

Biopolitical Departures: A Love Story

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Penetrating the Body

I lay on the cold metal examining table while two doctors busied themselves in the corner. The cloth bag from which they pulled their metal instruments had bloodstains, but the instruments appeared clean and sterile. I trusted them. They were trying to help. My dye-filled uterus and fallopian tubes clenched violently and simultaneously expanded like an overfull water balloon that wouldn't burst. "Breathe in and out," they said. "Deeply." The pain was short lived but more intense than anything I had ever felt. Struggling to smooth my jagged breath and avoid whimpering, I told myself that this was for a good cause. With the test finished, I walked out of the clinic and into the golden light of an early summer evening in Asmara. I joined some friends for a drink.

That was in 2005, several months before my husband Eyasu¹ and I finally left Eritrea for good. I was forced to undergo this painful procedure so that we could get him an exit visa that would permit him to leave Eritrea and move with me to the United States. We had been trying to do this since our engagement in 1998. The doctor needed the data from this test to prove to the medical board that we needed fertility treatments abroad. There was no other way to leave Eritrea. We had tried everything else. During these seven years, the United States gave us three fiancé visas prior to our marriage in 2000 and two immigrant visas afterwards. But the Eritrean

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¹ All names used in this essay are pseudonyms.

government would still not let Eyasu leave. We gained an audience with several top Eritrean government officials asking them to let him leave. They said no, always citing the ongoing national service program and the need to defend the country, even after his national service commitment had ended. We looked into whether anyone could be bribed to get him an exit visa, but Eritrea is a country where bribery is almost non-existent. We prepared my husband to cross the border illegally trying to send him first to Sudan, then Yemen. Both fell through and we decided that an illegal border crossing was too dangerous. Thousands of Eritreans make these crossings every month in order to escape state repression and endless military service. The dangers have increased; those who try to escape risk being shot or imprisoned by Eritrean authorities or being kidnapped, trafficked, tortured or shipwrecked once out of Eritrea.

In the days after the hysterosalpingogram, I reflected on the refraction of pain through one's sense of its larger purpose.² Righteous suffering is a common theme in Eritrea, a nation that engaged in a thirty-year grassroots struggle for its independence from Ethiopia. The purposeful pain suffered by Eritrean fighters and the civilians who supported them came from torture, atrocities, bombing, and battles. Pain suffered at the hands of the Ethiopian state in order to liberate Eritrea is incessantly remembered. It is enshrined in textbooks, films and televised documentaries and murals throughout the capital city. But alongside this narrative of purposive pain, there were other stories of purposeless pain suffered at the hands of the Eritrean state, the state that was supposed to liberate Eritreans from suffering. In bars, teashops, and homes people murmured about forced conscription, a prison-like state, a state that detains and torments the bodies of those who do not accept its discipline. These were the everyday realities of life in Eritrea, a place where a state imagined as dangerous inflicted hidden pain on its people.

So what had I endured? Purposeless or purposeful pain? And to what end? To leave the country and have a "normal" marriage elsewhere? For reproduction? For love? For freedom? I'd always assumed I'd have natural childbirth and never gave it much thought. It seemed like a rite of passage. Undergoing a painful hysterosalpingogram in order to get my husband out of a country was not a rite of passage I had ever imagined. During the test in the clinic that day, I told myself, this couldn't hurt as much as labor, but it was already a kind of labor. This is what I had to undergo if I wanted a child and a life where all of us would be free from the constraints of the Eritrean state.

Porousness

Eyasu and I both originate from border crossers and border crossings. He comes from a long line of Orthodox priests; his great, great grandfather originally helped found his ancestral village in central Eritrea. Since then, every generation has had at least one priest in it. His grandfather travelled to Alexandria for religious training. But my father-in-law rejected priesthood. He ran away from the village and headed for the urban centers of Ethiopia, first to Harar and later to Addis Ababa. He later found a wife from Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, started a family and helped younger relatives move to Ethiopia. This makes my husband an Amiche — an Eritrean born and raised in Ethiopia. Like many Amiches he is thoroughly hybrid and grew up learning to identify with both Eritrea and Ethiopia, but to love each country in a different way-- Eritrea was his indubitable homeland, and his identity as an Eritrean grew stronger throughout Eritrea's thirty-year war for independence. But during the years of his childhood and youth, Ethiopia, and

² See Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, (Oxford University Press, 1987).

Addis in particular, was cosmopolitan. For a young, middle-class Amiche, Addis Ababa in the 1970s and 80s was an exciting, hopeful and edgy place, despite the violent political contention and very real danger that accompanied the Derg's overthrow of Haile Selassie. Nevertheless, when Eritrea became independent in 1991, my husband had recently received his diploma in electricity and, after managing his uncle's furniture business for years, was ready for a new challenge. He was curious about how life would unfold in a newly independent Eritrea.

He moved to Eritrea in August 1991, three months after Eritrea's liberation. Like hundreds of other young Amiches he headed for the town of Assab, located at Eritrea's southern tip. Assab served as Ethiopia's port until 1998 and its residents – Eritreans and Ethiopians of multiple ethnic groups — tended to have some connection with Ethiopia. The traffic back and forth to Ethiopia far surpassed the traffic back and forth between Assab and the Eritrean capital. In fact, there was no real road through the long desert between Assab and Eritrea's northern port, just winding riverbeds. Most people travelling to Asmara would fly. But the majority traveled back and forth to Ethiopia instead. The town was multi-lingual, but Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia, not one of the Eritrean languages, was the most common tongue in Assab. Assab was a port town, a truck stop, a mixed-up borderland, and a crossroads. It was the kind of place where everyone is always having a cross-cultural experience. When Eyasu arrived there, the government assigned him to be a teacher, not a career he had planned for, but a job for which there was great demand. We met a few years later when I, as a Peace Corps volunteer, was also assigned to be a teacher in Assab.

My road to Assab was more circuitous. My mother grew up living in various places around the world because my grandfather's career tracked with the historical trajectory of the U.S. development industry. After World War II, he worked in France and Italy under the Marshall Plan and then, following a brief period in the United States, went to India, Somalia and Kenya with USAID.

