Refuge

Return and Retreat in a Transnational World: Insights from the Eritrean Case

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ABSTRACT

When refugees' access to economic, political, and social rights cannot be guaranteed in one locale, individuals make pragmatic choices about what relationships to sustain with authorities elsewhere, even with those that caused their flight in the first place. This process of return is rarely akin to conventional repatriation, understood as the full re-establishment of the rights and responsibilities associated with citizenship (Bradley, 2013). In this paper, the authors instead propose the concept of retreat to capture the process initiated by those who are seeking to escape protracted displacement through a partial return to their country of origin, and through which individuals hope that they can assemble multiple sources of rights across several locations. Drawing from recent ethnographic research in Eritrea, the authors analyze the stories of individuals, mostly refugees, who have decided to retreat despite the lack of political change. Neither exclusively citizens nor refugees in countries of origin or asylum, research participants' "dually absent" socio-legal position is analyzed in this article. The authors show that this rests on stratified forms of citizenship and the relational nature of different rights and statuses and argue that this position should be recognized as an additional dynamic in the literature on flight, return, and transnational citizenship.

KEYWORDS

return; repatriation; Eritrea; refugees; diaspora; citizenship; transnational livelihoods

RESUMÉ

Lorsque l'accès des réfugiés aux droits économiques, politiques et sociaux ne peut être garanti dans une localité, les individus font des choix pragmatiques concernant les relations à entretenir avec les autorités ailleurs, même avec celles qui ont causé leur fuite en premier lieu. Ce processus de retour est rarement comparable à un rapatriement conventionnel, compris comme le rétablissement complet des droits et responsabilités associés à la citoyenneté (Bradley, 2013). Dans cet article, les auteures proposent plutôt le concept de retraite *(retreat)* pour rendre compte du processus initié par ceux qui cherchent à échapper à un déplacement prolongé par un retour partiel à leur pays d'origine et par lequel les individus espèrent pouvoir rassembler de multiples sources de droits à travers plusieurs lieux. S'appuyant sur de la recherche ethnographique récente en Érythrée, les auteures analysent les histoires d'individus, pour la plupart réfugiés, qui ont décidé de se retirer malgré l'absence de changement politique. Ni exclusivement citoyens ni réfugiés dans le pays d'origine ou d'asile, la position socio-juridique « doublement absente » des participants est analysée dans cet article. Les auteures montrent qu'elle repose sur des formes de citoyenneté stratifiées ainsi que sur la nature relationnelle des divers droits et statuts et soutiennent que cette position doit être reconnue comme une dynamique supplémentaire dans la littérature sur la fuite, le retour et la citoyenneté transnationale.

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INTRODUCTION

Even amid the long list of words that scholars of migration and forced migration studies have picked up, pulled apart, and thoroughly problematized, **return** still appears to be a particular favourite. One of the earliest waves of critique challenged the widespread belief, strongly reflected in policies on repatriation, that return marked the "end" of any cycle or experience of displacement. Using rich empirical data, scholars in this wave drew attention to the ways in which physical return can instead initiate new processes of improvisation, construction, and negotiation, and further onwards, migration (Black & Koser, 1999; Hammond, 1999; Warner, 1994). After this came literature that challenged the exceptionalism that surrounds how return is conceptualized in refugee situations (cf. Fresia, 2014). Bakewell (2002), for example, suggests that the vocabulary of repatriation is loaded with assumptions about return and home that are premised on refugees approaching movement in much more definitive and unidirectional ways than other populations. More recently, incidences of return have been interpreted as one strand of refugees' broader efforts to build transnational networks, which involve attempts to establish social, economic, and political nodes across multiple sites (e.g., Kivisto & Faist, 2007). No longer is the movement of people back to their country of origin seen as the end of mobility. It is here that this article seeks to enter and expand the debate.

Among the cases of those we draw upon here to illustrate the shortcomings of conventional understandings of return and repatriation are Eritreans who possess **diaspora citizenship**. These are citizens who possess a legal right to reside in a country other than Eritrea, hence their official status as diaspora citizens, and whose legal status when they return to Eritrea slightly differs from other long-term resident citizens. Most notably, they are exempt from having to serve in the country's indefinite national service program (Amnesty International, 2015), which almost all Eritreans must join upon completion of their secondary schooling or upon turning 18 years of age, and their freedom of movement into and out of the country is relatively unconstrained. This is not the case for Eritreans who have always lived in the country under a one-party system presided over by President Isaias Afewerki and his People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) since the country gained independence in the early 1990s. Alongside experiencing restrictions on fundamental political, social, and economic rights, including the right to vote or the right to free speech (for further information, see United Nations General Assembly, 2015), these citizens must also be granted an exit visa to leave the country, which is only granted in an extremely narrow range of circumstances. One result of these restrictions within Eritrea is that large numbers of Eritreans escape the country each month to seek asylum, work, and other basic opportunities, including family reunification. In 2020, over 520,000 Eritreans were therefore living as refugees under United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) mandate.[1]

Within this category of diaspora citizens are thus also individuals who left Eritrea "ille-

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[1] The data are obtained from UNHCR's (n.d.) Refugee Data Finder website.

gally" and who, after a few years in exile, are given the choice to sign a letter of apology for their departure, which forms a necessary precursor to regaining a connection with the government. Although these individuals can only formally return to Eritrea on a temporary basis, as a permanent return would nullify their diaspora status, many diaspora citizens live long-term in Eritrea in what we document below as a condition of "double absence" (Sayad, 1999): they are neither formally full residents in Eritrea nor physically present or politically accepted in their supposed country of asylum or diaspora.

