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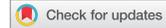
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Ambivalent memories of imperial legacies: Asmara as 'beautiful' and 'segregationist' from Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how the capital town of Eritrea, Asmara, is depicted alternately as Italian, Eritrean and Ethiopian thus showing the competing claims of 'ownership' that traverses its colonial and postcolonial histories and a multifaceted identity. It focuses specifically on how the Italian architecture of Asmara is depicted both as a sign of modernization and oppression. Literary and oral- sources are analysed to illustrate Asmara as a site of cultural encounter and a historical palimpsest such as the poems *Asmara* (1958, included in the collection *Esat Wey Abeba*) by Tsegaye Gebremedihin, and *And Nebis* (1992, included in the collection *Efta 60 Tirekawoch*) by Haile Meleket Mewael. The novels *Oromay* (1984) by Bealu Girma, *Ye Burqa Zimita* (1992) by Tesfaye Gebreab. These contemporary literary and oral reminiscences of Asmara show how Asmara's architectural legacies are remembered to express memories of ambivalence between beauty and inhibition; being modern and segregated. Whereby, Asmara gets represented as a model town for other African cities, and a city of colonial decay and segregation, in these contradictory accounts of memories of Asmara, a de-colonial method of engagement seems to emerge.

KEYWORDS Colonial echoes; oral reminiscences; novels; de-colonial deliberations; memory Asmara

Since the long twentieth century, the Eritrean-Ethiopian relationship has been marked by the spectre of colonialism. Briefly, the end of Italian colonialism in Eritrea (1890–1941) and Ethiopia (1935–1941) was followed by the British Military Administration of Eritrea, ending in 1952 with the country's incorporation into the Ethiopian state. The following years (from 1952 to 1961) have been defined as 'The Federal Experience',¹ a period whose interpretation remains divisive. For Ruth Iyob (1997) and Yohannes Okibezighi (1986) this was an imposed project by the United Nations. For Tekeste Negash (1997) the inclusion of Eritrea to its 'Motherland Ethiopia' brought rightfully the autonomous federal government of Eritrea together with the Ethiopian Imperial state. The first claim stems from debates that emerged right at the end of the colonial rule and analysed the consequences of not granting Eritrea the

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right of independent self-rule. They understand the colonial presence as an event that needs to be discussed in its own right. The second view embraces conversations that focus instead on the pre-colonial cultural, religious, linguistic, political, and economic ties that connect Eritrea to Imperial Ethiopia. As such, they account for the impact of Italian colonialism as minimal compared to the longstanding ties between the two countries. Clearly, these historical interpretations correspond to conflicting ideological positions and this is why even such a panoramic exploration gives the sense of how the production of knowledge about the past becomes highly contested.

It is in this political and social context that Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, emerges as a particular site of narrative contestation. And especially so in the Ethiopian imagination that elected the city as one of its favourite site for artistic production. The city features in a number of creative works such as poems, novels, songs, movies and photographs. Within them, Asmara becomes the ideal site for placing, re-placing, and embed old and new memories as means to substantiate interpretations of its past and orient its future. In other words, artistic interpretations of Asmara reflect attempts at re-positioning the city within ongoing debates about the contested history that links (and yet divides) Eritrea and Ethiopia. To be sure, to write about the contested history of the two countries meant that literary works were censored and authors' lives put in danger for expressing views that contrasted those of the ruling authorities.² In this context, the meanings and imagination of colonial history remains a key site of contestations.

In this paper, I mobilize Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'os' (2009) notion that the rupture between the colonial and the post-colonial moment is a site of production and reproduction of the past. This is because, in the rupture, new forms of representations of the past emerge in relation to the contested present. Ngūgĩ writes that collective memory shapes along political, intellectual and artistic responses to colonial memory, which can also generate counter-memories. For Ngūgĩ, acknowledging the interruptive aspect of colonial memory entails simultaneously the necessity to re-create critical remembering of the past by a creative intervention of what is lost in the colonial past. This is because memory is both a concept and the practice of accessing with the imagination the past that, despite lost, remains tied to the present and could be re-discovered through creative processes. Similarly, Premesh Lalu, (2009, p. 11–12) has argued how the narration of history in post-apartheid South Africa struggled to acknowledge imaginative modes of providing evidence, especially in the historical reconstruction of the killing of Xhosa king Hintsa ka Phalo. Lalu points to how the discourse on history creates a 'binary between evidence and imagination' and, in so doing, 'suppresses the conditions of narrativity in its discourse' (2009, p.11). Acknowledging such limits, I look at oral reminiscences as well as fictional literary works to describe and analyse the idea of Asmara as it serves in the Ethiopian historical imagination.