Meanwhile, in the post World War II years, my father and his family were also on the move, but for very different reasons. They migrated from Arkansas, where there was little work, to central Washington State in order to work in the apple orchards, joining dozens of other rural working class families in moving to what was fast becoming a small "southern" town in the Northwestern United States. Like my father-in-law, my father knew that a sedentary life in a rural village was not for him, and as soon as he graduated from college he joined the merchant marines, then travelled around the United States working as a butcher, and finally went to Africa with the Peace Corps, where he first met my grandparents and then my mother. My dad had a deep connection to family and home, but an insatiable philosophical and geographical restlessness.

He was rooted in Kenya when my parents met and definitely not making plans for the future. My mom was a woman who'd lived a transient life, often rich in material comforts, but sometimes sparse in emotional ones. She was looking for commitments and a home. After college she moved to Kenya because she knew she had found that home in my father. In Kenya, she taught in a small rural school that needed a teacher. My parents came from very different backgrounds, but perhaps the feeling that they never fully belonged to what they came from pulled them together. Ultimately, in ways I can't fully understand, they seem to have completed each other's needs.

I was conceived in Kenya and we lived in Chad until I was two. Africa was always at the center of our lives although I did not go back to Africa until I arrived in Eritrea in my mid-

twenties. My grandparents' house and the houses of many of our friends were covered with African art. I grew up playing with woodcarvings and sculptures from all over the continent as if they were toys. Bedtime stories were often about Kenya or Chad. My Tanzanian "uncle" often visited as did former Peace Corps volunteers. When I was bored, I often pulled out the Atlas to look at the map of the continent or other books full of pictures of it. It took me a long time to realize that not only was Africa not at the center of other people's lives, but most people could not name a single African country. At the same time, we had a sort of colonial romance with the continent. I have a distinct memory of going to see *Out of Africa*, a movie version of Karen Blixen's memoir of her time as a colonial farmer in Kenya, which romanticizes colonialism, infantilizes the indigenous Kikuyu, does credit to the physical beauty of Kenya, and includes the requisite wildlife shots. The whole family walked out with nostalgic tears in their eyes.

Somewhere between the lure of this colonial romance and the very real presence Africa played in our lives, I developed, from before I can remember, an understanding that the African continent, and East Africa in particular, was integral to my life. This was not so much a desire, but an assumption, as if I would not be a complete person if I did not live there. I confess that I knew very little about Eritrea when, in March 1995, the Peace Corps told me I would go there four months later. It was definitely more a romantic desire to experience Africa than a real relationship with a specific place that initially drew me to Eritrea. This small place that had been fighting for its independence for thirty years had not entered my imagination. Before leaving I happened to skim over a segment on Assab, the southernmost town on Eritrea's Red Sea Coast at the edge of the Danakil desert, in a guidebook. The guidebook described it as a forlorn place that should be avoided. I was a little afraid of being sent there.

Unlike the guidebook descriptions of a place that was inaccessible, barren and notable only for the extreme heat and humidity, Assab in the 1990's was a vital and vibrant town. My friend and colleague Tomas once described being in Assab at that time as "like living in a party." When I asked him why Assab was different, he explained that everyone was young, and everyone was from somewhere else. There was a palpable excitement around independence. Assab was a fairly affluent town, a place people went to work, so everyone had some money in their pocket and the freedom to enjoy it.

In the rest of Eritrea, there was excitement about independence, but the mood was less festive. The Eritrean government showed signs of beginning to control their population, for example, through restrictions on exit visas to travel out of the country. In 1995, the National Service Program was started, which required Eritreans to undergo six months of military training and one year of free service to the government. No one was allowed to leave the country until they'd completed their service unless they put down a very large bond, which they would forfeit if they did not return.

Assab was an exception. There was so much traffic back and forth to Ethiopia, so many Ethiopians living there and so many Eritreans who had family in Ethiopia or in neighboring Djibouti that Eritreans were allowed to travel in and out freely. Assab was porous when the rest of Eritrea was not. It was a space of flows.

For me and the other Peace Corps volunteer assigned to Assab, named Helen, the town's combination of isolation and porosity made for an unusual experience. Unlike other Peace Corps volunteers, we couldn't visit the capital very often, so our lives oriented inwards toward Assab, while the town itself oriented outwards towards the world. We spent time with a handful of other foreign volunteers in the town and a steady flow of international aid workers, cargo supervisors

and business people, who came and went with ships loaded with aid shipments for Ethiopia. But our closest relationships came to be with Eritreans.

Eyasu and I met early on. We were both English teachers in different schools. He was popular with his students because of his kindness and sense of humor. He never took himself or his own authority very seriously. He almost bounced when he walked. For years, all my pictures of him were of him twisting his face into a funny expression. His eyes wide, eyebrows raised and mouth twisted under his moustache. He laughed a great deal, small wrinkles forming around his eyes when he did.

We didn't get to know each other right away. It was not love at first sight. In fact, we didn't pay a lot of attention to each other at first. After we'd been in Assab for about four months, my roommate, Helen, started dating his best friend, Yacob. One day Eyasu stopped by our house to meet Yacob and found me writing intensely. I nodded at him, barely greeting him. I was probably very rude. Years later he told me he found me odd. In many ways, I was his opposite—shy, quiet, stuck in my own head.

The second year of my two-year term in Assab, Helen and I socialized more with Yacob and his friends, especially Eyasu. One night I remember drinking beer at the Port Club, a somewhat run-down hotel built by the Soviets next to the Red Sea. We sat on the patio, Rod Stewart blaring on the radio, listening to the rush of waves, the wind so strong it sometimes whipped bottles off the table. Our conversation ranged through various serious and sometimes taboo subjects, from religion to gender roles to our families to homosexuality to politics. This was always the way it was with our conversations. There was debate, but not anger over different points of view. It was exciting to hear things thought through from the perspective of someone who comes from a very different place. Eyasu and I found ourselves gravitating towards a common point of view as we talked. As we ended the evening, I thought, I'm going to be friends with this person for the rest of my life. I loved that we were from such different places and somehow saw the world in such a similar way.