Through the cases of this specific category of diaspora citizens, this article shows how the language of return and repatriation is challenged by such interdependent legal statuses and forms of citizenship that are not territorialized in one place. These dynamics of return reflect the ongoing recalibration of the citizen–state–territory nexus as individuals and governments recognize the multiple advantages of decoupling citizenship from strict residency requirements (Bauböck, 2009). While some individuals may be empowered by these transnational mechanisms of governance, which enable them to participate in more than one political system, others, like the refugee diaspora citizens we discuss here, end up being partially excluded by all parties. Their best, or only, choice is to navigate the interstices of different political and protection systems to get by.

From a more practice-based perspective, this work aims to provide clarity to refugee-hosting governments that are clearly struggling to reconcile these non-linear "return" dynamics with established orthodoxy on refugee protection. Numerous examples exist of states assuming that when individuals re-enter their country of origin, this automatically equates to the re-availment

or re-establishment of that state's protection. Physical return to the country of origin, however temporary, has thus been used by these host states to negate their responsibility to conduct a separate assessment of whether the persecutory risk has abated and whether the protective function of the state has been re-established. In the act of ceasing refugee status, we see the power of these states' assumptions around what contact between displaced persons and their governments means in terms of rights and protection. This article thus challenges any simplistic assessment of what state protection consists of when refugees "retreat" to their country of origin.

The article thus proceeds as follows. It begins with a brief discussion on the data that were used to inform this article and how they were collected, reflecting in particular on the limited opportunities for conducting research in Eritrea. After briefly reviewing the literature that has shown that refugee return does not automatically equate to the full re-establishment of these individual's rights, we add that in some circumstances, it is explicitly intended not to from the perspectives of governments in countries of origin and citizens themselves. We propose the concept of retreat as a useful heuristic for drawing attention to these different dynamics of return in the Eritrean context and beyond. We draw upon ethnographic data from Eritrea and elsewhere to illustrate the types of experiences that have informed this concept of retreat before concluding with a discussion on how the modalities of retreat present further challenges to the normative and legal assumptions about return within the refugee regime.

Notes on Method and Analysis

This article is based on both authors' research in and about Eritrea over the last decade (Bel-

loni, 2019; Cole, 2019a), though the material we present here is mainly drawn from more recent ethnographic fieldwork in Eritrea (September–December 2018, Belloni; December 2017, January 2019, Cole), and Uganda (January–February 2020, Cole), and ongoing transnational connections with our informants in different countries in Africa and Europe. These research trips formed parts of various longer-term projects, including a study aimed at understanding how migration influences the material living environment, including remittance houses and the perception of home of those family members who stay back in the country of origin (Belloni, 2021), and research exploring how Eritreans perceive onwards migration and the various, albeit constrained, options available to them (Cole, 2018, 2020). The trips during which the data used here were collected were all assessed and approved by the required ethical approval boards at the authors' respective institutions, and both researchers have secured the authorization of the PFDJ Research Office to conduct research in Asmara. Despite having this approval, however, both authors are aware of the risks of conducting certain conversations within Eritrea, particularly for those they are speaking with, and the challenges of establishing any definitive account of laws, policies, and histories in such a politicized, sensitive, and opaque context (Belloni, 2019; Cole, 2016).

Both authors thus used an ethnographic approach to collect and analyze their data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). In Asmara and other towns, this involved neighbourhood walks with key informants (Kusenbach, 2003; Walks, 2018) and informal conversations with individuals while participating in locally organized events—festivals, reli-

gious ceremonies, diplomatic occasions, and so on—and everyday life—visiting friends and families in their houses, hanging out in cafés, taking public transportation, and so forth.[2] Because migration is such an omnipresent reality in Eritrea (Belloni, 2019; Cole, 2019a), all these occasions yielded stories of people who had left Eritrea and could not return, who had managed to return after signing an apology letter, who had returned and ended up in prison, and so on. Given the logical connection between local houses financed with migrant remittances (Belloni, 2021) and the possibility of returning to Eritrea, and between how plans to leave are conditioned by the opportunities to return, our conversations during these periods would often touch on who among Eritreans abroad would actually come back and who instead decided to stay away for whatever reasons Cole (2019b).

These observations, and a smaller number of scheduled and structured interviews with key informants and government officials working in various government ministries, were recorded and transcribed. The rich data within these records were then searched, including by searching for certain key words (including **return**, **apology letter**, and **exit**), reread, and analyzed to inform this paper. Similar experiences and stories were grouped together, with illustrative examples included below. Our methodological approaches mean that we do not claim that the findings presented below can provide a complete picture of return dynamics in the country, as limitations on the type of data collection that is possible in Eritrea preclude any systematic approach to research. However, based on the multiple angles and sources from which we observed "retreat," we argue that it is a notable and important

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[2] All research participants have been anonymized, and details about places and people have been changed to guarantee their privacy and safety.

phenomenon to engage with and account for. While neither author thus set out to conduct research on resident diaspora citizenship, the issue became unavoidable in daily encounters and inquiries around migration and return with government officials, migrant families in Eritrea, and refugees abroad. These life stories and conversations have oriented our theoretical discussion to a neglected but omnipresent reality of people who negotiate return in the interstices between state systems.

