However, the little money that they managed to earn or find was put towards calling distant loved ones.

Some demonstrated the importance of calling home by explaining that they called friends and family more when they had more money. Walitta told me that her frequency of calling home had increased after finding some work.

MO: How often do you talk to your brother and sister?

Walitta: Now? Once a month or two months. Before it was once in three or four months because before I hadn't worked in two years.

Yusef was among those that felt close to the people in Eritrea. The frequency with which he called home also depended on his financial situation.

MO: Now do you feel close to the people in Eritrea?

Yusef: Yes. Not too far. I don't feel like I'm too far because I call them sometimes. If I find work I could call them more.

Some based their frequency of calling home, not so much on how much money they had, but on more emotional reasoning. They tried to protect their family from worrying about them by limiting their calls home or censoring themselves during conversation.

Walitta: I don't always call. Because if I call a lot, they think that I'm not well. Now they think that I'm living tranquilly...that I work, have a house, everything. But I don't. Do you understand what I'm telling you?

MO: They think everything is alright for you? (Exactly.)

¹⁹ As explained to me by the social workers at CE, it is difficult to fully understand how much a resident at the Center is working. At times, residents will find jobs but want to continue staying at the Center due to the high cost of rent in Rome. Therefore, they avoid fully disclosing their work status out of fear that they will be dismissed from the Center.

Sara called more or less, depending on how her life situation was. When things were going well for her, she called a lot. When things were not going so good, she avoided calling other people. She did not like to talk to people about the “bad things.” She tried to protect her family from hearing bad news because she did not want them to hear negative things. She explained that they are far and can do nothing about it. This is similar to what Berhan said about feeling he could do nothing to help due to the distance. It only created anxiety for Sara’s family to hear bad news. The practice of censoring information in order to protect or decrease anxiety in distant family members was also observed in Turkish transnational families (Senyurekli and Detzner 2009). However, this practice somewhat goes against Simon’s idea of helping out with the “bad things” by sending money or sharing the burden emotionally through communication via ICT.

Affording to Communicate

Because lack of money was such a pressing issue among the residents of Centro Elena, people had to find ways to cut down on expenses when using the telephone or Internet. The majority of the people interviewed did not use their cell phones for calling abroad because of the high costs. The cheapest alternative (besides online calls) was going to one of the many Call Centers throughout the city.²⁰ These are small shops which usually consist of a row of phone booths and usually have several computers for access to the Internet and other computing needs. Most of the

²⁰ Because most of these establishments contain phone booths and Internet service, I may refer to them as either Call Centers or Internet Points throughout the text.

Internet Points that I visited were run by Southwestern Asians (e.g. Bangladeshis or Sri Lankans). It seems as if these immigrants had found a niche economy in the management of these Call Centers. The clientele of these Call Centers was largely non-Italians, either immigrants or tourists. Calls are made by entering a phone booth and dialing out. Once the person on the receiving end of the call picks up, the client presses a button on a meter attached to the phone. Pushing the button allows the client to be able to speak to the person on the other end of the line while also initiating a meter which tells the client how much the call will cost. After the call is completed, the client pays the clerk.²¹ Tesfalem, who managed to call his mother about once a week, told me that it costs 25 cents/minute to call Eritrea from Italy.

Most Internet Points that I visited charged 50 cents for every 15 minute increment (2 Euros/hour) of Internet use. Many offer computers with webcams and headphones/microphones. Usually one can print documents and send faxes from Internet Points as well. Connection and computer speed may vary but, in my experience, one could make a video call without too much trouble.

The closet Calling Center was about a ten-minute walk from Centro Elena. Several participants mentioned using the Call Centers near Termini. This could be because Termini Station is the major transportation hub of the city and so those that

²¹ One of the managers of a Call Center near the city center, who I have spoken to on a number of occasions, told me that sometimes people will call friends and family and not press the button to start the meter. After some time, they will come out of the booth and tell the clerk that the person did not answer, even when they were in the booth for half an hour. The clerk suspects that people call just to hear the person on the other end of the line talk without talking themselves. This demonstrates another strategy some immigrants use in order to stay in touch with people while saving money.

take public transportation pass by the area often. The proximity of the station to the Eritrean neighborhood near Termini could also explain why the participants in this research chose to use the many Call Centers there.

Most of the participants of this research said that they would only call abroad from the Call Center phones. To call from a cell phone would be too costly. Many told me that when a person in Eritrea wanted to reach a person at Centro Elena on the phone, they would make a “missed call.”²² By seeing that the call was coming from Eritrea, the participants would know that an Eritrean family member or friend had something to tell them. It was generally too expensive for the person in Eritrea to make a call to an Italian cell phone. Therefore, the recipient would not answer the call. Instead, they would have to go out to the nearest Call Center. This method was problematic in cases when the person called during hours when the Call Centers were closed. When Lehem’s parents called her during the night, it meant that they had something urgent to tell her and she would feel obligated to respond to the expensive call.

In most cases when the participants were calling Eritrea, they were calling to a cellular phone. One person told me that the cost to call a landline and cell phone in Eritrea were the same. I was also told that cell phones were more prevalent in Eritrea due to the cost, waiting time, and infrastructural difficulties involved in installing a private landline in one’s home. A study by Mbarika and Byrd (2009) support these

²² Participants in this research would often use the phrase “make or do a missed call.” The name, of course, comes from the message displayed on cell phones when someone misses an incoming call.

reports and states that “wireless communication seems to be an excellent alternative to landlines, and a major contribution to the resolution of teledensity problems in Africa’s Least Developed Economies” (324). Zion told me that in the countryside, only a few houses have a landline, but nearly everyone has a cellular phone. Not all people in this research were able to call their parents directly, however. Firezgi, for example, had to call his uncle’s cell phone when he wished to speak with his parents. The uncle lived close to Firezgi’s parents and would go find them when Firezgi called. Similarly, Yusef had to call a relative who had a phone and arrange an appointment in order to speak with his father.

Technical Difficulties

There were other problems reaching relatives on the phone because of technical or infrastructural difficulties. Some said that they never experienced problems with calls being dropped or not being able to connect, while others reported both of these things. The reliability of the connection did not necessarily depend on whether or not the participants were calling an urban or rural area. Firezgi, who called his parents in the countryside, said that the line was always good. In general, however, there seemed to be better phone service in more urban areas. Joy told me that in the lowland village where his family lives there were no phone lines until recently. His parents had to climb a hill on foot for about half an hour in order to make a call. The network has since expanded to provide coverage to the lowland village. Zion said that, in her experience, there was no phone coverage outside of the city. Getet, who

called her family in Khartoum, said that she would sometimes have to try several times before the call would go through. Some days, she would have to wait for another day to try to call. Abraham (who was from Debarwa, a market town near Asmara with a population of about 25,000) would call his mother and sister on their cell phone because the landline network was not reliable. However, the inconsistent electricity in their house made reaching them on their cell problematic at times. He told me that when he lived with them, the house had electricity 24 hours a day; but now they only have electricity for a few hours a day. Therefore, if the battery on the phone is depleted, there is no way to charge it until the power comes back on.

One more obstacle with keeping in touch with loved ones is when a phone number no longer works. We may take for granted the ease with which we can reconnect with lost contacts through various methods, but when a single phone number is your only connection, and it is lost, reconnecting can be very difficult. The number that Fatima had for the caretaker of her daughter had not worked since Fatima had left Africa. Walitta has not been able to reach her mother and sister for some time because the number no longer worked. I can only speculate on the reasons that the numbers do not work, however (e.g. poor infrastructure, telephone service discontinued for monetary reasons, or people purposely not accepting calls).

While phone service in Eritrea appears to be fairly reliable since the spread of cell phones, Internet connectivity still seems to be limited. Compared to many countries in the world, Eritreans' introduction to the World Wide Web came fairly

late, in November 2000, when the country obtained a local Internet connection and finally brought all of Africa's countries and territories online (Mbarika and Byrd 2009). Berhan told me that online calls to Eritrea were frequently dropped or there was an "echo" heard when speaking. Kifle told me that he had not been able to call online to Eritrea and Yusef said that the webcam never works. People in Eritrea do not typically have Internet access in their homes and public Internet Points can only be found in big cities, according to Brei. Michael and Dawit both said that there was no Internet in the countryside or lowlands, while Joy and Selam told me that there was not a wide distribution of the Internet in Eritrea in general.

Communicating within the Diaspora

It would be extremely inaccurate to give the impression that the participants in this research were only communicating with people in their homeland. A great deal of communication, via phones and Internet, was taking place between Italy and countries across the globe. While parents and older relatives tended to still be in Eritrea, Ethiopia, or Sudan, many (if not most) friends and younger relatives were on every habitable continent. For example, Semere spoke on the phone with a brother in Rome, Australia, and the United States. Tesfalem would receive calls from friends in England and Sweden, while Walitta received calls from Switzerland and Malta. Unlike relatives inside Africa, it seems that friends and relatives outside of Africa could afford to make calls to Italian cell phones.

Friends and relatives on Yahoo Messenger and Facebook were equally dispersed around the world. These friends were not only people that the participants had met personally, but also those they had met online; for instance through Facebook groups composed of Eritreans around the world. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of the people that the participants talked to, online or on the phone, were Eritrean or Ethiopian. A glance at Fatima's Facebook friend-list revealed that the majority were Eritrean or Ethiopian (based on their names). As of December 2011, there were only 19,180 Facebook subscribers (about .03% of the population) inside Eritrea (Internet World Stats 2011). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that most Eritreans on Facebook are in the diaspora. In order to illustrate how widely the diaspora reaches, participants in this research were in contact with a friend or relative in the following countries: Australia, Belgium, Canada, China, England, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Germany, Holland, India, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Libya, Malta, Norway, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Sweden, Switzerland, the United States, and Uganda. This data is a testament to how widely-dispersed the Eritrean diaspora has become and also supports Kifle's claim that Eritrea is now filled with old people because the youth have largely left the country.