One evening, a few months later we were walking home. Eyasu and I walked more slowly than usual, slipping behind Helen and Yacob. He took me by surprise by stopping, turning towards me and saying, "I feel affection for you." I did not feel the same way, but he convinced me to spend more time together. Knowing that in Eritrean culture going out to tea regularly with a man could constitute an engagement, I made it very clear that there was no commitment between us. He didn't give up.

My relationship with Eyasu was safer than any relationship I'd ever been in. He was straightforward. I knew where I stood with him. Looking back on it, he grounded me. I'd been agonizing over an impenetrable loneliness for years and probably thinking about it way too much. I could get along with almost anyone, but felt connected to almost no one. I was disconnected. Eyasu had little tolerance for this kind of agony. It is his nature to focus on concrete, material things that you can explain clearly. But I think his nature is shaped by growing up with a very real sense of fear, leaving little mental space for existential reflections on loneliness. He was seven when Haile Selassie was overthrown, and, during the terrifying Red Terror years that followed, he found dead bodies in the streets when he was walking to school and remembers security forces barging into their home to search it. His father came close to being killed a couple of times. These threats were part of everyday life in Addis Ababa at that time. I remained ignorant about these things until many years later.

When we started dating, I ignorantly found myself frustrated by his unwillingness to think reflectively. During one of our evening conversations over beer at the Port Club, I asked him what the meaning of life was and he answered, “life is a short blanket. One part of you is always cold.” At the time, I thought the statement was intended to end a conversation that he thought was impractical. It seemed like a pessimistic worldview, at odds with his cheerful personality. I was bothered by the impossibility of having a full blanket. I now understand that what goes unsaid is that you should be thankful for that blanket, thankful for the part of you that is warm.

In the summer of 1997, I finished my Peace Corps service and agonized about leaving Assab and leaving Eyasu. He was chosen to go to England for a summer teacher-training course. I spent much of that summer in England with him. We took long bus rides across the English countryside, hiked along the Cornish coastline, visited picturesque towns, and drank English beer. Eyasu and I stumbled, confused, through massive grocery stores together, baffled by the range of choices. We were anxious about catching trains and buses that ran incessantly on time. We both felt completely out of place and were incredibly happy about it. Being somewhere foreign to both of us brought us closer together.

We talked a lot about whether would we stay together after I went back to the United States. He wanted to come to the U.S. I was willing to help him do that, but didn’t want to get married and was concerned that this was the only way to get him there. In September 1997, I flew back to Philadelphia, where I planned to live. He flew back to Asmara and then, a few weeks later, to Assab.

We wrote to each other every day. Our letters were sometimes romantic and erotic and sometimes full of arguments, but much like everyday life, mostly they were filled with ordinary details—the kinds of things that we would have known if we’d been together. He talked about school politics and his students. He kept me up to date with rumors about the government, Assab, and our friends. I translated the details of everyday life in the United States so that it would make sense to him.

I quickly figured out that the only way to get a young, unmarried African man with no property into the United States is to marry him. The U.S. embassy considers young men with no attachments a “flight risk.” I was 26 years old and terrified of losing him, but also terrified of marrying anyone. It seemed too soon. I was too young and uncertain and unformed. But by spring of 1998, after a year of working it out in our letters, I decided that it was a bigger risk to *not* be together than to be together. We planned for him to travel to Ethiopia in summer of 1998 when the school year ended, spend time with his family, who he hadn’t seen in almost two years, tell them about our plans, make sure his paperwork was in order and begin immigration procedures.

Right after we’d made this decision, the war broke out.

War Stories

I heard that the border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea started in late May 1998. I was living in Philadelphia at the time, but happened to be in New York visiting a college friend. We were at a party in a spacious apartment in New York’s Lower East Side when my friend asked me, “Did I hear something about fighting between Eritrea and Ethiopia today?”

“No, you must have heard wrong,” I replied. “That couldn’t happen.”

"I must have heard wrong," she responded. "I wasn't listening carefully." We went to get another drink and walked out on the balcony to enjoy the view of the East River.

Later when I confirmed that there had, indeed, been a border skirmish, I dismissed it, telling myself it would be worked out quickly. Eritrea and Ethiopia had been firm friends since Eritrea became independent in 1991. The ruling party in Ethiopia was allied with Eritrea. While Eritrea was fighting for independence from Ethiopia, the ruling party in Ethiopia was fighting to overthrow the communist Derg regime. They both succeeded in 1991. I assumed this would be a short war that would blow over quickly, something that was not without precedent in Eritrea. During my first year in Assab there had been a brief war with Yemen that ended with both sides agreeing to international mediation after a few days of fighting.

But the border war did not blow over quickly and, in fact, at the time of this writing, is still not resolved although there has been no active fighting for many years. The war began in May, when negotiations over a disputed portion of the Eritrean-Ethiopian border suddenly went badly, but the conflict did not show up in the mainstream international news until early June when Ethiopia bombed the airport in Asmara and Eritrea bombed the Ethiopian town of Mekele. Later, foreigners were evacuated from Eritrea and international flights, which carried our precious letters back and forth to each other, stopped. There were no international phones in Assab and no Internet. I had no way to find out if Eyasu was safe.

On Eritrean and Ethiopian websites there were stories about Ethiopians and Eritreans arresting and mistreating each other's nationals. There were rumors of violence against Ethiopians in Assab, where Eritrean and Ethiopian neighbors had shopped together, drank together, did business together and intermarried. I suddenly had visions of people in the mixed-up, hybrid, peaceful border town where I'd lived turning on each other. This was something new and ugly.

The news got worse. In mid-June reports began to circulate about Eritreans deported from Ethiopia. News of these deportations was also something new and ugly. The categories of "Ethiopian" and "Eritrean," categories that had remained fluid even after Eritrean independence, were being redefined, solidified by the policies of two governments at war. People like Amiches and places like Assab that lay in the blurry space between these new rigid categories were in danger.