RETURN, REPATRIATION, AND RETREAT IN THE ERA OF STRATIFIED CITIZENSHIP

While return and repatriation are often used interchangeably to describe refugees' journeys back to their country of origin, scholars have sought to draw a clear distinction between the two in an attempt to unlock durable or enduring solutions for displaced populations (Van Hear, 2003). This has involved distinguishing between **return** as a **physical experience** of going back to the place of origin and **repatriation** as a **political process** whereby the severed bond between citizen and state—which initially caused the former to seek international protection—has been re-established (Long, 2013). Authors such as Long (2013), Bradley (2013), and Van Hear (2003) argue that disaggregating these phenomena makes it easier to identify two main flaws in dominant institutional approaches to facilitating and managing refugee return. The first is that repatriation does not necessarily have to follow from or entail a process of physical return if the main focus is on ensuring political **empatriation** of displaced persons. Citizens can regain rights in their country of origin, and the protective capacity of the state there, without having to physically return (Long,

2013).

The second concerns the opposite phenomenon, whereby physical return to the country of origin must not be understood to automatically equate to the re-establishment of a citizen's rights there. As many commentators have documented in the last two decades, institutions have supported repatriation despite ongoing concerns about the human rights conditions in the country of origin (Black, 2002; Hathaway, 2007; Takahashi, 1997), and returning refugees have struggled to reintegrate in fragile political and environmental contexts with minimal, if any, governmental support (Hammond, 2018). The upshot of both these observations is that institutions should consider designing and supporting empatriation efforts without premising these on refugees' immediate desire to return, and instead promote return as part of a flexible pattern of mobility whereby refugees are enabled "to move **between** places, building their own solutions" (Long, 2016, p. 479). Return can then constitute a tentative step in the direction of building transnational lives and livelihoods, which replace displacement with sustainable forms of mobility.

Understood from this perspective, the act, duration, and permanency of **returning** become a process over which individuals can exercise meaningful choice, which numerous academics have argued is central to a "just" return (Bradley, 2013, p. 2). Hammond (1999) similarly points out that moving away from a prescriptive approach to return is critical for both supporting the transnational lives of most refugees and respecting that their conceptions of home and return may have changed over the years they have been displaced. This may diminish their appetite for any unidirectional or complete "return" home. As Long (2016) states,

> Migration and mobility may not only enhance exist-
> ing solutions: they offer a means of connecting
> them, allowing refugees to build their own compos-
> ite solutions that reflect complex identities, particu-
> larly for those refugees who have spent considerable
> time in exile and may have family or other social ties
> to their host community, speak the language, own a
> business, or attend school there. (p. 482)

When, or if, refugees do then decide to return home, much evidence points to the value of this being deliberative and incremental (Steputat, 2004). To minimize both the risk of returning to a country that has likely been negatively affected by conflict and economic devastation and the risk of losing one's foothold in the country of asylum, families may split, with certain members returning to the country of origin to re-establish political, personal, or professional ties for part or all of the year while other family members remain in exile (Al-Ali et al., 2001; Fresia, 2014; Muggeridge & Doná, 2006). "Revolving" return (Hansen, 2007) among these populations, whereby individuals continue to cycle between sites in exile and in the country of origin, can constitute a step towards "sustainable return" within a general pattern of continuing transnational movement (Steputat, 2004, p. 2). Families may (re)acquire political and economic rights in the country of origin alongside retaining them in the country of asylum. This constitutes the same tactical or "strategic switching" between destinations with different opportunities and constraints that is seen among populations who have not been displaced (Ley and Kobayashi, 2005, p. 112). In these cases, return is firmly divorced from repatriation, and displaced populations also remain oriented towards legally establishing lives outside the country.

The theoretical elaboration and empirical evidence for this difference between return and repatriation has nonetheless failed to silence legal debate as to how these return movements relate to the end of refugee status, especially when they are conducted outside of institutionalized repatriation pathways. Part of this debate rests on the fact that while international refugee lawyers have argued that there is no "causal connection between the end of a danger of persecution and the re-availability of protection against persecution" (Banks, 2015, p. 231), states have continued to waiver on this point. As detailed in the introduction, there is a widespread assumption that when individuals make contact with the state of origin (not only by physically returning but also in the case of contacting their own embassies), this automatically equates to the re-establishment of that state's protection.

Beyond resting on a misreading of what refugees' engagement with the country of origin might consist of and result in, this simplistic formula also fails to account for **stratified** forms of citizenship (Woldemikael, 2018) as well as the **relational** nature of different rights and statuses. First, it can no longer be assumed that citizenship is binary: that citizens have access to either full rights or none at all (Faist, 2000; Vertovec, 2009). As Stokke (2017) discusses, citizenship is instead inherently stratified, that is, it is divided up into different "tiers" of rights and responsibilities based on social status, wealth, residency, educational levels, ethnicity, gender, and so on, and consists of various integrated dimensions: membership, legal status, rights, and participation. Citizens can construct forms of citizenship that draw on these elements to differing degrees (Janoski & Gran, 2002), but so can states, which construct tiers of citizenship between and within resident and non-resident nationals who govern their access to rights and protection (Choo, 2006; Woldemikael, 2018).

Riggan (2013b) refers to this stratification in the Eritrean context as **graduated citizenship**, whereby the social contract between citizens and the state varies for different segments of the Eritrean population, with implications for the rights that each group can access. She describes how the rights and responsibilities that cohere to Eritrean citizenship are far from uniformly experienced as "graduated policies have created different categories of citizens: external citizens, whose loyalties are cultivated so they will continue to make financial contributions to the nation, and territorially bound citizens, required to engage in national military service" (Riggan, 2013a, p. 102). Woldemikael (2018) and other scholars (e.g., Belloni, 2021; Mohammad, 2021) have further nuanced this picture of graduated citizenships by considering the ethnic, generational, and political divides within the diaspora, as well as the divides between local elite and other locals who are not connected to the power structure. This means that, depending on their background, different refugees may access different rights and duties upon their return as diaspora citizens, as we show in the next section. Moreover, their status in one country—that is, diaspora citizenship in Eritrea—may depend on their having another status elsewhere.