Using the Internet for Communication

Residents of Centro Elena were fortunate that the shelter had its own Internet Point. It was open Monday through Friday, 3PM-8PM and Saturday and Sunday, 10AM-1PM and 2PM-5:30PM. The Centro Elena Internet Point (CEIP) was run by

Ahmad, a Sudanese immigrant, who would take reservations for the use of the Internet. Ahmad had the uncanny ability to remember the five-digit ID number of most of the residents that requested a reservation. He would write their names and ID number on a table divided into the hours that the Point was open. Each resident was allotted about an hour a day of Internet use. However, if there were open computers he would allow a person who had already used his or her time to use the computer.

Both the outside Internet Points (IPs) and the CEIP had their advantages and disadvantages. The outside Internet Points had the advantage that they were available every day and for longer hours. They would usually not close until 10 or 11 PM. One could stay online for as long as one wanted, granted that they had the money to pay. Zion, who enjoyed playing games on the computer (alone or with friends online), preferred to use the outside IPs because there was no time limit.

Zion: Here, in Centro Elena, you can only use the computer for few minutes. I don't go here. I've only gone here a few times.

MO: Why?

Z: Because when I talk with friends, 40 minutes is not enough for me. I also don't want to stop when I am playing games. I want to play. It's too little time [at Centro Elena]. So I go near Termini.

Kifle pointed out that the time limits also causes people to have to interrupt their online conversations.

The connection speed of the outside IPs was typically much faster than the CEIP. At the CEIP, watching a video on YouTube, for example, was difficult because one had to wait a long time for it to fully load. One could typically only navigate one or two websites at a time or the computer would "freeze up." At times, the connection

would be temporarily lost. Another advantage of the outside IPs was that they had the equipment necessary to make calls online or video calls. Ahmed told me that in the past, Centro Elena would lend out headphones to the computer users. However, this practice was discontinued because some people would not return the headphones. Some of the residents would bring their own headphones and sometimes share with those that did not have them.

In addition to the advantage of convenience, the CEIP had the large advantage of not costing anything to use. Therefore, even those who could not afford to use the Internet at outside IPs still had some Internet access. A few of the participants told me about another option for those that did not have the money to pay for outside IPs. Some of the libraries in Rome offer computers with access to the Internet for free to those with a type of membership card (signing up for this program is also free). With this card, people can use the computers up to two hours a day.

Another option besides using Internet Points is using a personal laptop. Six of the participants used a laptop, either one they had bought themselves or one that they borrowed from a friend. While observing Fatima on her laptop, I noticed folders on the desktop containing files of two of the other women; evidence of sharing. Internet was accessible by using a pen-drive that plugged into a USB port on the computer. A monthly subscription could be purchased for around 15-25 Euros a month that gave the user a limited number of hours or data. One of the Centro Elena staff told me that there once was a Wi-Fi connection in the Center, which would have provided free

internet service to the residents. However, it had since been removed due to “privacy issues.”²³ As long as one had the money to afford the monthly charges, having a personal laptop with Internet pen-drive seemed to be the most ideal solution, offering 24-hour access, privacy, and the capability to make online calls and video calls (given the laptop was enabled with a webcam and microphone). At times the connection speed was slow, however. Residents of Centro Elena could also pool their limited money and share the costs of the monthly subscription. Some mentioned sharing cell phones under expectations of reciprocity in the future. Other participants in this study borrowed or were given money by others in order to call home.

The participants of this study typically communicated online through e-mail, Yahoo Messenger, and Facebook (either through sending private messages or posting comments on “walls”). As mentioned above, Messenger was also used to make online calls. Not surprisingly, Internet communication was predominantly used for talking with younger friends and relatives. Only one of the participants reported communicating online with a parent (Lehem, the youngest of the group). When I asked people why they did not talk online with their parents, many thought the question amusing because, in their minds, it almost went without saying that their parents had little to no knowledge of computers. Even Lehem’s father used the computer very little. Therefore, for people like Simon, who did not want to call his parents for fear of government surveillance (see Chapter 10) and whose parents could

²³ Although allowing a way for outside parties to log into the Wi-Fi network and observe sensitive documents could have been a legitimate concern, I suspect that the removal of the Wi-Fi may also have been part of a budget cut.

not use the Internet, there was no way to communicate with them (other than letters in the post, which he did not send). He would only pass greetings and news to them through his brother, with whom he communicated online.

Some seemed to really enjoy using Yahoo Messenger and Facebook, while others did not like it very much. Kifle told me that “now is the realm of the computer in the world” and proudly said that he could “know the situation in Eritrea by one click.” He would also communicate on Messenger with people who he had never met and who did not speak the same languages as him. He told me that he was able to speak with a Norwegian, for example, with the assistance of Google Translator.²⁴ Brei liked Messenger because it gave him the ability to carry on multiple conversations at once. Many spoke about the cost advantage of communicating online versus calling on the phone.

Dawit and Selam liked how Facebook provided people with a way to post and view photos. They could see how people had changed and it helped them to remember people they had not seen for a long time. Lehem showed me some photos of her parents and scenes from Eritrea that she had stored on Facebook. On the other hand, Michael did not like Facebook because he felt there was a lack of privacy.

Getet and Lehem did not like Messenger very much. One reason, which Lehem gave, was that she had difficulties spelling. Berhan did not like to use

²⁴ He wrote his message in the translator in English and then copy-and-pasted the Norwegian translation into the Messenger. When he received the message in Norwegian, he simply translated that message into English.

Messenger on occasions when the person on the other end of the conversation was a slow typist. He became bored waiting for people to send their messages. My observation of Walitta as she used the computer was evidence that not all young Eritreans are well-oriented with the computer. She would very slowly and clumsily type out words on the keyboard. Highlighting, copying, and pasting text were actions that took a lot of time and multiple attempts. For those who grew up solely using letters of the Tigrinya or Amharic alphabet, using a keyboard with Latin letters could be quite challenging. It would also be difficult navigating menus and online links in a language that one is not very familiar with.

When I was observing Joy using Messenger, I saw that the text of the messages had been replaced by squares. He told me that this happens when the message has been written using Tigrinya letters. Some computers do not have the necessary software to reproduce the messages as they were written. From this, we see another obstacle when attempting to communicate online. Those who write using Tigrinya are sometimes denied a voice online.

Varying Computer Proficiencies

Knowledge and proficiency with the computer varied widely among the participants. Their prior usage patterns with computers seemed to be related to their educational background. Some had used computers more before coming to Italy than they did after their arrival. This category was made up of five of the men, all of whom had some university education. A few used computers about the same amount in Italy

as they had in Eritrea. The two men in this category both had some university education. The two women in this category both had some sort of computer training at the secondary school level. From my observations of Lehem, I noticed that she is very well orientated on the computer. The majority, however, used computers more since they had arrived in Italy. Everyone in this category had either graduated secondary school without going on to university or had had their education interrupted at some point in their lives. Some started to use computers after they had left Eritrea and entered Sudan. Some were self-taught while others learned from watching friends. Others had some experience with Messenger or the Internet while in Eritrea but their experience was limited because there were not many (or any) Internet Points in their towns or the cost was too high. Finally, there were those, like Fatima, who had never used a computer before coming to Italy.

Improving Computer Proficiency

Since coming to Italy, a few of the participants had taken some sort of computer course and others expressed an interest in taking one in the future. Lehem and Simon were attending Evening School in order to receive an Italian high school diploma. Computer lessons were included within their general school curriculum. Fatima, Sara, Semere, and Pietros²⁵ had all attended *Mondo Digitale* (Digital World), a 28-hour course taught over the duration of seven weeks by Ahmad in the CEIP. Ahmad was hired through *Mondo Digitale* and given a curriculum to follow which

²⁵ Pietros already had had a good deal of experience with computers before coming to Italy. He told me he had taken a more advanced course in collaboration with Cisco which trained people for ICT jobs and careers.

included learning the basic parts and functions of the PC; how to search for information and communicate using the Internet; how to search for work and housing online; and learning to use Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint.

The summer session began a few days before my departure from Rome, so I was able to observe one lesson. None of the participants in this research were in attendance but there were four men: from Sudan, Afghanistan, Gambia, and Somalia. Ahmad told me that six months earlier there were many people from Eritrea, mostly women. That day's lesson began with instructions on how to use Google Maps to find one's way around Rome and how to use a transportation website to find bus routes and schedules. They were told to find the route between Centro Elena and Termini Station. Following this, Ahmad explained the parts of the computer and how to perform simple actions within the Windows desktop and Internet browser.

Discussion

Although there is seemingly no connection between frequency of contact with family and friends at home and how close the participants feel to those people, some do accredit ICT use with 'feeling close' to their loved ones. One of the most effective tools for feeling close to loved ones who are far away is by making video calls. The ability of being able to see and hear a person in real time, can temporarily bridge the physical distance. The testimonies from this study support what Panagakos and Horst (2006) have said about video calls providing a visual and real time medium that has

the potential to amplify emotional connections. I would disagree with their idea that this technology may decrease the need to physically visit home, however. From my observations, it seems that many of the refugees still have a strong desire to see and be near their families, in spite of their use of the technology.

Making online calls, even without the use of video, can also be seen as a useful tool for 'feeling close' to loved ones because online calls are free. However, this method is only effective if both parties are online at the same time. For people in Italy, having Internet access is generally not a problem. There were some financial limitations for the refugees of Centro Elena, however, there were many different resources and tools available for calling or writing home. Even financial constraints were often overcome through sharing resources with other refugees in the Center. On the other hand, in Eritrea, where having Internet in the home is a rarity, and public Internet Points are costly, these online calls are more problematic.

A couple of the Eritrean refugees in Centro Elena found their 'closeness' to Eritrea through encounters and time spent with the Eritrean (or Ethiopian) community in Italy. Kifle was fortunate enough to have a brother in Italy to help reduce feelings of homesickness. He also 'felt close' to the Eritrean community when frequenting Eritrean bars, restaurants, and church services. Walitta also felt closer to her ethnic community when attending church services. As McLellan (2004) noted, attending ethnic religious gatherings forms and strengthens social networks and social cohesion. They are also occasions for speaking one's mother-tongue language and practicing

cultural traditions tied to the homeland. Groups that are marginalized by parts of the dominant society, as these refugees certainly were, can feel a sense of belonging within the church community (Fresnoza-Flot 2010).

