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Mothering against Asylum and Border Regimes: Eritrean Women's Navigations of Settler Colonial Israel and Beyond

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**Mothering
against
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Laurie Lijnders

**Mothering against Asylum and
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and Beyond**

Laurie Anna Catharina Lijnders

**A thesis submitted for the degree of PhD
2022**

**Centre for Gender Studies SOAS, University of
London**

To Tsigereda and Tsinay.

To women mothering and children mothered in exile

Abstract

Contextualising asylum and migration within the settler colonial state of Israel, this dissertation explores how Black, non-Jewish women from Eritrea, who identify as mothers, navigate, resist, and respond to the Israeli asylum regime. The dissertation explores the overlap of gendered racialisation and legal precarity Eritrean mothers encounter within the settler colonial state of Israel and beyond. First, I explore the continuum of violence experienced by women from Eritrea, stretching from life under Eritrean dictatorship, along the migration route, and through to the daily reality under the Israeli asylum regime. Israeli border and asylum policies and practices exacerbate past harms and have significant gendered consequences. Second, I set out the ethnographic research methods used and methodological challenges faced when studying Eritrean women through a feminist-activist, multi-sited ethnography in Israel and the United Kingdom between 2016 and 2018. I explore how theory and epistemology are intertwined with activism, research practice, and everyday life. Third, I understand the Israeli asylum regime as an integral part of settler colonialism and apartheid and explore how the infrastructures and policies used to oppress, violate, erase, and exclude Palestinian people and occupy Palestinian land are used to exclude, criminalise and violate the rights of Black non-Jewish asylum seeking women. Following this analysis, I examine how an Eritrean mother and her wider intimate ties were impacted by and challenged three state policies under the Israeli asylum regime: the detention of single men in Holot Detention Centre, the “Voluntary Departure” Scheme, and the taxation

policy or ‘deposit’ law. Fourth, I explore the emotions and practicalities of maintaining families transnationally. Through the narratives and lived experiences of a small number of Eritrean women, I emphasise various aspects of prolonged transnational motherhood in the context of gendered and racialised legal precarity under the Israeli asylum regime. I ask how mothers sustained and cared for children in, through, and against conditions of protracted displacement with limited opportunities for family reunification and shared futures. Finally, I conclude the dissertation by following three Eritrean mothers as they irregularly leave the settler colonial state of Israel to secure legal status and permanent protection for themselves and their children, some still unborn. These Eritrean mothers used forged Ethiopian Israeli identity documents to travel to the UK to enable family reunification with the children they left behind in Israel. I argue that by engaging in acts of refusing the global apartheid regime, its interconnected processes of migration enforcement, and their racialised orderings, the Eritrean mothers shaped a future for themselves and their children.

Keywords: Settler Colonialism, Resistance, Motherhood, Mobility, Gendered Racialisation, Legal Precarity

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A Note on Visuals

In October 2013, a young Eritrean woman was found dead in the Mediterranean Sea off the Italian island of Lampedusa. Her newborn baby, still attached to her via the umbilical cord, was also found dead. The mother gave birth as the boat with which she attempted to travel from the coast of Libya to Italy to seek asylum in Europe sank. The woman and her newborn baby were among around 400 people who lost their lives that day (Teklehaimanot 2021).

The painting by Eritrean diaspora artist Michael Adonai, on the front page of my dissertation, is his visual memorial to the mother and her newborn baby who lost their lives at sea. His painting, in addition to a decade and a half of working, researching, and sharing life with women from Eritrea experiencing different asylum and border regimes, inspired the focus of my doctoral research. Reading about and researching this tragedy led me to question: How do pregnancy and motherhood affect how displacement is experienced? This question then turned into my doctoral research project on Eritrean mothers' gendered and racialised experiences and navigations of the Israeli asylum regime.

Each title page of the various chapters of the thesis displays a painting by Michael Adonai. In Michael Adonai's work, mothers are central figures, whether during war or peace. Adonai's paintings artistically visualise the focus on women from Eritrea with mothering responsibilities who experience gendered and racialised asylum regimes along their

migration from Eritrea to settler colonial Israel and onwards to the UK and Canada. The artist has permitted me to use his artwork to visualise my dissertation after multiple online conversations between October 2020 and December 2022.¹

List of Figures: Artwork by Michael Adonai

1. Front Page: *Lampedusa*, 2014
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3. Introduction: *Lampedusa*, 2014, p. 1
4. Chapter One: *Longing*, 2013, p. 43
5. Chapter Two: Untitled, no year, p. 90
6. Chapter Three: *The Trauma of Africa*, 2001, p. 133
7. Chapter Four: Untitled, no year, p. 180
8. Chapter Five: Untitled, no year, p. 230
9. Reflections: *The Messenger*, 201, p. 305

Acknowledgements

I read Junot Diaz's *Islandborn* to my daughter Tsigereda when she was five years old. The book follows a young child as she embarks on the process of remembering the island she left together with her mother and grandmother when she was just a baby following a natural disaster and decades of dictatorial rule. I hope that writing this dissertation and my daughter Tsigereda - and later son Tsinay - joining me for research in Israel and in the UK has started a process of remembering for them too, although they have never set foot in their ancestral land, Eritrea. I hope that this has set in motion a process of finding where they belong, as they connect with, witness, and gain an intimate understanding of the lived experiences of their father and his Eritrean people both in Eritrea and the wider diaspora. The birth of my children inspired my focus on mothering in times of legal precarity. Writing this dissertation was at once deeply personal as well as political, just as life is, and at all times intimately intertwined with my mothering practices and caring responsibilities. I embarked on this doctoral programme when my daughter Tsigereda was growing in my womb. She is now nine years old and joined by her brother Tsinay, and they have both become intimately familiar with the struggles that writing a doctoral thesis brings with it, including the affective and relational impact. Both of them have been attached to my body or boobs while researching and writing this dissertation, often while asleep. The process of completing my dissertation has meant that I often had to divide my attention and presence. My daughter Tsigereda, son Tsinay, and partner Kidane have

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A thousand thanks to Kidane, my partner, who studied and worked full time, at times two jobs, waking up at five o'clock in the morning, picking up our daughter Tsigereda in the afternoon from nursery, and later school, and then heading to university for his BA degree in the evening hours to support our family and to allow me to carve out time for my PhD research and writing. He has been a loving, amazing, engaging, adventurous parent and partner. He supported our family while working through a global pandemic, dealing with the insecurity and stress of securing his immigration status in the UK and supporting family members in Eritrea and in the diaspora. In the final months of finishing my dissertation, he too became entangled in his MA studies and yet ensured that I could finish. I am so grateful for our able bodies, clear minds and the beautiful people we have around us, who support us. Now it is time to start dreaming again and re-imagining our lives once more.

