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Publication Date

2018

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Eritrean Nationalism and the Digital Diaspora:

Expanding Diasporic Networks via Twitter

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Master of Art

in African Studies

by

Niat Gebremichael Afeworki

2018

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2018

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Eritrean Nationalism and the Digital Diaspora:

Expanding Diasporic Networks via Twitter

By

Niat Gebremichael Afeworki

Master of Art in African Studies

University of California, Los Angeles 2018

Professor Stephanie Francis Bosch, Chair

This thesis examines the second-generation Eritrean digital diaspora and the ways they use and perform nationalism to forge connections with diasporans via the social networking platform, Twitter. Second generation diasporans are able to build networks and strengthen ties that are transcultural and transnational, as they engage in discussions that are culturally and politically relevant to Eritrea, their identity, heritage and experiences living in the diaspora. In addition, this paper will show that nationalism among second-generation diaspora has two distinct features: the postmemories passed down from the previous generations who experienced trauma from the war for Eritrean Independence and a sense of duty to defend and serve the nation. Their brand of nationalism is performed in online spaces and many times initiates connections between each other, altering the very structure and understanding of diaspora.

This thesis of Niat Gebremichael Afeworki is approved

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2018

Dedication

To Afeworki Gebremichael and Zufan Abraham, my Mom and Dad:
You walked and crawled and ran and swam seas to make all of this possible. You are not the inspiration, you are the reason.

To my friends who cradled and edited and distracted and forced me to focus, for all the laughs and all the love.

To Senait Tadesse for all of your help and contributions to the research.

Thank you may never be enough but “thank you” is all I have.

Thank you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In April of 2013, Eritrean-Canadian musician Luam Thomas, put out a call across Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube, for Eritrean artists in the diaspora to work on a project titled the Eritrean Mass Online Music Collaboration Project (EMOMCP 2013). Her use of social networking sites to broadcast her project and solicit young Eritrean diasporans to, “unite in the name of music, culture and love for our country Eritrea,”¹ resulted in an outpouring of replies across the platforms. Thomas received responses from individuals who were interested in participating and even more from people who were excited about the project and wanted to lend their moral support to her and the participants. She was able to reach young Eritrean diasporans across the globe, including some of whom reside in Israel, the United States, Rwanda, and Germany. She claims the video she posted on YouTube, which explained the project and its goals and that has since been deleted received around 40,000 views and the Facebook group she created for the project grew to about 500 members in a matter of weeks.² This experience showed Thomas the “desire and willingness of Eritrean youth to learn about their culture, the desire to connect with their brothers and sisters all over the world, and to be in touch with their identity.”³ The final project culminated into a 15-minute video in which the main feature was a collaborative rendition by vocalists and musicians of Abraham Afewerki’s song, “Deki Erey.” A collage of video clips including singers and musicians, traditional dances, photography, and paintings created and submitted by diasporans accompanied the music and gained 10,000 views in 3 days.⁴

¹ EMOMCP 2013 Facebook page, accessed September 21, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/emomcp2013/>

² Issayas Tesfamariam, “Conversation with Luwam Thomas”, *Issayas’ Blog* (blog), September 7, 2013, <http://kemey.blogspot.ca/2013/09/a-conversation-with-luwam-thomas.html>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hade1Hade, “Eritrean Mass Online Collaboration Project FINAL VIDEO!” video, 14:59, August 27, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDJFHjWVncY>.

“Deki Erey,” which translates to ‘Children of Eritrea’ is a song about the Eritrean diasporas and their visceral connection to the homeland. It also highlights their efforts in fighting for and defending the sovereignty of the nation in the War for Independence against Ethiopia. “Deki Erey” focuses on the connection and strength these communities have on account of the pride they have for their homeland and the desire they share to work towards a better future for Eritrea. Thomas’ project illustrated the song’s message by showcasing the interconnectedness of the Eritrean diaspora through a common experience of loving, longing and supporting the homeland as one people. The project was indicative of the ways in which young Eritrean diasporans establish new connections and expand their networks, on the basis of their shared identity via social networking sites. The first few lines of the song roughly translate to, “Where ever we may be/ you connect us with a never-ending thread/You told us to be one/We drank from the water of never-ending love.” Though the song lyrics reference a thread of shared Eritrean national identity, it also references the Internet itself because new modes and layers of interconnectivity are made possible for the second-generation of Eritrean diasporans.

This thesis will explore the Eritrean digital diaspora’s presence on Twitter with a focus on the second-generation, and will look at how they build networks and strengthen ties that are transcultural and transnational, as they engage in discussions that are culturally and politically relevant to Eritrea, their identity, their heritage and their experiences living in the diaspora. Their networks are assembled as they engage with their counterparts on the basis of their shared Eritrean nationalism, regardless of their political orientations. Often these online encounters are sparked by a trending topic or event that catches the attention of the Twitter user. In addition, this paper will illustrate that diasporic nationalism among second-generation Eritrean youth has two distinct features: First, a post-memory of the war with Ethiopia for Eritrea’s independence; the second, an obligation to be of service to Eritrea, which can be recognized in their defense of Eritrea’s sovereignty and their ideas for and real actions towards the nation-building effort.

Diaspora

The Oxford dictionary defines diaspora as “People who have spread or been dispersed from their homeland.” This over-simplistic definition limits our understanding of diaspora to the physical movement from one space to another and does not address the conditions in which people migrate out of their homelands. Mojab et al say that the term ‘diaspora’ has been used in ways that disregard the violence in population displacement, defining it as “the dispersal and relocation of populations” as a result of colonialism “in the historically specific context of [global] capitalist accumulation.”⁵ Mojab et al understand diasporas through their historical contexts, focusing on precursors of war, repression or oppression because it is through these events in their history they come to understand themselves as a community.⁶ This is most certainly the case for the Eritrean diaspora as over a quarter of the population fled during the war for independence, which lasted 30 years.⁷ Understanding the conditions in which the Eritrean diaspora was created reveals the impact the war had on the country and its people, however, this does not touch on the relationship the diaspora has with the homeland or examine their diasporic consciousness.

The emergence of new information communication technologies (ICTs) has provided diasporans the ability to maintain networks from their places of origin and develop new networks with their co-ethnics in their new homes. The transnational nature of the diaspora and their use of ICTs essentially expand the borders of the country, altering the ways in which national identity is constructed, performed, and understood. These online communities are known as digital diasporas and are defined as “the distinct online networks that diasporic people

⁵ Shahrzad Mojab and Rachel Gorman, "Dispersed Nationalism: War, Diaspora And Kurdish Women's Organizing." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 3, no. 1 (2007): 78.

⁶ Ibid, 79.

⁷ Lucia Anna McSpadden, “Contemplating Repatriation to Eritrea,” in *Coming Home?: Refugees, Migrants and Those Who Stayed Behind*, ed. by Lynellyn D. Long and Ellen Oxfeld. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2017), 34.

use to re-create identities, share opportunities, spread their culture, influence homeland and host-land policy, or create debate about common-interest issues by means of electronic devices.”⁸ According to Alonso et al., digital diasporas differ from other online communities because digital diasporas bring a sense of identity and community prior to the emergence of the Internet. Diasporans have a strong tie to a nation before they ever convene online to bridge transnational networks and the technology either reinforces or transforms their previous meanings and attitudes about themselves and that of their new homes. The Internet has provided a space where diasporans have opportunities to build networks on Internet platforms in which they can promote their cultural values, facilitate political discussions, and exchange social capital. In addition, the diasporas understanding of the imagined community they subscribe to, shifts and expands as new forms of communities emerge as a result of the Internet.

Nationalism

A feature of the Eritrean diaspora that will be further explored in the coming chapters is their strong sense of nationalism. According to Gellner, the nation is a product of people's willingness to recognize a common culture and thus subscribe to a political unit, the nation.⁹ The technological advancements of the Industrial Revolution engendered the social and economic institutions that afforded people the ability to connect with one another in ways they had never been able to before, which contributed to the creation of the nation. Another component of Gellner's theory deals with the physicality of the nation as he theorized that nationalism exists within the vacuum of the physical boundaries of the nation. His theory did not leave much for understanding how nationalism may exist outside the borders of the country, which has increasingly become the case due to greater advancements in transportation and

⁸ Andoni Alonso and Pedro J. Oiarzabal *Diasporas in the New Media Age: Identity, Politics, and Community* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2010), 11.

⁹ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 54.

ICTs. Winichakul defines the nation through its physical borders and all the related values and practices that exist within these borders.¹⁰ Borders define and construct what is and what is not within the realm of the nation, making territoriality a major component of the collective “self” as those who lie outside the border are othered. However, the Eritrean diaspora, obviously situated outside the bounds of the borders, is still very much a part of the nation, as is evident from their financial and political contributions in the struggle to demarcate the borders of the nation and secure Eritrean sovereignty from Ethiopia. In fact, it is through the threat of the Eritrean borders that nationalism throughout the diaspora peaks, evident in the increased traffic on Eritrean diasporan websites during the 1998 Border War with Ethiopia. During the time of the Border War from 1991-2001, the diaspora congregated in online spaces to discuss updates about the conflict, show support in the form of fundraising and organizing public demonstrations to gain public favor for Eritrea’s position.¹¹ Though Winichakul demonstrates that a nation lies within the lines drawn on a map, the rise in ICTs have expanded these borders in a sense that sets aside the emphasis on the physical space people of a nation inhabit, yet not entirely as it is these borders that place value and understanding within a diaspora. It is Eritrea’s history to establish and defend the borders of the nation that make the nation’s territoriality a major component of Eritrean nationalism despite the ethnic and linguistic diversity.

Anderson understands the nation to be a social construct which he defines as “an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”¹² They are imagined because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members... yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”¹³ He

¹⁰ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1994) Preface.

¹¹ Victoria Bernal, “Civil Society and Cyberspace: Reflections on Dehai, Asmarino and Awate,” *Africa Today* 60, no. 2 (2013) 27.

¹² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (New York: Verso/New Left Books, 1991), 7.