As has been found with other immigrant groups, associating with compatriots reduces feeling of homesickness for some (Ryan 2008; Tartakovsky 2007). Going to a church service in the center of the city is also a good excuse to be amongst many people and distance oneself from Centro Elena, which can create a feeling of isolation due to its position on the outskirts of the city. However, Firezgi's comment about cultural gatherings increasing longings for home should not be ignored. These gatherings have the potential to make the individual recall memories of times when family and friends were close by; and the realization that they are far away can create distress.

Some homesickness may have been reduced for the refugees at Centro Elena because they lived in a place where they could easily associate with their compatriots. Conversely, an Eritrean who lives in a neighborhood where there are few or no other Eritreans may find that they feel more homesick because of their isolation from other *paesani*. Perhaps this can be seen as a reason why some of the refugees at Centro Elena find it so hard to leave. After staying at the shelter for some time, they build up a social network of compatriots and people of other national backgrounds. I imagine it is difficult to then move into an apartment in a part of the city where one has no sort of social network for support.

Finally, there is a type of ‘closeness’ to Eritrea that can stay with a person regardless of where they move in the world. This ‘closeness’ comes from a sense of solidarity and shared cultural background that was created during the many difficult years of fighting for Eritrean independence. For many years Eritreans fought to define themselves against the Ethiopian identity – a distinction originally born out of Italian colonization. Coincidentally, a shared goal of independence from Ethiopia also contributed to making Eritrea’s nine distinct ethnic groups come to imagine themselves as one national identity. Michael had relatives who fought in the war and so it is likely that he was often reminded about this distinction. Furthermore, the conflict over the border from 1998-2000 and tensions between Eritrea and Ethiopia that continue to this day serve to remind each respective population on which side they are fighting. Their national identity is constantly called into question and each time they make the “us/them” distinction, their sense of nationalism is reified. This, I suggest, is part of the reason that Michael, and perhaps others, ‘feel close’ to the Eritrean people.

Although contact through ICT may lessen feelings of homesickness for some, use of the technology can also create anxiety. The same technology that allows a person to hear and read good news also allows a person to hear and read worrying news about the situation in the country. A person can feel anxiety because they are physically distant and have little possibility of helping in some way.

Then for others, no matter what technology is available to them, they still feel far or homesick. It seems that these feelings come from the inability to physically visit loved ones and actually hold them and give and receive some sense of security. They may also miss the help that family can provide when one has material needs. The sentiments of some in this study reflect those of Somali refugees in the US who reported that the support of extended family was missing (Boyle and Ali 2009). Furthermore, the participants in this study are unable to return to Eritrea and financial constraints limit reunions in Italy or other countries. The women seem to be especially afflicted by homesickness. The two mothers in the group long to be with their children and no number of phone calls is likely to reduce that longing. Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) cite Stroebe et al. (2002) in saying that homesickness is more common in female international college students. However, they seem to have misinterpreted the results of that study. Stroebe et al. (2002) found that homesickness is more common in UK female students when compared to female students in the Netherlands. Furthermore, this is a cross-cultural study comparing native, not international, students. Therefore, there is no evidence which says that women experience homesickness more than men within the context of migration. With such a small sample size, I am not able to draw any conclusions about the possible differences in how refugee women experience homesickness compared to men, but this would be an interesting line of inquiry for future research.

Like transnational migrants the world over, most participants in this study felt an obligation to financially support their relatives. This remittance sending was not

always possible due to the sporadic employment or unemployment of the refugees at Centro Elena. However, when enough money was scraped together it was sent to loved ones in Africa. This may attest to the economic situation in Eritrea. In Rome, I was observing refugees living in a shelter with little or no employment. Yet they were the ones to send money instead of the other way around. However, the reported frequency of sending remittances may have been exaggerated by the participants because I explicitly asked them if they sent money home. Because of cultural values, they may have been embarrassed to say that they had not sent money.

There seems to be a social expectation in Eritrea society to support family members with remittance money. Therefore, the sending of money from Europe becomes a demonstration of fulfilling this expectation. This may also explain why refugees, who did not have much to give, were sending money home anyway. There is an expectation that one goes to Europe in order to find success and wealth. Eritreans who do not immediately find these things, may try to save face by sending whatever money they can manage.

There was also pressure from relatives who contact the refugees through ICT in order to ask for money to be sent from Europe. We saw this with Simon's example of being able to help his family in times of trouble by sending money (or by offering emotional support). As Al-Ali et al. (2001) pointed out, members of the local community in Eritrea are required to contribute financially to public projects and may

ask relatives abroad for help with these contributions. Or like Getet's mother, they may be asking for money to help pay for the rent, gas, lights, groceries, etc.

In Chapter 6, we saw how the desire for refugees to flee their countries and stringent restrictions for immigrating to Europe created a new market for traffickers to exploit. In this chapter, we see that the desire of Eritreans abroad to send remittances creates a new market for second economy money transferring. There is no doubt that official banks and money-transfer services make millions of dollars every year from transnational money transferring. But it can be assumed that those working in the second economy system are also making great deals of money from their operation. The advantages of the second economy banking are that it provides better exchange rates and anonymity for those that fear government surveillance. Given the focus of this research, it is interesting to note that ICT is essential for these money transfers. "Businessmen" in Europe must tell their associates in Eritrea how much and to whom the money is to be given through the Internet. The person sending money to his or her family must also advise them how much they should be receiving. Again, the Internet is typically used in an effort to avoid government surveillance, which is supposedly more likely when using the phone. If the actions of the sender, "businessman," or recipient were discovered there could be legal consequences for them. A more detailed discussion of surveillance on the part of the Eritrean government will be provided in Chapter 10.

Whatever the financial situation of the participants in this research, communicating with loved ones in Eritrea and other countries seems to be one of their top priorities. However, obstacles for realizing these desired communication events were often found. Refugees and their loved ones abroad had to deal with obstacles, such as lack of money, inconsistent service, limited electricity, and limited landlines in certain areas of Eritrea. From the interviews in this study, we see evidence of the digital divide across numerous categories: across generations, geographic areas, economic levels, education, and gender.

With the exception of Lehem, none of the parents of the participants had the competency to use the Internet. Therefore, communication with the older generations was limited to expensive phone calls. Thanks to the diffusion of cellular phone technology, there is less of a discrepancy in access to phones between rural and urban areas in Eritrea. Most of the participants were able to call their parents, even if this meant calling them by way of another person's cell phone. Is this sample representative of the larger Eritrean population? In 2010, only four in 100 people in Eritrean had mobile cellular subscriptions (The World Bank 2010).²⁶ As far as landlines, only 0.5 people in 100 had lines in 2009 (Mbarika and Byrd 2009). Therefore, it seems a bit unusual that so many of the participants in this study were able to successfully call home. This may be due to the fact that most of them were

²⁶ We can compare this to 136 mobile cellular subscriptions for 100 people in Italy (The World Bank 2010). In fact, I have met several Italians who carry more than one cell phone.

calling urban areas. Additionally, most seemed to be from middle-class families, which would be more likely to afford the cellular phone technology.

According to the Eritreans of Centro Elena, Internet connectivity is still limited to larger cities. Even in these cities, Internet in the home is a rarity and connections in the public Internet Points are not particularly fast. There were only 5.4 Internet users per 100 people in Eritrea and there were no 'fixed broadband' Internet subscribers in 2010 (The World Bank 2010).²⁷ Therefore, the obstacles that Eritreans in Centro Elena had when trying to communicate with people inside Eritrea is partially explained by this data.

Economically, a lack of money for parties on both sides of the Mediterranean puts limits on how much they can communicate using ICT. Among the participants in this study, there is a general pattern of them assuming the cost to call Africa versus relatives and friends abroad taking on the cost to call Italy from North America and Europe. Therefore, the varying levels of wealth in each of these regions of the world are reflected by phone-calling practices.

Different educational backgrounds also create disparities in how efficiently one is able to utilize the ICT. Familiarity with computers prior to coming to Italy seems to be closely related to educational background. Those with a university education had more proficiency with computers before they came to Europe. Those with less education, and consequently less experience with computers, had some difficulties

²⁷ In Italy, there were 53.7 Internet users per 100 people and 22.5 'fixed broadband' Internet subscribers per 100 (The World Bank 2010).

with the utilization of the computer initially. However, all participants reported using the computer, in Italy, for communication and other Internet use. Therefore, it seems that once a person enters into a social context in which computer use is integrated into many daily functions and activities, as is the case in Italy, they begin to adopt these practices themselves. Part of the adoption of computer utilization comes from watching and learning from peers. Additionally, organizations in Rome, such as *Mondo Digitale*, have recognized the need for ICT education among immigrants and have thus created programs to assist them with their adoption of the technology.

A brief look at the national data will reveal if the Eritreans in this group have a typical educational background. For secondary school enrollment in Eritrea, there are three females for every four males (The World Bank 2010). However, in tertiary enrollment, there is only one female for every three males (The World Bank 2010). The fact that no females versus seven males in this sample attended university shows that indeed, a college education is more usual for males. However, this sample contains more people with a university education (33%) than is to be expected. According to the national data, only 2% of university-age Eritreans are actually enrolled in tertiary education (The World Bank 2010). Again, the explanation is likely related to the above average socio-economic background of many of the participants in this study.

Because of the relation between familiarity with computers and educational background, we see that the digital divide also affects gender. Eritrean females, who

are less likely to be enrolled in secondary and tertiary education, are also less likely to be exposed to computers. Their best chance to become familiar with the technology outside of a school setting is in public Internet Points. However, as explained above, there are geographic and economic limitations to access to the Internet Points.

It is important to recognize that the digital divide does not only limit the ability to communicate with others. It also limits educational, economic, and social development since these elements are currently so closely integrated with computers in so many parts of the world. As Weiskopf and Kissau (2008) write “as more of society’s processes are transferred to the Internet, its use will increasingly become a bottleneck for the participation and integration into society” (97). Therefore, Eritrea, which already struggles in the educational, economic, and social sectors, stands to fall farther behind if deficiencies in ICT education and access are not addressed.

Chapter 9: On the Web

Like many of the readers of this thesis, the Eritreans of Centro Elena used the Internet for a wide variety of activities. Even those that had little exposure to the Internet before coming to Italy found some use for it in their everyday lives. I was particularly interested to see how the Internet was being used to maintain cultural ties to Eritrea. With regards to Eritrean websites, I wanted to see if any of the participants could be said to be engaged in a transnational social field, or ‘imagined community.’ I was also interested to see if and how the Internet was being used as a tool towards integration into Italian society.