Surely, I could have accounted for diverse genres to approach this research. This paper focuses mainly on how personal memories of Ethiopians who once lived in Asmara correlate with depictions of Asmara in Amharic literary works. I approach these texts as fictional ethnography of the city and I compare them with real-life experiences. In so doing, I single out and discuss how empire, coloniality, and modernity entangle and confront counter-processes aimed at decolonizing the urban imagination. Among literary works, I discuss: the poem *Asmara* Tsegaye Gebremedihin (1958, p. 201) included in the collection Esat Wey Abeba, *Oromay* a novel by Bealu Girma (1984), Habtamu Alebachew's *Awrora* (2016), and Tesfaye Gesese's (2017) *Megemerta Mechereshita* [*The Beginning and the End*]. Representative of a period of five decades, I chose these texts because, I argue, they are exemplary of how colonial-imperial ideas of 'beauty', 'civilization', 'difference', and 'femininity' circulate as normative and universal in contemporary Ethiopia, while these ideas are simultaneously entangled with narratives of oppression, segregation and difference.

Crucially, the paper draws on an understanding of social memory as a process of knowledge-production that involves the transmission and circulations of ideas in the form of oral reminiscences, poetry and literature. Accordingly, the paper presents a portrayal of Asmara that testifies to the multifarious and influential ways in which imperial legacies are perceived in the everyday and how they support processes of identity formation that move towards or away from empire. The essay speaks to the gendered forms through which the enactment of poetic urban representations link the female body to processes of colonization, thus pointing to how gender might become crucial to acts of decolonization. Strikingly, I show how accounts of the 'modern' and 'beautiful' Asmara as desirable entity of cityhood are not consistent. Rather, these representations are also embedded with counter narratives of experiences of the ethnically segregated city. I draw on these moments of confusion – when the narration loses its consistency and direction – to argue for the possibility of mobilizing memories for decolonial projects.

As such, to off-centre empire means, in this essay, to highlight discursive ambiguities, continuities, and critiques as sites of both colonial and decolonial formulations and practice. In other words, this paper argues that acts of reminiscences are itineraries of deliberations – by this I mean that oral – literary and non-literary – representations of Asmara are political acts of speech delivered in form of memory to reflect how ideas of being modern, beautiful, clean entangle with the equally imperial legacies of segregation and discrimination. As such they become embedded within ambivalent (ideological) narrations of the past. Drawing from Gloria E. Anzaldúa's (1987) notion of 'mestiza consciousness,' Walter D. Mignolo (2007) conceptualizes the de-colonial project as a form of double consciousness that emerges from inhabiting a site of

'borderlands.' This entails acknowledging contradictory sites of interactions among competing ideologies of race, class, and sexuality.

In this paper, I oral reminiscences – poems and novels – to explore them as contradictory sites that contain both accounts of coloniality and counter-movements towards decoloniality. Specifically, I do so to argue that theorizing the decolonial can emerge from the standpoint of imperial remains as sites of deliberations. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (2009), I understand memory first and foremost as an interruption but also as that which has partially survived – or is created in fragments as well as that which is reassembled through creative resistance against the imposed version of memory. Therefore I argue that by exploring oral reminiscence I am able to rescue what has partially survived as well as to capture the workings of memory as a force of creative resistance to colonialism. My aim is to illustrate how new memories are forged in relation to pre-existing and competing narratives. In turn, I approach memories that survive celebrating the colonial as products of processes of circulation and reproduction of the old ideological narratives to see how they can be reclaimed and countered. As such, I propose a proactive engagement with memory sites as potential resources for decolonization.

This paper is also a call to examine discursive oscillations between colonial and postcolonial temporalities, which I trace by identifying the regeneration of discursive legacies of colonial categories as a form of decolonial engagement with/in the present. Accordingly, I explore and analyse oral reminiscences of Asmara's built environment as a register of this ambivalence – that which put colonial ideas of beauty and being modern with accounts of its critique. It is simultaneity of representation in oral reminiscences and literary imaginations that I propose them to be read as a method for off-centring imperial legacies in literary works.

The first part of this paper introduces Asmara's built environment through its main literary tropes: Asmara the 'beautiful', the 'civilized' and the 'feminine'. As Chattopadhyay discusses in the Indian context, colonial discourses of representation were about 'the *idea* of Calcutta, a perception of its physical attributes rather than the attributes themselves' (2005, p. 2). Similarly, in the first section of this essay I illustrate how ideas of Asmara are represented and circulated in contemporary Ethiopia. These are mainly accounts of 'the desirable' or 'regrettable' city more than historical narratives of Asmara and the complexities of its historical formation. Such accounts were produced by conceptions of colonial modernity that continue to be reproduced along with critical accounts of what it meant to imagine and create a desirable city in the present. The second section illustrates how the various acts of reminiscing Asmara embody an ambivalent register that sits uncomfortably between the paradox of representing Asmara as 'modern' and 'beautiful' and experiences of social and racial segregation.