¹³ Anderson, 8.

characterizes them as a community because “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship,” which was facilitated in large through the rise of print capitalism, an advancement in information communication technology.¹⁴ Print capitalism laid the foundation for national consciousness as it first established a shared field of communication, which led to the standardization of language. This meant that people who spoke different variations of a language were now able to understand one another and they became aware of the thousands of others who shared the same language, imagining themselves as a part of a larger community.¹⁵ It is through a shared history and cultural commonalities that a national consciousness is born and it is circulated and strengthened through advance modes of communication that help people sustain this consciousness. Anderson and Gellner focus on how communication technologies can create and bind a nation and instill nationalism among people. However, it is important to note that communication technologies can also contribute to creating nationalisms and strengthening communities among dissenters who oppose the nation for various reasons. This is the case for the Eritrean diaspora as many who oppose the nation-state have taken to online spaces to express their sentiments, rally amongst themselves, and sometimes even engage in heated discussion with those on the opposite side of the political spectrum.

Eriksen furthers Gellner’s understanding of nationalism with his analysis of diasporas and their use of the Internet and claims that social and cultural principles contribute to shared identities and are the basis of nationalism. However, the principles that legitimate nationalism can now function across “national” borders because of ICTs like the Internet.¹⁶ People located outside the physical bounds of the homeland are still able to participate and be a part of existing

¹⁴ Ibid, 9.

¹⁵ Ibid, 44.

¹⁶ Thomas H. Eriksen, “Nationalism and the Internet,” *Nations and Nationalism* 13, no. 1 (2007): 6.

communities and networks and form new ones because the Internet allows them to connect transnationally and instantly, though at the same time it alters the structure of the community changes. The increase in migration and development of telecommunication technologies has shifted the way we imagine and understand the nation and the people who are a part of it. The Internet has become a site where nationalism thrives because it is fast and efficient in reproducing national identities and uniting the diaspora.¹⁷ Diasporas are able to connect with and create their social networks through the Internet, which provides them a virtual space to reinforce their membership in the imagined community.

Bernal argues the diaspora and cyberspace are linked through displacement because of the ambiguity in the location of both.¹⁸ People of the diaspora see themselves as a part of a dispersed community with no central point and cannot understand themselves through their present location, so they create a social context through the Internet, which also lacks in physicality. The Internet is also comparable to print capitalism as both altered the “lived experience of citizenship, community, and nationalism as well as the way in which these can be collectively imagined.”¹⁹ The Internet facilitates transnational relationships between people of the diaspora and between the diaspora and the nation-state. It also works to reflect reality because the cyber-space is embedded in actual social structures and power dynamics, weaving in and out of the real world and the digital world.²⁰ In the same token, however, the Internet is a part of the real world and transforms reality as it changes the social structures of diasporan communities in the ways that they emerge, convene and function.

¹⁷ Ibid, 7.

¹⁸ Victoria Bernal, "Eritrea On-Line: Diaspora, Cyberspace, and the Public Sphere," *American Ethnologist* 32, no. 4 (2005): 661.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Bettina Conrad, "We Are the Warsay of Eritrean in Diaspora": Contested Identities and Social Divisions in Cyberspace and in Real Life," in *Diasporas Within and Without Africa: Dynamism, Heterogeneity, Variation*, ed. Leif O. Manger and Munzoul Assal, (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrika Institute, 2006), 137.

Eritrean Digital Diaspora

One third of Eritrea's population resides in the diaspora; they have made major contributions to the Eritrean economy through remittances and taxes, and remain an integral component of the country's existence through their economic and political support.²¹ Hepner describes them as "a global diaspora that still seems more closely tied to the home country than to the international and national spaces in which Eritreans have settled."²² They were an essential component in the struggle for independence as of the late 1970s with the rise of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the armed group that won Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia in 1993. The EPLF was able to strategically engage those who fled to Western nations by building transnational networks that instilled a sense of inclusion. These networks served primarily to assist the EPLF with the war effort but also established global links among the diaspora.²³ Embodying the spirit of self-reliance because Eritrea did not have allies during the war against Ethiopia, the EPLF "began soliciting financial donations from Eritreans all over the world" and this laid the foundation for the state's relationship to its diaspora.²⁴ They were also able to cultivate political activism among diasporans in Europe and North America through "Eritreans for Liberation" groups that either identified or were connected with the EPLF command leadership on the ground.²⁵ These groups were successful in generating funds for the war effort as well as positioning Eritrea in the conflict as they staged protests in the hopes of influencing public opinion in favor of Eritrea's position in the countries they were operating

²¹ Nicole Hirt, "The Eritrean Diaspora and its Impact on Regime Stability: Responses to UN sanctions," *African Affairs* 114, no. 454 (January 2015): 122.

²² Tricia Hepner, *Soldiers, Martyrs, Traitors and Exiles*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 13.

²³ Hirt, 122.

²⁴ Awet Weldemichael. *Third World Colonialism and Strategies of Liberation*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 158.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 158.

from. The EPLF was able to rely on these global networks of diasporans who were eager to contribute to the war effort. The War for Eritrean Independence was not only fought on the front lines but abroad as well, highlighting the importance of the transnational nature of the Eritrean diaspora. In a sense, all who chose to help, became freedom fighters within their own capacity because they were vital to the nation's freedom, regardless of their location or their roles. The struggle for independence yielded a collective social history that included the efforts of all Eritreans willing to contribute, those living in the country and those abroad.

The Eritrean digital diaspora emerged six months after the nation's independence alongside the birth of the Internet in 1993.²⁶ Computer literate Eritreans in North America created a listserv forum in 1993 to convene and discuss nation building projects and the state of political and cultural affairs in Eritrea. Eventually, with the introduction of the World Wide Web, the listserv was turned into a website, www.dehai.org.²⁷ This first digital space was created in response to attacks from Ethiopians who were discrediting the legitimacy of the new nation on a web-forum that was meant for Africans living abroad. Dehai.com served as a productive space for Eritreans of the diaspora to engage in discussions about political issues, collaborate on and contribute to nation building projects, and post artistic expressions. Bernal says Dehai was founded on a “world-wide web of Eritrean nationalism” that preceded and extended beyond the Internet.²⁸ She says Dehai and websites created afterward that catered to diasporans who wanted to share more critical views of the Eritrean government, created an online public sphere. Users who posted on the sites felt like they were speaking not only amongst themselves but also to the Eritrean government, who they believed were watching the conversations happening online. Bernal's work focuses on first generation diasporans whose characteristics differ from

²⁶ John C. Rude. “Birth of a Nation in Cyberspace.” *The Humanist* 56, no 2 (1966), 17.

²⁷ Victoria Bernal, "Eritrea On-Line: Diaspora, Cyberspace, and the Public Sphere," *American Ethnologist* 32, no. 4 (2005): 664.

²⁸ Bernal, “Civil Society and Cyberspace,” *Africa Today* 60, no. 2 (2013): 25.

the second generation. The first generation's relationship to the country differs from that of the second generation's, as they have direct ties and relationships with the country, including the social networks that were formed there, their experiences during the war, and an overall different conceptualization and meaning of the homeland. The second generation's relationship with the Eritrea lacks the strong and tangible connections to the country their parent's possess. The connections second generation diasporans do have, however, are strong ties to other second-generation diasporans they have created through the digital medium because of the ways social networking platforms have reshaped the digital diaspora.

As with the evolution of the Internet, the platforms used to expand networks of Eritrean diasporans have changed along with the emergence of a new generation. In the age of Web 2.0, the second-generation have taken to social networking platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat to establish new connections and strengthen old ties with each other and create new communities worldwide. These platforms provide young Eritreans, who may not possess strong ties and networks to the homeland as their parents do, a space to develop ties across the second-generation diaspora community, especially for those who are most nationalistic.

Social networking sites have gained worldwide popularity over the past decade, among the most popular are Facebook which has amassed 1.7 billion users²⁹ and Twitter which has 313 million users.³⁰ The most convenient way second-generation diasporans are able to access, establish and maintain transnational networks with their counterparts are through social networking sites. Boyd and Ellison define social network sites as, " web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2)

²⁹Seth Fiegerman, "Facebook is Unstoppable." *CNN Tech*. Last modified July 27, 2016. <http://money.cnn.com/2016/07/27/technology/facebook-earnings-high-expectations/>.

³⁰ "About Twitter," Accessed November 20, 17. <https://about.twitter.com/company>.

articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.”³¹ Boyd and Ellison differentiate between “social networking sites” and “social network sites” because the term networking emphasizes the initiation of relationships among strangers and that networking is not the primary function of these sites, though they acknowledge that these terms are used interchangeably in the current discourse to refer to sites such as Facebook and Twitter.³² However, I would argue that this is not the case for second-generation Eritreans who do expand their networks and establish new relationships through platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat on a local, national and transnational scale.

Second-generation Eritrean diasporans who have met online and who live in close proximity to each other are likely to meet each other at community events either because they coordinate with one another to attend those events or they meet by chance. Social networking platforms alter the ways in which diasporans meet, creating a geographically, religiously and ethnically diverse and engaged diaspora. Their willingness to connect online and meet each other in person also demonstrates the level of comfort second-generation diasporans have in approaching or meeting one another that can be traced to the way they were socialized to network with other diasporans by the first generation. These online connections are also established in reverse, as diasporans will link their social networking profiles with those they have met in person.

³¹ Danah. M. Boyd and Natalie B. Ellison, “Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13, no 1. (2006): 211.

³² *Ibid*, 2.

Methodology

The objectivity of the researcher is limited as it is influenced by different factors of varying degrees including but not restricted to their agenda, their experiences, and their access to information, which ultimately affect the researcher's findings and their arguments. My background has influenced my interest in Eritrean nationalism among the second-generation diaspora as I am a second-generation Eritrean diasporan, raised in a household with a parent that strove to inculcate nationalist pride. This was the case with many of my Eritrean peers as it was important for parents to instill an Eritrean identity and cultural heritage in their children. They did so by maintaining ties to the Eritrean community in the new countries they resided in, encouraging their children to participate in local Eritrean events like the Eritrean Festival where second generation youth could meet one another and form their own networks. However, social networking sites make creating and maintaining these ties to the community much more convenient as the digital space is accessible from any location, meaning that the diaspora need not wait until community events or other happenings to socialize, they can log on to their preferred platforms to do so. The ways in which these new diasporans connect with one another also alter the way the Eritrean diaspora is shaped, as the newer generation is able to develop networks in ways that are overarching and intertwined across locality.