Much like my PhD thesis has undergone multiple transformations, so have I. In the span of researching and writing this thesis, I aged eight years, moved countries four times, lived in six different homes, gave birth to two children, and changed jobs four times - working both part-time and full-time to finance the PhD research and family life. One can say that the PhD - as for many - has been a steady accompaniment for adulthood and motherhood. The PhD has been a presence that often felt unpleasant and burdensome to have with me at all times and deeply impacted my mental health and well-being. I struggled through postpartum depression, the consequences of Brexit deeply impacting my family and

friends' social, political, economic and legal lives, a global pandemic, hospitalisation, and the aftermath of COVID-19. I have juggled working, writing a PhD, mothering children, dealing with immigration issues, and life under racialised capitalism in London. Within this, it felt asphyxiating, debilitating, and burdensome to always have to return to the PhD. Many times, I was ready to give up, but my family, friends, and colleagues' support kept me going.

ከብረት ይገባለይ *Kbret yhabele*. Thank you to the Eritrean and Sudanese mothers and their families in Israel, the UK and Canada, whose lived experiences and narratives are at the heart of this dissertation. I am grateful to them for sharing their lived realities. I would like to thank them for helping me gain a deeper understanding of the workings of the asylum regimes so intimately impacting their lives and those of their intimate ties (Lijnders 2022). My interlocutors welcomed me and my daughter into their lives and homes so beautifully. I try to share and describe their complex, intersecting lives as truthfully and fully as I can. I am grateful to their children for their cheerful presence and patience as I took their mother's time away from them. For the beds shared with me, the homemade food and the intimacy of their lives and stories. It is not just the people, but also the movements and spaces they created that informed my research. Particularly the women at the Eritrean Women's Community Centre (Zebib, Saba, Samrawit, Helen, Eden, Simrit and Bisrat) and Kuchinate in Tel Aviv (Aziza, Diddy, Lina, Yerusalem, Eden, Titi, Freta, Brikti, Sofia, Lichiya, Salamawit, Shewit, Stav, Lindsey, Ruth, Michal). At the Network of Eritrean Women in London, I thank Monaliza, Khedijah, Haben, Asmahan, Niat, Samia, Ayah, Helen, and Brittney.

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I am deeply grateful to my family and friends for encouraging me and continuing to believe in me over the past eight years of researching and writing my dissertation. My parents, Con and Henriette, have encouraged me inexhaustibly and supported me on every level possible. I am the first in my family to pursue a PhD. My father was raised by a builder and a stay-at-home mother and did not attend university. My mother was brought up by two farmers and gained a BA degree. Despite their unfamiliarity with academia and the English language, they read parts of my thesis and never stopped bothering me with questions about the progress I made. My twin sister Loes offered emotional and intellectual support and asked the critical questions needed to write and rewrite my thesis. My sister Lisan and brother Willem travelled with and to us to support us with the care of our children, especially in the final months. In London, I thank Carmen, Luna, Esther, Ria, Libi, Barbara, Jessica, Willow, Dan and Kate for their continued friendship, sisterhood, love, exchange of time, and care for each other's families. Sanne, Lieke, Andel and others have supported me in and from the Netherlands.

Adane, Sophie, Hassan, Adrieh, Jack, Jenna, Sari, Steven, Ziv, Rachel, Noa, Kim, Suleiman, Shani, Layal and many others made life in Yaffa full of love and laughter.

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My research, thinking and writing have been deeply informed by engaging with fellow PhD students at the Centre for Gender Studies, the participation in several conferences and workshops throughout my PhD as well as the feedback from peer reviewers on academic publications. It is impossible to name them all, but I thank the organisers and participants in these academic spaces for learning, sharing, participating, reflecting and providing feedback.

Yaffa, December 2022



Prologue

Prologue: A Celebration of New Life

The shrieks of an infant penetrate the singing and praying in Ge'ez and Tigrinya in a warm and packed church hall filled with hundreds of women, men and children from Eritrea. The mother holds the infant in her arms as members of the Eritrean community in Israel gather for an early morning baptism ceremony at *Medhane Alem*, or Saviour of the World, an Eritrean Orthodox church located on the first floor of a rundown building in Shapira neighbourhood in South Tel Aviv, Israel. Standing outside on the street, one would not know that the building, in a residential area, serves as an Orthodox Church for the Eritrean people experiencing the Israeli asylum regime. Ascending the narrow staircase, one is greeted with the sounds of religious prayers sung through a microphone. Speakers hanging from the ceiling carry the prayers into the ears of the hundreds of churchgoers. A mix of traditional white Eritrean shoes, or *Habesha chama*, and modern shoes and high heels are sprayed across the floor. Men are standing and seated to one side and women and the children to the other.

Some are dressed in a mix of traditional white clothes with colourful crosses and other embroidered ornaments, and others in modern dresses and suits. The women have covered their heads with *shashes*, traditional long scarfs made of white cotton with colourful embroidered edges. A deep-red carpet covers the church floor. The blackened-out windows are covered with white curtains. Posters with images of Mariam, Jesus and Archangels decorate the walls, further adorned with plastic flower chains. The images have Tigrinya, one of the national languages of Eritrea, and scriptures written around the

religious figures. Some images depict these religious figures in European ways, while others show them in typical Eritrean and Ethiopian imagery. Engraved wooden crosses hang between the posters. Colourful red and green curtains adorn some of the walls and hang from the ceiling with golden tassels. A plastic statue of Mariam is covered in translucent Christmas fairy lights, flickering from red to green. Plastic flowers stand tall in vases. Through the open windows, the sound of newly arriving churchgoers and early morning traffic are audible.

The new mothers, waiting for their children to be baptised, are dressed in *zurias*, traditional white cotton dresses, their hair covered with matching *shashs*. They are seated at the centre of the church hall, in white plastic chairs, holding their infants in their arms wrapped in white baptismal blankets. On this Saturday morning in late May 2017, 18 children are baptised. The mothers' faces are decorated with golden earrings and *werqi shilmat*, golden headbands, and their hair is done in the festive *albeso* style, in high braids on their heads. Their hands, arms, feet and legs are painted in elaborate and delicate flower patterns with black *henna* and adorned with golden rings and bracelets. Around the new mothers stand their female family members, friends and fellow villagers, also dressed in traditional white, their heads covered with *shashs*. Some have sat down on the floor. The service, which started well before dawn, has been going on for several hours already. A group of men, dressed in suits, are covered in *gabi*, long white cotton cloth, and lean over long white sticks while they recite prayers. The service is led by four Eritrean priests dressed in golden prayer ropes, holding crosses in their hands whilst reciting prayers from the bible in Ge'ez, an ancient language still used for religious purposes. Their heads are covered with golden prayer hats decorated with red crosses. One of the priests

holds a life-size golden cross. They pray and sing in Ge'ez. The smell of incense fills the room, as one of the priests moves the chain censer around in different directions.