Even though Eyasu's family had no idea who I was, no idea of my existence, I needed to know they were okay. My father had a work trip planned to Ethiopia. Relaying messages through Eyasu's cousin in Nashville, I arranged for my father to visit them. Eyasu's family was a little confused about the purpose of my father's visit, wondering why this American friend of their son's was sending her father to check on them. My father came back with great stories about the meeting, assurances that they were fine, but also accounts of war-thirsty Ethiopians calling for Eritrean blood in the streets.

Several weeks later Eyasu's father was deported from Ethiopia to Eritrea along with his younger brother. He left behind a pension from working his whole life for Ethiopian Airlines, his only source of livelihood. His brother left property and businesses. Other family members followed several months later, leaving everything behind in the city where they had lived their whole lives. They also left their hybrid identities behind — no longer could they safely claim they belonged to both places, although many of them still felt it.

The sudden proximity of that danger scared me. Things I never wanted to imagine suddenly seemed possible for people I was close to. Avoiding tragedy was utterly out my control.

In Philadelphia, half a planet away from the war, horror was suddenly close, too close. Fighting in what came to be known as the first offensive in the Eritrean-Ethiopian border war lasted from May through most of the summer of 1998 and then stopped almost as abruptly as it started. No one thought the war was over. Many people vaguely speculated that fighting might resume in September when the rains ended. I had two weeks of vacation and the minute flights to Asmara restarted in August, I flew there.

When vacation was over, I came home. I wanted to stay with Eyasu, but felt like we had to be practical as well. There were no jobs for foreigners in Assab, and no way we could both live on his salary, which was about one hundred dollars a month. I considered trying to get a job in Asmara, but that would also be difficult and, realistically, given that there were only two flights a week to Assab, I wouldn't see that much more of him if I lived in the capital. So our life adjusted to distance and uncertainty.

The war consisted of three offensives. In between each, fighting stopped, no one quite sure when it would continue. The second offensive started in February 1999 and I was back in Philadelphia. I didn't know how to talk about it, so I didn't. I couldn't find words to make anyone understand. I couldn't understand. I lived the normal life of an urban young professional on the outside and worried constantly on the inside. It was a bifurcated existence. I lived with my brother then. We had great parties and lots of friends who often came over. We laughed a lot, but I was always living in two realities, always aware of the closeness of a distant war.

My bifurcated life was not so different from the lives of many in Eritrea during the war years. War is both better and worse than we think and sometimes both at the same time. Amid war, life goes on. There are pockets of the ordinary. There were long lulls between offensives when everyone pretended life was normal, but knew war could return any minute.

Eyasu and I squeezed our relationship around the war, or perhaps it was the war that was squeezing our relationship, molding it into shape, giving it a sense of urgency, crystalizing the things that mattered. When the second offensive ended, in fall 1999 and it was safe to travel to Eritrea, I took a two-month leave of absence from my job to visit. I had no trouble going in and out of Eritrea as long as flights were flying, but he still couldn't leave. In between offensives we made plans in our letters, imagining the future together, working through the details of how we would handle money, childrearing and careers much as any couple does.

During times of fighting, letters slowed down, arriving at unpredictable intervals. When either of us received a letter we would become giddy from the sight of it. It mattered little what it said. It was like an embrace. Those letters were full of fear of the war and frustration with the distance it created between us. The unpredictability and seeming endlessness of the war led me to quit my job. I studied for the GREs and applied to graduate school. The decision to go back to school was a pragmatic one – as a student, I would have longer vacations to visit Eritrea and access to student loans to fund the travel.

In early summer 2000 I had planned to go on a cruise in Norway with my family to celebrate my parents' wedding anniversary and then spend the summer in Eritrea before going to graduate school in the fall. Just as my family was about to embark on what seemed to me a lavishly luxurious cruise, the third offensive started. Ethiopian troops penetrated deeply into Eritrean territory occupying about a third of the country. Eritrea was conscripting everyone — teachers, students, farmers, civil servants. Amidst majestic fjords, quaint Norwegian towns and sunny days that never ended, snippets of information leaked into the boat via CNN. I smiled and

praised the glasses of wine poured by cheerful blond waitresses with lilting accents and the food from the endless buffet, but they were tasteless.

At the end of the cruise, I checked email in Oslo and learned that Assab had been evacuated and everyone under forty, including Eyasu, had been taken to military training in a remote part of the country. Asmara was not under attack, but Ethiopian armies were moving across the western lowlands rapidly and no one was quite sure where they would stop. It looked like they were heading for the capital. In hindsight, everyone will say that they were never after the country or the capital, but at the time everyone was terrified.

I had no idea what would happen next or where I should go — on to Eritrea as I'd planned? Or back to Philadelphia? Or somewhere else? This was not like the other two times I'd visited in 1998 and 1999 when there was a clear lull in fighting. The war was actively going on. I considered traveling in Europe while I waited to see if things got better in Eritrea. I thought about going back to Philadelphia, to the familiar, the predictable, my house and parties and friends, choosing the safe side of my bifurcated self.

Instead, I went to a place where no one knew what would happen next to inhabit the landscape of war. I needed to occupy the same geography as the man I loved. I needed to be somewhere where I might get a letter from him or see someone who had seen him. I needed to hear the rumors first hand. I needed to be around other people whose loved ones had been conscripted. I needed to be surrounded by people whose lives were affected by this war as mine was. In the end, it was never a choice.

My certainty was striking given that I am an indecisive person. I have difficulty making life-altering choices, and instead prefer to let things unravel. Eyasu is the opposite. He *knows* things deeply. He trusts his instincts. But my decision to go to Eritrea during the third offensive was something I knew I had to do. It was bigger than my romance with Africa, Eritrea, and Eyasu. It was commitment. The decision to travel into war didn't seem particularly extraordinary once I decided that my life and life in that place were the same.