Twitter allows users to connect in ways that are distinctly different from other social networking sites like Facebook, which promotes more involved and personal social interactions. Twitter allows users to share and engage with others outside of the social networks they engage with regularly, thus providing users with a space to participate in conversations that pertain to the collective discussions on shared diasporan experiences, identity, nationalism, politics and whatever other topics of conversation they choose. I interviewed Senait Tadesse, a second generation Eritrean who successfully navigated the platform to emerge as a popular Twitter user among second-generation Eritrean digital diaspora. She has close to 3,000 followers and though it is quite difficult to verify how many of her followers are second generation Eritreans, she

claims that the people she most interacts with on Twitter are second-generation Eritreans.³³ Though she has met many of the people she interacts with through Twitter online, she has also met some in person before connecting with them online. This platform is utilized to create networks and strengthen existing networks that are valuable to sustaining an Eritrean diasporan community as well as mediate their social interactions and shape their diasporic consciousness. In addition, Eritrean diasporans are able to find one another across physical space through the digital realm without doing much mining across the platform due to the nature of Twitter. Twitter users are presented with content that they have not subscribed to through retweets from those they follow and suggested content provided by Twitter's algorithms that appear on their timelines, making it easier for these communities to find one another and build connections.

At its inception, Twitter allowed users to post tweets of 140 characters or less that encouraged users to communicate their thoughts and ideas concisely, though as of November 2017 the character count has increased to 280, providing users with more space to express themselves within a single tweet. The platform is accessible via personal computers (PCs) and phone applications. It allows users to connect with their audience, also known as their followers, through posting tweets, photos, GIFs, and links to other medias and webpages. The user's home timeline is a feed of tweets, favorited tweets, and retweets from the accounts they follow as well as paid advertisements and suggested content provided by Twitter based on a users activity on the platform. Users can respond to tweets and have long threaded conversations with one or multiple users by tagging them in the posts through the "@" function. They can also repost tweets from another profile's public account onto their own timelines automatically by clicking on the retweet button. Twitter also allows users to tailor their timelines, affording users with the option to mute certain user's tweets without unfollowing them and block accounts from viewing their content. Hashtags are also a popular feature of the site as they facilitate what the trending topics are at the moment in a given location, which users can also customize. They also make

³³ Senait Tadesse, interview by Niat Afeworki, February 25, 2017, Interview 1.

searching for tweets on a specific topic more convenient and are useful because users can see what others are saying about a topic during a specific moment like during a crisis, such as natural disasters or terror attacks.

I first began exploring the digital diaspora on Twitter by using the website's search tool. I entered the hashtags "Eritrea" and "Eritrean," casting a wide net, and from that inquiry emerged several tweets regarding the UN's Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Human Rights in Eritrea. From there I learned more about the digital diaspora's thoughts and feelings about the COI and continued my research by looking at the following hashtags: "COI," "IStandWithEritrea," and "HandsoffEritrea" which were associated with tweets pertaining to the UN's investigation on human rights abuses in Eritrea. However, this method was limiting because I was only able to discover the tweets on the matter that contained these hashtags as I realized that not every user utilizes hashtags to mark their tweets when engaging in online conversations. Many times users will freely tweet about topics in a way that only their users would know what topics they are referring to. For example, in the third chapter, you will see that I was able to observe diasporans tweeting their thoughts about the Akria protests that were unfolding in Eritrea, without explicitly revealing information about the actual event through hashtags or other information. Only those who were aware of the incident understood the context of these tweets, while those who were not aware of the protest, looked to their followers for more information.

After spending a few weeks using the search tool I decided to create an anonymous Twitter account so that I could follow accounts to observe the conversations that were taking place in real time. My anonymity was transposed with that of a simple connecting idea in the form of the username @Erinagual. The username signifies that I am an Eritrean female and thus conveys to those I followed that the account holder is either a member of the Eritrean community or at the very least "in the know". I archived tweets used in this study by favoring them, which notified the user so it became important for me to relay to them that I too was an

Eritrean in order to not cause alarm. Next, I followed Senait Tadesse's account, who had shared valuable insight on the Eritrean digital diaspora's presence on Twitter during our interview. I used her account as a jumping off point from which I added users who she had interacted with and then used those accounts to find more diasporans to follow until I had followed a little over one hundred users who I understood to be second generation Eritreans.

I was able to determine that these profiles were those of second-generation Eritreans by first identifying specific superficial and culturally rooted markers that would indicate their nationality such as the presence of the Eritrean flag, iconic photos of Eritreans or Eritrea; biographies that disclosed their Eritrean heritage, and writing in and transliterations of Tigrinya. Secondly, I looked at their profile photos to determine whether they looked young enough to be second generation but as this was somewhat arbitrary I also scrolled through their timelines to find more evidence of how they identify themselves and what kinds of conversations they were having that would indicate their age. Now that I had a lively timeline with tweets from those I followed, I browsed it weekly to investigate what topics of conversation were popular among second-generation diasporans. I focused on tweets that sparked interactions with other users in the form of retweets, replies, and favorited content. When users engage with others through these means, retweeting, replying and favoriting tweets, they are sharing content from another account with their own followers, increasing the visibility of users and creating the potential for new connections and further widening the network.

Second-Generation Nationalism

Though Eritrea was federated to Ethiopia by the UN after World War II, Ethiopia illegally dissolved the federation and incorporated the territory to its empire. This act ignited the Eritrean armed struggle for independence that took place from 1961 to 1991, one of Africa's longest armed conflicts. The war affected many families, as a large portion of the population fled

while those who stayed lived under oppression. While the first-generation diaspora collectively experienced suffering and had to make sacrifices during the Eritrean Independence war to ensure their survival, the second-generation are only able to experience the repercussions of the war as a post memory.³⁴ Post memory is “the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up.”³⁵ Bernal argues Eritrean identity is premised on “collective sacrifice and the victimization of the nation... Where collective suffering serves as a foundation of group identity.”³⁶ The postmemory works as a component of the second-generation’s nationalism because they acknowledge the sacrifices of not only their immediate family members but also the sacrifices of the greater imagined community. This post memory is at the basis of strong nationalistic pride for the second-generation diaspora and it is evident in the content they tweet or promote on their Twitter feeds.

The second characteristic of Eritrean nationalism is being of service to and defending the sovereignty Eritrea, which appears not only in the Twittersphere but translates to the everyday experiences of many second-generation Eritrean diasporas. Amal Hassan, a member of the Eritrean Student Association at Virginia Commonwealth University, said in a video posted to YouTube,

“Realizing my parents had to come here because of the hard times they were facing in Eritrea, it makes me realize I need to step up and I need to ensure that I will be able to take care of my parents in the future as well as my country. Knowing the hard times that my country is going through whether it is economically or politically makes me want to involve myself to ensure that I can help those people. So whatever path I choose to take in life whether it be a medical path or a path within technology, I want to ensure I can help my Eritrean people out

³⁴ Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” *Poetics Today* 29 no.1, (2008): 106.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 106.

³⁶ Victoria Bernal, “Diaspora and the Afterlife of Violence: Eritrean National Narratives and What Goes Without Saying,” *American Anthropologist* 119, no. 1 (2017): 27.

and they can benefit from my career path because I feel as though we are blessed to be in America. Our parents didn't get the educational opportunities that we got so we need to take advantage of that and whatever we chose to be in life will be something that benefits our country and our people.”³⁷

Hassan's statement exemplifies the nationalist sentiments of the second-generation. She is conscious of the collective social history and is also aware of the privileges she holds and opportunities she has access to being of the second-generation diaspora. She also dedicates her education and career to helping her family and her country, Eritrea. Again, Hassan declares her nationalism, as she says “Eritrea is my one and true only home and that I feel as though it is the only place where I belong and everywhere else is temporary.” Though not all diasporans feel this strongly about Eritrea, many do evoke this narrative of sacrifice when expressing their nationalism. The collective history is one aspect that rallies strong nationalist sentiments among second-generation youth and redefines Eritrean identity. The Young People's Front for Democracy and Justice (YPPDJ) hosts annual regional conferences for second-generation diasporan youths of Europe and North America. The conference gives the youth an opportunity to contribute their ideas and time to nation-building projects and encourages them to help their home, especially among those who feel like second-class citizens in their host countries.³⁸ It is also a space in which they expand their social networks transnationally, as they meet like-minded second-generation diasporans from other countries. The YPPDJ conference, along with other local community events or spaces, such as Independence Day celebrations, martyr's day observance, and dance party fundraisers, give diasporans a feeling of belonging as their identities, cultural values and shared social memory is are reaffirmed. Bernal says that of the Eritrean diaspora “Their sense of themselves is intertwined with Eritrea's destiny as a nation,

³⁷ Siona Peterous, “Eritrean Student Association Diaspora” video, 12:03, April 23, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ath74cYsDpo>

³⁸ Hirt, 127.

even if they have no intention of returning, ‘home’ permanently.”³⁹ In addition to being included in the nation building dialogue, many Eritrean youths involved in YPFDJ chapters around the globe bring a strong presence to the Twittersphere by launching hashtag campaigns such as, #IAMERITREAN or participating in Twitter conversations like #HANDSOFFERITREA, acting as unofficial public relations ambassadors on behalf of the nation-state. This hashtags and campaigns also are replicated on other platforms including, Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat. Twitter, in particular, is popular among second-generation Eritreans because they are able to connect with others and directly become a part of a transnational community. It also provides them a space in where they can participate in conversations within their community pertaining to their identity, nationalism, politics and whatever other topics may be popular at the moment.

It is also important to note that there are also diasporans on Twitter who are not interested in nationalism as they either do not care to be of service to Eritrea and/or do not have knowledge of the nation’s history. Their main concern online may be to socialize with others who they share a similar background with but upon entering the Twitter network of second-generation Eritreans, the probability that they will be exposed to nationalist sentiments, relevant information and discussions regarding Eritrea becomes pretty likely. Edward’s defines articulation in the discourse of Black diaspora, as “a process of linking or connecting across gaps”⁴⁰ in which he is referring to the disconnections between communities of the black diasporas because of their positionality in the local and the global contexts that influence their understanding of themselves and the larger diaspora as well as the privileges they have. Twitter acts as a space for articulation for the Eritrean diaspora as they become aware and get connected with others outside of their locality in convenient and entertaining ways. Users may be able to

³⁹ Victoria Bernal, “Diaspora, Cyberspace and Political Imagination: the Eritrean Diaspora Online.” *Global Networks* 6, no. 2 (2006): 129.

⁴⁰ Brent Hayes Edwards, “*The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*,” (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 11.

gain some understanding of their counterparts, whether they live in the states or across the ocean, of certain privileges and knowledge others may have which influence the ways they enact their Eritrean identities. Regardless though, diasporans are able to connect across space and time to build networks that continue to grow and reshape the diaspora.