Some of the mothers nurse their infants, covering them with their long scarves, while others hold their sleeping infants in their arms. Up against their legs sit their older children, dressed in traditional clothing. Other children are asleep on their mothers' backs, held by a *gabi* while their mothers gently rock back and forth. The new mothers have dressed their soon-to-be-baptised infants in white garments and shaved their heads. Black kohl is smeared around their eyes. Then, the mothers undress their infants and pass them into the hands of elders while the churchgoers perform a praying ritual in *Ge'ez*. The infants' cries intensify as they are passed naked from the arms of their mothers into the hands of a respected male elder, and then on to one of the priests for the baptism ritual. They are then dipped into a plastic translucent tub filled with Holy water from the Jordan River. Water is poured over their faces and bodies, while they are circled by the four priests. The mothers too come forward to wash their faces with the Holy water. After the infants are immersed in the water, they are returned into the arms of elderly men in the community and another priest marks a cross on their forehead with anointed Holy oil. The babies are finally returned to their mothers who dress them, and the church service resumes.

Culture and Orthodox church law require that boys are baptised forty days after they are born, and girls after eighty days. Among the Eritrean Christian community in Israel, baptism is an important event and for mothers, the religious gathering is a crucial part of their passage into motherhood. With Eritreans experiencing the asylum regime in Israel

reaching nearly 36,000 in 2017, such mass baptisms are not uncommon. Eritrean communities have unique access to holy sites in Israel and occupied Palestinian territories and these have become integrated into their baptism rituals. After the religious celebration, the new parents are joined by their family and friends aboard busses and driven to cities and religious centre points, such as Jerusalem, Bethlehem and the Jordan River, the traditional site of the baptism of Jesus, and other religious sites in Israel and occupied Palestinian territories to celebrate and further solidify their baptism. These border crossings into the occupied Palestinian territories come with gendered and racialised encounters at checkpoints and places of worship. Baptism, and other life celebrations such as engagements and weddings, are documented by teams of video- and photographers from the community hired for the occasion. The footage is sent to family members in Eritrea and the wider diaspora, who participate in the celebrations this way. Important moments during motherhood are documented to make these accessible to family and other intimate ties scattered globally. Video footage is also sent the other way around, from Eritrea to Israel, so that weddings and baptisms can be enjoyed from afar and a sense of connection and presence is maintained.

The above is a vignette of a baptism ceremony that took place in Tel Aviv, Israel in May 2017. I chose to open my PhD thesis with this religious ceremony as it represents an important celebration of new life for women, who identify as mothers, experiencing the asylum regime in Tel Aviv, Israel. They celebrate their children's new lives in much the same way as they would in Eritrea, surrounded by members of their community, people who too left Eritrea to seek asylum, security and stability for themselves and their family members. This baptism ceremony is an example of how non-Jewish, Black women with

caring responsibilities living under the asylum regime are “claiming and practising belonging in the everyday cultures they co-create” (Erel, Reynolds and Kaptani 2018, 62), notwithstanding the hostility, violence, and legal precarity they face in the settler colonial state of Israel. Churches and religion offer a space where Eritrean women can express and celebrate motherhood in a way that the Israeli government and society may not accept or rather would frame as a security threat (see Chapter Three). It is racialised non-Jewish mothers who experience and live under the Israeli asylum regime who are at the heart of my thesis. I explore their everyday understanding of and resistance to this regime which is so intimately encroaching on their lives.

I conclude the prologue with a quote from Fatima, an Eritrean woman whose migration and motherhood practices are at the heart of Chapter Five. Fatima is married and has one son born in Israel, who is seven years old and a daughter who was born in the UK who was almost two years old when I visited them for an interview in 2018. Fatima used a forged identity document to travel to the UK and after receiving refugee status facilitated the family reunification with her son and husband whom she left behind in Israel. Despite experiencing the Israeli regime as unbearable, the communities of people living under it brought her and each other solace and perseverance. Reflecting on her time in Israel, and the cultural and religious practices she engaged in in the presence of her community she said:

“In Israel, people love each other, they communicate with each other especially when you have a wedding, baptism or something. You can feel like you are in your own country. You can’t feel like you have no paper, no future, you can’t feel it. We have a community life there. In Tel Aviv, you have celebrations every weekend, you don’t

have time to think as well. You are busy, always busy. For years and years, we wanted to leave, but we miss Israel. Israel is a nice country. Only the government is not good. Me too, I miss Israel.”²



Introduction

Introduction: “We Are Refugees Not Infiltrators”: Eritrean Mothers’ Navigations of the Israeli Asylum Regime

“[...] Black mothers’ care of their children and families is not confined to the domestic sphere of the household and family unit. Rather, black mothering operates at the borders of public/private boundaries. Black mothering represents a site of struggle and survival. Yet, it is also a collective and connective space where we, as black women, can thrive and accomplish great acts of achievements in our individual lives and those of our children” (Reynolds 2020, 3).

“We are refugees! We are refugees!” chanted the thousands of Eritrean and Sudanese women experiencing the Israeli asylum regime³ who marched through the streets of Tel Aviv from Levinsky Park to the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and onwards to the American Embassy on the 15th of January 2014. Sumaya Omar⁴, a Sudanese woman and activist, shouted through a portable microphone: “We need protection!” and the thousands of women followed her by echoing: “We need protection!”⁵ Sumaya continued:

*“We have been in Israel for several years now. We live here with no basic protection and no basic rights. We live in fear of our husbands and brothers being sent to prison. We feel that there is no one to stand by our side in our time of need. We call on UNHCR and the rest of the international community to help protect our rights”.*⁶

The protest was organised by a group of women activists from Eritrea and Sudan. With their children strapped to their backs or seated in buggies before them, several thousands of women marched holding protest signs in Hebrew and English saying: “We are refugees not infiltrators”, “Release our husbands”, “We are human beings”, “Being Black is not a disease” and “Do not arrest fathers”. These five slogans capture the focus of my dissertation: the experiences, intimate ties, and political subjectivity of Black non-Jewish women from Eritrea, who identify as mothers, and their gendered and racialised experiences in and of the Israeli asylum regime in Israel. Adopting this multi-layered frame of analysis seeks to avoid “the trap of essentializing women, viewing them instead in their fluid and changing identities within which they perceive themselves.” (Abdo 2011, 11). Some women crossed their hands above their heads, as if handcuffed at their wrists, a sign that had come to mark all the protests at the end of 2013 and beginning of 2014, and visually represented their feelings of being imprisoned.⁷ One woman from Eritrea, in particular, stood out, with a protest sign around her neck saying: “We need asylum. We need protection”, balled fist in the air, pushing her son in his pram. The women and their children marched to protest the new Holot detention centre opened in Israel’s Negev desert (or Naqab)⁸, to halt the planned deportations of the men in their communities, and to demand they are all recognised as refugees. The women gave a letter to representatives of both the UNHCR and the US Embassy stating that they marched because:

“The Israeli government is treating us as if we are not human beings. We live here with no status, no basic rights, no hope and no means to support our children. We are not criminals. Our children are not criminals. Our husbands and our brothers are not criminals. The Government of Israel is summoning men with families to the "open" Center in the Negev desert, separating husbands from wives, and children from their

fathers. The arrests and imprisonment of asylum seekers are tearing away at the only support system we have - our families and our communities. We did not come to Israel for a better life. We come here to stay alive. We escaped dictatorships, forced labour, genocide and war. Some of us have survived the torture camps in Sinai, where women were held captive, raped and tortured for ransom. Many of us are single mothers and they are standing here today alone with their children. We did not choose to become refugees. We did not choose to leave our families and spend years without seeing them. We miss our homes. We want to go back. But for now, for us, home is a dangerous place. We came to Israel seeking protection because we wanted to feel safe, as women and as refugees. But the Israeli government is calling us infiltrators, incites the public against us, and we feel we are under attack. We are scared to go out. Our children live in fear. We feel that we too live in a prison. We cannot provide our children with their most basic needs. We cannot work legally and we are paid pittance for our labour. We struggle to pay for our children's health insurance. When we cannot support them, there is no welfare system to turn to for help. Our children are being punished for a situation they have no control over. We are calling on UNHCR to do its duty – protect refugees and the rights of asylum seekers.”⁹

The women and their children protested – as part of weeks of public protests, marches, sit-ins and a strike - alongside tens of thousands of Eritrean and Sudanese people living under the Israeli asylum regime (Mesgena and Ramati 2017). The women called on Israeli policymakers and the UNHCR “to do its duty to protect refugees and the rights of asylum seekers” and “to ensure that Israel is examining our asylum claims in a fair and transparent way, according to international law.” They called on the US government and other countries to “remind Israel of its obligations and the 1951 refugee convention¹⁰.”¹¹ By protesting with their children, the women made their mothering practices visible and brought them into the public sphere. Levinsky Park, the start and end point of the protests led by people experiencing the Israeli asylum regime, is in the heart of the neighbourhoods of South Tel Aviv, where many people from Eritrea and Sudan live.¹² The

women showed Israeli policymakers and society, who referred to the groups as “work infiltrators” that “we are not only men. Today there are 7500 refugee women in Israel.”¹³ Zebib Sultan, the founder of the Eritrean Women’s Community Centre and an activist emphasised in various media interviews the importance of women’s and mothers’ intimate ties as networks of emotional, financial and social support in the absence of state support and highlighted in a press release how, if their men would be taken to prison, families would be separated:

“We are marching on our own today because women refugees are suffering acutely under the policies of the Israeli government. When our husbands and brothers are taken away we are left to fend for ourselves. Our children don’t get basic health services. We have no welfare support. We came here to be safe but we are trapped in an unbearable daily struggle for survival.”¹⁴

Zebib Sultan connected the struggle to keep the men in their communities out of immigration detention to the wider criminalisation of the community falling under the Israeli asylum regime and the lack of recognition and provision of rights of their children:

“We are seeking asylum. We are not criminals. We need protection. We hope the Israeli government will hear our voice and respect our human rights. It is very difficult, our kids have no legal documents, they are undocumented, and they have no basic rights. We have no support for our kids”.¹⁵

In this thesis, I elaborate on the many ways in which mothering and childrearing open up spaces of agency and resistance for those who engage in it, to stand against racism and

other forms of oppression (Lanari 2022; Lijnders 2022; Shobiye and Parker 2022; Tschalaer 2022). Alexia Bloch (2022), in her research with Congolese women without refugee status in Moscow, argues that having children with fellow African migrants becomes a “political act” when living with legal precarity and is one of the most striking practices of how women make lives for themselves. I turn to Black feminist scholars who have outlined the political dimensions of mothering and care work (Reynolds 2003; hooks 1991; Hill Collins 1990, 1994), in ways that are also visible in the actions of Eritrean women in settler colonial Israel, hereafter referred to as Israel, unless I specifically want to emphasise the workings of settler colonialism. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) stresses how Black women’s practices as ‘othermothers’ foster ethics of care within the Black community. She describes motherhood as an ambivalent status that introduces challenges to Black women’s lives, but also provides a foundation for “self-actualization, status in the Black community, and a catalyst for social activism” (ibid. 2000, 176). Similarly, Tracey Reynolds (2003, 44) found that “within ‘black community parenting’ the self, family and community are irrevocably intertwined”. bell hooks (1991, 45) highlights how Black women build homes for the next generation that form sites for resistance. She emphasises how racism shapes Black women’s thinking, home-building, and childrearing (ibid, 46). Likewise, scholarship on Latinx mothering has framed mothering as “an act of transformative labour within academic and community spaces”, thus emphasising its political potentialities (Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022; Caballero et al. 2019, 3).

Mothering as a Resistance Strategy

In these acts of resistance discussed in the introduction, mothering and care practices enter the political sphere (Lijnders 2018). Mothers used care, resistance and activism to approach the everyday tasks of existence under gendered and racialised legal precarity, their mothering practices as well as the task of crossing borders and seeking legal security (Feldman-Savelsberg 2022). As Peter Nyers (2011, 127) and Anne McNevin (2006) have shown in other contexts, including the USA, Canada and Europe, asylum seekers and refugees are emerging as “key protagonists” in local, national and global struggles for refugee rights and freedom of movement across borders. The women, racialised non-citizens, use the protest to claim social recognition and rights in the domains of political, social and economic life in Israel (cf. Isin and Nielsen 2008). Women with children took their mothering practices into the public sphere to appeal to the Israeli government, lawmakers and the host community. Women from Eritrea and Sudan use care, resistance and activism “to approach the everyday tasks of existence and parenting as well as the extraordinary tasks of crossing borders and navigating legal precarity” (cf. Feldman-Savelsberg 2022). By doing so, they are challenging their racialised non-citizenship and lack of refugee status and rights under the Israeli asylum regime. Through their engagement in public protests, women politicise motherhood, and mothering became a site of resistance to various forms of oppression, including racism and legal precarity (cf. Suerbaum 2022a; Hill Collins 1994). Motherhood is made a public matter that redefines “care as resistance as a matter of justice” (cf. Quintela and Biroli 2022). Through public protests, Eritrean mothers challenge political and public ideas about who has rights and can contribute to society through mothering and intimate ties (see also Erel, Reynolds,