Before I left Oslo, we visited the Kon-Tiki museum, which celebrates the work of Norwegian scientist and adventurer, Thor Heyerdahl, a notable cosmopolitan, famous for crossing the Pacific Ocean on a reed raft in 1947. At the museum, I bought Eyasu a t-shirt with one of Heyerdahl's famous quotations, "Borders, I have never seen one, but I have heard they exist in the minds of some people." It seemed subversive to buy that shirt for a man who was training to defend the border between his country and the country he grew up in. It seemed an appropriate gift just as I'd made a decision to travel to Eritrea, a decision that was as much about relinquishing the exclusive hold my own country had on my fate, my life, my safety, as it was about loving him. He wore the shirt for years.

The places where we come from try to tell us who we are, where we belong and what kind of life we should have. The country that we are from holds onto us in often-invisible ways. It tries to tell us who to love, what is safe and what and who are dangerous. Born to people who wandered across borders, I never had tight bonds to my home country or a sense that one should play it safe and stay home in the face of potential danger, but once I committed to a place and a person beyond those boundaries, the ties become looser and things that did not make sense before were suddenly logical.

So I went to Eritrea even though I was terrified. The night before I flew to Asmara, I didn't sleep. A friend from my Peace Corps group who had also returned to Eritrea shortly after the first offensive offered me a place to stay. He was doing volunteer work collating information

and writing reports about the humanitarian side of the conflict, and he needed help. Work made me feel useful. His life was also entwined with Eritrea; he had agreed to take care of four of his former students who were now in high school. He loved them like sons. Three of them were in military training as well.

Having made this commitment, I had a great deal to learn about uncertainty. The longing to see Eyasu and the complete impossibility of doing so filled me with grief, but I was grieving for someone who might, or might not, be lost to me, for months or forever. There is nothing more maddening than incomplete grief, than not knowing if you should keep hoping or accept the loss. Nothing was comfortable that summer. Nothing was familiar. It all felt surreal, like I was walking around in someone else's life, and yet this life was so viscerally mine. One night in Asmara I remember lying in bed breathing. The cold breath going in and out of my throat was the only thing that had felt comfortable or familiar or pleasant for a very long time.

I like to have control. I believe this is not so much a personality trait as it is a cultural trait that comes from being an upper middle class, white American. I was socialized to enact plans and accomplish goals. Until we lose control we don't realize how our privilege inscribes in us an assumption that control is our right. My expectation of control and my unraveling without it was a mark of privilege, but in Asmara that summer it was a weakness.

In contrast, Eyasu is familiar with not having control. He is not a planner. This is partly his personality and partly a by-product of growing up under a succession of authoritarian regimes in a country where war, poverty, politics, and economic instability control lives. In many ways he coped much better with the unpredictability of the summer of 2000 than I did even though it was much harder for him.

While in military training, Eyasu somehow found time to write long letters and people to bring them to me in Asmara. In his letters he told me about how every movement, every waking hour was under the control of commanders who told them when to eat, sleep, run, walk, sit or dance. Punishments were severe for failure to obey every command. He described people being hit with sticks, made to roll in the dirt and tied up and left in the desert sun for hours for not following orders. He described grueling hard labor and military drills in desert heat well over 100 degrees. He described sleeping outside on the sand night after night, eating watery lentils with stale flatbread. He described being at the constant beck and call of commanders who could wake them up or tell them to sleep at any time and could punish them severely for things that they didn't even know they'd done wrong.

The war felt close as I sat in a crowded office and gathered information on numbers and needs of displaced people and wrote reports, but in some ways it got even closer when the fighting stopped in July and I was asked to accompany several NGO groups on trips to border areas and camps for Internally Displaced People. The selective destruction startled me. Anything of value – a hotel, a cotton-processing factory, a restaurant – was destroyed. Donkeys wandered through the debris as if nothing had happened, stepping over abandoned boots that were left behind when soldiers found a better pair on a corpse and traded up. But the ability of people to normalize their everyday life in the face of such uncertainty was also striking. In the camps, children smiled even in one camp where there were not enough tents and many of them would sleep outside in the cold summer rain.

The government started releasing people from military training beginning with high school and college students. I waited, anxious with hope that Eyasu might come back. When he didn't return with the first group, I worried that I would go back to the United States to start

graduate school before he was released. Every time the phone rang or someone knocked on the metal gate, I would hope it was him. Finally, about ten days before I was scheduled to fly home, hope exhausted me and I gave up. I decided to go out for drinks with some friends. We went to Asmara's one international-class hotel, a place I hated and almost never went to because it felt so out of place in Eritrea. When I came home that night, he was there.

He had shrunk, lost twenty pounds, his eyes hollowed. His mannerisms were different — he seemed crouched like someone who had spent months living close to the ground. His hands twisted and wrung the plaid shirt he was wearing and his gaze darted around as if waiting for someone to come bark orders at him. He seemed dazed by his freedom. Slowly, over the days that followed, he stretched into himself again.

When he returned, I was shocked, relieved and certain. I didn't say this out loud, but thought to myself, 'I will have this man's children.' My desire to reproduce was born from our skirmish with loss. It was a decision that got made without making it — a choice that chose me. My desire to produce children who would blend both of us and be from two places was born from a war obsessed with maintaining boundaries. Meanwhile, making wedding plans was something we could control. Over the next two weeks, we went out to buy rings and a dress. The cessation of hostilities agreement was signed in August and we got married on December 31st 2000.

Our guests commented on how lovely our wedding was. When I asked what made it different from any other Eritrean wedding, they usually laughed and said, "It was short!" Indeed, our one-day of festivities was substantially shorter than the typical three-day weddings. But I think what made our wedding such a celebration was that for the first time since the border war began, our wedding indicated that it was time to hope again, time to make plans, time to think about the future. Like the years just after independence, there was lightness in everyone's mood, a sense of relief, a sense that there was a future. During war, time is constrained. The ability to think about the future aborted. You think about the moment in front of you. You think about today.