Involvement in the Eritrean Transnational Social Sphere

Almost all of the participants went to an Eritrean website of some sort. Some of the most often mentioned sites were Awate.com, EastAfro.com, and Asmarino.com. Awate.com describes itself as an “opposition website” whose purpose “is to serve as an anti-dote to the stifling propaganda of the Eritrean State media and its tentacles in Europe and North America” (awate.com). The homepage is in English, but there are links to Tigrinya and Arabic articles as well. There are news articles concerning the Horn of Africa, editorials, and user-submitted articles. There are a few videos available and a links page which lists several “opposition/resistance” websites and very few PFDJ and “sympathizer” websites. At the bottom of each page there is a place to post and read comments.

Asmarino.com had text in English, Tigrinya, and Arabic. Visitors to the website can find videos, news articles, radio broadcasts, editorials, and a place for user-submitted creative writings. Each video and article gives the option for people to leave comments or post the medium to their Facebook page.

EastAfro.com's audience seems to be largely Eritrean but also encompasses the interests of other Horn of Africa nations. One can find videos for entertainment such as Eritrean comedies, dramas, and movies. There is a live stream of an Eritrean TV channel and music. There is also a separate page for Amharic music. One also finds a live chat in which users can communicate with each other. There are also the news stories and interviews of a typical news website. The EastAfro Social Networking branch of the website holds discussion forums on a number of topics, not only political. Most text is in English except for the live chat which is written in Tigrinya using Latin characters. I have observed advertisements for companies that offer cheap international calls to Ethiopia or Eritrea on this and the other websites. This is a telltale sign that the websites have a largely transnational readership.

Only Lehem mentioned visiting a pro-government website, Shabait.com, which is run by the Eritrean Ministry of Information. When I observed her on the computer, I took note of some of the pro-government headlines: "school under construction" and "irrigation expansion."

Several of the participants mentioned that they visit these websites for news in order to find out what is going on in Eritrea. Many go to listen to Eritrean music or

watch the comedies, dramas, and films. Some told me that they read the discussion boards but only one reported posting any comments. Daniel sometimes posted comments under a pseudonym, which surprised me given his high fear of government surveillance. Some, like Kifle, chose not to write on the websites out of fear of government surveillance and the potential consequences to his family in Eritrea. Others were too concerned with sorting out their own lives, so they did not necessarily have the time or energy to speak out politically. I asked Joy if he wrote on the websites.

Joy: No. I don't write. I'm a reader. You know, what the Russian says: an empty stomach is not good at politics. If you don't have something to eat, you can't think about politics. You have to only search the things that make you satisfy your hunger. For example, for me, I am surviving. I am searching for myself. In this situation I don't want to involve myself in that issue. I just read. That's all.

I have tried on a few occasions to find the Russian who said this quote. The closest I could find was Einstein's "An empty stomach is not a good political adviser." While Einstein seemed to have meant that one should take caution when making political decisions on an empty stomach, Joy's quote is slightly different but successfully conveys the concept that he intended.

Berhan did not contribute to the online discussions because there were limits set by his lack of money. He felt that the little contribution he could make by writing would not be worth the amount of money that he would have to spend.

Berhan: If you have your own access, your own computer, then you are encouraged to do more. But when you are in an Internet Center, most of the time, you worry about the money that you pay more than...what you believe that you can bring a change or give a change by just writing.

MO: If you had free access to the Internet...if you didn't have to think about the money, would you write something? Would you contribute or not?

B: Well, I would. Because I'm interested in poetry, something like that. I'd do something like poetry or...comments. I'd do that.

MO: Poetry and comments related to what's happening...?

B: To the situation there, yeah.

Besides his concern for putting his family in danger, Kifle felt that writing on these websites was useless because "change can only come from inside the country." He told me this after I had asked him if an uprising like what happened in Egypt in the spring of 2011 could happen in Eritrea.²⁸ He felt that the government leaders could not possibly care what the Eritreans outside of the country were saying. He said that the government would have more fear from those who acted inside the country. Furthermore, the youth had the power to make change and Eritrea was, thus, at a disadvantage because of the large number of young people that had fled the country.

Berhan wanted to read both pro- and anti-government websites to get a more balanced idea of what was happening in the country. He told me that the pro-government websites highlight the positive aspects of what was happening in Eritrea and could not be trusted while the opposition websites sometimes exaggerated the negative.

Berhan: I often visit these websites...just to know what's going on because it's hard to find from...there is biased information coming from the country, actually. Because those that support the government, most of the time they give you information that is good about the government that is, most of the time, not real. And those who are against the government, most of the time, they give you exaggerated things against the government. So you have to balance the things yourself.

MO: And you read both?

B: Yeah. I read both.

²⁸ It has been said that an extensive social media environment played a crucial role in organizing the uprising against Mubarak. In Egypt, details of demonstrations were circulated by Facebook, Twitter, and e-mail (Beaumont 2011).

MO: The pro- and the anti-government?

B: Yeah, because I have to. I think most of the time it is exaggerated against the government, although most of the time, it is real but exaggerated. And the government doesn't tell the real situation within the country. Because they just use the propaganda: the construction, the educational progress, the constructional progress...all these things...but I know actually the real thing because I know when I was there, the thing was the same. Actually, I don't believe what they say most of the time. Even those things which are contrary to the government, they tell exaggerated things, things which are not well analyzed. Everything is not actual...so we are in a time of confusion, we can say. It's hard to know how a country is going actually. What real progress is going on there. But from family members or friends you can get the real life, how the real life is going on there. But the political situation, at least you know how the life is going there. They tell me it is very expensive. It's very hard to get a job there... a lot of things.

It is interesting to note that the only way that Berhan felt that he could know the "real life" situation in the country was by communicating with family and friends still inside Eritrea.

Simon did not write on the sites, not out of fear, but because he first wanted to inform himself more about the issues and possible political action that he could take. He told me that he did not visit Eritrean news sites very much because he already knew what was written because he had lived there. Furthermore, he was "very very tired of the words of the government." He said that the criticisms of the government were true but felt that only reading about them accomplished nothing. This is similar to Kifle's idea that merely discussing the issues on the websites was ineffective in creating change.

Yusef avoided reading the Eritrean news sites because "there are many lies." He is also not interested in going on any of the discussion boards or forums. Tesfalem, on the other hand, expressed that he did not go on Eritrean websites because they created stress for him.

Tesfalem: I don't like because if I read that I get some stress. I don't like to listen to that politics. [The forums] talk about the situation in our country. I don't like to go there. That website makes me some stress. If I hear something about my country, I don't like.

Facebook has also become a platform for communication within the Eritrean diaspora. Joy was a member of the *Eritrean Youth Global Movement* group and the *Eritrean Youth Solidarity* group. Being a member allowed him to read and post comments on these groups' pages (Joy told me that he did both). He is also a member of a group that is raising money for the family of an Eritrean named Rezene Welday. From this, we see an example in which ICT is being utilized to call upon members of the Eritrean diaspora for financial contributions. Lehem was a member of the *Woyane Watch*, a seemingly anti-government Facebook group. They asked her to join but she does not read the "wall" posts. They talk of politics and she told me she was not interested in such things. I observed that Tesfalem was a part of the *Eritrean Youth Solidarity for Change* and the *Eritrean Peace Group* Facebook pages. The former boasted to have reached nearly 7,000 members. The latter had 877 members. He told me that he does not regularly read these pages. He felt that they had nothing important to say.

Another type of online activity connected to Eritrean (or Ethiopian) culture was going to religious websites. Abraham, Walitta, Fatima, and Selam told me that they liked to visit religious sites. Selam and Walitta listened to religious music, while Walitta also went on YouTube to watch videos of Ethiopian Christian Testimonies. I observed Fatima as she watched a video of an Eritrean Orthodox choir and a video

which depicted the story of Abraham. I believe the actors in the story were Eritrean or Ethiopian.

Two of the women, Sara and Zion, told me that they played games online. In cases where they play with friends that are geographically far, this can be seen as another way of maintaining a distant relationship. Often online games also permit the players to communicate with each other through instant messaging or by voice. Therefore, online gaming provides a further opportunity for communication and a way to interact with someone in a non-communicative manner. Perhaps the thought that you and a distant loved one are both involved in the same activity at the same time is enough to temporarily transcend the geographical distance. In Zion's case however, she still reported feeling "far" from the people in Eritrea.

Finally, Brei and Firezgi told me that they sometimes watch soccer matches online. Following a sports team that one has followed since a child may be seen as a way of maintaining a cultural connection. Most of the Eritreans I talked to rooted for Arsenal. At first I entertained the idea that rooting for a British team was somehow connected to a cultural legacy left by the British protectorate. However, one of the men explained to me that Arsenal is an internationally well-admired team. Additionally, I saw Walitta and Fatima watching clips from an old soccer match on Walitta's new mini-PC. It was not easy to watch because of the slow loading time.

Others were interested in more global news and visited the homepages of the BBC and the Sun (another British media publication). Brei mentioned that he went to Al Jazeera English for his world news.

The Internet as a Tool of Integration

Only four of the participants mentioned visiting Italian news websites. Abraham and Semere would go to sports journals such as *Corriere dello Sport* and *La Gazzetta dello Sport*. Yusef read *Il Messaggero*, a daily “paper” and Gossip.it, an Italian gossip magazine. I observed Kifle browsing Sky.it for soccer scores and *La Repubblica*, the second most-circulated Italian newspaper. It is interesting to note that three of these men spoke Italian fairly well in my estimation.²⁹ Does reading more Italian-language websites improve language proficiency or does one begin to visit the Italian-language websites as proficiency improves? The causation probably goes in both directions. Additionally, many factors shape how well one learns and speaks a language. Semere, who had been in Italy for the longest time of any of the research participants (six years), told me that he preferred to use Italian over English online because it came easier to him. He told me that he had learned the language by taking language courses, speaking to Italians during the time he was working, and interacting with Italians in an everyday context. Semere was among those that had lived in rented apartments in Italy for a period. This interaction with Italians on a regular basis was something that those who never had jobs in Italy for any extended period of time, or those who never lived outside of shelters, did not have. I suspect that his higher level

²⁹ Kifle spoke to me mostly in English, so I was unable to assess his proficiency in the Italian language.

of integration into Italian society did more to build his proficiency in Italian than his online activity.