The 'beautiful' Asmara

In oral reminiscences and popular cultural forms, Asmara is perceived as desirable because of its beauty. One of the ways in which the city is venerated as beautiful is through a favourable assessment of its built environment, which carries the imprints of Italian colonialism. In the poems, novels and oral recollections of the city I take into account, Asmara is described as a model for other African cities. Let's take as an example the poem written by Tsegaye Gebremedihn, a poet and playwright who defined the literary scene in 1960s Ethiopia.

Asmara
 How I wish like you Asmara
 the centre of cities,
 the core of all,
 the Medina of all cities;
 like you Asmara,
 The streets of other cities would be made,
 so attractive and organized,
 widely opening their arms-
 to embrace,
 How I wish, like you Asmara, the main streets of many cities
 call us all,
 for a pleasant walk
 with ambiance, comfort and beauty.

(Tsegaye 1958, p. 201)

Tsegaye describes Asmara as a city that should serve as a prototype to other cities due to its exceptional beauty. Here, beauty is narrated in comparison with other unnamed cities. In the poem, Asmara's peculiar beauty is linked to the architecture and/or the infrastructures of the city – such as the streets. In particular, the description of Asmara as a well-planned city is emphasized through the recollection of how such a 'well-planned' city enabled urban dwellers to navigate it easily. One of my interviewees, Mebrat Tsehaye likewise described Asmara as being well organized, stating:

Asmara is a well-planned city. It has street addresses. I remember my brother left the country in 1966 and in the 70s, after 7 years, he sent a message – a letter to my mother. It was easy to locate our house because he had clearly indicated our street address and house number. I remember Godana - Via Menelik, Via Etege Menen, and Via Haileselassie. (Interview by the Author, 2015)

In Mebrat's account, the term 'well-planned' articulates notions of penetrability and reachability that allow easy movement from one place to another in the city. Unlike Tsegaye's poem, in which the 'well planned city' ties architecture to aesthetics, the above oral account attaches sensibilities of a well-planned city to its functionality. Such functionality is expressed through the

easiness of locating addresses on a map; a feature that also induces a sense of permanence to time itself. For instance, the fact that the narrator's address makes it easy to locate his house even after seven years seems to suggest that the passage of time cannot affect the reachability of his neighbourhood.

By equating Asmara with 'beauty', the city becomes an aspirational (idealized) model, which is symptomatic of registers that continue to re-appear as a discursive continuation of colonial-imperial legacies. In Tesfaye's novel *Meqemerta Ena Mechereshita*, Asmara is continuously represented as both beautiful and modern from the 1950s through 2017. In the following extract, we see another example of how Tesfaye represents Asmara as beautiful:

The airport in Asmara is very beautiful. It has spacious roads, beautiful buildings. Tafesech found the view magnificent ... she felt like she had gone to the West. Buildings have well designed shapes and same height. The street is very clean! Palm trees embrace the centre and sidewalks. The street is beautifully decorated with different kinds of flowers. (Tesfaye 2017, p. 7–8)

Once again, Asmara is described as a beautiful, clean city with well-designed buildings and well-decorated streets, which the protagonist perceives as the experience of having been 'to the West.' Through sanctioning the described attributes of the beautiful city with that of experiencing the West, contemporary Amharic literary works continue to reproduce the West as a timeless or permanent reference to what is beautiful and modern. Hence, Asmara's beauty is mobilized not only on its own right but also due to its relational proximity to the West.

Timelessness is an attribute that reinforces normative understandings of beauty. One of the ways in which the imperial category of beauty sustains its imprint in the meaning-making practice of the present is through the notion of beauty as timeless. What I mean is that the sustained (re)production of Asmara as *the* beautiful city at the same time reinforces both imperial categories of beauty that depend on colonial aesthetics as well as the notion that such conception of beauty is timeless. This is also to say that by rendering Asmara as timelessly beautiful, authors reinforce empire and legitimize colonial legacies as footprints of modernity. In this sense, to off-centre empire means to create space for the possibility of Asmara to exist and be narrated as other-than-beautiful. I continue this conversation in the next section addressing how and why Asmara is represented as 'civilized'.