Becoming Imprisoned

War seals borders that have been porous. The Eritrean-Ethiopian border, once a site of fluidity and exchange, was closed. Assab, once a crossroads, became an island and a ghost town, emptied of trucks and truck drivers, ships and sailors, workers and shopkeepers. Ethiopians who lived in Assab relocated to Ethiopia and Eritreans who lived in Ethiopia relocated to Eritrea, many to or through Assab. Everyone was sent back "home" to a place they did not know. Governments deported them, but people also removed themselves out of fear that they would no longer be welcome. Identities became rigid. War is a strange, and at times dangerous, place for people, like my husband and I, who have forged our identities and our relationships out of a sense of being hybrid, ambiguous and liminal.

The Eritrean government had always tried to make the country a place of certainties and separated identities. The ruling party is dogmatic that being Eritrean means being willing to sacrifice your life, your livelihood and your freedom for your country. But after the war, policies that enforced "sacrificial citizenship" became even more stringent.³

³ For a discussion of "sacrificial citizenship," see Victoria Bernal, *Nation as Network: Diaspora, Cyberspace and Citizenship*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

After our wedding, I went back to graduate school. Initially graduate school was simply a means for me to spend more time in Eritrea. I never thought of myself as an intellectual and the thought of getting a PhD never crossed my mind. Following some initial anxiety about whether I belonged in a PhD program, I discovered I loved the life of the mind. I was almost immediately attracted to the study of nationalism. This surprised me because I'd never thought much about my own nation until that point. In hindsight, I know I wanted to understand the forces that created bounded identities — identities that I'd recently learned could be mobilized and manipulated instantaneously in ways that changed everything, that had changed everything in our lives.

I returned to Eritrea in summer 2001. That summer just after the war was one of the last good times in Eritrea. Everyone assumed that now that the war was over elections would be held and the government would take steps towards becoming a democracy. Buoyed by hope, people engaged in unprecedented political commentary and critique. The private presses printed political cartoons and editorials. No topic was off limits. People raised questions about conditions in national service more broadly and particularly abuse of women in service, the way the war was managed, and working conditions for civil servants, among other things. When I left Eritrea at the end of summer to return to classes, everyone was optimistic, but critical, and most of all, engaged.

A few weeks later, in September 2001, I heard that Eritrea had shut down their private presses, arrested prominent politicians — ministers, ambassadors, U.S. embassy employees — who had been publicly criticizing the president and were calling for democratic reforms. They have not been heard from since. That was a turning point from which the country has not recovered. Since then anyone who protests or criticizes the government is arrested. Arbitrary arrests. Closure of private presses. Eritrea was not supposed to be the kind of place where this happened. Again, as when the war began, I felt close to a kind of danger that was unfamiliar to me. And there was no escape. Along with many other Eritreans, we began to feel that the country had become a prison. I visited twice a year between 2000 and 2003, but no one could get out.

Mass round-ups, called *gifa*, became a common feature of everyday life in Eritrea in 2002. During *gifa* military police would be placed on street corners asking for ID cards. If you did not have an acceptable ID, not an uncommon occurrence given that there was no consistency around identification, you would be detained until it could be verified that you were not avoiding national service. Check points on all the major roads were common and military police would climb on buses routinely and check for ID cards.

In the summer of 2002, the government announced that national service, once an eighteen-month commitment, but in reality much longer for those who were never demobilized after the war, would be indefinitely extended.⁴ Every year, more people were conscripted and no one was released. It became a machine, albeit a somewhat dysfunctional one, intent on transforming its population into a mass of soldiers who would unquestioningly defend the country.⁵ War and its aftermath made what was once porous into something impermeable. In

⁴ For a discussion about national service, the Warsai Yikaalo Development Campaign, and forced labor in Eritrea, see Gaim Kibreab, "Forced Labor in Eritrea," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 47:1, 2009, 41-72.

⁵ Discussions of technologies of the state and the ways states biopolitically produce soldiers is inspired by the work of Michel Foucault; see especially *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, (New York: Picador, 2007); *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976*, (New York: Picador, 2003).

response, Eritreans figured out how to create new openings. Power, when structures seem impermeable, is often not the power to break down a wall, physical or metaphorical, but the power to find cracks within it and slip through. The Eritrean state tried to control everyone. People did not push back but rather, found ways to evade and avoid the strictures of the state. The thousands who leave Eritrea each month and those who help them are still finding these cracks, widening them and making once impermeable structures weaker.

Getting Intimate with the State

After three years of travelling back and forth, when my coursework was finished, I was ready to conduct fieldwork, and I moved back to Eritrea. During these years, the Eritrean state labeled me a “housewife.” I had grants to do research, Institutional Review Board (IRB) clearances from my home university and permission from the University of Asmara. But on my ID card, it read “housewife.” I worried that this might limit me, but it turned out to be a huge advantage.

“Housewife” in Eritrea is one of the freest categories that one can be placed in. Married women with children are typically exempt from national service and are therefore, in theory, free to leave the country. Women travelling on buses or on foot throughout cities were seldom stopped at military checkpoints and are thus freer to move around the country. Housewives are effectively in the margins of the state, existing on the edges of the web of surveillance.⁶

However, a foreign housewife is a complex and somewhat liminal category. Foreigners in Eritrea faced a particular type of surveillance, which was in some ways more restrictive than that of Eritreans, but certainly not as dangerous. By 2005, when I left Eritrea, foreigners could not travel outside the capital city without government permission. Tourists were easily given permits from the Ministry of Tourism. Anyone with a work permit was supposed to be given permission to travel through his or her supervising ministry, but these could be hard to come by, depending on the ministry. As a housewife, no office or institution was responsible for me except for the municipal government in Assab where I was living. But the Ministry of Local Government was typically responsible for citizens, not foreigners. I was in two categories that did not comfortably coexist: the official category of foreigner and the more intimate category of housewife.