Second, then, the situation of Eritreans highlights a broader need to better understand people's rights and legal statuses in a relational sense, including how the different statuses that individuals hold in countries of origin and asylum interact during the process of refugee settlement and return (Bauböck, 2010; Fox, 2005). How, for example, do the rights and responsibilities of individuals in one state result from, or rest on, their legal status in another? In what ways might one set of rights be affected by change in the other? And how can this approach help us

understand the functions or experiences of retreat and continuing transnational mobility? For the Eritreans we met, as shown below, their rights as returning nationals have indeed come to depend on their actual or potential membership to another system of legal rights and protections.

Further to this, and though the circumstances we examine are exceptional in some ways, we propose that the literature on return may be enhanced by considering particular movements through the lens of **retreat**. The idea of retreat is inspired by the militaristic vocabulary used by De Certeau et al. (1980) in their philosophical attempts to understand the common practices of resistance. These authors distinguish between **strategy** and **tactic**. The first is defined as "the calculus of relations of force which become possible whenever a subject of will and power […]" holds a "place," that is to say, a base from which to capitalize and prepare for future projects and control the surrounding space. Tactic, on the other hand, is a "calculated action which is determined by the absence of a proper place." De Certeau et al. (1980) write that tactics are the art of the weak or marginalized. It is the art to "vigilantly utilise the gaps which the particular combination of circumstances open in the control of the proprietary power" (p. 6). Drawing from De Certeau et al.'s philosophy "On the Oppositional Practices of the Everyday Life" (1980), we thus define **retreat** as a tactic—an art of the marginalized—used by those who need to make use of the interstices between the laws and regulatory regimes imposed on them.

Going back to our discussion on return, retreat can thus be better understood as a tactic of those who do not fully belong from a legal and political point of view in any singular place and must use the gaps in between legal and protection systems and,

in general, between nation-states to survive. The refugees that we speak about are those who have not managed to make a place for themselves in exile and have to retreat to a place that accepts them only as non-residents. Their condition is thus one of "double absence," to use the words of Sayad (1999). Their survival is based on their non-presence in the context of exile, where they should have gained protection but where this is currently nominal in practice, thus leading to their retreat, and in the context of origin, where they could not or chose not to avail themselves of full citizenship rights and are now treated as "temporary visitors."

We suggest that conceptualizing certain incidences of return in this way pushes scholars to consider the forces that individuals come up against during movement and also to question both why these individuals felt unable or unwilling to overcome them in the country of asylum and then what they secured, or hoped to secure or gain, from moving back to their country of origin. The concept of retreat, therefore, is intended to draw attention to different causal mechanisms and goals of movement, as well as to the different forms of protection and rights that retreating refugees might acquire in the context of graduated citizenships and relational legal statuses. It pushes us to ask questions around the decision-making, planning, and operationalization of any process of retreat, as well as to question its (im)permanence as a next step (Ajibade et al., 2020). As Ajibade et al. (2020) importantly point out, however, retreat or even "withdrawal" need not necessarily coincide with defeat or loss; it can constitute a reasoned tactic for saving lives, which, in the Eritrean case, has a particularly strong historical precedent—and even veneration—in the country's history of liberation struggles (Riggan, 2013b).

The heuristic of retreat nonetheless also has conceptual and empirical overlaps with Klekowski von Koppenfels's (2019) elaboration of the phenomenon of "reactive transnationalism," which she suggests "can emerge as a result of discrimination or [the] negative context of reception in the host country" (p. 598). The transnational behaviour she observes, therefore, is not an attempt to capitalize on the opportunities that exist in different spaces but rather the only way for individuals to secure social, economic, and political rights through a tapestry of different citizenships and residencies.

Here, we propose that certain refugees undertake a similar or related tactic of "reactive retreat." Cut off from full citizenship rights in the country where they sought formal or de facto refuge from the political and economic situation "at home" (Kibreab, 2003), retreated refugees feel compelled to return to their country of origin, at least temporarily. In the case of Eritreans, as discussed below, they contemplate retreat due to both a lack of substantive opportunities in exile and the possibility of upholding certain professional or familial expectations upon re-entering Eritrea. They nonetheless only feel safe to do so provided they can establish or maintain a foothold outside of Eritrea in the form of citizenship, refugee status, or another immigration status.

Retreat thus highlights a different motive for movement than is usually referenced in the literature on return, which has come to be associated with a geographical step "backwards" but a political or personal step "forwards" (Harild et al., 2015). Movement—when conceptualized as return—tends to be seen as part of a new process, even if not a linear one, that initiates a new chronology of rebuilding or re-establishment. Retreat as a heuristic is, in contrast, intended to be shorn of these connotations, in the hope of

distancing these movements from any false conflation with the discourses, processes, and expectations of full repatriation.

STRATIFIED CITIZENSHIP AND THE HISTORY OF RETURN IN ERITREA

Although we mostly focus in this article on the retreat of those who went back to Eritrea without having secured a permanent legal status in exile, it is important to situate their return within a longer history of migratory movements back to the country. Beyond its specific characteristics, Eritrea represents an archetypal example of how and why states extend citizenship beyond their national borders in order to benefit from the economic and political resources of a significant diaspora (Barry, 2006; Collyer & King, 2015; Glasius, 2018). This history of movement to and from Eritrea furthermore provides the context to the development of the country's stratified citizenship regime. Different generations of Eritreans abroad have enacted different kinds of return depending on the legal status they have been able to secure there and the nature of their relationship with the PFDJ, which has ruled Eritrea as a one-party state for the 30 years since independence in 1991 and arguably during the liberation struggle that preceded this.