Another type of Italian online media that few had interest in was Italian music. Only Brei, Sara, and Selam reported listening to Italian music online. Some listened to English-language music like Celine Dion and Enrique Iglesias. This is not surprising given the extent to which English-language pop music has been dispersed and promoted around the world.

Some other online activities that I consider as contributing to the processes of integration are searching online for street addresses and bus schedules. These may seem insignificant, but they are still part of familiarizing yourself with a new environment. Semere told me he had searched for cars and apartments online; another example of activities that one does when making a home in a new place.

A few of the men took practice exams for the driver's test online. Not only did this involve learning and applying the Italian language, obtaining a license would be a step closer to autonomy. Having a car would allow for new employment opportunities for these men. Michael stressed to me that it was necessary to have a license because many jobs were far from home. Additionally, the symbolic value of having a state-issued document should not be overlooked. How many teenagers see receiving their license as a rite of passage into adult society? I imagine obtaining an Italian driver's license has similar symbolic value for immigrants as they work to become integrated into Italian society.

As I watched Yusef studying for his driver's license on the *WebPatente* 4.0 website, I noticed he would occasionally look up an Italian word he did not know by putting it into Google Translator. The word would then be translated into English. One of the social workers that I worked with told me that from her observations, some residents at the Center had improved their vocabulary since beginning to search for work online. When they come across a word that they did not know they asked a social worker or referenced an online translator.

One very large step towards autonomy and integration is finding work. The majority of the participants in the study reported searching online for work or apprenticeships. In fact, searching for work online seemed an important priority for many. Fatima told me that she had bought her laptop specifically with the goal of finding a job in mind. Some would simply perform a Google search, while others used Infojobs.it or *Porta Portese* Online. *Porta Portese* is a publication that comes out twice a week in print. It is a large classifieds journal for the city. One of my informants told me that it was still better to read the print version because the online version was slow to update its listings. Sara told me she has had some luck obtaining job interviews through the *Porta Portese* website.

Despite the apparent potential of searching for work online, none of those that had searched for work on the Internet managed to obtain a job via this method. Selam, Joy, Tesfalem, Walitta, Sara, and Yusef all managed to obtain an interview from an online listing but were not offered the job afterwards.

There were a few who were hired for jobs indirectly through their Internet searches. Pietros found an apprenticeship for a hotel worker online. After completion of the course, the hotel offered him a job, which he did until the tourist season was finished. Semere found an employment agency online that helped him to find a job as a welder.

Therefore, no one had great success finding work online. A few found work by using an employment agency, however. Besides Semere's welding job, Selam found a cleaning job through an agency. Others found work after completing a type of apprenticeship. They would typically be trained for some months without pay. Some complained that they were unable to find a job upon completion of their apprenticeship. Joy, however, was offered a job at a gas station/car wash after his apprentice period and, as mentioned above, Pietros was taken on by the hotel for which he did his apprenticeship. Apprenticeships were either found online, through *Caritas*, or through social workers at centers of reception.

Most jobs that the participants had done in Italy were in the service sector. Even those with specialized diplomas or university degrees had to settle for work that did not require their higher education. Moreover, even if their degrees were valued at the same level as Italian degrees (which they were not), the nature of their escape from Eritrea prevented them from requesting the official transcripts. A couple of the participants were attending evening school for this reason. The most often mentioned jobs were cleaner or domestic worker, done exclusively by women, and *bancarelle*

work, done exclusively by men.³⁰ Many of the work that the Eritreans found was *lavoro nero* (“black work”); meaning done without a formal contract. Uncontracted work is virtually the only option for undocumented immigrants, but is also often done by those with documents.³¹

Discrimination seemed to contribute to unemployment. A few of the participants, especially the women, told about instances when they were passed by for work or treated unfairly because they were black. A staff member of the “Back Office” told me that she would sometimes call potential employers on behalf of the residents of Centro Elena. On several occasions, the employers would explicitly ask if the person was a foreigner or black, and would refuse an interview apparently based on that information.

Refugees are typically at a disadvantage compared to other types of migrants when looking for work because other types of migrants have had time to establish information networks to inform relatives and friends of special job opportunities (Boyle and Ali 2009). In the case of Eritreans in Rome, they are less at a disadvantage in this respect because of the long history of Eritrean migration to Rome. More than any other method, these jobs were found through contact with another Eritrean or

³⁰ *Bancarelle* are large tables or stands commonly found on the sides of streets or in *piazze* in Rome. They sell a variety of wares for low prices and are usually run by immigrants. The participants of this research reported selling clothes, bags, purses, and books.

³¹ Work done without contracts leaves migrants open for exploitation. They can be made to work long hours for little pay. There is also no job security if the person is hurt or becomes ill. For example, Getet lived with her employers as a domestic worker. She had to care for the house and the employers’ children and was only given Sunday off. She asked for a contract for a long time but was always refused. Eventually, she became sick and lost her job because she could no longer continue working.

Ethiopian. For instance, Fatima found a job as a domestic worker for an Italian couple through an older Eritrean woman she had met in a café. The *bancarelle* where some of the men had worked, were managed by Eritreans. Berhan was actually offered work by a relative who happened to manage a *bancarella* in Rome. Brei was browsing the items of a *bancarella* one day and the Eritrean owner told him he could come and work when one of the regular workers was unavailable. Lehem started selling newspapers on the street after she had met an older Ethiopian man who supplied the papers. Sara told me that the most common way to find work was through friends. One friend who is working will tell another friend when the employer is looking for someone else. Sometimes the employer will tell a person to bring another friend. Yusef also spoke about finding work through friends.

MO: Have you gotten any interviews from your computer searches?

Yusef: With the computer I've found them and gone but...only through friends, I've found work.

Discussion

The Eritreans of Centro Elena can be seen as being engaged in a transnational social space with regards to their use of Internet communication tools, such as Yahoo Messenger and Facebook. They also seem to be quite engaged with Eritrean cultural media which is another area of that transnational social space. Communication, after all, is not merely the exchange of words and phrases in a conversational way. We know that it is also the exchange of images, sounds and texts. Accessing Eritrean

music, film, religion, and sport³² places a person within that transnational social space. These various media are charged with memories, emotions, and sentiments linked to the homeland. The Internet offers the participants a way to continue to participate in cultural practices. It may be hard to find these cultural elements being recreated in Rome, but they can be recreated online with ease.

Similarly to how Anderson (1983) describes the ability of print media to create an 'imagined community', accessing media online does the same. The difference with online media is that one does not only imagine that others are reading or watching the media, one has confirmation of this. For example, a video on YouTube counts how many viewers have watched the video. People are able to leave comments and engage in online discussions. Many of the Eritrean websites that the participants were accessing allow for the same sort of exchange. While the newspaper is a one-way flow of information from publisher to reader, online media users can assume the role of both publisher and reader. In these ways, the online 'imagined community' assimilates a 'real community'. People in a town can run into each other on the street; share stories or photos; and watch TV, sporting events, or cinema together. While they do these activities, they are constantly sharing their ideas and sentiments; giving and receiving feedback. Users of the Internet are now able to recreate these face-to-face communal interactions online.

³² Even if one is not watching an Eritrean team playing in a sporting event, it can still be considered a link to home for the immigrant. Watching an English soccer club that one has watched since youth brings back memories and sentiments that link the individual to home.

Eritrean websites seem to be an important source of knowledge about what is happening within Eritrea. Most participants preferred the “opposition” websites to the government-run sites. Some participants spoke of not being able to trust what was written on the government-run websites. From a quick glance at the headlines of a government-run news site, it becomes obvious that the stories are meant to portray the state in the best possible light. Because the Eritrean state has outlawed independent press within the country and even imprisons journalists who criticize the regime, a clearer picture of what is actually happening in the country may seem hard to come by. However, the Internet provides people with alternative information and analyses. Those writing in the Eritrean diaspora are able to give a voice to those that are unable to criticize the government from within the country.

As Berhan points out, the opposition websites are not without bias, however. In order to counterbalance the propaganda being put out by the Eritrean state, the oppositional online writers may exaggerate the atrocities happening within the country. Not everyone may read the two types of sites with the same discernment as Berhan, however. In addition to online news and informational sites, an alternative way to be cognoscente about what is happening in the country is through communication with friends and family who are still in Eritrea. However, these personal sources cannot be thought as being free of bias either.

The participants of the study seem to be more engaged in the online political sphere as readers, instead of writers. Some liked to keep abreast of the issues while

others preferred to distance themselves from the online political debate altogether. A variety of reasons were given for not contributing text to the political discussions. One reason is the fear of punishment that may be inflicted on an online participant's family should their identity be discovered. This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 10. Others refer to having more immediate priorities. The participants of the study are all struggling in some way to become autonomous by procuring work and housing. For the time being, this may be more important to them than helping with the Eritrean "cause." Even though the Centro Elena Internet Point is free, they have limited time online. Searching for work or sending messages to relatives may take precedence to engaging in political online discussion. Also, even those with the time may simply not wish to spend their time and energy in that way. I suspected, from some of the interviews, that there is a sense of futility in engaging in online political debate. Kifle felt that change could only come from within the country. However, he seems to be ignoring or unaware of the Eritrean diaspora's contribution to the formation of the country in earlier years (see Bernal 2006).

Perhaps, their uninvolvedness in the online political sphere can be attributed to the socio-historical context in which they grew up. Al-Ali et al. (2001) found in their studies that the more recent arrivals to Europe had not been inculcated with the same 'culture' of contributing as earlier generations. This may be the case with this group of Eritrean refugees. They were all very young children or had not been born yet when Eritrea became independent. They may have missed the flurry of nationalism that was stirred up during the "struggle for independence." Even so, I would not say

that they are apathetic to the political situation in Eritrea. Michael, for example, was jailed for his involvement in political protests at the University of Asmara. I also heard sentiments of hope that the situation in the country would change. Some told me that they were ready to return to Eritrea in the event that these changes come to fruition.