and Kaptani 2018). It is precisely through intimate ties that women and mothers sought to challenge detention and other restrictive policies. They directly engaged with authorities to challenge individual detention orders, but also to demand policy changes for their children to be recognised and documented. The women do not just show up in these protests as refugees, they emphasise their identity as racialised mothers, wives, sisters and aunts. Women bring their children along and attend to their needs publicly and vocalise slogans and speeches related to their mothering responsibilities. Women use images and discourses of severed intimate ties – children being separated from their fathers, wives from their husbands, sisters from their brothers, women from the men in their communities - to challenge and resist the terms on which the state legitimises and enforces the detention of single men (cf. Luibhéid, Andrade, and Stevens 2018, 2). In addition, the state also tries to present men as "single" to justify their detention.

Their protest and demands show how intimately the women understand and experience the Israeli regime as gendered and racialised. The women developed a gendered and racialised political consciousness (cf. Richter-Devroe 2022; Veillette 2021, 87). Anne-Marie Veillette (2021, 91) refers to such political activities organised by women as “racialized popular feminism”, conditioned by the distinct ways that racism shapes women’s experiences, consciousness and strategies for resistance. As such the women and children protest of January 2014 is an illustrative way to introduce the focus of my thesis: how Black, non-Jewish women from Eritrea experience, negotiate, challenge and resist the Israeli asylum regime. I focus on four analytical dimensions: asylum experienced in Israel, motherhood practices and experiences of Eritrean women living under the Israeli asylum regime; legal precarity caused by the policies of and the encounter with the Israeli

asylum regime; and gendered racialisation through the analysis of the simultaneous and interacting effects of race and gender processes on women with mothering responsibilities and their wider intimate ties.¹⁶

While asylum seeking men are often depicted as threats, women employ emotion-triggering images of refugee mothers and their children as victims (see also Tschalaer 2022; Amores, Arcila-Calderón, and González-de-Garay 2020; Arshad and Islam 2018). By leading protests, Eritrean and Sudanese women seek to challenge the negative constructions of men from their communities as criminals, rapists or violent (Ravid 2021, 210) but also undo their assumed passive and secondary role. They assume the role of “protectors”, not only of their rights but also those of the men in their communities. Similarly, they subvert the language used by the Israeli government and media, which refer to them as “infiltrators” by arguing instead that they are refugees. Through these protests, women actively and publicly transform racialised and gendered notions of who deserves to have rights in Israel. By bringing their children into the public sphere in the form of protest, women also bring together the private and the public in a way that challenges traditional notions of these two spheres (see also Erel and Reynolds 2017; Erel 2011). As such, Eritrean mothers demand rights by protesting the injustices involved in their experiences (see also Luibhéid, Andrade, and Stevens 2018). Umut Erel and Tracey Reynolds (2018, 1) argue that “migrant mothers’ cultural and caring work enables their children and themselves to occupy a place as future citizens, despite their racialised subordination”. While the ‘here and now’ is an emotionally demanding and energy-consuming space for Eritrean women, it is also “resourceful as individuals, families and

communities creatively negotiate precarious political-economic circumstances” (Sakti and Amrith 2022).

I argue that Eritrean women mobilised as mothers to develop a racialised political subjectivity (cf. Veillette 2021, 92). Political development happened in the public sphere, as well as on intimate domestic levels – also referred to as infra-politics (Veillette 2021, 92; Lugones 2010, 746) – where women challenge and resist the Israeli asylum regime. It is the women’s political subjecthood, whether expressed in radical, collective, and public ways, or in individual, intimate and domestic ways that my thesis explores. I observe both public and hidden transcripts—forms of resistance that openly challenge and subvert the established order, and those that undermine power without being detected (Veillette 2021, 88). I thus focus not only on public but also private and intimate acts of citizenship and rights claiming conducted by Eritrean mothers (see also Erel and Reynolds 2018, 2 in the context of the UK). The two must be studied together to understand how the private is forced into the public and how women equally use this political enforcement to expose the fraught asylum policies. As Ruba Salih (2017, 4-5), in the context of the Palestinian diaspora argues, Eritrean mothers’ struggles in the domestic sphere of the home should be considered politically productive realms in their terms and not in opposition to the protests taking place in the political sphere (Lijnders 2018).

Research Questions

The following research questions are at the centre of my dissertation:

- How do Black, non-Jewish, Eritrean women, who identify as mothers, experience the Israeli asylum regime on an everyday level? How do they manage their mothering responsibilities and practices within this regime?
- How do Black, non-Jewish, Eritrean women resist the Israeli asylum regime on the personal and domestic, and collective and public levels?
- What political and affective strategies do Black, non-Jewish, Eritrean women experiencing the asylum regime in Israel develop to challenge legal precarity and prolonged periods of waithood?
- Can we engage in an intersectional feminist analysis of the Israeli asylum regime without understanding it as part of the settler colonial state, apartheid regime, and ongoing occupation of Palestine?

Before I continue, I want to make a note on tenses through this dissertation. When I refer to policies or practices under the Israeli asylum regime that are ongoing and continue to affect Eritrean women in Israel, I write in the present tense. When providing ethnographic insights and analysis on the Eritrean mothers I engaged with for my doctoral research, I write in the past tense.

Main Concepts: Migration as a Gendered and Racialised Process for Eritrean Mothers in Israel

In zooming in on the biographical narratives of mothers from Eritrea, I seek to develop an analysis of gendered racialisation in Israel. The mothering practices and intimate ties of Eritrean women offer complex insights that allow a close exploration of life under the Israeli asylum system (Lijnders 2022). Mothers focus not only on their own but also on their children's future and their search to manoeuvre themselves towards an envisioned trajectory (Vigh 2009) of a stable future and a life with their children and other intimate ties (ibid.).

I start with the understanding that migration and diaspora experiences are racialised and gendered. Eritrean women experience intersectional oppression and violence in Israel and the United Kingdom (Lijnders 2018). I take a feminist, intersectional approach to understanding the experiences of women from Eritrea living under the asylum regime in Israel. I explore how intersecting oppressions impact women's journeys and experiences. I focus primarily on the intersection between 'race' and gender, but I also consider the impact of other axes of oppression, such as immigration status and class. I refer to Israel as a settler colonial state and apartheid regime, recognising the ongoing occupation of Palestine and understanding asylum harm in the context of wider oppression and violence towards Palestinian people, Ethiopian Jewish Israelis and other marginalised and racialised Jewish communities such as Mizrahi communities, migrant workers from South East Asia and other places, as well as undocumented migrants and asylum seekers from countries in Eastern Europe, West Africa and Latin America.