Even before the country gained formal independence in 1993, Eritrea's ruling liberation front cultivated strong political and economic links with Eritreans abroad. The diaspora was at the time estimated to be one million—that is, one quarter of the total population of Eritrea. By the late 1990s, the government's strategy of courting this group had been further refined, however, with Eritrea's state-run national newspaper publicizing that

> because it is unrealistic to expect the return of all people in the diaspora it is deemed necessary to

> redefine the meaning of reintegration so as to mean participation in the economic, social and cultural renaissance of Eritrea wherever they are.

(Tesfagiorgis, 1998)

The same newspaper, as well as national rhetoric in general, continues to praise the diaspora's contributions explicitly **without** encouraging their return; nation-building is presented as an activity that citizens can, and should, contribute to extraterritorially (Cole, 2016; Hirt & Saleh Mohammad, 2018).

Those who left Eritrea during the liberation struggle and secured a stable, permanent status in Europe, the United States, or Canada have thus generally managed to since find ways and space to return to Eritrea (Hepner, 2009). The site of their new permanent residency, as well as the ability to be a dual national of these countries and Eritrea, has contributed to their ability to enjoy transnational citizenship. Having naturalized in their country of asylum, and having fled a very different set of circumstances in pre-1991 Eritrea (i.e., the liberation conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia as opposed to repression by the country's current ruling party), return does not threaten their residency or citizenship rights in their country of asylum. As such, these earlier generations of refugees and migrants visit Eritrea periodically, often to coincide with the country's patriotic holidays, to check in on businesses, or during their children's school holidays (Arnone, 2011). Among residents conscripted into the country's indefinite national service program, who are generally granted extremely limited personal liberties in all spheres of life, external citizens come to be seen as privileged citizens, a view that is only reinforced by national propaganda that praises them for their economic and political support to the nation Riggan (2013b).

As mentioned earlier, it is this population that the Eritrean government sought

to cultivate early links with, both to promote their political loyalty and to capitalize on their economic situation for the country's future development (Bereketeab, 2007). This is exemplified by the tax, established since independence, by which all diaspora members who want to retain Eritrean citizenship contribute to national development with 2% of their income (Poole, 2013). This contingent of the diaspora has generally been welcomed to reintegrate from their countries of residence and to uphold their duties as diaspora citizens (even if some exceptions exist when it comes to political opponents). Our interactions with individuals from this cohort who are based in Eritrea suggests their widespread desire to retain their second citizenships. Through these, they are granted passports that almost always enable greater, visa-free movement than their Eritrean ones and a host of rights—such as the freedom to choose your livelihood and place of residence—that are not attached to Eritrean nationality.

Since the early 1990s, numbers of Eritreans in exile have nonetheless increased due to individuals leaving to escape political and religious persecution and the indeterminate nature of national service. Some of these individuals have managed to achieve a significant degree of protection once arriving in Europe, the United States, or Canada; others, however, remain stuck in surrounding countries, where their refugee status, if recognized, has rarely given them access to significant prospects of socio-economic and legal inclusion (Belloni, 2019; Cole, 2018). The return of this group, who left Eritrea after it became a one-party state in the early 1990s, and whom we are mostly concerned with here, has proven much less smooth for several reasons. First, governments in the countries where these individuals have sought asylum—such as the Swiss government—have interpreted Eritreans' returns to Eritrea as evidence of them re-availing themselves of that country's protection. Return is seen as evidence that this population is no longer escaping crippling restrictions on their fundamental rights in Eritrea and are thus no longer in need of refugee protection.

Second, this population's relationship with the government in Eritrea is highly complex and conditional. Most of this group of refugees fled the country irregularly to escape national service and were thus initially viewed as illegal absconders by the regime in Eritrea's capital, Asmara. This resulted in some families being punished for their relatives' illegal exit and would have made it unsafe for those who left in this way to return. In recent years, however, the government has initiated a formal system of forgiveness that enables this population, which as for a long time disqualified from ever returning, to re-enter Eritrea (Riggan, 2016). To qualify for this amnesty, individuals must have resided for two to three years outside Eritrea, signed a formal letter of apology at the Eritrean embassy to show their regret for having left illegally, and pledged to contribute 2% of their income to the Eritrean government for as long as they hold that status. Only then are they allowed to return as "diaspora citizens." Within this group, a small number return without having established a solid legal status for themselves outside the country, be it as a refugee, a foreign resident, or a national, as exemplified in the case of diaspora citizens from Saudi Arabia below.

This article thus aims to refute the assumption by governments that host Eritrean refugees that this form of return constitutes voluntary and successful re-availment of the protection of the country of origin. It also aims to nuance the widespread belief we and other scholars have encountered within

Eritrea that it is **always** preferable to be a diaspora citizen because of the increased freedom and respect accorded to individuals who return with this status. As the cases below illustrate, both beliefs rest on erroneous assumptions about how and why these individuals return, the rights they have in the diaspora, and their subsequent positions within Eritrea's economy and society. More fundamentally, the nature of the return movements detailed below highlight that return and repatriation may not be the most appropriate terms to analyze these displaced populations' movements. We thus analyze the following empirical examples using the concept of **retreat**.