The 'civilized' Asmara

This section illustrates the ways in which written and oral reminiscing practices reproduce the ambivalent (yet persistent) relation between the colonial, the imperial, and the modern. Oral accounts of Asmara describe the city's built environment through the category of 'being civilized,' again circulating

inherited imperial notions as means to assess and narrate the present. As Wro Mebrat Tsehaye, one of my interviewees, tells us:

Most people from Asmara were modern or civilized. (*Silitaneneber Asmara drom* literally 'Asmara was a civilized city, even in the past') Meaning you always had to wear shoes. You did not have to work as a child ... Eritreans used to work as [car mechanics in a] Garage. Asmara was very different because it was well organized. [It was] civilized, there was a drainage system and they used to recycle the waste from toilets and it would be used as fertilizer and the waste was linked to suburb agriculture. To be able to do this at that time showed that Eritrea was civilized. The city was very clean. The municipality used to conduct inspections on beggars on the streets and they used to put the beggars in camps in Enda Seal. The [municipality] would clean them, shave them and relocate them to their respective locations. In restaurants, the municipality used to [supervise cleanliness] they checked every utensil as well as the cleanliness of the restaurant and the food ... Electricity was always there. There were so many people who used to read the newspaper. These were Italian newspapers, for the most part. Educated people read a newspaper. Regardless of whether they were rich or not, people started their [formal] education with church education. Before that, people only attended school until the fourth grade and they would get employed with just that education. Cinema Roma, Dante, Capitol. The themes were on dance, tango and on child rearing. On Sundays, there was a bicycle tournament. As a form of theatre, we used to have performances in church. (Interviewed by the Author, 2015)

It is in narratives of what constitutes civilization that literary and oral reminiscing continue to reproduce colonial ideologies. The association of being civilized to people wearing shoes, to cleanliness, constant access to electricity, municipal disciplining, and cultural centres articulates notions of being modern and civilized that link back to the ideal of the colonial-modern.

Asmara's potentials are embedded in the built environment and materialize in the services available to its urban dwellers so much so that the city is described as a 'civilized place'. Hence, these memories re-inscribe colonial-modern discourses of progress linked to the geographic West, especially referring to Italy. Through these reminiscences, Asmara, Italy, and its colonial-modernist project are monumentalized and celebrated. This, in turn, supports the circulation of ideas of the West as a site for civilization and progress even during what could have been framed as a post liberation moment for both Ethiopia and Eritrea, namely the end of direct colonial rule for both countries in 1941. The failure to make such a distinction between what Asmara offered in the past and how much of this resulted from colonial, civilizational claims imposed to the city, misses the opportunity to explore the hierarchical power relations that remain between the native and the settler. This is similar to Nancy Rose Hunt's observation that postcolonial healthcare practice in the Congo involves the circulation and 'embodiment of colonial [memories] in African social imaginaries' (1999, p. 6). As these examples show, the post-Italian era in Ethiopia still needs critical engagements that challenge colonial

categories of classification – such as the ‘beautiful’ and the ‘civilised’ one such example of a counter memories of the ‘civilised’ ‘modern’ and ‘beautiful’ is deliberations on memories ‘segregation’ and ‘social hierarchies’.

The beautiful as the feminine: feminizing Asmara

Another instance where colonial spatial ideologies meet with colonized visions and characterization of space is in the feminized representation of Asmara. The feminine representation transpires at two levels in the depiction of the city. For instance, in the novel *Oromay* (1984) Bealu writes:

1 Asmarina Asmararina
 Sei tu bella regina
 Stivido de lontano
 Casca kulilu en meno³
 2 Asmaraye Asmaraye,
 Kab hanti Nigisti Yibelitsi Melkekhi
 Maediye erieyeki keleku kea
 Ab Eday zelo neger yiwediq⁴
 3 Asmaraye Asmaraye
 kandit nigist yibeltal melkish
 be ruq siyayish be wubetua siletemareke
 be ege yale neger sayitawekegn yiwediqal⁵

(Bealu 1984, p. 28)

In the above Italian, Tigrigna and Amharic versions. Bealu represents Asmara as a beautiful queen whose beauty makes people losing control. In the three versions, the poet’s rendering of Asmara is feminized through the comparison of the city to a queen. Further, it is the process of writing the poem in three languages that must be read as the wish to make Asmara’s feminization global. In other words, I see this as revealing of how transnational patriarchal male culture works. Regardless of differences in genre, time of publication, and literary generation, majority of portrayals of Asmara embody feminine attributes that are tied to ‘beauty’, ‘love’ and the bodily features of a woman (see for example, Tsegaye (1958), Bealu (1984), Habtamu Alebachew (2017), Mulatu Astatike’s musical composition *Asmerina* [My Asmara] (1967), and Tedros Kasahun’s *Gual Asmara* (2012)).