Applying the Lens of Motherhood

My dissertation centres on empirical data that document the experiences of those living under the Israeli asylum regime who self-identify as women and mothers. I am aware that this does not imply that such experiences also speak to or represent those of people who identify as trans or non-binary and that this has to be taken into consideration when theorising gendered experiences of legal precarity (cf. Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022). I also acknowledge that I therewith contribute to scholarly work on forced migration that “continues to render sexuality invisible by having heterosexuality as the unmarked but taken-for-granted premise for migratory relationships, desires, and processes” (Fobear 2014, 51).

Existing scholarship has paid increasing attention to mothering and care work in migration contexts (Coe 2013; Baldassar 2007; Parrenas 2001; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997). Umut Erel and Tracey Reynolds (2018) conceptualise mothering practices as interventions into citizenship, showing how racialised migrant women, through paid and unpaid labour, as well as their cultural and caring work, contribute to the societies in which they live and transform racialised notions of citizenship. Their work sheds light on women’s agency, subjectivities, and claims to rights and belonging. I build on these arguments and seek to unpack further the overlapping and interconnected experiences of gendered racialisation and legal precarity in Israel, and Eritrean women’s navigations of them (cf. Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022).

Legal Precarity

I use the concept of legal precarity, understood in its gendered and racialised ways, to refer to the lived and embodied experiences by Eritrean women of the laws and policies together making up the Israeli asylum regime. Asylum regimes, not just in the case of Israel, but across the globe are inherently linked to a condition of precarity. The concept of legal precarity has received widespread attention in anthropological studies of migration regimes. Luin Goldring and colleagues (2009, 240) show that precarious migratory status and the ensuing gendered and racialised legal precarity is “multi-dimensional” and constructed by asylum and migration regimes, but also through activism and political and public discourses (see also Suerbaum 2021). In the context of Israel, policies and directives have been set with the explicit and implicit purpose of making the lives of those living under the Israeli asylum regime “miserable”, triggering various legal challenges in the Israeli court system by refugee support organisations. Resulting of both public protests and these court challenges, the Israeli asylum regime has constantly shifted and the legal precarity experienced by Eritrean women has changed too. Legal precarity has gendered and racialised aspects and consequences (ibid, 257) and asylum regimes create hierarchies based on people’s race, gender, class, religion and nationality (Ellerman 2020, 2464). Legal precarity, as seen in Chapter Three, in the context of Israel, materialises in the form of detainability, deportability, insecure and exploitative work conditions, inability to access public services and state protection, and exposure to discrimination and isolation in everyday life (cf. Tschalaer 2022; Paret and Gleeson 2016, 281). Mothering under legal precarity as such is deeply

intertwined with concrete and abstract uncertainties and insecurities (Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022).

Referencing the term legal precarity, Antje Ellermann (2020, 2464) points out that it has long been associated with undocumented and temporary immigration status, but has come to afflict all types of immigration status. I also use the term legal precarity to analyse the types of temporary and provisional status most Eritrean women received in transit countries such as Sudan, Ethiopia and Egypt and receiving countries such as Israel and the United Kingdom (cf. Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022). For Eritrean women, life under the Temporary Protection Policy, which forces them to renew their documentation every other month, only protects them until they can be deported to their home countries, and grants no rights is linked to the absence of permanence (cf. Ellerman 2020, 2470). As such, legal precarity is experienced by many Eritrean women as existential uncertainty (cf. Jackson 2013) as they live in a “state of deportability” in what Ronit Lentin and Elena Moreo (2015, 7) have called the “state of exception that is Israel/Palestine”. Additionally, the inability to obtain refugee status makes Eritrean women vulnerable to forms of structural and symbolic violence (cf. Abrego and Lakhani 2015, 269). As Chapter Five makes clear, women frequently live in liminal legality ‘in-between’ legal categories, and often there is long-term uncertainty inherent in their legal status (cf. Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022).

I explore how women’s mothering practices under the Israeli asylum regime permeate their sense of self, their relationships, their ability to engage in local communities and to sustain contact with intimate ties in Eritrea and the wider diaspora (cf. Menjívar 2006,

1000). I study the interconnections of these various dimensions, from the personal to the transnational, and how they manifest in women's everyday lives (cf. Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022). State strategies of constituting Eritrean women as legally precarious work through and impact on women's intimate ties to their children (cf. *ibid.* 2022; Luibhéid, Andrade and Stevens 2018), who receive no status until they turn 18 and then automatically adopt their parents' legally precarious status.

Gendered Racialisation

Throughout the thesis, I focus on the interconnection of legal categorisation and processes of gendered racialisation. In line with Patricia Hill Collins' (1994) call to "shift the centre" of feminist analysis, I attend to the experiences of various forms of discrimination among racialised Eritrean mothers. I understand the gendered and racialised experiences of Black non-Jewish women from Eritrea within processes and hierarchies of racialisation in Israel. I start from the premise that there is a triangular overlap of mothering practices among women living under the Israeli asylum regime, gendered racialisation, and legal precarity in the context of the settler colonial state. Jennifer Ma (2020) understands racialisation as the "process of race categorization based on a socially constructed hierarchical ordering of groups of people wherein Whiteness is considered superior to non-White 'others'". In the context of Israel, it is not just whiteness, but also Jewish supremacy that is at play. Sarah Willen (2010, 267) argues that "Jewishness is racialized in Israel to the benefit of citizens with Jewish heritage and to the detriment of all other citizens and residents", including Palestinians with Israeli citizenship, Palestinians in the occupied territories and Gaza, and migrant workers and

people living under the Israeli asylum regime. Israel has been conceptualised as a racial state (Lentin 2018) and Israel's asylum regime has been understood as racialised (Ravid 2022a; Yacobi 2011; Anteby-Yemini 2015). Border Criminologies scholar Maayan Ravid (2022, 131) argues that Israeli policies amount to racialised structural violence as they apply to a distinct group of Black people from a variety of African countries who are "made distinct through collective categorization, negative evaluation and associated stigmatisation based on shared attributes or origin". Ronit Lentin (2018, 116-17) points out that Racialisation can be described as a process of essentialisation, naturalisation and biologisation, which takes into focus an aspect of social personhood and uses it to create meaning (Silverstein 2005, 364). Alia Al-Saji (2014, 137) highlights that racialisation "relies on the naturalisation of projected and oppositional difference to the perceived body". Racialisation thus depends on a mechanism of othering in which racialised bodies are seen as naturally inferior, a process that these bodies cannot escape (ibid, 138).