My first introduction to the way one’s intimate networks can create openings in bureaucratic machinery came as I navigated the process of getting permission to leave and return to Assab. In Asmara, the capital city, no one had jurisdiction over me because I was a housewife, but in Assab, I was the wife of a well-known teacher. I was not an anonymous foreigner, but the wife of someone people cared about. For example, the secretary responsible for giving travel permits in the Local Government office was a former student of my husband’s and mine. She was also closely related to one of our best friends. I had no problem getting permission to travel round-trip to and from Assab as long as I made the request in Assab where webs of relationships bound me intimately to the bureaucracy.

The central reason why wives are exempt from national service, and therefore on the margins of the state in Eritrea, is to protect their reproductive capacity. Even though Eritrea has a

⁶ Veena Das & Deborah Poole, *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*, (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2004).

long history of celebrating female soldiers, and unmarried women have the same national service requirements as men, the Eritrean state and society converge around a consensus that reproduction is vitally important. A state that is otherwise keen to extract labor from its citizens is generous with maternity leave. And a state that strictly restricts emigration makes an exception for infertile couples seeking fertility treatment. Reproduction seems to trump all. But first the state needs proof of infertility.

The importance of reproduction had a great deal to do with why I was on that examining table in that clinic. I was warned ahead of time that the procedure would be painful. I did not hesitate at the suggestion of pain but thought only of the procedure as a means to escape, finally. I did not ask, “how much will it hurt?” but went through the procedure with certainty.

The process to get permission to leave the country to seek fertility treatments was a long and highly invasive one. Two things had to be proven and documented through various tests and procedures. First, that the couple’s infertility is not completely untreatable. Second, that all treatments in Eritrea have been tried. We had been married for five years without children. This was enough to show infertility. But a variety of tests, including the hysterosalpingogram, had to be performed in order to demonstrate that the condition was not permanent or irreversible. Additionally, a course of fertility drugs was prescribed to show that we had taken advantage of treatments available in Eritrea.

For an exemption to the prohibition on leaving the country to be made, the state had to gather information about and through the body. For the state to make an exception for us, I had to be willing to submit my body fully and completely to the state, to welcome the state, its techniques, technologies and technologists.

Effectively, by trying to leave Eritrea, we were trying to find a pore in a system that tried to seal all its citizens inside. In this process I learned how important it is to be intimate with the state. There are different forms of intimacy. The state penetrated my body, literally, but we also had to learn to recognize state actors as people capable of caring. To leave the country we needed a series of papers. The first letter from the Ministry of Health gave validity to our infertility, but was just the beginning. It was followed by a letter of permission from my husband’s supervisor in Assab, which was then passed to another office and finally to the Minister of Education. Then, the Minister of Internal Affairs had to approve in order to get the visa itself. Navigating three ministries and acquiring multiple signatures required many relationships. Everyone had the power to say no. Everyone was afraid to say yes. Each piece of paper was more powerful than the last, but also harder to get. We could have been stopped at any point in this process by any single person who was jealous, angry, scared, resentful, ideological, power hungry, didn’t like Americans or was just having a bad day.

How did we deal with disillusioned people who only had the power to deny? With relationships. Intimacy. We turned a state that penetrated the most intimate places of our lives into an even more intimate organism. I remember one man in a dark office in the Ministry of Education. His face was wrinkled as if it had forgotten to smile for many years. This man was a fighter from the war for independence who had probably lived many decades in the field, seen terrible things, hung on to hopes for the future of his country, and resented seeing people trying to leave the place he had fought to free. I imagined that man left in that dark windowless office for many years, forgotten, even the power he had, forgotten. He was responsible for signing a paper that would give us permission to get a letter from the Minister of Education to release Eyasu from his work. Without that work release, he would not be allowed to leave. We went back

to his office three times. Every time he said no. He had reasons. First, he said that he didn't have the authority to do this, but didn't know who did. Later he said we didn't have the right paperwork and he wanted to send us back to the Ministry of Health. After three visits to that dark office we tried a more intimate approach. One of my husband's former supervisors who also fought in the war for independence had worked with this man for years. We implored him to help us and he talked to the unsmiling man on our behalf. When we went back the third time, he had signed the paper.

The relationships that were tangibly influential were with people whose power was mundane and hidden, people who knew how to filter things through the pores — a driver who could bring our case to the attention of the Minister whose car he drove, secretaries who knew just the right moment to get us in to see someone important, or just when to put a paper to be signed on someone's desk, a friend of a friend who could put in a good word with the clerk in the visa office who could then slide an application in with a stack of visas to be signed.

There was a secretary in the Ministry of Education. Every time she saw us, her face lit up. Following each of our trips to the unsmiling man in the windowless office, beaming as if she was the one trying to leave the country, she would ask, "did you get your paper yet?" She was ultimately able to help facilitate getting our paper signed by the Minister.

The immigration office, an office that I'd always associated with bureaucratic denials, became a friendly space. Inside, in one large room, behind a tall counter, desks full of clerks worked busily and tended to ignore you when you walked up to the counter. We were in that office so often that they got to know us. They regularly enquired about the progress of our case. Like the secretary in the Ministry of Education, over time several employees in the immigration office came to care for us. As with the secretary, we had someone who knew just when papers were being signed and slipped our visa into the stack. There is power in timing, in knowing routines, in reading the moods of superiors.

There are times in your life when you feel a powerful, effervescent sense of goodwill coalescing around you — your wedding day, when your children are born. This was one of those times, but there was also uncertainty about the outcome. There was so much goodwill behind us that it felt like we were carrying the hopes of many people with us.

This was the state at its most intimate. I think of this as a form of love and also resistance. The impenetrable, impersonal bureaucracy was determined to say 'no'. It had disciplined its functionaries to deny. But when transformed into a web of relationships, the state became malleable and concerned. In this process, the bureaucratic functionaries were transformed into human beings with desires and emotions. Most of these people were state employees, civil servants or support staff in some way merely doing their job, but they did their jobs in a manner that was both ordinary and extraordinary. Bureaucracy and barriers were penetrated by relationships. The state's attempt to massify and constrain its population was transformed to an exception made on the basis of an intimate understanding of individual circumstances.