The circulation of Asmara’s representations as a beautiful place extends to the concretization of femininity as an abstract embodiment of beauty and love. For instance, Bealu’s depiction of Asmara as a beautiful city is characterized by its feminized linguistic genealogy as well as attributes of feminized beauty:

From Tsenserat (Forto) and Hazhaz (where there is a women’s prison and Bete Giorgis where the television satellite is in place, Arbate Asmara where women founded the city of Asmara) from ‘Geza Birhanu’ and ‘Adis Alem’ hills, we

proceeded to Ras Alula's compound. We recorded the city of Asmara with our camera ... it looked like a sea of diamond in the flat platform of the valley. It is found 7,500 feet above sea level and resembled a bride that is beautifully decorated. Its well-planned arterial and sub arterial streets, beautiful pine trees, flowers and climbers. It's breath taking to be in such a place. (Bealu 1984, p. 26)

Bealu narrates Asmara by filming the city's neighbourhoods. He marks the Hazhaz neighbourhood as the location of a women's prison and highlights Arbate-Asmara (one of the city's earliest neighbourhoods) as a place founded by women. The gendered place names are not only peculiar to the characterization of place names through feminized attributes, but masculine names of dignitaries and rulers such as Geza Birhanu and Ras Alula Gibi are also utilized. At least in the above instance, masculinized spaces are named after historical figures, whereas the feminization of Asmara is achieved through literary symbolism. Asmara – referred to as a 'she' – is characterized as a beautiful bride, decorated with palm trees and filled with perfumed, rare and colourful flowers and ivy plants. And further, women in Asmara are described through their capacity to 'love':

Women are his vice. But women in Addis are not so fast like the Eritreans ... their conversation melts someone's heart so easily ... yes women love him quickly ... when he calls them 'my northern beauty' they also melt in turn. (Bealu 1984, p. 99)

Similarly, Tsegaye poem *Asmara* (1958) illuminates how the feminized representation of Asmara intertwines with the physicality of the built environment. The city, whose architectural aesthetic is already compared with the bodily features of Eritrean women, is also described by Bealu (1984, p. 26) in similar terms tying the beauty of palm trees to the beauty of Asmara women's hair. As these accounts emphasize, Asmara is not only constructed through its built environment, social, political or economic reality, but is also a construct of normative-gendered femininity, through the normalization of the dependence between femininity and beauty.

Such double objectification of women and Asmara is one of the tropes through which reminiscences of Asmara keeps circulating. These accounts of reminiscences in the post-colonial era continue to re-inscribing and circulating patriarchal – and colonial gendered sensibilities as normative categories of beauty. On this regard, Lila Abu Lughod critiques the post – colonial national elite: 'post- colonial national elite remained in the state of intellectual dependency with their values defined [through] the colonial metropolis and [...] this dependency was most manifest in the role of language of the colonizer' (2013, p. 139). Abu Lughod further attests that, the so-called 'Third world' elite need to 'be epistemologically independent' for them to offer a decolonized history. This assertion can be extended to illuminate how the

circulation of gendered sensibilities using notions of beauty and femininity illuminates a doubled reiteration of the patriarchal and colonial as the normative and universal notion of beauty. Hence, by examining oral reminiscences and literary works as sites of representation, re-inscription and critique, I illustrate how these value laden gendered reiteration of beauty as femininity necessitate an engagement with these categories not only as sites of representations but also as sites of critique. The critique here is located in the reminiscing accounts that contain categories of 'the modern', the 'beautiful' and the 'civilized' along with memories of the 'segregated' and 'othering city' thus illustrating oral reminiscence as site of contestation, adaptation, and recalibration of the past, present and future.

Asmara – 'segregation'⁶: sensibilities of difference

The oral and literary accounts of Asmara I collected in Ethiopia describe forcefully another side of the city, which challenges imperial legacies of Western and colonial modes of narrating the city recounted and circulated in form of poems, novels and oral reminiscences that are presented in the above section of the paper.

Returning our focus to Bealu's *Oromay*, this time paying attention to urban social dynamics instead of aesthetics, allows another portrayal to emerge:

Caravel is not that far from Niyala Hotel. I heard that it is a restaurant known for its lasagna and pasta al forno and I turned my car and I looked at her and said, I really want to see Asmara in (Through) your eyes. After all the beauty of a city is not the greatness of its buildings or the broadness of its streets or the cleanness of its streets; as I see it what makes a city beautiful or hideous are the people living in it. Without a person's heart, a city has no meaning ... it's just a jungle of buildings or a pile of masonry stones. (Bealu 1984, p. 250)