Chapter 2: Eritrean Identity and Habesha Twitter

Many second-generation Eritrean Twitter users are subscribed to an online community known as ‘Habesha Twitter’. This Twitter community consists of second-generation Ethiopian and Eritrean diasporans who use the platform to connect with one another, expanding their networks via tweets that speak to their cultural practices, politics, western popular culture and their daily experiences navigating life between their ethnic cultures and that of their birthplace. Often their tweets incorporate literary devices and genres like irony and comedy as well as images which include video clips and GIFs to create content other users will engage with and share with their following, thus expanding the contents’ reach. Users are the driving force behind Twitter communities because the specific content they produce speaks to their experiences. This content includes, poking fun at shared experiences that sometimes are painful, and the political activism or charitable causes they are involved in. Borrowing from Andre Brock’s understanding of Black Twitter, Habesha twitter can also be described as a “user-generated source of culturally relevant online content, combining social network elements and broadcast principles to share information.”⁴¹ It is important for users to be equipped with cultural literacies, basic language skills, and some historical background, along with their experiences as diasporas so that they are able to engage in and navigate through Habesha Twitter.

It is helpful for Twitter users to have a grasp of language skills as some tweets use transliterations of Amharic, the national language of Ethiopia⁴² or Tigrinya, which is spoken in the Tigray province of Ethiopia and is one of the main languages spoken in Eritrea. When transliterations are used in a tweet, the user excludes those who do not possess strong enough language skills needed to be able to make out the transliterations of the tweets. It can be quite

⁴¹ André Brock, “From the Blackhand Side: Twitter as a Cultural Conversation”, *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* no. 56,4, (2012): 530.

⁴² “Ethiopia,” CIA World Factbook, last modified January 3, 2018, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/et.html>.

difficult to decipher through tweets with transliterations, even for those who know the language because users do not have a set of rules that guide their transliterations and those who do not know the language are excluded from the conversation all together. Though each of these nations are comprised of a number of different ethnic groups and languages, Habesha Twitter is dominated by these two languages, Amharic and Tigrinya, which speaks to the dominance of certain voices and experiences over others within the diasporas.

Lastly, background on the history and relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia can be important as it provides users context for the more political conversations that take place on the platform. Users are either politically correct when engaging in these kinds of conversations or not, which can result in contentious debate across the Eritrean and Ethiopian diasporas. A reoccurring topic of discussion that happens in the Habesha Twittersphere is the comparison between Eritrea and Ethiopia, which in figure 1, @MehaberNextDoor's tweet shows the type of reaction a Twitter user will most likely receive from Eritrean users, if they tweet something to the effect that the two nations should unite or that there is sameness they share. The image accompanying the tweet is a GIF taken from the *Simpsons*, which depicts an angry mob with torches marching forward. The image represents the kind of response from Eritrean users that one must be prepared for when making highly offensive statements that delegitimizes the sovereignty or ignores the history of Eritrea's war for independence. In figure 2, @shukorina_'s tweet, also shows that Eritrea and the Eritrean identity needs to be respected, but that Eritrean and Ethiopians can still find common ground and team up to defend certain cultural staples they share. In her tweet she refers to a Nigerian person who compares Ethiopian cuisine to cardboard, though it is unclear if the user is referring to a specific incident or tweet. Eritreans and Ethiopians have similar cuisine so in response to the Nigerian's charge, @shukorina_ responds with an image of the Ninja Turtles and Power Rangers uniting. This symbolized that although Ethiopians and Eritreans have different identities they can still come together to defend their cultural commonalties, and many users seemed to agree with her sentiments

because the tweet received 184 retweets and 555 likes. Habesha Twitter is an assemblage of content that highlight the differences but also the similarities between the cultural heritage and experiences of Eritrean and Ethiopian diasporans. However it can be difficult to navigate the digital terrains, as there are no clear rules that inform users of what is proper to post or the ways in which one can relay their message most effectively. Nonetheless, users' willingness to post relevant content, which draws others in for engagement facilitates the building of transnational and transcultural networks through Habesha Twitter.



Figure 1. A tweet that illustrates the reaction of Eritrean Twitter users who are told they are the same as Ethiopians.



lydia
@shikorina_

Follow

Me: Eritrea and Ethiopia are NOT the same!
Put some respect on our name!
Nigerian says Ethiopians eat cardboard
Me to Ethiopia:



12:04 AM - 3 Jan 2017

184 Retweets 555 Likes



13

184

555



Figure 2A. @shikorina_'s tweet depicting Eritreans and Ethiopian joining forces to defend the foods they share

Habesha Twitter, as with many other Twitter communities, is not exclusive to Eritrean and Ethiopian users as the content produced by users who identify as Habesha, whether Eritrean or Ethiopian, is open for all to see. Users may think that they are broadcasting to a bounded audience, as their primary audience is of their followers, but in actuality public profiles make their content available to anyone, leaving the user unaware in who is actually viewing their content.⁴³ Twitter users have multiple audiences, which implies that people who engage with

⁴³ Alice E. Marwick and Danah Boyd, "I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience," *New Media & Society* 13 no. 1 (2011): 120.

Habesha Twittersphere are diverse as well. The same users who subscribe to Habesha Twitter also subscribe or interact with multiple online communities, this can include other digital diasporas or virtual communities focused around a certain culture or political orientation. Occasionally, Habesha Twitter will engage with other digital diasporas like African Twitter facilitated through trending hashtags such as [#IfAfricaWasASchool](#) and [#IfAfricaWasABar](#), which became so popular it caught media news attention. In these hashtagged tweets, Twitter users, primarily who identified as African, characterized African countries as students and bar patrons, commenting on feuds, identity, history and socio-economic issues using humor, irony and creativity. Tweets about both Eritrea and Ethiopia containing these hashtags focused on the political and historical tensions between the two nations. Habesha Twitter is a community among other African and African diasporan Twitter communities, which suggests that it is a part of a larger digital diaspora, African Twitter, and even bigger network, Black Twitter.

Habesha is an ambiguous term used by some Eritreans and Ethiopians to identify themselves and their culture and this can be seen throughout social networking sites. The word Habesha and its variants (Habasa, Habashat, Abesha, Habesh, Habeshi) were employed by Arabs to refer to the mixed people and the geographical region they inhabited which extended from the southern Arabian peninsula to the Horn of Africa.⁴⁴ The Tigrinya and Amhara ethnic groups who reigned over the Abyssinian empire adopted the term to distinguish themselves, highlander Orthodox Christians, from other ethnic and religious groups, primarily Muslims.⁴⁵ Though the term has changed meaning over time and it is not clear what exactly it signifies, it is still heavily used in both Ethiopian and Eritrean diasporan communities. Because there is no consensus on the words meaning today, the term becomes vulnerable to different

⁴⁴ Godesso Roro Ameyu, "The Postponed Discourse in Habesha Identity: Real or Performance?", *African Journal of History and Culture*, 3, 7 (2015): 80.

⁴⁵ Shelly Habecker, "Not Black, But Habasha: Ethiopian and Eritrean Immigrants in American Society," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 35, no. 45 (2012): 1204.

interpretations and applications which results in conflict because it excludes certain ethnic groups of what is today Ethiopia and Eritrea. Twitter, along with other social networking platforms have become a place for users to push back on the term, especially Eritrean Twitter users who find 'Habesha' to be a term that conflates Eritrean and Ethiopian national identity because it disregards the history, and the ethnic and linguistic diversity of their respective countries. Usage of the term 'Habesha' on the web complicates what it means to be Eritrean in the political and cultural context. Many users who do not identify as Habesha have used social networking sites as platforms for campaigns to call attention to the problematic nature of the term.

There are several accounts popular on Habesha Twitter dedicated to posting entertaining, political, and informative content that is relevant to the Eritrean and Ethiopian communities. Many of these pages are anonymously run and have rather large followings, some of which include; @WeAreEritreans, @HabeshaMazer, and @HabeshaProblems which each have over 3,000 followers each. The most popular account and most recently established is @BunaTime, which launched in June 2014.⁴⁶ Buna is the Amharic word for coffee and is pronounced 'boon' in Tigrinya. The Twitter handle highlights not only a major staple of both countries but also the cultural and societal significance of the coffee ceremony. It has a long tradition and is particularly important for the diaspora because the ceremony is a time and space that facilitates social inclusion, support, information sharing, and helps to maintain cultural and customs through maintaining community and national identity.⁴⁷ Unlike the physical coffee ceremony that is confined by space and time, Habesha Twitter exists in a virtual space and the opportunities for networking and building community in the diaspora occurs in and through the digital, which at times translate into the physical space. More importantly, it

⁴⁶ BunaTime. Twitter account. June 17th, 2017. <https://twitter.com/BunaTime>

⁴⁷ David Palmer. "The Ethiopian Buna (Coffee) Ceremony: Exploring the Impact of Exile and the Construction of Identity through Narratives with Ethiopian Forced Migrants in the United Kingdom." *Folklore* 121, no. 3 (2010): 324.

provides a space for second-generation Ethiopian and Eritrean diasporans who do not reap the same benefits from the ceremony their parents do. As with the coffee ceremony, Habesha Twitter produces similar social and cultural benefits for its participants and audience through accounts such as @Bunatime, whose content drive conversations and engagement that prompt transnational and transcultural interactions, developing and influencing national and cultural identity.

The @Bunatime account posts tweets that are relevant to second-generation Eritrean and Ethiopian youth, signified through the use of either Amharic or Tigrinya transliterations and visuals. Figure 3 speaks to the experience of an Eritrean or Ethiopian person who wants to approach a woman they recognize could possibly be Eritrean or Ethiopian based on her phenotype. The person wants to approach the woman by appealing to the cultural or linguistic similarities he assumes they share so he uses both Tigrinya and Amharic to greet her. The use of both languages used in the tweet reflect real life dilemma of deciding how to approach a person that one recognizes as possibly being Eritrean or Ethiopian without offending the person. This is important as @BunaTime is followed by over 13,000 Twitter accounts, many of which are Eritrean and Ethiopian youth, making it a major presence on Habesha Twitter. The @BunaTime account keeps a balance between the Eritrean specific and Ethiopian specific content they produce and engage with, because it is important for the account to cater to both these diasporas to sustain their popularity. @BunaTime's followers bring traffic to the page by retweeting or replying to tweets that they relate to and/or find entertaining, especially content that pertains to their diasporic identities and experiences. They also tweet to highlight the accomplishments of Eritrean and Ethiopian professionals and entertainers who have made impacts in their fields⁴⁸, like the Ethiopian-Canadian singer the Weeknd who is one of the most visible Ethiopian diasporan celebrities and whose images are repeatedly used as a meme on the account (figure

⁴⁸ BunaTime. Twitter thread: "Most Successful Habesha People," June 17th, 2017. <https://twitter.com/BunaTime/status/716418255162740736>

4). @BunaTime is a staple for Habesha Twitter as it entertains its followers in a culturally specific way, engages them and exposes them to a wider network of Ethiopian and Eritrean diaspora networks. However, many Eritreans on Twitter, as well as other ethnic groups from the region including the Oromo, take issue with this account and much of the content that generalizes or conflates the Eritrean and Ethiopian identity into a Habesha one.