The interplay between racialisation and legal status has been discussed in US-focussed scholarship. Menjívar (2021, 92), for instance, stresses that (undocumented) legal status has become a proxy for race and an axis of social stratification with wide-ranging repercussions on migrants' lives. Apart from the role that legal and bureaucratic structures play, there is a social dimension to the racialisation of legal status, namely, the presence of stereotypes, stigmatisation, and narratives of threat in society. (ibid, 93). In the European context, Nicholas De Genova (2018) brings racialisation into contact with illegality and mobility by scrutinising the mass deaths of non-Europeans in the Mediterranean Sea. He stresses that there is a racial specificity to these deaths and other forms of structural violence and that those exposed to suffering and lethal threats are

commonly euphemised across Europe as ‘migrants’ (ibid, 1768). Ultimately, De Genova argues that “the very figure of migration is always already racialized” (ibid.). Similarly, Lorena Gazzotti (2021, 279) shows how bureaucrats at the EU borders leverage blackness to create illegality. She thus describes legal status as racially constructed. To this critical discussion of how legal status allocation and illegalisation processes have racial components, I add a gendered lens, particularly the lens of motherhood (cf. Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022).

Asylum in the Settler Colonial State of Israel

How settler colonialism links in with infrastructures of apartheid and occupation and is used to oppress people under the Israeli asylum regime, becomes particularly pertinent when looking at the ways in which asylum-seeking women (and men) are criminalised, excluded and violated under the Anti-Infiltration law as “infiltrators” (*mistanením*) (Lijnders 2022; Yaron, Hashimshony-Yaffe, and Campbell 2013, 145). The Anti-Infiltration law and the accompanying term “infiltrators” were initially applied in the 1950s to describe and criminalise Palestinians attempting to return to the lands they had been expelled from in the 1948 Nakba (Lijnders 2022; Lentin 2018, 115; Willen 2018, 20). Racialisation, legal exclusion and state violence have long shaped Israel’s treatment of Palestinians (Willen 2018, 119). Settler colonialism and Zionism are inherently Jewish supremacist. This dissertation argues that the settler colonial state of Israel operates through the elimination of Palestinians, and also the subordination of “racialised outsiders, like asylum seekers from East and West Africa, and migrant labourers based on their phenotypical distinctiveness from the European Jewish population” (Brown

2017, 45). In addition, there is a complex intra-Jewish racial order, with Ethiopian Jewish people at the bottom of the hierarchy due to racism, followed by Mizrahi Jews from the Middle East. Within this racialised hierarchy, Israel racialises and excludes Black non-Jewish women, as the “other,” or new “national abjects” (Willen 2018, 20), with the Palestinians and other enemy nationals facing maximum exclusion” (Kritzman-Amir 2009, 603) as the country’s “real” Others (Willen 2018, 20).

Whereas in the previous academic work, I have used the term Israel/Palestine (Lijnders 2022) and other scholars use Palestine/Israel (See also Natanel 2022; Zreik and Dakwar 2020; Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2015; Abdo 2011) I will refrain from doing so, influenced by Palestinian scholar Eman Ghanayem (2017), who writes in an open letter:

“It is more appropriate that you refrain from discursively coupling Palestine with Israel in your declarations and statements. “Israel” is not an inviting term for most Palestinians. In fact, it connotes a relationship of power where Israel dominates the discourse. Additionally, it gives the impression that both Palestine and Israel should be spoken of mainly and solely as relating equally to one another, which completely undermines the historicity of Palestine as an age-old culture and place that is magnanimous in legacy and gravity in comparison to Israel, a sixty-eight-year-old novice and forced settler colonial creation.”

As such and following Ghanayem (2017), from now on when you read Israel in the remaining text, it refers to the settler colonial state and apartheid regime of Israel.

Gendered Racialisation, Legal Precarity and the Israeli Asylum Regime

Through Eritrean women's experiences of mothering responsibilities, how can we then understand legal precarity in the context of the Israeli asylum regime? In the context of forced migration, Georgina Ramsay (2020, 17) understands precarity as a general state of protracted instability that captures the politico-economic forces that create uncertainty (Lijnders 2022). In the case of Eritrean mothers, their legal precarity is experienced from and within the Israeli asylum regime. Their experiences of temporality in Israel situate them "perpetually in crisis, indefinite indeterminacy, unable to project themselves into a certain or stable future" (Ramsay 2020, 13). Abrehet, an Eritrean woman said:

*"We are flying in the air. I don't know if this is our home, but it doesn't feel also like we are welcome. We are given every reason not to believe that this will ever be our home, isn't it? We are like a burden always. They push us that this is not our home, everywhere and in everyday activities. When we go to the visa, we have to take our children from their class to take them to renew our visa, the area, the environment, and the situation. All that I feel, my sons will feel too. We take them early in the morning, and we have to wait in tents in the heat, there are many children there, but there are no services for them. How can they wait for long hours under these conditions? For what purpose am I bringing my children to renew my visa? If they want to know who they are, why don't they give them an identity document themselves? They are in the school, how can they make them absent, they are missing a class? I only got it for 2 months. I questioned them. Then they said if you don't bring him then you won't get your visa."*¹⁷

Abrehet is from a small village in Eritrea. She completed her high school education and worked as a journalist in Eritrea before fleeing the country with her husband. She left her one-year-old son in the care of her mother and has had two sons in Israel. At the time of

our interview in 2017, she had arrived in Israel seven years earlier. Under the Israeli asylum regime, Abrehet and other Eritrean mothers, could not “project action into a predictable future and sense of stability” (ibid, 16). The lack of coherent and constantly changing policies took away their capacity to plan their lives long-term and caused great distress. Yet, as anthropologists have pointed out, refugees and asylum seekers attempt to forge futures of possibility despite their often-depleted present (Lijnders 2022; Ramsay 2020, 7; Feldman 2018; Fassin 2012).