This approach to the city is far from previous notions of 'beauty', 'cleanliness' and 'civilised' place. Instead, the author is interested in people's experience of the city. For instance, the sentence 'Without a person's heart, a city has no meaning ... it's just a jungle of buildings or a pile of masonry stones' well accounts for Asmara as a site of the social. During our interview, Wro Teame, a migrant from the Debre Damo area of Tigray, recollects the social experience of segregation he experienced in Asmara:

Asmara was pleasant. I used to live in Geza Kenisha. I was born in my hometown of Debre Damo ... [Asmara] was a place where one could work and live. When you [went] to the market, people were well dressed with tidy and clean clothes. I really liked Asmara. I still love it and the weather was good. There wasn't too much stress. For those who went to Asmara from Tigray, there was discrimination; the freedom [they had] wasn't equal with the Eritreans ... *agame*⁷ [was] often used as a derogatory term. I say [Asmara] was pleasant because one should not describe a place of living as bad [but] yet we used to build relationships – social neighbourly relations – by taking godchildren and the like. (Interview by the Author, 5 May 2015)

Teamu describes Asmara as discriminatory to migrants from Tigray *despite* the 'pleasant' aspects of the city. Other oral accounts further elaborate on social segregation towards Tigrayan migrants by mobilizing the derogatory category '*agame*.' This discriminatory process took root as a marker of difference in which *agame* was used to describe both those who used the Tigrayan dialect as well as an occupational and settlement category of migrants from Tigray. Through name-calling, *agame* were constructed as outsiders and as a group of lower economic status.

As Francesca Locatelli (2009) shows, such categorization of Tigrayan migrants originates in the Italian colonial mode of classification and rule. Similarly to the localized notion of *agame*, Locatelli uses the concept of '*oltre confine*' (beyond the border) to signal the experience of migrants in colonial Eritrea. In Asmara, urban migrants from *oltre confine* were thought to come to the city to accumulate money and then return to their place of origin. For this reason, they were considered 'bloodsuckers' (Paoli 1908, p. 79). Such suspicious attitudes towards migrants from '*oltre confine*' developed as a result of the Italian defeat at the Battle of Adwa (1896), which deteriorated relations with the Ethiopian empire and generated anxiety among colonial administrators. Although labourers from across the border were welcomed in some particular circumstances, their presence in Asmara was perceived as a danger.

As the oral account of Ato Gebre, a migrant from Tigray, emphasizes, the social segregation of Tigrayans did not end with Italian colonial rule:

During Haile Selassie's regime, Tigrayans had a difficult time in the city. They used to face opposition from local people – Eritreans. [The Tigrayans] used to find administering their business difficult at times. They used to sell cattle, sheep, goats, chickens, eggs and animal skin. The Tigrayans used to settle around Edaga Arbi, Arbate Asmara, Hadish Adi and some parts of Akria. Areas settled by Tigrayans used to be clean but the houses were built using mud. (Interview by the Author, 14 October 2014)

Here, the social discriminatory marker *agame* is remembered as an occupational category – as a synonym for migrants' settled in Asmara from Tigray areas. Such social discriminatory patterns illuminate the complexities that lie beyond descriptions of Asmara as 'beautiful', 'clean', 'civilized' and 'accessible'.

Accounts of segregation inscribed in the memories of *agame* link and contrast the hierarchies and valorized depiction of Asmara as beautiful and modern with social, administrative and economic segregation. Hence, what was described an accessible and an easy to navigate space is at the same time discriminatory.

The characterization of the Italian colonial urban administration as segregationist was, at varying degrees, common to both Eritreans and migrants from Tigray. As Locatelli has shown, memories of segregation and racial zoning

during the Italian period abound among contemporary Eritreans (2009, p. 235). Certainly, conceptions of hierarchies go beyond social categories and respond also to divisions among rural and urban sensibilities. As Semaynesh noted in a personal interview (15 August 2015), food consumption served as a gendered and civilizational marker of belonging. What such evidence illuminates is that colonial formulations of space – as both civilized and segregated – continue to circulate. As such, I suggest that the apparent contradictions that characterize the production of affirmative memories of empire along with counter imperial memories of Asmara in oral memories and popular culture is a critical meditation of imperial legacies and one that off-centres empire by illuminating its contested present.

To be sure, oral life-story reminiscences are more prone to remember Asmara with its segregationist legacy even after the Italian colonial era. Racial difference, which emanates from colonial rule, was inscribed into the city through planning and building. During the Italian period, the fenced camp (*Campo Cintato*) of initial settlement became Asmara's 'European area' through segregationist policies applied by the colonial administration. The Campo was modelled following set criteria, which accommodated the needs of Italian settlers and reproduced the 'lifestyle' of Italian cities. As others have shown, areas more commonly described as beautiful and modern were those built to exhibit the difference between the civilized colonialist and the uncivilized native (Fuller 2007, Denison *et al.* 2007). Such colonial infrastructures of Asmara are further utilized as markers of difference, ascertaining the superiority of Asmara compared to other African cities.