RETREAT TO ERITREA

The situation for those fleeing Eritrea to neighbouring countries or further afield has become harder in recent years as political playing fields have shifted and animosity towards migrants and refugees has increased. Within countries in the East and Horn of Africa, Eritrean refugees have seen a deterioration in the access and quality of asylum, affecting their decision-making around the necessity or desirability of returning. This has been most notable in Ethiopia, where the re-establishment of amicable relations between Eritrea's President Isaias Afeworki and Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in 2018 resulted in the Ethiopian government changing the eligibility criteria for Eritrean refugees from prima facie recognition to an individualized process that no longer recognizes national service as sufficient grounds for asylum (Lucht & Mengiste, 2020). More recently, the outbreak of violent conflict in the Tigray region of Ethiopia has dramatically affected

Eritrean refugees, with credible reports of Eritrean troops blocking humanitarian aid to and destroying refugee camps in Tigray, as well as rounding up the camps' inhabitants and forcing them back across the border into Eritrea.[3] Widespread violence in the region has also forced thousands of Eritreans into eastern Sudan, which presents its own threats of insecurity and violence for Eritrean refugees (UNHCR, 2020, 2021a, 2021b; United Nations, 2021).

The situation of Eritreans in Uganda has similarly worsened in recent years. When Eritreans first began arriving in the country in larger numbers in the late 2000s, recognition rates were high as reports of religious persecution in Eritrea, particularly of Pentecostals and Jehovah's witnesses, were accepted by the Ugandan authorities in charge of refugee status determination procedures. Increasing arrivals of Eritreans during the 2010s, however, including Eritreans who were ending up in Uganda having been deported from Israel via Rwanda, were met with less sympathy by the Ugandan government. Unsure how to adjudicate Eritreans' claims for asylum, recognition rates within the country plummeted. The de facto policy for this population within Uganda is now passive acceptance: they can live in the country, but there is little by way of support offered to them (Cole, 2018). With very few opportunities to find employment within Uganda or to regularize their immigration status through legal channels, people's personal and financial security has deteriorated within Kampala. For some, this has left them and their families with few options other than to temporarily go back to Eritrea.

Interviews with Eritreans in Uganda thus suggested a desire and necessity to "retreat" to Eritrea. One of author G.C.'s Eritrean

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[3]Our fieldwork in Eritrea and surrounding countries does not cover the period since the current war in Tigray began in November 2020, and thus, this article does not capture the experiences of Eritreans displaced by the conflict.

research assistants, Beilul, recounted stories in 2016 of friends who wanted to return to Eritrea but who lacked the resources to finance the journey. One such friend, who was waiting to hear the outcome of her asylum application, was clear: "If I don't get a sponsor [for resettlement], it is better to go back to Eritrea." Beilul also questioned: "How can I stay without a job in Uganda? It is better to stay in my country like that [without a job]. Why suffer in someone else's country?" There were no legal options for Beilul to stay in Uganda or to move on, though she did not at the time have the money to go back to her family in Eritrea, and she remained worried about how the government would receive her upon her return. Her and her friends nonetheless faced a Hobson's choice, whereby remaining in Uganda as refugees was impossible without any reliable source of income, leading them to contemplate return to Eritrea so that they could secure the necessary resources to support their families. In Eritrea, they could at least live with families rent-free and they hoped they could access some government rations to reduce the cost of food. It would also be easier for them to call on relatives to send money to Eritrea than to Uganda, where the expectation was that they would be contributing to the pool. Without activating the protections of a diaspora citizenship somewhere else, however, they knew they risked being enrolled in national service if they returned to Eritrea.

In Uganda, G.C. also met Eritreans who had come to Kampala having been required to leave Saudi Arabia over the preceding years. Before arriving in Uganda, however, and upon losing their legal right to reside in Saudi Arabia, they had been forced to first enter Eritrea as it was the only country that would legally admit them (Cole, 2020).

Almost all these individuals did so as diaspora citizens, having retained their Eritrean passports in Saudi Arabia. They have done so because the authorities in Saudi Arabia required them to in order to access work permits, but also because Eritreans in the Gulf wish both to send their children to embassy-operated Eritrean schools and to maintain the ability to travel to and from Eritrea. As diaspora citizens who paid their 2% diaspora tax, they were therefore entitled to re-enter Eritrea on a government white paper that allowed them a short-term stay in Eritrea. If they exceeded this period, which for most was 6 to 12 months, they would nonetheless lose their right to leave Eritrea freely and their exemptions from national service.

In this situation, neither Eritreans nor the Eritrean government saw their arrivals as instances of "return" as no protective functions were re-established. These populations, displaced once again from the Gulf, were furthermore anxious to quickly find opportunities to move on from Eritrea so that their diaspora status would not expire (Cole, 2020). For individuals in this situation, return was therefore for the most part a process of temporary "retreat," providing an opportunity mainly to regroup and re-strategize. It was not so much the voluntary choice of individuals with alternative opportunities but rather the tactical withdrawal of a people who felt unsure about how to move forwards or were unable to remain at their current location.