For some, the emotional and psychological pain may still be too strong to become immersed in debates related to the abusive system from which they escaped. Like Tesfalem, visiting Eritrean websites may cause too much stress. They have escaped Eritrea in body, but they may still need to escape Eritrea in mind. Visiting websites that speak about the oppressive government can reopen wounds that they want to heal.

For future study, it would be interesting to explore if online political involvement increases once a refugee has been out of the country longer. With time, refugees may be more integrated into the new society and may have had more time to let the psychological wounds heal a bit more. Perhaps, at that point they would be more willing to put their energy into online political engagement.

From a certain standpoint, the fact that everyone in the research sample was living in a center of reception suggests that they are not fully integrated into Italian society. We should recognize that the concept of integration is problematic (Grillo 2010) and the participants may have been integrated in social and cultural ways that were beyond my gaze. However, arguably not living autonomously within Italian

society suggests that there is much more work to be done towards achieving integration in whatever way we conceive it to be.

When refugees are not working, they do not have as much opportunity to interact with members of Italian society; both within and outside of the workplace. Not having steady income also limits the degree with which one can interact with Italians. Selam told me that she would like to go out with Italian friends but not having money to spend on food and entertainment makes this difficult. This is similar to what King and Mai (2008) found among Albanian youth in Italy. Immigrant youth often cannot go out with Italian youth that pass the night spending money at restaurants, pubs, and cinemas. Even living at Centro Elena can isolate the refugees from Italian society, given that the location of the Center is very far from the center of the city.

There are resources at Centro Elena designed to assist with integration. Italian language lessons are offered to the residents. As supplemental practice there were some language computer programs that the residents could use. Although none of the participants in this research reported using such programs, this could be considered another useful tool to assist in the process of integration. Tutoring for the driver's exam was also offered. At times, meetings were organized in order to discuss aspects of Italian society that may not be familiar to the residents. For example, I observed a meeting in which the Center's psychologist showed a film to some of the women

about female circumcision (also known as Female Genital Mutilation)³³. After the film there was an opportunity for discussion. The purpose of the session was to habituate the Eritrean and Somali women to the mores of Western society; mores which one Somali woman did not agree with.

I see Information and Communication Technology as also contributing to the integration process, particularly cultural integration. As described above, the refugees were utilizing the Internet to learn the streets and bus routes of the city. They were studying for driver's exams and were improving their Italian linguistic competency by accessing Italian media and looking up words with online dictionaries and translators. Of course, some were using the Internet for these purposes more than others. I agree with Weiskopf and Kissau (2008) when they write that the Internet aids integration, depending on the immigrant's intentions and ways in which he or she uses it.

They were also searching for work that had the potential to lead them towards autonomy and further integration. Although the participants in this study did not seem to have much success with obtaining employment from their online searches, I think it is too early to rule out the effectiveness of the Internet as a resource for job hunting. Many factors are involved in whether or not a person is able to find work. Lack of language proficiency, being under-skilled, having past credentials and experience not being recognized by employers, coping with psychological trauma, and racism from employers are all reasons why it may have been difficult for these Eritreans to find

³³ In 2002, the Eritrean Demographic and Health Survey showed that 89 percent of Eritrean women had undergone some type of the procedure. The practice was banned in 2007 but is still performed "underground." (Leshomo 2010).

work. The refugees were also looking for work during an economic crisis which made it difficult, even for Italians, to find jobs. In this case, creating social capital and depending on networks of compatriots seemed to be an effective method of finding work over any other. However, the type of work found in this way was often the work that is most available to immigrants in various global contexts; undocumented work in the service sector.

It should be noted that the Internet is not a magical tool for integration without replacement; it merely has the potential to facilitate it. For instance, to find one's way around the city, there are maps made of paper. To study for the driver's exam, there are books. To gain access to Italian media, there are still record stores, cinemas, and newspapers in print. However, these things are easier, and often cheaper, to access online. An endless wealth of information is available to those that are able and know how to access it. And this point – that in order to benefit from the wealth of online information, one needs to know how to access it- should be kept in mind. The residents of Centro Elena have the luxury of a free Internet Point. Not all people have free access to computers. As mentioned earlier, there is a membership card that allows immigrants to use public library computers for free. I see this as a sign that an organization in Rome has recognized the importance of computer access and created a program for those that do not have the financial means to pay for Internet service or computer equipment. However, as explained earlier, access to the Internet does not only depend on costs. One needs certain skills and knowledge in order to effectively take advantage of what the computer has to offer. Not all refugees, or non-refugees

for that matter, have such computer competency. Once again, an organization in Rome (namely *Mondo Digitale*) seems to recognize this and works towards educating those refugees that wish to be educated.

Another area in which we see a digital divide is related to linguistic barriers. I see this as a problem that needs to be addressed so that more Eritreans have access to the Internet. Less than 0.1% of all websites are in Tigrinya (W3Techs Nd.). Perhaps, this is not surprising given the small percentage of the world's population that speaks this language. There is only one online English-Tigrinya dictionary which I was able to find (<http://www.memhr.org/dic/>). Although one cannot use 'Google Translate' to translate from or into Tigrinya, there is a Tigrinya Google search engine. The paucity of online resources in Tigrinya means that Eritreans who do not speak one of the more widely used world languages are precluded from information online and any benefits that may be associated with such information.

Different languages have different values, what Bourdieu might call cultural capital. Speakers of English, Chinese, and Spanish have much more information available to them online compared to lesser spoken languages. This cultural capital is closely tied to economic capital because, on the global scale, speakers of Tigrinya do not account for very much of the world's wealth. Therefore, there is not a large economic incentive to have multiple online Tigrinya translators or websites. Additionally, the Internet has only been available to people within Eritrea for about a decade, so there has been less time to develop Tigrinya websites compared to other

world languages. However, within Eritrea, Tigrinya has much more cultural and economic value. Therefore, it is largely up to Eritreans in the homeland and within the diaspora to create translated versions of websites so that Tigrinya speakers will have more access to the online information.

Chapter 10: Under the Gaze of the Eritrean State

One very noticeable theme running throughout the interviews with the Eritrean refugees at Centro Elena was an enduring fear of government surveillance. Most said that the fear was not so much for them because they had left Eritrea. The fear was more for the family and friends they were calling in Eritrea. According to my participants, it was especially dangerous to talk about politics or criticize the government on the phone. Some mentioned that the government listens in on or records conversations. There was also suspicion that the sending of text messages to those inside Eritrea was being intercepted or blocked. The fear caused them to avoid using or alter the ways in which they used the phone or Internet.

Abraham had some friends in Eritrea who held government jobs. He told me that when speaking on the phone with these friends, he would sometimes ask them about the situation in the country and ask about what the problems of the country were at that time.

MO: So with your friends...what are the problems?

Abraham: About politics, some things with the country.

MO: Are you afraid to talk about these things with your friends?

A: Ahh...yeah...for me there's no problem because I am far. But some days when I was talking about these things, they said, "Eh, please...leave this thing alone. It's better we talk on the Internet." They told me like this...for their safety. The cell phones are blocked and the government controls the messages. They want to know, "What did he talk about?" For [my friends in Eritrea], it's a problem. For me, it's not...not anymore. [The government] records things. When I will have some possibility to return to my country, they will put it on the table. They will say, "Did you speak about this thing with your friend?" This is an example that I'm telling you.

MO: I want to understand. When you send a message, the government blocks it or when you talk on the phone?

A: When you talk, when you talk. You can't send a message. I can't send a message. No texting. It doesn't work.

MO: Why doesn't it work?

A: This depends on them. They block it.

MO: The government?

A: Yes. The government.

MO: Is it something intentional or because there's some problems with the technology [infrastructure]?

A: In my opinion. They have the technology. They have all the things...Internet...satellites. But why doesn't texting work? According to me, the government has blocked it.

MO: And when you talk on the phone, the government listens or records something?

A: Yes. Yes. They listen and record because there are many guys that have been put in jail for these things.

MO: Do you know someone that was put in jail?

A: Yes.

MO: For what? For talking...

A: For talking on the cell phone. [laughs nervously]

MO: Really? For speaking badly about the government?

A: Yes. Once in a while, I begin to talk about these things because I am far. They won't do anything to me because I escaped. I went out of the country. But when I want to say something to [my friends], they get angry because the words go out like nothing...they go out freely. For these types of things, the government registers everything and records it and then they call the police. They don't dress like the military. They dress like you and I. They take you. They go in without saying a word. Then there's no justice.

MO: No justice?

A: There's nothing. Because you go in jail in one day without having a trial. This is the problem.

MO: There isn't a trial?

A: No. [said softly]

During the conversation with Abraham, he gave the impression that Eritreans were put in jail without a fair trial. This absence of law or justice in Eritrea was also

alluded to by Brei. He explained that now that he was in Italy, he was able to speak more openly or freely.

MO: So you speak more openly?

Brei: I speak more openly. I am not afraid...because I am in Italy. Why am I afraid? [Why should I be afraid?] There is law in Italy.

Michael also had a suspicion that text messages were being blocked or intercepted by the government. In his opinion, this was done in order to limit people in Eritrea's access to outside information. Perhaps the government worried that citizens would be able to organize themselves to rebel against the state. Intercepting the messages could also be used to discover the whereabouts of those who had escaped from the country. According to Michael, these "tricks of the government" were possible because all media and telecommunications were state-owned.

Michael: Messages do not enter there. I can't communicate with messages with the telephone. The last time I have sent to my sister but she told me that it did not arrive in Eritrea. It is a trick of the government. If the message arrives maybe people can do many things. So many information will be easily transmitted with these people. So the message does not enter this region.

MO: Do you think the message is blocked?

M: Because...I told you...all Eritreans are going out of Eritrea. This message can be helpful for them to track the people outside of Eritrea. Maybe this is the reason.

MO: So you tried to send the message with your phone to your sister but it didn't arrive? Because you think it was blocked...by who?

M: I don't know by who? Most of the time the media is owned by the government. All the media: the TV, the radio, telephone, everything is owned by the government. So most probably the government is responsible for that.