What is memorable and superior about Asmara is therefore presented not only in built structures, but rather in the literary imaginations where a hierarchical sense of difference circulate. Bealu for example, compares the restaurant service in Asmara and Addis Ababa. He praises the experience in Asmara as pleasant and efficient. The sensibility of the modern embedded in this particular instance, expressed through taste and restaurant service, equates being modern with being distinctive and efficient.

She did not want anything to eat. We ordered beer and a Sprite for her and whisky for me. The waiters are not slow like they are in Addis Ababa. They are faster. In Asmara, the service and handling of a bar is like an art, everyone is happy with the work they are assigned. One's position is respected. A problem arises when there is even the slightest disregard for bureaucratic discipline. (Bealu 1984, p. 158)

Asmara is described not only from personal experience but also in comparison to Addis Ababa, which has been selectively depicted with what it cannot offer. Hence, Asmara and Addis Ababa share not only descriptive possibilities gained from comparison but also a conceptual comparison that set hierarchies of urban development.

Lavatories are the other sites of comparison in oral reminiscences of Asmara from Addis Ababa. As Wro Desta notes, comparing the two cities in the late 1960s:

What I was shocked about when I came back [to Addis Ababa] was the toilets. It was not available and [when it was available] it was not clean. It's very clean, very clean there in Asmara. Even the toilets in the countryside were very clean. The city cannot be compared with Addis; it will not catch up with [Asmara] even in the next 100 years. One of our friends who also used to live in Asmara in the 1960s, when he moved to the Ayat neighbourhood in Addis Ababa [a relatively well-built real estate community for upper middle-class and upper-class Ethiopians], he said that it felt like he had entered Asmara. (Interview by the author, 27 May 2015)

While Asmara is described as offering toilet services, which adds to its 'clean-ness,' Addis Ababa is represented as inadequate. As another interviewee, Abrehet, noted:

Asmara is like its name Asmara

N.G: What do you mean?

[It is] *tsebuq* (pleasant). What makes it pleasant is that it is clean. And people are very direct. They do not twist words. People are straightforward. [Their attitude is that] what has happened has happened and there is nothing that can be done about it. (Interview by the Author, 14 October 2014)

Beyond this descriptive comparison lies a more conceptual clash between colonial and non-colonial urban formations. Non-colonial spaces in Ethiopia are conceptualized as uninhabitable, unpleasant, and disorganized. As Sean Anderson (2016) illustrates, Asmara itself was similarly described as a regressive site requiring civilization from abroad in the onset of the Italian colonial project in Eritrea. Hence, the description of Asmara as more modern, efficient and pleasant in comparison to Addis Ababa is not only the product of empirical differences but also a conceptual and ideological legacy of the colonial gaze.

Such an interpretation follows Shimelis Bonsa's critique on the impact of colonial urbanism on stereotypical depictions of Addis Ababa as a place that has an 'absence of order' and as one that is filled with 'chaos' (2012, p. 20). Shimelis argues that historiographical biases against Addis Ababa emerge from taking colonial cities as ideal sites of comparison to other histories of urbanization. He further notes that such an approach has a double-blind spot. First, historiographical depictions of Addis Ababa as chaotic fail to take other historical formations of modern urbanism into account – in other words they only consider the colonial model. Hence, such assessments remain conceptual rather than empirical. Second, even taking the colonial city as a standard measure fails to take the segregationist legacy of colonial-settler's idea of cityness and its practices of urbanization.

The necessity to qualify critically the difference between Asmara and Addis Ababa was also shown in the oral reminiscences of my interviewees. The characterization of Asmara as special embodiment of racial segregation, the small size of Asmara and its characterization as modern all embody the layered registers of empire compounded in Asmara. In being modern, oral reminiscences, literary texts, and scholarly works represent Asmara as a site of articulation of an ambivalent set of relations, tying notion of progress to Asmara's segregationist history.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that deliberative memories of Asmara are a site of decolonial practice because here colonial categories are pro-actively countered through the production of new competing memories. I illustrated this by combining two sets of sources – oral interviews and forms of artistic production – which operate through the reiteration and circulation of colonial categories, as well as methods of critique embedded within these productions of memories which embodies counter memories of colonial legacies as undesirable. As I showed, within projects of re-presenting and circulating the colonial, there are acts of deliberations that proactively contest empire. In locating a method of critique through the reiteration and circulation of the colonial, I invite to reflect on how creative, artistic, re-appropriation of the past and its narratives illuminate existing gestures that off-centre empire. Thus, while oral reminiscences and novels are descriptive forms, they are also always-already accounts of deliberations – and especially so in their relationship to imperial legacies. As this paper shows, such decolonial habitus is formulated through orientations towards empire, that both embrace and reject colonial categories. In the mundane form of memory-making practices, thinking and deliberating on imperial legacies is necessarily a critically engaged process.