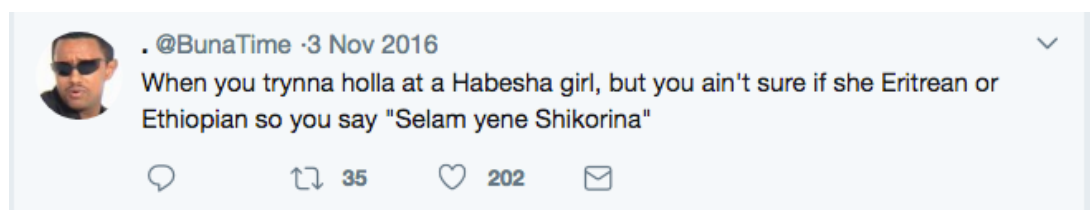


Figure 3. A tweet by the popular account, @BunaTime that is in English, Tigrinya and Amharic



Figure 4. @Bunatime using an image of The Weeknd for their tweet

Tadesse expressed that displaying pride in her Eritrean identity on Twitter was important, especially in the face of those who have tried to invalidate her identity. She says “Our families, our mothers, our fathers, aunts and uncles fought 30 years for a war for us.”⁴⁹ Through postmemories of the struggle for Eritrean independence, Tadesse understands herself to be a part of a community that was founded on the sacrifices of the generations before her and so her Eritrean identity is important because it symbolizes those sacrifices. She says “when I see an Eritrean, like they don’t say anything or they say yeah we are the same. It’s kind of like slapping them in the face, for everyone who died for our country.”⁵⁰ It is important that the integrity of her Eritrean identity is not compromised, especially when often times Eritrean identities are dismissed or invalidated in the face of Ethiopian identities. To do so would render the collective history invalid. For Tadesse and many others, Eritreans of the diaspora who fail to assert their Eritrean identity have discredited the sacrifices of their ancestors and have rendered the collective history invalid. Figure 5 illustrates this encounter, between an Eritrean and a person who is trying to pinpoint their background but assumes that they are Ethiopian. By the popularity of the tweet, as it gained over 234 retweets and it was favorited by over 500 users, it can be assumed that many people resonated with the tweet because they have experienced these kinds of encounters. When the Eritrean corrects the person and tells the person that they are Eritrean, the person disregards their correction and responds like it is a trivial distinction. The tweet is accompanied by the popular *Arthur’s Fist* meme⁵¹, which is used to illustrate the Eritrean person’s frustration with having their identity rejected and this could possibly be because the person may not have the historical background to understand why the distinction between the two identities is important. Again in figure 2B, a continuation of the conversation in

⁴⁹ Senait Tadesse, interview by Niat Afeworki, February 25, 2017, Interview 1.

⁵⁰ Ibid. Senait Tadesse, interview by Niat Afeworki, February 25, 2017, Interview 1.

⁵¹ Megan Elias, “#SoRelatable: Why The Arthur’s Fist Meme is More Relevant than Ever” last modified February 2, 2017. <https://medium.com/rt902/sorelatable-why-the-arthurs-fist-meme-is-more-relevant-than-ever-67f38704ee8e>

figure 2A, @shukorina_ tweets about coming together with Ethiopians to defend injera and @70Enderta responds to her by saying that this would be the reason that Eritrea and Ethiopia would permanently unite. She rejects his declaration and clarifies that it is only injera that she is defending, and not the union of both nations. These kinds of encounters happen not only online but in real life as shown in figure 6 and they can make Eritreans feel frustrated and disrespected.



Figure 5. The Arthur fist meme is used to illustrate the frustration Eritrean diasporans feel when their Eritrean identity is invalidated.

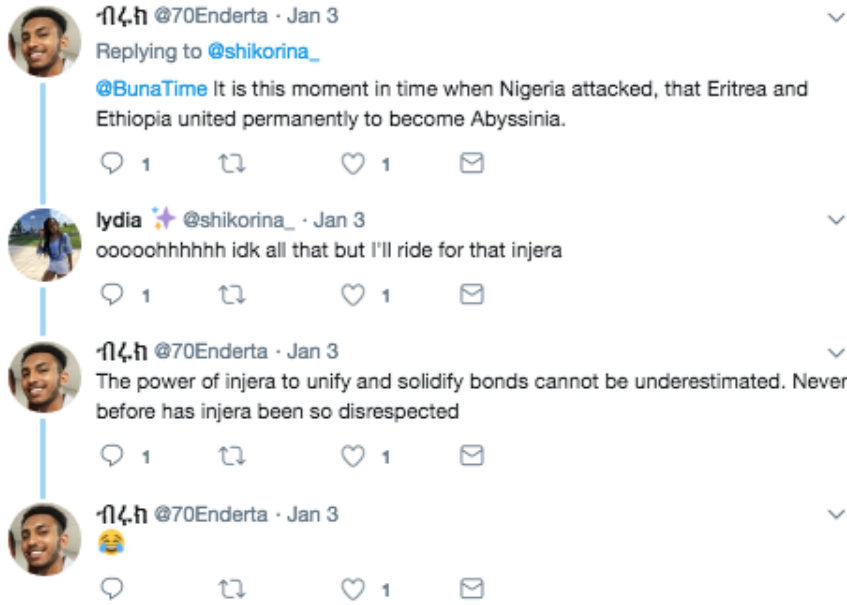


Figure 2B. A conversation sparked from the tweet in figure 2A.



Figure 6. A tweet about a real life encounter between an Eritrean and person who refuses to acknowledge the sovereignty of Eritrea.

#IAmNotHabesha #IAmEritrean

The #IAmNotHabesha campaign launched in March of 2017 on Twitter and Instagram when members of YPFDJ chapters across the globe began posting an image which denounced the term ‘Habesha’ as an identifier for Eritreans. The campaign image has the words “I am ~~Habesha~~ Eritrean” in bold over a gray outline of Africa with the names of the nine Eritrean ethnic groups placed below. The campaign spread across social networking sites as many second generation Eritreans reposted the image or posts related to the campaign with hashtags such as #IAmEritrean, #Eritrean, #ireperi and #IAmNotHabesha. Twitter users who posted the photo accompanied the photo with the statement “My identity is based on more than just boon and injera. My roots are planted in Eritrea.” This was a direct dig at Twitter pages like @BunaTime and Twitter users who dismiss or reject the Eritrean identity on the basis of cultural similarities with Ethiopia and ignores the historical context of the war and at the same time, the conditions in which the diaspora was produced. Coffee and injera, staples of both Eritrean and Ethiopian life, are not what define the Eritreans; it is nationalist pride, predicated on the sacrifices made by Eritreans to achieve liberation from Ethiopia. Using the term Habesha to describe or label an Eritrean is to render the past insignificant and discount the ethnic and linguistic diversity of both nations. The twitter user @KarenJuwa responded to the Orange County chapter of YPFDJ’s #IAmNotHabesha tweet with “Our people did not fight to be generalized”⁵² The user is evoking the history of the war and the postmemories of sacrifices her people had to make in order to have the privilege of calling herself an Eritrean. @Mileesi (figure 7) builds onto @s_tesfamariam’s post by pointing out that using ‘Habesha’ unifies Eritreans with the same people who once oppressed them.

⁵² The tweet was deleted before I had a chance to go back and screenshot it.



Figure 7. #IAMERitrean campaign

The Eritrean diaspora has utilized Twitter as a space for a host of different activities and this chapter has looked at their nationalist stance in the face of pro-Habesha users. Habesha Twitter is a community that encompasses both Eritrean and Ethiopian users, even users who are anti-Habesha because those users produce content about Eritrean identity, often times, as a response to the dismissal of the country's sovereignty and its history. In this chapter, I have illustrated the kinds of encounters that happen between Eritreans and Ethiopians online as well as out in the real world.⁵³ Twitter also gives diaspora communities the voice and power to mobilize as cultural ambassadors and advocates, as in the case of the #IAMNotHabesha hashtag that attempted to define what the Eritrean identity . In the Internet's infancy, many thought that the deterritorialized character of the Internet would contribute to the fracturing of populations and disintegration of national identities.⁵⁴ However many studies suggest that the use of Internet has strengthened nationalism and can be, "exceptionally efficient in reproducing such identities across vast distances, uniting dispersed populations in virtual communities,"⁵⁵ as

⁵³ Gellner. 6.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Eriksen, "Nations in Cyberspace," Paper presented at the ASEN Conference, London School of Economics, March 2006.

is apparent among the second generation Eritrean diaspora who take pride in their Eritrean heritage. We can think about the discourse on Eritrean identity in the digital diaspora among second generation youth as “an atlas of identity that occupies multiple geographic locations, construct[s] different ideological discourses, speak[s] different languages and dialects, represent[s] various degrees of assimilation into their countries of residence, and maintain[s] various degrees of transnational connections among themselves and with the homeland.”⁵⁶ Although the second generation might not have the same ties they have to the homeland as their parents or they might not have personally experienced the trauma the generation before them had faced, they still have a strong sense of pride in their Eritrean identity. Twitter provides a platform for Eritreans to express and defend their identity as well as a space to network and collaborate with people throughout the diaspora. They are able to share their experiences in culturally relevant ways not only as it relates to Eritrean culture but Internet and popular culture. Eritrean nationalism is able to flourish in this dialectic space, between the various online communities where users are able to visibly declare and defend their Eritrean identity.

⁵⁶ Alonso and Oiarzabal, 9.