CONDITIONS UPON RETREAT

In some ways, however, while respondents in Uganda spoke of moving back to Eritrea as a form of retreat, their vision of what life would be like upon arrival did not capture the realities that they may face as diaspora citizens. Though it can hardly be said that the rights of any citizens in Eritrea are

clear, the vagaries of this group's position have their own particular dynamics. Even those who return to Eritrea as diaspora citizens, and who are aware that this status gives them some freedom from the national service system, speak of existing in a climate of fear, attempting to avoid the gaze of the authorities as much as possible. The Eritrean government may have accepted their formal letter of apology, but this does not fully reverse the fact that these same authorities once saw their actions as criminal. One interviewee spoke of being prevented from having a licence to open a business upon their return, despite friends having been granted that opportunity. Seemingly their only duty was to pay 2% of their annual income to the government, but our respondents claimed that the rights they received in return were nowhere formally clarified and that the government's treatment of different diaspora citizens was extremely inconsistent. The unpredictability of the Eritrean government has indeed long been noted as an effective tool of governance, engendering self-discipline and self-censorship within the population (Bozzini, 2013; Riggan, 2016). Moreover, to keep their status, diaspora citizens are required to periodically leave the country. Depending on their economic status, some respondents stated that this movement provided an opportunity to expand their businesses; for others, it was an unaffordable expense, and so they remained in Eritrea, hoping that nobody would notice that they had not fulfilled that part of the status requirement.

The case of Ismael[4] exemplifies many of these dynamics. Author M.B. met him after Ismael had returned to Eritrea from Sudan and assumed a position lecturing at one of the country's colleges for tertiary education. Ismael was teaching biology there and seemed happy about this position. His salary was better than that of many others in Eritrea, and his job enabled him to live close to his family. Many of these perks derived from the fact that he had returned as a "diaspora citizen," which had exonerated him from national service and its low levels of remuneration.

Before this, Ismael had lived for over eight years in Sudan with refugee status. His story follows that of thousands of others who entered Sudan or Ethiopia, mainly to avoid being conscripted into Eritrea's indefinite national service, but who have subsequently remained stuck there, with few prospects for local integration or resettlement even if they are granted asylum.[5] Everyday survival in Sudan had been a struggle for Ismael, who had never managed to raise enough resources to move onwards to other destinations in the Gulf or in Europe. His experience is thus like that of many other refugees returning to Eritrea from Sudan, Libya, the Gulf, South Sudan, Ethiopia, and Europe who experienced limited protection in these destinations alongside worsening restrictions on their rights to move, work, and study freely. Faced with these constraints, Ismael therefore began the process that would enable him to join the ranks of the refugee returnees who have come back to Eritrea in the last five years. Not unlike what Kibreab (2003) has written about, Ismael's movement back to Eritrea was largely driven by his inability to access citizenship and other rights elsewhere.

This process of return began with Ismael signing an apology letter for escaping the country irregularly and promising to contribute to Eritrea's development by paying 2% of his annual income to the government. As Ismael did not have an individualized case

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[4]Names and personal details have been modified to protect the anonymity of the research participants.
[5]According to UNHCR (2018), there were 486,200 registered Eritrean refugees in 2017, mostly hosted in Ethiopia and Sudan.

against the Eritrean government, and thus did not worry about being personally targeted by its regime, he was prepared to do this. Despite wanting Eritrea to be his primary base and permanent address, he recognized the protection that returning as a "diaspora citizen"—as opposed to a permanent resident—afforded him. In particular, Ismael did not have to participate in military training or be mobilized again in the army. To keep this diaspora status and the rights associated with it valid into the future, he claimed to have to leave and re-enter Eritrea roughly twice a year.

Instances like that of Ismael thus further complicate the picture of graduated or stratified citizenship by showing the difference in rights and duties accorded to citizens who left under different circumstances. Resident diaspora citizens like Ismael are exonerated from national service but can still hold government posts. Their position is, however, far from being one of privilege. As another informant told M.B.: "As a returnee you feel under constant threat. By signing the apology letter, you declare that you have committed a criminal act and maybe one day they will decide to punish you." In the eyes of the state, the status of these group members is therefore a reminder that they have previously committed a criminal act: that of leaving the country irregularly. "The apology letter states that you committed a felony … but it is not true," one of M.B.'s informants, John, told her in 2018 while she was visiting the family of a returnee from Sudan. John had fled Eritrea in 2011 but after five years in Sudan had decided to come back. His decision to return was not easy, driven largely by the political and economic insecurity that

plagued the life of Eritreans in Sudan. As John bemoaned,

> Eritrea is better than Sudan for me at this moment. In Sudan the police are corrupted [referring to the common harassment that refugees experience at the hands of authorities in Sudan] and I had no ways to move onwards from there.

However, John was worried for himself and his family, who had been targets of the government for some time due to their faith as Jehovah's Witnesses. Several of his relatives had disappeared for years into prisons, and nobody knew whether they were alive or not. He had thus decided to move back in order to stay close to his family and to try to establish a form of economic and physical security that had proven unattainable in exile, even if it was intrinsically precarious within Eritrea.[6]

Official statistics on how many Eritreans reside in the country with this status are not available, though representatives of the PFDJ, interviewed by M.B. in December 2018, state that thousands of Eritreans have returned in this way since the mid-2010s. Verifying this is almost impossible given the lack of transparency around statistics within the country, but during our various stints of fieldwork in Eritrea, we encountered many cases like those of Ismael and John. Mostly, these were refugees or labour migrants with protection concerns from countries that had offered limited prospects for local integration, such as Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and Uganda. Like Ismael, these individuals also normally lacked the necessary economic and social resources needed to move onwards to destinations with more inclusive protection systems. Their retreat was a move towards a networked system of residency, citizenships,

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[6] This seems to constitute a partial inversion of the trend around return observed in Eritrea in the aftermath of the country's Independence. Bascom's (2005) 1998 survey of returnees to Eritrea suggests that "reasons why returnees thought life would improve upon return to Eritrea were primarily psychological and political rather than material. Sixty-four per cent cited the joys of peace, security, freedom, and home as the main reason why they anticipated life would improve, while only 34 per cent cited material advantages (e.g., land, jobs). (p. 176)"

and statuses that offered Eritreans as individuals and families a fragile route to economic, social, and physical security.