I have analysed accounts of the past by presenting how they re-present memory of a city as an account of the (imperial) past. As acts of deliberations of the present such accounts are best illustrated in the form of circulating colonial categories of classification. Yet they also offer accounts of the limits of the colonial promise because they foreground how empire's segregationist, discriminatory and hierarchical elements are embedded in categories such as the 'civilized', the 'modern' and the 'beautiful'. Accordingly, the acts of reminiscence explored become both a method and a critique. As representational and critical deliberations, they materialize the present as highly contested site, that simultaneously embraces and moves away from colonial categories.

Taking Asmara as the centre of my investigation, I examined how imperial legacies continue to affect the present. Yet, and by exploring narratives about the imperial past, the paper also engaged with the decolonial potential of the present. The decolonial therefore emerges as a theory in the making through

acts of writing, publishing, and oral deliberations that mediate how the past is represented, presented and imagined. In doing so, they make possible to imagine life *despite* the imperial. My analysis shows that whereas what is desirable is still generated from within colonial/imperial imaginations, the limits of this process are being exposed to foster counter-narratives. This tension offers an opening to disrupt accounts of colonial memories by indicating how the desired is part of what is critiqued or, as Ngugi states, the rapture becomes both a site of lamentation of what is lost and a 'deliberations' on new political and cultural imaginings. I find it productive to enable a dialogue between Ngugi Waiiong's concept of 'rapture' (as a moment of new discursive and political imaginings) with Walter Mignolo's use of 'border consciousness'. 'Rapture' is the tool to delve into the borders by exposing the contact zone between empire past and present as a site of creative decolonizing.

To take part in a decolonial theorizing; one has to take the deliberations found within oral sources and imaginative writings as seriously as political pamphlets. These sources are engaged in envisioning the decolonial through the production of post-imperial reiterations, as they circulate both the imperial past and the desire to overcome its visions. Doing so, such acts must be seen also as deliberations on what is and is not desirable in the present. In such forms, the imperial is no more a centre but also not a periphery – rather, it continues to be an off-centre site of engaging promises and limits of the present through the past. Such processes of going back and forth open up new space within memory making as an oral and imaginative literary enterprise, a desire to go beyond the facts and limits of empire and imagine what could be possible.

Notes

1. Referring to the resolution 390A (V), Tekeste Negash points out that the nature of the federation is stipulated, as 'Eritrea shall constitute an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia under the Sovereignty of the Ethiopian crown.' The resolution further pointed out that the Eritrean government has legislative, executive and judicial powers over domestic affairs. Negash (1997). Eritrea and Ethiopia: the federal experience. Nordic Africa Institute.
2. The publication of *Oromay* novel by Bealu Grima (1984) for example, is thought to be linked to the disappearance of the author. Tesfaye Gesese reflects on theme of the disappearance of Bealu Grima in the novel, *Megemeta Mechereshita* (2017). Besides the controversy it created at the time, Tesfaye further account and circulates the depiction of Asmara's built environment through its fictional rendition. Hence Tefaye's novel in 2017 commemorates on the disappearance of the author Bealu, recreates *Oromay's* fictional narratives in 2017. *Oromay* is also the most mentioned literary text in oral narratives of Asmara, themes that are employed to narrate Asmara's built environment that are co-examined with oral narratives of Asmara's built environment. It is also indicated that *Oromay* was orally narrated via the radio- which has popularized Eritrea and

Asmara to the wider Ethiopian public,, the novel *oromay* is still in print and circulation making it to its 6th edition. Its this circulations of genres and imaginations of Asmara across oral reminiscences in form of novels and radio in Amharic a language which is not popular in Eritrea, a language which is widely spoken in Ethiopia and hence illustrates these oral and written deliberations on and About Asmara are mainly made for the Ethiopian public.

3. Italian
4. Tigrigna
5. Amharic
6. Here, the use of segregation is not mobilized to entail histories racial zoning, rather, as Mia Fuller (2007, p. 36) points out notion of segregation illuminates how spatial and racial difference was 'reinforced' through in making sense of varied population in Asmara. It is this sensibility of difference, which continues to haunt the imagination, and reminisces of Asmara in fiction and oral reminiscences.
7. She used the term to refer to people who moved from Tigray.

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