Michael also told me that he does not put photos online. When I asked him the reason he paused for a long time and explained that he did not want to tell me everything but it was better not to put photos on the Internet. His wife tells him not to post them and she does not post her photos either. From his explanation, I suspect that either it is for reasons of jealousy or because Michael and his wife were afraid of having their identity revealed online.

Berhan was also careful about what he said on the phone and explained that people in Eritrea do not enjoy the same freedom of speech that people in North America and Europe do. The reluctance to speak openly on the phone also hides the complete reality of what is happening in Eritrea from those outside of the country.

Berhan: When you speak on the phone, back home, you have to be careful about what you say. You don't have to get the people in trouble because I think, most of the time, they are wired up. They are recorded.

MO: By who?

B: By the government. So even when they tell you the real situation, they are kind of conservative.

MO: They don't tell you the complete story?

B: The complete figure because they have to be careful with what they say.

MO: What makes you worried about this? What makes you think that there's a risk?

B: Well, generally no. It's a different story from what you see in Europe here or America. Because there, there's no freedom of speech, freedom of expressing your own thoughts or comments or anything like that...so people, if they are accused of being against the government or saying things against the government, they can be arrested or they can risk themselves...so you have to care about them. You have to be reserved yourself when you are talking.

MO: And you know of cases where people have been arrested for saying something bad on the phone against the government?

B: Well, I used to hear rumors but actually I haven't experienced it yet. But still they are scared. There is a kind of phobia there about the government. People are very much afraid. [he laughs a bit uncomfortably]

MO: So when you speak on the phone you have to edit yourself?

B: Yeah.

Simon also feared government surveillance of his phone calls and avoided talking on the phone to his parents all together.

MO: Do you speak with your parents on the phone?

Simon: No.

MO: Can I ask why?

S: Because it's dangerous to speak in our country. Because if a person goes away, [the government] always searches for them.

MO: So if you call their cell phone, there's a risk?

S: Yes. For not having a risk, I don't call them.

Daniel's interview revealed a general fear about government surveillance. Even after Daniel had agreed to do an interview with me, he warned me before we had begun that he would not talk about his country because of the dangers that could come to his family. Not surprisingly, he did not want the interview to be recorded. In fact, six of the participants did not wish to be recorded; Daniel and five of the women. Perhaps, they did not fully trust me and what I might do with the information³⁴; or maybe, not wanting to be recorded was related to a distrust born from so much time spent in fear of the Eritrean government and their surveillance tactics. He then explained that he avoided talking with people in Eritrea on the phone and through the

³⁴ I think it was normal that the participants would be somewhat suspicious of an American ethnographer that had come all the way to Rome to discuss their phone and Internet habits. On my last day at the Center, one of the Somali women joked that I was with the FBI (although, I think she meant the CIA).

Internet out of fear that he would be putting those people at risk. He talked to me about spies that go into Internet Points and ask users about the identities of people on their lists of Facebook contacts. When he had to talk to his brother in Eritrea on Yahoo Messenger, he took certain precautions. He only left messages for him when his brother's status was "offline," or not connected at that moment. Daniel's brother would read the message when he signed into Messenger and would only respond when Daniel was "offline." In this way, the two brothers were never talking in real time. For them, there was less risk by using this method.

I asked Zion if there were certain things she did not like to talk about on the phone.

Zion: I don't want to talk about the government.

MO: Why?

Z: Because when the government hears your secrets, you go directly to the police station. Because I escaped [from the country]...also they don't want to... [*unintelligible*]

MO: If you talk on the phone, the government can know? Why? How is it possible?

Z: When you call, the government needs to control what is said.

MO: They listen?

Z: Yes. They listen. I can't talk because I am afraid...not for me. I am in Italy. I'm not afraid of anything now. But I am afraid for them [my parents]...because I escaped.

Simon, Zion, and others had left the country under illegal circumstances, usually because they had avoided or defected from the National Service (NS). The government might not have been aware that these people had escaped. If they were made aware that they had escaped from the NS or the country, through surveillance of a phone conversation for instance, there would be negative consequences for their

parents. When the authorities found out that Firezgi had escaped from his military assignment, they interrogated his father and put him in jail for six months.

Firezgi: If you return in my country, they put you...they put your parents in jail...those of the government.

MO: They put your parents in jail?

F: Yes. When I escaped to Sudan, my father did six months in jail.

MO: Because you had escaped?

F: Yes.

MO: Has he been released?

F: When I escaped from Sudan, they put him in that jail. They asked, "Where did your son go?" My father said, "I don't know. He went into the military." The authorities responded, "Where?? Go and find your son!" My father said, "Where will I find him? I'll never find him. I don't know where he is." Then they put him in jail and after six months, my father went out.

As mentioned in Chapter 9, people avoided writing on online message boards or forums that criticized the government out of fear of the consequences for their families. I asked Kifle if he wrote on these kinds of websites.

Kifle: I am afraid to write...but I read it.

MO: Because you don't want to or it's not possible?

K: It's possible but I don't want to.

MO: Why?

K: Because I am afraid. I'm not afraid for me, but for my family...my family in Eritrea.

Zion explained that it was only safe to criticize the government online if one is out of the country. She told me that Eritreans inside the country could not criticize the government but Eritreans who were in Ethiopia were able to write negative things about the government online.

MO: The Eritreans inside Eritrea can't write bad things about the government?

Zion: No. Because everyone is afraid.

Discussion

The testimonies of the participants in this research and the literature (Bernal 2006; CIMA 2011; Hepner 2008) strongly suggest that the Eritrean government uses surveillance techniques on the phone and on the Internet. This surveillance can be seen as an attempt for the state to protect its interests. First, the state wants to deter its citizens from defecting from or avoiding the National Service. Not only does the state gain military protection from people's enlistment in the Service, it also gains an inexpensive source of labor for public and private projects. Second, the PFDJ wants to keep a close eye on and ear to information being spread among the diaspora. It likely fears the possibility that Eritreans abroad could incite Eritreans within the country to organize in rebellion. Recent events in Egypt and Libya suggest that such a citizen-led revolt is a possibility. The state recognizes how instrumental various forms of ICT can be in the organization of people and the rapid spread of information amongst them. Therefore, the Eritrean government blocks certain foreign-based radio broadcasts and websites (CIMA 2011); monitors online message boards (Bernal 2006); maintains watch-lists, photos, and videos of dissidents (Hepner 2008); sends spies into Eritrean Internet Points; surveys phone calls and possibly blocks incoming text messages from abroad.

Several participants, such as Abraham, Zion, and Brei, had said that they no longer fear for themselves now that they have been given asylum in Italy. In fact, they seem to have been acculturated with the Western ideal of free speech. However, as long as they have friends and family in Eritrea who they care about, they remain afraid to discuss politics on the phone, limit their contact or avoid contact altogether. They do this because they fear that their loved ones will be fined or imprisoned. Berhan had heard rumors that this was a possibility. Others, like Abraham and Firezgi, know individuals personally who had been imprisoned because somebody criticized the political regime or were found to be related to someone who fled the country. The literature also supports this phenomenon: “Families are punished for the acts of one of its members, especially for draft evasion or desertion. The family is given no opportunity to defend itself. Families are fined Nakfa 50,000 (US\$ 3,333) for evasion or desertion. Those who do not or cannot pay are jailed and may have property confiscated” (CIMA 2011: Np.).

Not only does the information obtained through surveillance lead to legal consequences for refugees’ loved ones, there are also emotional consequences. People, like Simon and Daniel, avoid talking to family members because of the perceived risks. What does this do to the nature of their relationships with those family members? Under these circumstances, they can no longer visit, see, or speak with their loved ones. Such separation must contribute greatly to the deterioration of the relationship. From this example, we see that the government is exerting what Foucault calls ‘biopower’ (i.e. the government has control of the bodies of its

subjects). Tactics of surveillance deter people from performing actions that they would normally want to do, such as calling their parents. People are also prevented from speaking and expressing themselves freely. Eritrean citizens, at home and abroad, can be said to be ‘docile bodies.’ “A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (Foucault 1977: 136). In this case, the aim of the PFDJ is that citizens be subjected, used, transformed and improved for the benefit of the state.

Paradoxically, the state’s surveillance practices also weaken the very nation-state it is striving to preserve. Eritreans abroad are likely to contribute less, politically and economically, if they are forced to decrease or discontinue their contact with those within Eritrea. In other words, if contact with people in Eritrea is not maintained (because of the perceived risks of maintaining that contact), perhaps Eritreans abroad would feel less obligated or inclined to send remittances and would provide less support, both through financial contributions and votes,³⁵ to political ventures.

I believe that Foucault’s analysis of the panopticon is appropriate for describing the situation between the Eritrean state and its subjects. The state uses surveillance via ICT, among other strategies, to keep Eritreans in all parts of the world in check. The gaze may not be constant as people do not spend all of their time on the phone or online. Additionally, it is not possible for the government to monitor every phone call and e-mail exchange. However, it does not seem that Foucault intended

³⁵ Fewer votes from the diaspora are not currently an issue since there has been no elections held since the Border Conflict.

that the physical gaze be constant. The most important part of the panopticon metaphor is that subjects control themselves out of the pure fear or paranoia that they could be under surveillance at anytime. Many of the Eritreans at Centro Elena had demonstrated that the mere possibility of being under surveillance was enough to make them alter their behaviors.

However, there is a key difference in this situation from how Foucault described the panopticon. The difference here is that the gaze goes both ways. Eritreans in the diaspora have been able to use the Internet as a tool to keep tabs on the state. They are able to disperse information and analyses, often critical of the government, in a way that allows them to reclaim some of the state's power. The Eritrean state has come to fear what the diaspora might be capable of. Additionally, the ability of one to communicate anonymously on the Internet has allowed people to hide themselves partially from the panoptic gaze (however, this anonymity is never certain). Eritreans, like Zion and Abraham, seem to believe that one is free to write what one pleases online once they are outside of Eritrea.

Ironically, entering the refugee reception system passes Eritrean asylum-seekers into another mechanism of surveillance and biopower. Upon entering Europe, asylum-seekers' information is recorded in the Schengen Information System (SIS) and their fingerprints are stored in the Eurodac, the data system administered by the European Commission (Tsianos and Karakayali 2010). In accordance with the Dublin

Convention, this information sets limits on where refugees can legally go.³⁶ Therefore, once more, their bodies are being watched and controlled.