Chapter 3: Diaspora disconnected

Diasporans of both the first and second generation use Twitter to express their thoughts and sentiments on current events and engage in debates related to the state of affairs in Eritrea. This chapter examines exchanges between Twitter users about current issues that affect the political and economic security of Eritrea, including human rights abuses and UN sanctions. It will highlight the opposing political views that have divided the Eritrean diaspora, those who support the PFDJ administration currently in power and have been since 1993 and those who are against the administration and want to see the party and its leaders ousted. Second generation Eritreans utilize hashtags to call attention to and highlight tweets on subjects that connect the user with others who are discussing the same topics or who are interested in following or joining the conversation. Hashtags are used to help assemble and push social movements in hopes of spreading information, showcasing solidarity and also to encourage others to join in, broadening the diasporic network. It is important to note that not all second-generation Eritreans have strong feelings of nationalism, whether it is geared in support of or against the current administration, or even are interested in politically driven conversations. Nonetheless, they are being exposed to Eritrean nationalism across their social networking feeds, as the nature of the site increases the interconnectedness of users.

COI on Human Rights in Eritrea Report

In June of 2014, the United Nation's Human Rights Council established a Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Human Rights in Eritrea and extended the inquiry into June of 2016.⁵⁷ This galvanized many Eritreans in the diaspora, those loyal to the PFDJ who decried the inquiry and those opposed to the current leadership who welcomed it. The commission found PFDJ guilty of human rights violations some of which they believed constituted crimes against humanity; the

⁵⁷ United Nations, *Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea: Mandate of the Commission* (July 27, 2014).

findings of the inquiry include, sexual violence against men and woman, torture, and unlawful arrest.⁵⁸ The manner in which the UN conducted their survey came into question because no tangible evidence was presented to support their claims, only the anonymous testimonies of recent Eritrean refugee arrivals to Europe. The lack of material evidence sparked outrage from pro-PFDJ users who took to the Internet to denounce these findings as incredulous and to accuse the UN of attempting to undermine the nation of Eritrea in collusion with Ethiopia.

The first report, released in 2015, found “a series of grave human rights violations in Eritrea’s military/national service programmes, including their prolonged and indefinite duration, abusive conditions and the use of conscripts as forced labour.”⁵⁹ The inquiry was extended for another year to focus on the temporal aspects of the investigation, essentially to ascertain how long these violations had been taking place. The inquiry found that, “Eritrean officials have engaged in a persistent, widespread and systematic attack against the country’s civilian population since 1991. They have committed, and continue to commit, the crimes of enslavement, imprisonment, enforced disappearance, torture, other inhumane acts, persecution, rape and murder.”⁶⁰ The second report not only supported the findings in the first report, but it also found that the PFDJ, “engaged in a persistent, widespread and systematic attack against the civilian population of Eritrea since May 1991.”⁶¹ This report incited both pro and anti-PFDJ Eritreans in the diaspora to take action against and in support of the report. Those who supported the PFDJ disputed these allegations through protest and through their online activities. On Twitter, the hashtags #IStandWithEritrea and #HandsoffEritrea were used to build and show solidarity with the PFDJ. For the second generation and the diaspora as a whole, defending the current administration was a show of their nationalism.

⁵⁸United Nations, Human Rights Council, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea*, (June, 21 2016).

⁵⁹ Ibid, 7.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 3.

⁶¹ Ibid, 18.

A search of the hashtags related to the UN’s report brought up Swedish diasporan @LuchiaSolomun’s tweet in which she showcased her unceasing support for Eritrea and her nationalism, which is also showcased by the elements of her profile. Photos of Eritrean women *tgadelti*, a Tigrinya term that refers to the men and women who fought in the war for independence and who are also referred to as freedom fighters, appears as her profile’s banner (figure 8). Her display of this image from the Independence war era is a recalling of the past and an artifact of her postmemory. Though she herself has not experienced that event she is familiar with the images and understands that they evoke a sense of national pride. The images displayed on her profile also establish her political orientation as Pro-PDFJ, in addition to her biography, a space where users can tell their followers about themselves, @LuchiaSolomun states “I am crazy in love with my Eri.” These elements in @LuchiaSolomun’s profile visually convey her nationalist pride, primarily to Eritrean users who would be familiar with them.



Figure 8. A collage of woman freedom fighters found on @LuchiaSolomun Twitter profile.

On October 31, 2016, @LuchiaSolomun tweeted (figure 9), “#UN, This is what my religion is called! And why dont [sic] you try to join me? #ISTANDWITHERITREA #Africa #Eritrea #COI #HadelibiHadehizbi.” The tweet was accompanied by a picture of a yellow wreath, the same that can be found on the Eritrean flag, and the words “I Stand With Eritrea” in yellow against a red background. @LuchiaSolomun’s use of hashtags serves the purpose of making her tweet searchable by each hashtagged term, so that if a person were to search for the hashtag Africa, they may be able to find her tweet, though only after mining through the search

results that will more than likely turn up thousands of tweets. The tweet declares her dedication to the state of Eritrea, likening it to practicing a religion. The hashtag ‘HadelibiHadehizbi,’ which translates to ‘one heart and one nation,’ demonstrates not only her unity with the country, but her belonging to it. She sees herself as an extension of the country, and it is safe to assume that the 21 others who retweeted and the 21 who favorited her tweet feel the same way. Second-generation Eritreans use Twitter to articulate to, and share their nationalism with, their followers, who in turn can respond by sharing the tweet with their followers through retweeting, archiving the tweet by liking it, or both. Though this tweet does not explicitly present any argument or objection to the commission’s report, her tweet shows her support and her dedication to Eritrea.

Those who oppose the PFDJ and @LuchiaSolomun’s pro-PFDJ sentiments have a chance to respond, and initiate dialogue, as was the case when Twitter user @Mafusi77 mockingly asks @LuchiaSolomun why she lives in Sweden if she stands with Eritrea (figure 10). @Mafusi77’s question attacks @LuchiaSolomun’s support for the PFDJ, implying @LuchiaSolomun would never choose to live in Eritrea because the COI reports are true. Another user, @HarenaSolomun who we can assume is a relative of @LuchiaSolomun as the surnames of their Twitter accounts are the same, enters the exchange in defense of @LuchiaSolomun. @HarenaSolomun tweets both users, “Why not? Why did you leave yo momma? Its the same question! So mind your own business... Be smart for once”⁶² to which @Mafusi77 responds to both with, “Nope. People flee Eritrea & beg for Aslym abroad. Who still prays the Ertrian [sic] regime should be send back.”⁶³ @Mafusi rejects @HarenaSolomun’s claim, charging that those who live abroad and support the current administration should be sent to live in Eritrea, to which the other two users respond by telling @Mafusi77 that refugees seeking political asylum are fooling the system and advise they advise him to get educated on the

subject. @Mafusi77 responds by calling them propagandists. The dialogue between the users shows how the Internet reflects realities as the diaspora is deeply divided over the topic of human rights abuses in Eritrea. @LuchiaSolomun and @HarenaSolomin engaged with a user who opposed their support for PFDJ and were able to communicate their stances. Though they were not politically aligned or within each other's networks, Twitter provided a space for transnational communication.



Figure 9. @LuchiaSolomun's tweet in support of the Eritrean state.

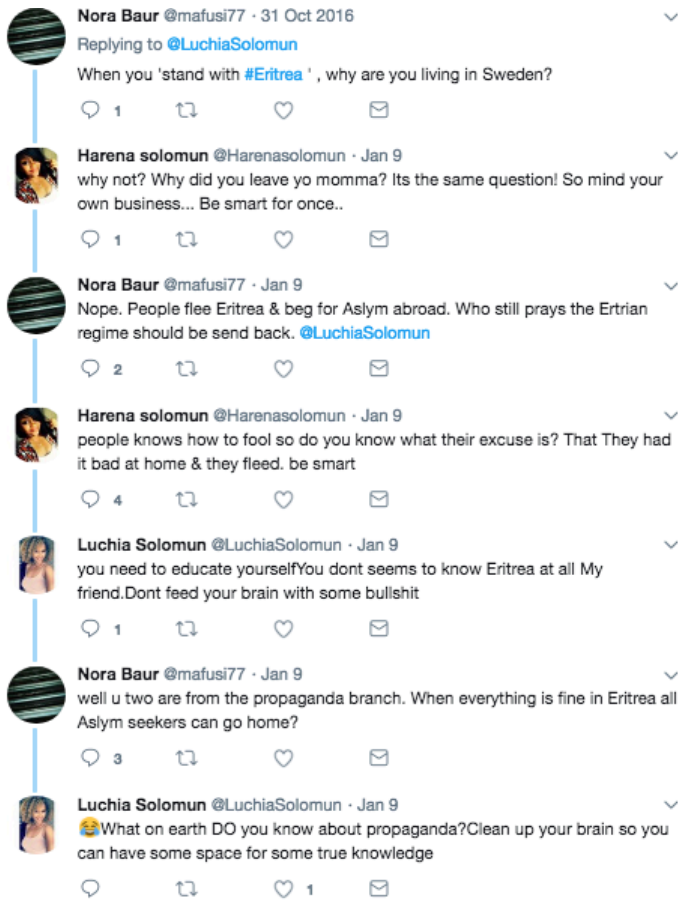


Figure 10. The threaded conversation sparked from the tweet in figure 9.



Figure 11. @weThe-eri’s tweet calling attention to matters in the region that are more serious than fabrications of human rights abuses in Eritrea.



Figure 12. @meronstoppable suggest the UN should work with Eritrea instead of attacking it.



Figure 13. @ThatChickSegen's response to the UN findings on human rights abuses in Eritrea.

There were plenty of other users who also defended the current administration as they dismissed the reports findings. Some users such as @weTHE_eri diverted attention from the situation at hand and drew it to what she felt was a more relevant crisis occurring in Ethiopia that the UN should be addressing (figure 11). To her the COI report held no validity as she accuses the UN of spreading lies about Eritrea. Another important matter her tweet alludes to is

the tensions between Eritrea and Ethiopia, which is also present in much of the content produced by those active in Eritrean politics who are aligned with the PFDJ. @meronstoppable also regards the report as biased and a part of a pattern of attacks on the country, however she offers the commission ways she would like to see them move forward in future inquiries (figure 12). @ThatChickSegen (figure 13) uses irony to respond to one of the commission’s findings that stated “testimony gathered indicates that non-governmental gatherings, whether in public or private places even in small groups are prohibited and could lead to arrest.”⁶⁴ She makes the point that weddings are events of large gatherings that people still attend to disprove findings of the COI report. Lastly, @HareguKidane (figure 14) states the commission’s report had ulterior motives to sabotage the country, which again is reoccurring narrative used by Eritreans due to it’s history of struggle. This distrust however stem not only from the war for Eritrean Independence, but also from the border war fought against Ethiopia from 1998-2001 and in which the UN intervened to rule a resolution in favor of Eritrea but failed to enforce. These examples show the ways Eritrean diasporans who are in support of the PFDJ administration have utilized their Twitters to bring awareness to this matter and others like it. Through their tweets, they have spread their views to a number of other diasporans and even resonated enough with a few to garner a number of likes and retweets.