We should have left Eritrea in secrecy and quiet. Relatives and friends warned us that there were many people who could easily block our progress. We were told not to tell anyone we were leaving. But there were so many people we felt close to, people who helped us, that we couldn't keep it a secret. We took two cars full of friends and relatives with us to the airport. In the bodies of those friends and family members, we took the support and hope of that broader web of people who helped us. In the airport, as we walked up to the immigration counter, several

of Eyasu's former students who were in the military and working at the airport saw him and cheered, "Teacher, you are finally leaving!"

But the lingering specter of the repressive state was in the airport, too. There are many stories of Eritreans who have exit visas being held back at the airport. As we went through immigration, Eyasu was pulled aside and ushered into an office without me. Fortunately, he came back a few minutes later. Once we were through security and immigration, in the waiting room, a man in civilian clothes with an ID around his neck came up to him and asked to see his papers. We held our breath again, but he just handed Eyasu's passport back and moved on. We sat in the airport and waited for the plane anxiously, still expecting someone to pull us back at any moment. Neither of us relaxed until the plane not only took off, but landed, in Rome.

Reproduction in Exile

It is a late fall day in Philadelphia and dried leaves crunch under my sons' feet as they run through the backyard, jacketless in the unseasonably warm November sun. They have picked up sticks and hold them like rifles. "Pop!" the six-year-old yells.

"Pop!" His two-year-old brother imitates, jerking the tip of the stick upward in a perfect imitation of his brother. They run and chase and continue to shoot at each other calling out, "Pop! Pop!"

We hate it when they do this. We have not cultivated their war play and, indeed, try to remove war toys and war play from their lives. And yet, when my youngest son wakes up in the morning, within minutes he is pointing his index finger at me, crying out, "Fight! Fight! Fight!"

This is not the life I'd imagined for them. These children were born out of our struggles to escape from a country infused with war, a country we left because it forced everyone to be a soldier, permanently. If we had stayed in Eritrea, Eyasu would have remained a soldier of sorts, a teacher-soldier, but a soldier nonetheless. Our children would have gone into national service and become soldiers too. I thought Eritrea would by now be free from its lingering border war, now grown cold, and its dictator bent on making his citizens into permanent soldiers. I thought we'd be able to travel back and forth freely to Eritrea. We do not feel we can return there. We are exiles.

At the same time, war and war games are pervasive here, and I wonder if we have really escaped mass militarization and life in a police state. This country has been at war persistently since before we returned. It has been involved in a succession of wars throughout my children's entire lives. But unlike the war in Eritrea for us, America's wars are intangible to my children. There is no immediate threat to our safety. The people being killed and harmed in these wars are invisible to them. My children don't know anyone in the military, and I know very few. This anonymity is made possible by our political values, but also our economic class, the classist nature of who serves the military in the United States, and the self-segregation of political communities.

And yet war has inserted itself in their childhood. Detailed battles are pervasive in their videos, videos that no longer just obsess over "good guys" and "bad guys" as children's media has since I was a kid, but militarize the solutions — kill the bad guy. Toy stores are stocked with an arsenal of toy guns. America's wars are normalized and legitimated through the mass marketing of products that shape children's play.

As I write this, the police shooting of unarmed African-American Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri is forefront in the news. This reveals to us how profoundly militarized our

police forces are. Last year, a civilian, George Zimmerman, was found not guilty of murder after shooting unarmed, seventeen-year-old, African-American Trayvon Martin. A Florida court decided that he was allowed to shoot a child in order to defend himself. The only thing exceptional about these two incidents is that they garnered so much media attention.

Children play war with toy guns. Police play soldier with military toys. Civilians play vigilante, form militias, claim their right bear arms and defend themselves by killing other civilians. Soldiers drop bombs from drones on the other side of the world by video game remote control. And the country is engaged in chronic war. War is fun. Guns are toys. Children, citizens, police and even soldiers play soldier. War is transformed into a game, a deadly game, fought at home and abroad and in my own backyard.

The “enemy,” to the majority of Americans, remains amorphous, anonymous and stereotyped, imagined as dangerous and evil, not unlike the characterization of “good guys” and “bad guys” in the videos my children love to watch. The shootings of Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin and others remind us that the “enemies” are not all “out there.” African-American men are imagined as dangerous. In a country where so many citizens have guns, where so many think of themselves as soldiers defending the country and themselves against these dangers, black male bodies are shot with impunity by police and civilians alike.

When I think of Ferguson and the plethora of incidents like it, when I think of the striking statistic that one in three African-American men can expect to spend time in prison, (the result of policies emanating from another war — the war on drugs) I find myself wondering if my children’s skin color is enough like mine to protect them or enough like their father’s to place them in danger. I hate myself for categorizing my children. A love of blending, the blurring of boundaries and a choice to be intimate spawned these children. Finding myself not only reinforcing racial and national categories, but also bifurcating them, multiplying them based on the nuances of phenotype goes against everything I believe. But it is literally a matter of life and death. Will my children play the good guys or bad guys in the game of American war? The ones imagined as dangerous or the ones who get to do the imagining? Can they remain blurrily in the middle? Should they?

One morning I walked to the bus stop with my son skipping along beside me. He chatted cheerfully, using the same lilting tone as if he were recounting the rules of a new game they’d learned in gym class, “you know how, when you are in war , and you put your hands up, and they won’t shoot you...”

I interrupted him. “That doesn’t really happen.”

“Yes, yes it does,” he insisted eagerly. “When you put your hands up and they don’t shoot you...” He tried to finish his sentence.

I interrupted again. Perhaps it is a hard thing to do to a six year old, but I can’t stop myself. “War isn’t really like that. War isn’t a game. In war families get torn apart and children die. It changes everything.”

“Let’s stop talking about it mommy,” he says.

Is he trying to shut me up? Is my somewhat rambling and impassioned explanation for war too dull? Or too real? I want him to know that war is not a game played on a playground or in a video. The most horrifying thing to me is that in the long succession of America’s wars — domestic and international — wars that our children have been born into, we have disconnected from our capacity to care about life itself. War, in this sense, is not intimate enough.