Even in Centro Elena, they are assigned an ID number; they must record their whereabouts by signing a sheet in the dorms to demonstrate that they have spent the night; and they must sign a sheet in the dining hall to demonstrate that they are eating in the Center. Their rooms are subjected to random searches to check for contraband and to ensure order and cleanliness. Furthermore, their “progress” is monitored by tutors and counselors. Arguably, these measures are done in the interest of effectively allocating resources and helping the refugees in some way. Nevertheless, their movements and behaviors are still partially being controlled by an overseeing, power-laden institution.

³⁶ A social worker at Centro Elena told me that some refugees, who wish to claim asylum in another country, will burn their fingertips with acid in order to make identification more difficult.

Chapter 11: Conclusion

Before offering some conclusions and recommendations based on the findings of this study, some limitations to the research should be considered. It should be noted that the results and analysis of this study are not necessarily applicable to the Eritrean diaspora, or Eritrean refugees, as a whole. Even within the Roman context, this small sample constitutes a very specific group of Eritrean asylum seekers. The participants all come from the same center of second reception and their experiences may differ greatly from Eritrean refugees in other centers of reception or those that live outside of refugee shelters. They are all single adults (i.e. in Italy without spouses or children) within a rather narrow age range of 22 to 38 years old. Interviews with Eritrean refugees that represent different generations and are accompanied by family members would likely yield more diverse results. However, due to time constraints, it was necessary to focus on a small sample found in a single locus.

Another limitation was determined by time and geography. There was only time for one formal interview with each participant. Follow up interviews would have been useful for further exploration of interesting topics brought up during first interviews and for making clarifications. However, transcribing and analysis were mostly done in Oregon, nearly 6,000 miles from Rome. Therefore, a return visit for further interviewing was not feasible.

While I in no way wish to discredit the testimonies of the participants in this study, the fact that they have received asylum should be kept in mind when analyzing their experiences. Essentially, a refugee must convince the UNHCR that he or she is in need of asylum. Therefore, certain facts may be exaggerated by some individuals when they recount their stories. Refugees often have to repeat their stories several times to different authorities. With time, some refugees become used to emphasizing the more “impressive” parts of their stories and the reality can become distorted.

Conclusions and Recommendations

An exploration of Information and Communication Technology use on the part of Eritrean refugees in Rome has brought to light many aspects of the lives of these refugees; many relating to the use of ICT. Even before the refugees left Eritrea in order to flee an oppressive government which subjects its citizens to forced labor, among other human rights abuses, ICT use is involved in the formation of imaginaries about how life will be once they arrived in Europe. Global media, at times transmitted through the Internet, coupled with information gleaned from conversations with Eritreans in the diaspora, creates imaginaries of Europe as either a land of opportunity or a land of obstacles. Those that decide to make the flight must be prepared for the risks and dangers that they may encounter, as well as the great financial costs that they will surely encounter. In order to decrease some of the risk and uncertainty, some utilize ICT to plan out the best route to reach European shores; usually the shores of the tiny Italian island of Lampedusa.

The second economy has flourished in response to the desires of immigrants, as well as laws and restrictions that European states put in place in attempts to curb those desires. This research has highlighted the second economies of human trafficking and unofficial banking. ICT use plays a role in both of these operations. For human trafficking, ICT plays a more sinister role when it is used to demand money from the families of migrants who have been kidnapped. For the transference of remittances the Internet and phone are necessary for communication between the money sender, “businessmen,” and recipient. Even before the money is sent, ICT use and remittance-sending are connected in positive and negative ways. On the positive side, access to the Internet and phones allows family members in Africa to call and ask for money when it is needed to pay bills or contribute to public projects. Eritreans can then feel that they are fulfilling their social obligation by remitting the money. On the negative side, the ease with which friends and relatives can ask for money may place stress on a refugee who does not have enough money for themselves.

Refugees often suffer from feelings of isolation and homesickness. In some cases, the communication technology is able to assuage some of those feelings. Internet and phone communication lets some ‘feel close’ to their family and friends in Eritrea and within the diaspora. Besides the use of this technology, interacting with members of the Eritrean community in Rome, or a sense of solidarity and nationalism engendered by shared struggles, have allowed others to ‘feel close’ to the Eritrean people. Still, for others, none of these things is enough to bridge the emotional distance created by not being able to visit and be physically near their loved ones.

The participants in this study have all demonstrated that contacting friends and family via ICT is important for them. They have also shown that being able to access Eritrean media and obtain information from members of the diaspora and homeland is important. Accessing this media and information places them within a transnational social space in which emotions and memories attached to the homeland can be (re)created. They are also given the chance to become members of an ‘imagined community’ that is spread though out every corner of the globe. One way in which members of this online community interact is through discussions of what life is like in Eritrea and what should be done to change the situation. The information written on politically-themed websites and discussion boards is an important alternative to the biased government-owned media. While the information on these websites is read by many in this study, most are less inclined to write for reasons such as having more immediate concerns of resettlement, believing that their contribution would make little difference, wanting to avoid psychological stress, or because of fear of government surveillance.

The literature and testimonies of the participants in this study show that the Eritrean government uses surveillance techniques in an attempt to protect the nation-state and punish dissidents. ICT have largely been used as a tool to survey Eritreans inside the country and abroad. The result has been a Foucauldian panopticon in which Eritrean subjects monitor and alter their own behavior and speech out of fear that the government could be surveying them at anytime. However, members of the diaspora have in turn been able to survey the actions of the Eritrean state via ICT. The

perceived freedom and anonymity of the Internet has allowed Eritreans abroad to spread information on the actions of the government and they are able to make criticisms of the state that those within Eritrea cannot. In some ways, this takes away some of the power held by the PFDJ.

This research has also shown that surveillance does not start and stop there. Once refugees enter into the European asylum reception system, they are subject to new forms of surveillance and biopower that determines where they can and cannot move. The Dublin Convention is largely responsible for how the asylum reception system functions in Italy and other EU member states. The way that the Dublin Convention currently “functions” taxes the Italian asylum reception system by forcing refugees, who have entered Italy because of its geographical position, to stay in that country. The added stress on the system means that the time needed to process claims is slow and once documents are issued, many refugees are left without a place to live.

I follow Christopher Hein in recommending that refugees should be allowed to choose a country where a social network may exist that could assist them in their integration process or that has linguistic or cultural similarities that would make the process of integration smoother. Facilitated integration is likely to result in costing EU member states’ welfare systems less and would reduce the time that refugees stayed in shelters, thereby freeing up the space for other asylum seekers in need. Reform to the Dublin Convention that would allow refugees to choose their country of

settlement would also reunite relatives that were separated because they had to claim asylum in different regions.

Many refugees attempt to settle in other countries regardless of the law. At times the decision to try settlement in another country is influenced by communication with friends and relatives via ICT. From their conversations, new imaginaries of a better life in a new destination are formed. Therefore, failure to reform the Dublin Convention pushes would-be legal refugees into an “illegal” status which leaves them vulnerable to possible detention or exploitation at the hands of those who employ them into undocumented jobs. Furthermore, by leaving one country, staying in another for a few months or years, then getting deported back to the first country, refugees are prolonging the time needed for resettlement and integration.

For refugees that are attempting to resettle and integrate themselves into a new society, the Internet can be a helpful tool. The Internet facilitates cultural integration by giving refugees a portal into the media of their host country; providing information for orientating oneself in one’s new surroundings; acting as a resource for translation and the search of work. One can also search for housing, cars, courses, etc. and can study for tests, like the driver’s exam which is another important step towards autonomy and integration. As one spends more time using the computer for such things, they are likely to improve their proficiency in the language of the host country.

In order to reap the benefits of the more positive and useful aspects of ICT use, there are certain obstacles that Eritreans in Italy and Eritrea must first overcome. This

is because of discrepancies in access to ICT between groups of people based on generation, geography, economic levels, education, gender, and language. More specifically, among Eritreans, there is less access to ICT among members of older generations that do not have much proficiency with computers. Even though cellular phone technology has become more widespread in Eritrea, Internet connectivity is still limited to a small portion of the population based on geography and economic level. Part of the problem is the fact that the telecommunication companies are all state-owned in Eritrea. As Mbarika and Byrd (2009) see it, existing governmental monopoly of the telecommunications sector hinders competition, resulting in poor services. Unfortunately, in light of the other practices and attitudes of the Eritrean government, there is little hope for the privatization of the telecommunications sector anytime soon.

As far as education is concerned, there seems to be a correlation between higher education and more proficiency with computers. The Italian school system and organizations such as *Mondo Digitale* seem to be effectively addressing this issue. However, it is important that they target enrolment at women and those who have not completed secondary school, as these are the categories of people that seem to be most in need of instruction.

Finally, it is evident that there are relatively few online resources for speakers of Tigrinya and I imagine there are even less for Eritrea's other eight languages. Fewer online resources limits the amount of information that speakers of these

languages have access to, thereby denying them any benefits that access to that information may hold. Some of this inequality to access may be alleviated by learning one of the more widely spoken world languages. But for those that do not have the desire or ability to do that, it would be beneficial for more online resources to be translated into Tigrinya or comparable Tigrinya websites could be created. The onus of this endeavor falls on bilingual and polyglot speakers of Tigrinya and more widely spoken languages.

In *The Rise of the Network Society*, sociologist Manuel Castells (1996) quotes Kranzberg's law: "Technology is neither good, nor bad, nor neutral." This quotation nicely sums up this study, which has shown that increased access and use of ICT is not always beneficial to a person and bridging the digital divide can be harmful from some perspectives. However, the advantages seem to outweigh the disadvantages. Furthermore, in today's society, computers are so deeply integrated into educational, financial, and social life that not having access to the technology can create disadvantages in other aspects of life. Refugees are generally already at a disadvantage in their new socio-cultural contexts, and do not need a lack in access to ICT to hold them further behind. Fortunately, the Eritreans of Centro Elena have gained, or are gaining, access to technology with the potential to improve emotional, cultural, social, and financial aspects of their lives. It is my hope that they will soon be able to improve all aspects of their lives, whether that improvement is facilitated by ICT use or not.

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