Figure 14. @HareguKidane’s tweet accusing the UN of attempting to destabilize the country.

⁶⁴ United Nations, Human Rights Council, *Findings of the Commission*, Article 598
http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoIEritrea/A_HRC_29_CRP-1_Chapter_VI.pdf

Though the majority of the responses that I was able to gather from my search were from those who defended the Eritrean state from the UN's findings, one can assume there were also tweets and dialogue with those who welcomed the report. However, because my initial methodologies consisted of inputting the following key terms in the Twitter search box: #Eritrea, #COI, #IStandWithEritrea, and #UN, the results were limited to those who rejected the report. This led me to create a Twitter account so that I would be able to be present for popular topics of discussion as they took place in actual time.

Akria Protest

On October 31st, 2017 warning shots were fired by police in response to a protest that took place in downtown Asmara, the capital of Eritrea. The incident was recorded and quickly uploaded onto Twitter, YouTube, and other social networking sites as unclear details soon circulated the platforms in the days following. A group of students from the Daa Islamic School located in the Akria neighborhood of Asmara were protesting the arrest of Haji Musa, the head master of their school. A couple of weeks prior to his arrest, Musa had given a speech to the parents of students and video footage of this address was posted on Twitter by the user @dawoodsaleh89, who prefaced that this meeting was the cause of his arrest. In the video, Musa shared with the audience that government officials had asked him to make amendments to the schools curriculum but he refused to oblige because they did not align with principles of Islam. Musa shared with the audience that he invited the officials to speak with parents, though he would maintain his stance against the government's request to change the curriculum.



Figure 15. @dawoodsaleh89’s tweet, which link the video footage of the meeting between Musa and parents of the students from the Diao Islamic School.

@dawoodsaleh89’s (figure 15) tweet of the video footage sparked much response, with over 200 retweets and 35 different responses, though much of it was in Arabic. The use of Arabic made the users’ comments inaccessible to non-Arabic speakers, limiting who can take part in and understand the conversation around the video and incident. Though it should be mentioned that the Google translator function is embedded within the site, it does not always provide users with the correct translations and it does not have the ability to translate tweets into other languages before users post them. In this way, language becomes a tool that is used to reinforce political, religious and ethnic ideologies and in this particular case, it may be used to restrict participation to Arabic speaking Muslims who also appear to be anti-PFDJ. Conrad’s study of Eritrean digital diasporan websites in Germany showed that some Eritrean diasporan sites used Tigrinya or Arabic to reach a specific audience in order to push a certain political agenda. Websites or postings that were in Arabic were tailored to diasporans who were against the PFDJ,

and the majority of whom were Muslims, while those who supported the government used Tigrinya and were largely Christian.⁶⁵ Conrad's study shows how languages can be used to engage some while purposefully excluding others and that is also the case of Eritreans on Twitter. The use of Tigrinya and Arabic decreases transcultural and transnational engagement across the platform between second-generation diasporans.

Nevertheless there was still much dialogue that appeared on my timeline between English speaking diasporans who showed a range of reactions to the events that unfolded in Eritrea on October 31st, 2017. @Wedi_Halay expressed his feelings of disappointment but also frustration with the lack of credible information that was circulating (figure 16). User @semhar321 responded to his tweet by informing him that Musa had tried to create another religion that branched off of Islam. @Wedi_Halay asked her to share her sources and she cited Eri-TV, the nationalized broadcasting channel of Eritrea, to which he responded to her by commenting on the lack of independent news sources operating in Eritrea. The lack of credible sources on the situation was an issue because not only did diasporans update their followers with conflicting reports, journalist from major publications such as Al Jazeera and the Washington Post did as well (figure 17).

⁶⁵ Conrad,132.

merzam @Wedi_Halay Following

I'm sickened at what's happening in Asmara.
What the hell is even happening

3:21 PM - 31 Oct 2017

7 Retweets 33 Likes

2 7 33

Tweet your reply

@semhar321 · Oct 31
Replying to @Wedi_Halay
The reason it's happening is cause who ever the dude that got arrested tried making a new religion that branches off of Islam.

1 2

merzam @Wedi_Halay · Oct 31
Where did you hear that from?

2 1

@semhar321 · Nov 1
youtu.be/NdVOLbckr20 and news from eri tv

 **After-Effect 2017 // መጠንቀቅታ ን ኣመንቲ ምስልም...**
After-Effect 2017 // መጠንቀቅታ ን ኣመንቲ ምስልምና ::
New Eritrean 2017
youtube.com

1 1

merzam @Wedi_Halay · Nov 1
You know what's interesting about this whole thing? The fact that there is only one news outlet in Eritrea. Makes you wonder sometimes lol

1 2

Figure 16. Twitter exchange between users, @Wedi_Halay and @Semhar321.

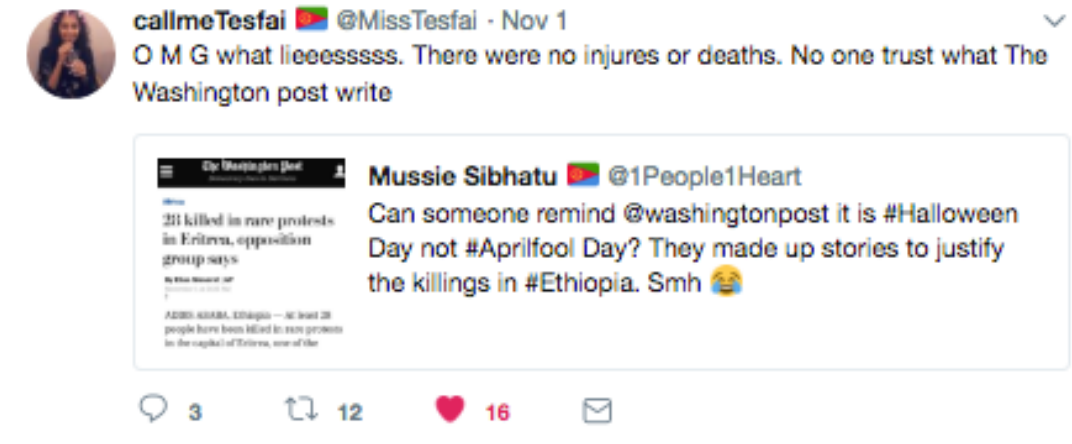


Figure 17. @MissTesfai calls out the Washington Post for falsely reporting on the Akria protest.

The Akria protest highlighted fractures along religious and political lines that are present in the Eritrean diaspora as it brought forth discussion between those from varying political stances. Many users expressed their sadness and disappointment, offering prayer and hoping for a peaceful resolution to the situation. Some diasporans protested to bring attention to the incident and show support for the politically and religiously oppressed. There was also much dialogue on religious persecution in Eritrea as many felt that the government was targeting Muslims unfairly. @senushikor responded to two users (figure 18), who’s comments we can assume were about the Eritrean government targeting Muslims, by stating that Musa was not arrested because of he was Muslim as she mentions that the third patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox church is currently on house arrest. @senushikor urges them not to attribute this incident to factitious tensions between Christians and Muslims, as the government does not target people of certain religions.

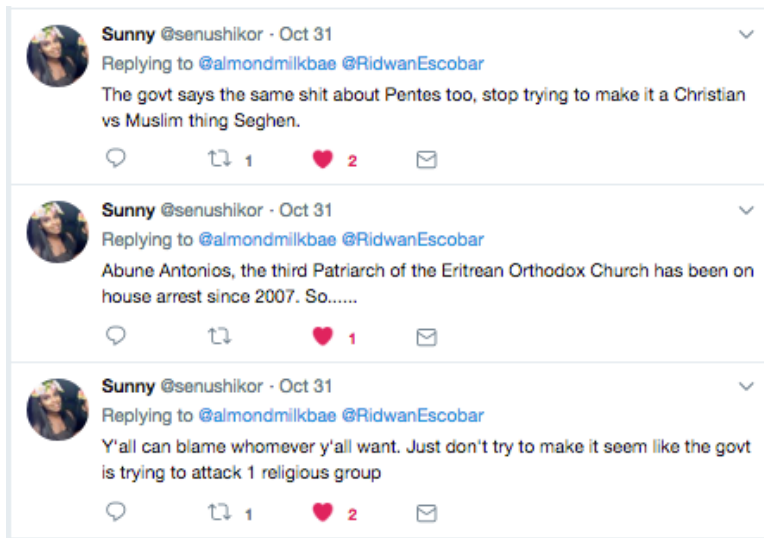


Figure 18. @senushikor responding to users who claim the Eritrean government is persecuting Muslims.



Figure 19. Diasporans protesting to bring awareness to the Akria protest.

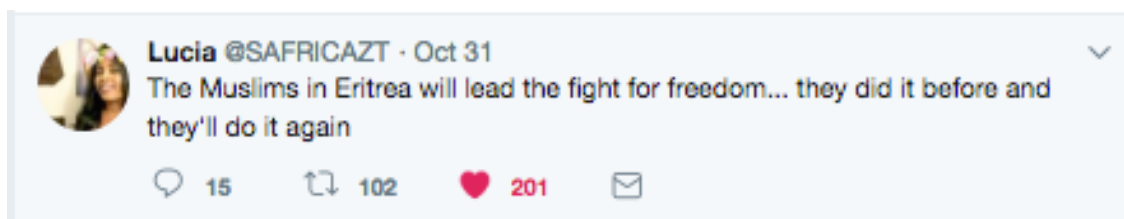


Figure 20. @SAFRICAZT recalls the contributions of Muslims in the early stages for Eritrean liberation.