Importantly within a context in which nothing happens without government support and authorization, it also has a clear value to the Eritrean state (Hepner, 2015; Hirt & Saleh Mohammad, 2018). Economically, it can boost citizens' opportunities by allowing them to work and trade across borders. Given the country's deteriorating public finances, the 2% diaspora tax itself represents a lifeline for the government. This diaspora citizen status also takes the pressure off the Eritrean government to provide individuals with secure and sustainable employment by constituting a "safety valve" that allows disenfranchised people to temporarily leave. However, it also politically reinforces authoritarian rule by legitimizing the government's long-standing claim that there are no refugees from Eritrea, only economic migrants looking for a better life.

In a way, individuals such as Ismael and John can then exercise their citizenship only through a "**double absence**" (Sayad, 1999): formal absence from the country where they in fact live, and absence from a second country in which they also formally reside. Contrary to the common claim in transnational studies that migrants can develop significant political practices "here" and "there," the above stories demonstrate instead the condition of those who manage their rights, responsibilities, and opportunities by being dually absent. Their citizenship is thus an "interstitial citizenship" (Brighenti, 2016) that emerges from the in-betweenness of their statuses in different territories, leaving these diaspora citizens in a precarious position vis-à-vis the governments in Eritrea and their countries of exile. Their return is thus far from fulfilling the terms of full repatriation and does not guarantee a viable transna-

tional mobile livelihood. It is rather a **retreat**, that is to say, a compromise by those with limited alternatives to both the tribulations that they have faced outside of Eritrea, and the lack of liberties they experience within their country.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: RETREAT AS A CHALLENGE TO THE NORMATIVE ASSUMPTIONS OF THE REFUGEE REGIME

Drawing from the case of Eritrean refugees who "retreated" back to Eritrea, this article has aimed to contribute to studies challenging the discourses that surround return and repatriation. The modalities of retreat that we describe above challenge dominant legal and normative expectations of repatriation, not least through troubling the straightforward legal operationalization of the term. If individuals can return to Eritrea without any immediate problems and no significant or durable change in the country's political situation, it could be—and indeed has been (SwissInfo, 2018)—argued that their initial claim for asylum was either fraudulent in the first place or, at the least, should now be cancelled. What this reasoning ignores, however, is masterfully captured by Riggan (2016), who describes the process of political transformation that Eritreans undergo upon leaving the country. Individuals cross the borders as "draft evaders" and "traitors," but if they, after a few years abroad, apologize for their departure and begin paying the diaspora tax to the Eritrean government, they are transformed, as Riggan describes, into valued "diaspora citizens." This recalibration in the relationship between individuals and the Eritrean government cannot, however, be undertaken in situ.

Exiting, and the risks of persecution and violence that doing so illegally entails, is thus

a necessary precursor to this model of citizenship and return becoming available to Eritreans, a fact that Eritreans are known to weigh up in their considerations on whether or not to leave the country (Riggan, 2016). Had the individuals discussed above never left the country illegally, they would not have been able to return with a status that at least temporarily exempted them from national service. In this sense, the protection offered by their current citizenship within Eritrea is **relationally contingent**: it rests on them maintaining or acquiring particular legal rights outside of the country, which can ironically derive from them having been awarded a refugee or migrant status—even if a precarious one—elsewhere.

The process of retreat, which we defined here as a tactic used by those who, having no singular, stable place for themselves, need to utilize the interstices between laws and regulatory regimes imposed on them, is therefore in no way a synonym of repatriation, intended as a full recovery of one's rights. Certain Eritreans are physically returning, and yet that "contract" often remains incomplete. They are also not "returning" in the hope of achieving something (a)new, but are "retreating" in the face of hostility, restrictions, and alienation in the countries they previously entered.   Individuals are less concerned that they will face persecution within Eritrea when they retreat in these circumstances because their ability to maintain or imminently establish a link with another country or regime of protection opens up the possibility for them to acquire diaspora status. If that link with the country of asylum or dual residency/citizenship is severed, as several European governments have proposed as part of efforts to deter or deport Eritrean asylum seekers, these returnees may find themselves exposed to persecution once again, such as through their enrolment in certain parts of the national service and/or through the denial of basic freedoms because they would return as **resident**, rather than diaspora **citizens**. At the point of these individual's "return," therefore, protection is not transferred from a surrogate state to the Eritrean government: individual security remains entirely contingent upon the continuation of the former or the possibility of some other form of legal status too.

Despite being challenged for decades, the assumptions that continue to underpin the language of return and repatriation still fail to capture models of graduated and non-territorial citizenship and the relational nature of different legal statuses. A failure to unpack the complicated relationship between a lack of persecution and the re-establishment of state protection has resulted in the dangerous assumption that the two are synonymous rather than simply interconnected.   Instead, we need to determine what protection is actually being provided to returning nationals, be they refugees or other members of the diaspora, and what aspect of their legal statuses activates this. What statuses then must returning individuals possess or be granted in order for governments in countries of origin to extend protections to them? And do these statuses and protections, as in the case of the Eritreans detailed here, rest on them also having continued or planned access to rights in another host country? It is important for policy-makers to answer such questions to ensure that these interdependent, protective mechanisms are not undermined and for the language of **return** and **repatriation** not to obscure the dynamics of **retreat**.

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