@SAFRICAZT tweeted that Muslims would take the lead in fighting for freedom as they had in the past, alluding to the early contributions of Muslims and their organizations, including the Muslim League and the Eritrean Liberation Front, in the fight to gain Eritrea's sovereignty (figure 20).⁶⁶ The tweet insinuates that there needs to be a fight for freedom, however the user does not mention from what or how people should go about attaining these freedoms. @RidwanEscobar asks diasporans to think critically about the PFDJ government and their actions as they have had the privilege and space to attain critical thinking skills with the formal education they have received living abroad. In addition, he questions Eritreans who spend more time criticizing the state of affairs of Ethiopia than that of the PFDJ (figure 21). @Hiyaab also urges diasporans to think critically about the incident as she recognizes that freedoms are being restricted in Eritrea (figure 22). She also acknowledges that though propaganda is being spread to hurt Eritrea's reputation, as she states that charges of human rights abuses are blown out of proportion, there are still issues within the country that need to be addressed. Though it is not obvious whether both @Hiyaab and @RidwanEscobar are anti-PFDJ, they are asking followers to evaluate the situation without a nationalist lens. Eritreans living abroad in the West are exposed to ideals of freedom of expression in their host countries so, "... development of spaces

⁶⁶ Joseph L. Venosa, *Paths Toward the Nation: Islam, Community, and Early Nationalist Mobilization in Eritrea, 1941-1961* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014).

for free expression and analysis is also grounded in the experience of the diaspora.”⁶⁷ Both users ask diasporans to use their positions to critically think about the PFDJ’s actions and policies and use their privilege to speak out against the administration. However, here is the disconnect between the diaspora and their Eritrean counterparts living in the country who do not have the online spaces to speak as freely as diasporans can and sometimes do on politics in Eritrea. Diasporans not only have the resources in terms of access to the Internet which exposes and grants them access to abundant amounts of resources and information, but also social networking platforms where they are able to broadcast their thoughts and spread them from the comfort of their homes. Unfortunately, this cannot be said for Eritreans living in the country.

⁶⁷ Victoria Bernal, “Nationalist Networks: the Eritrean Diaspora” in *Diasporas in the New Media Age: Identity, Politics and Community*, ed. by Andoni Alonso and Pedro J. Oiarzabal (Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 2010), 128.

Ridwan @RidwanEscobar Follow ▼

Eritreans are so quick to be critical when talking about the govt of Ethiopia, but will never use that same level of energy on our own 😞

9:45 AM - 2 Nov 2017

17 Retweets 54 Likes

4 17 54

Ridwan @RidwanEscobar · 2 Nov 2017 ▼

Being critical and asking questions is what literally started the Eritrean Independence movement. It's literally what makes us Eritreans lol

2 6 24

Ridwan @RidwanEscobar · 2 Nov 2017 ▼

Sad thing is alot of these young Eritreans in the diaspora have some sort of formal education. So being uneducated isn't an excuse anymore.

2 8 19

efremJatta @efremkwassi · 5 Nov 2017 ▼

Replying to @RidwanEscobar

Exactly my thoughts.

1 1 1 1

Figure 21. @RidwanEscobar urging Eritreans to be critical of the PFDJ administration.



Figure 22. @hiyaab points out that though reporting on the Akria protest is being exaggerated, freedoms are still being restricted.

Eritrean nationalism has facilitated networks among the digital diaspora in ways that connect diasporans with one another regardless of the political disconnects. For example, though a diasporan is Pro-PFDJ and they tweet in support or defense of the current administrations, their public profiles welcome others to interact with their thoughts, regardless of their political orientation. Twitter provides a space where diasporans can post their own understanding and knowledge of current events for other diasporans, spreading information instantly. In turn, diasporans can dialogue with one another for a public discussion or silently comment by favoring or retweeting tweets.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

This thesis has illustrated the interactions of second-generation diasporans on Twitter and the ways in which they perform nationalism, creating new bonds and strengthening existing ones. Which shape the diaspora. It has also showed how Twitter is a space where Eritrean diasporans can join each other, regardless of the disconnects that may exist in terms of culture, politics and language. Advancements in ICTs and the prevalence of the Internet in our daily lives make it not only convenient for diasporans to engage with one another but also raises their awareness of the larger diasporic community to which they belong. Similar to the way print capitalism contributed greatly to the building of nations in Europe and the imagined community, the Internet strengthens diasporic connections, locally and transnationally. Twitter is unique as compared to other social networking sites like Facebook and Snapchat due to its format, which allows more visibility across the community for the individual due to the platforms features. These features include retweets and the suggested content which Twitter's algorithms present to users based on their activities. It has become a space where connections across the diaspora are made more organically as second generation diasporans are made accessible to one another. Many diasporans can find and interact with each other through the discussion they participate in or witness online that center their diasporan experience, heritage and culture as well as their perspectives on Eritrea's political and economic situation, as these are the topics that activate discussion in the digital diaspora as a collective. Twitter is a space where second generation diasporans build their own transnational networks, independent of their parents, by communicating with those they follow and those who follow them on the platform. Though they might connect with fellow diasporans over a wide range of topics, it is their shared identity that initiates new relationships.

A large majority of the Eritrean diaspora was born out of the 30 year war against Ethiopia that affected the lives of many people, as a huge segment of the population fled to other

countries as refugees to escape the violence, severing their physical connection to Eritrea. Per Anderson, the nation is a concept that is imagined but invested in by members of the society and even after Eritreans left to other countries, they kept their ties to the nation, as is the case with other diasporans. However, the Eritrean diaspora is unique in that during the war for Eritrean Independence, diasporans became an integral unit in that fight as they lent their support to the war effort from afar. The war effort sparked the nationalism among the diaspora that is crucial to the nation-state as they can count on this relationship to assist the nation with securing its sovereignty. Nationalism among the diaspora is kicked into high gear when events take place that threaten the country's integrity and reputation, as with Border War with Ethiopia in 1999.

Furthermore, we have the phenomena of a nationalist second-generation diaspora, who bring their nationalism to their social networking platforms. Per Hirsch, second generation diasporans experience the memories of the previous generation as post-memories. The first generation to make it to the West brought a strong sense of pride along with them, which they instilled, in their children, the second generation. The memories from the war were so prevalent in their experiences that these traumas and history were also passed down and adopted by the second generation. The strong nationalism present in second generation Eritreans is not only something that they adopted from their parents but also a way to seek and forge connections as deep-rooted as the connections their parents have to the homeland. The connection the first generation diasporans have to Eritrea is different from the second generation, as it is deeply rooted in the physicality of the nation. This deeply held connection functions in the same way as Gellner's concept of the nation, demonstrating that the idea of nation is divorced from the actual physicality of a nation. Diasporans of the second generation participate as citizens, and indeed, some of them contribute in tangible ways by paying taxes, sending remittances and starting campaigns to fund small projects for the benefit of the Eritrean people. Through the use of ICT's and their particular brand of nationalism, they have effectively extended the borders of Eritrea to span the globe.

Wherever there are second-generation diasporans and access to the Internet, there is Eritrea, located in the networks activated through the interactions between the diasporans. This is different from other diasporas, whose members are able to travel frequently to the homeland or who have a greater presence of their national or cultural heritage in the areas they inhabit. Take for instance the Mexican diaspora located in the U.S. The Mexican diaspora is able to travel to their parents or grandparents homes or even communicate with relatives in the nation affordably, in comparison to the cost associated with traveling to Eritrea or even mspeaking to friends and relatives there. The second generation may find it hard to establish and sustain connections with people in the country due to cost and accessibility, so they establish these connections amongst themselves.

Digital diasporas function in ways that expand the borders of the nation. They become an extension of the nation state through the performance of nationalism that occurs online. The second generation practices nationalism by defending the integrity of Eritrea, as shown in chapter 2, against Ethiopian diasporans and, as was shown in chapter 3, the UN. Though not limited to a particular networking platform, Twitter becomes a space to perform a civic duty in either defending Eritrea, whether that means questioning the current administration in power, the PFDJ, or defending the nation's sovereignty and history. By doing so, diasporans are also asserting their Eritrean identity. Though they reside in countries beyond the border, they hold on tightly to this identity, thus expanding the borders of the nation. In the past, the physical displacement often did disrupt a citizen's participation in their prior society as the flow of information was slower and there was not a facile way to create a forum for people to keep performing their political lives in the new country they inhabited.

Though Twitter is used to connect diasporans, it is important to note that there also exist various disconnects within the digital diaspora that affect the ways in which different nodes in the network are constructed. As shown in chapter 3, during the Akria protest in Eritrea, it was

evident from the tweets regarding the event that there were religious disconnects in the diaspora. Some users accused the PFDJ of targeting Muslims and other users joined in the conversation to add that the PFDJ has gone after other religious leaders for inciting dissent. This also highlighted discord between Eritrean Muslim diasporans who believed that the arrest of Musa was justifiable and that Muslims should put their country above their faith while those who were outraged by his arrest recalled the past in which Muslim leaders ushered in a campaign for Eritrean independence. Additionally, and somewhat related to the religious disconnect, is the use of language users who sympathized with the Islamic school tweeted each other in Arabic, and many of these diasporans regularly tweet in English. Their use of Arabic effectively shut out non-Arabic speaking and presumably non-Muslim diasporans from their conversations. On the other hand, diasporans who use transliterations of Tigrinya in their tweets, also prevent diasporans who are non-speaking from interacting with those tweets in a meaningful way. Lastly, in regards to language, English is most prevalent when diasporans communicate with one another transnationally; meaning if diasporans do not have the English language skills it is difficult for them to build wider networks.

Differences in religious beliefs, political orientations and language skill sets show the divides within the diaspora that may cause issues as diasporans take to the online sphere to link with their counterparts. However, these disconnects do not take away from the nationalism that drives second generation Eritreans to use Twitter and other social networking platforms to make connections with one another in ways that are meaningful to the larger Eritrean diaspora. Though social networking platforms exist in the online space devoid of any physicality, it allows diasporans a virtual space where they are able to construct networks that effect real time and space. One example, which was mentioned previously was Luam Thomas's EMOMCP 2013 which sought musicians and artists to collaborate on a project for the Eritrean diaspora. Thomas's project highlighted not only the nationalism and cultural heritage rooted in the second generation but also the ways in which the virtual space is used to make real connections.

Examples of endeavors diasporans have taken on to effect change in Eritrea include organizing medical missions to provide services to Eritreans in the country or donating solar energy panels to rural villages. These projects speak to the ways that diasporans are interested in carrying out their civic duty. Many second generation diasporans are committed to assisting Eritrea in whatever ways that they are able to, and the online realm gives them the space to collaborate, fundraise, and spread the word about projects that allow them to carry out their missions. In the end, the diaspora exists because of the creation and sovereignty of Eritrea and diasporan nationalism instills that understanding within them, while the online space provides them access to one another to form networks that enact real change in their worlds.

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