Israel’s asylum regime has been described as “Ordered disorder” (Paz 2011), “bureaucratic ambiguity” (Afeef 2009, 11), “governmental unruliness” (Willen 2010) and “deliberate disregard” (Berman 2013). Between early 2000 and 2012 around 47,0000 asylum seekers entered Israel irregularly along its southern border with Egypt through non-authorised border points (Ravid 2018). Up to date, Israel has not put in place coherent national asylum policies that address the rights of asylum seekers and refugees residing in its territory, nor are there special gender-sensitive guidelines (Lijnders 2022; Ghebrezghiabher and Motzafi-Haller 2015, 4), apart from a short and vague paragraph on “Gender sensitivity in Asylum Procedures” in the Asylum Seekers Handling Procedures. Instead, asylum seekers from Eritrea (and Sudan) are regulated under a collective non-removal policy. Most women cannot imagine creating a different reality for themselves and their children under the collective non-removal policy, which offers them only temporary protection from deportation, and little hope of regularising their own and their children’s status from asylum seeker to recognised refugee (Lijnders 2022). There is no pathway to citizenship for non-Jewish asylum seekers in Israel. Following the construction of a high security fence along the Egyptian border in 2013 few people have

been able to cross into Israel (Raijman 2017, 2). A “Voluntary Return ” Scheme was announced in 2015, coercing many single men experiencing the asylum regime to “self-deport” (Birger, Shoham and Bolzman 2018). In June 2022, there were 26,195 Eritreans and Sudanese living in Israel under the Israeli asylum regime (Population and Immigration Authority 2022).¹⁸ A year later, in 2023, that number had reduced to 17,000. In the first six months of 2022, 1211 people left Israel through sponsorship programmes, resettlement through the UNHCR, and family reunification opportunities (ibid.) Under amendments to the original anti-infiltration law (1954), Eritrean women have been living with temporary protection permits, also called 2A5 visas, which grant them no rights other than the protection from being refouled to their home country under the principle of *non-refoulement*, due to the political situation in Eritrea and the risk of torture, imprisonment and persecution they face in Eritrea upon return (Belloni 2018a, 317). Their status has been left precarious under a non-transparent, biased and arbitrary RSD system (Lijnders 2022). None of the women I engaged with through my research has received refugee status in Israel despite many having unprocessed claims. Up until the end of 2013, the state of Israel did not allow individuals to claim asylum but rather granted temporary group protection. Temporary group protection has previously been applied by Israel to people from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d’Ivoire, and South Sudan but was lifted when the state deemed, against the belief of asylum seekers from these countries, that their countries were safe to return to and as such they were deported (Oztig 2022, 54; Lijnders 2013). As such, fears of losing temporary group protections and deportation were grounded in the lived experiences of communities from other African countries. However, there is nothing temporary in the presence of Eritrean women in Israel. Many have lived in Israel for 10 to 15 years, but

their status has remained unchanged throughout this period. The RSD process is fraught and only 17 Eritreans and one Sudanese have been granted refugee status (HIAS 2020) over the last decade. Women have limited to no access to state services and women receive no formal or financial institutional support during and after their arrival (Gebreyesus et al. 2018, 2; Eritrean Women's Community Centre 2013) and as such are pushed into poverty (Anteby-Yemini 2017, 10-11), poor housing situations, and marginalisation (ASSAF and PHR 2019, 4). The women have restricted access to health and social services (ASSAF, 2013), and experience extreme precariousness in employment and informal access to the labour market with their rights as workers deliberately left precarious (Mesgena 2015; Mesgena and Ramati 2017, 68). Eritrean women are often forced to find work in the informal economy within racialised sectors, receive low pay, and are prone to exploitation. As public health laws do not apply to people living under the Israeli asylum regime, women are not eligible for health coverage via the public system. For healthcare, women rely on humanitarian and government-run clinics, like Physicians for Human Rights and Terem Clinic, that are based in Tel Aviv only (Gebreyesus et al. 2019, 3) or emergency care in public hospitals. Children, especially those growing up in Tel Aviv, are educated under a segregated education system (Tsurkov 2012, 41).

Under the asylum regime, women receive no support from the Israeli government and its institutions (Raijman 2017, 2) except on very rare occasions. The women have no hope of acquiring security and stability for themselves and their children. Due to structurally racist policies and racism in Israeli society, communities seeking asylum live in a persistent state of anxiety and uncertainty. The oppression, racism and violence in the Israeli asylum regime operate on intimate, interpersonal, institutional and systemic

levels. The Israeli asylum regime impacts women's lived realities mental health and wellbeing, intimate ties, identities and communities. Constantly changing policies are crafted to "make their lives miserable" or unliveable (Ravid 2022a). The Israeli asylum regime is racist and its intentional hostility fits into a nationalist agenda to control the border and the demographics (Lijnders 2019). A lack of coherent policies takes away the capacity of women to think or plan for the long term, causing great distress, especially for mothers unable to plan for their children's future or expand their families.

Women from Eritrea, living under the asylum regime in Israel and beyond, have been negotiating multiple, interlocking, racist, classist and patriarchal structures of power and oppression. These systems influence the women's physical, mental, and spatial autonomy, reproductive freedoms, mothering practices and intimate relationships, including with their partners and children. Migration and diaspora experiences are gendered, and racialisation processes that profoundly shape mothering practices and strategies. Mothering becomes a site of resistance to oppression and racism (Hill Collins 1994). Racialisation is institutionalised in the Israeli asylum regime through policies of exclusion (cf. Suerbaum 2022b; Erel and Reynolds 2018; Luibhéid 2013) that are only applied to Black non-Jewish people from Eritrea and Sudan living under the Israeli asylum regime (Ravid 2022a). The Israeli asylum regime is deeply informed, not just by racial prejudice and privilege (cf. Suerbaum 2022b; Gazzotti 2021, 278), but by settler colonialism, apartheid and Jewish supremacy. Racialisation occurs not only between the Jews as a majority and Palestinians as a minority, but also among Jews – between European (white) Jews and Mizrahi Jews (the overwhelming majority of whom came from Arab countries) (Abdo 2011, 2) and Ethiopian Jews.

Contextualising the Israeli Asylum Regime in the Settler Colonial State

I situate Israel's settler colonialism as a framework through which to critique and analyse the Israeli asylum and border regime and understand irregular migration into Israel (cf. Madrigal 2019, 24). I am sharing the women's narratives in the context of the Israeli asylum regime and its complex and constantly changing, systems of harm and violence, namely the policy of 'temporary protection' in Israel under the Anti-Infiltration Law (1954) (Anteby-Yemini 2017, 10; Raijman 2017, 2; Mesgena and Ramati 2017, 79; Yaron, Hashimshony-Yaffe and Campbell 2013; 1).¹⁹ I examine the Eritrean mothers' experiences of forced migration and everyday life in relation to the larger system of power as rooted in and reproducing colonialism, heteropatriarchy and heteronormative gender and sexuality (Tschalaer 2022). Following Nahla Abdo (2011, 19 in her analysis of Israeli citizenship) I use settler colonialism as a frame of analysis to provide a "more inclusive account" and use a more "appropriate conceptual tool" for understanding the classed, racialised, and gendered nature of the Israeli asylum regime within the context of Apartheid towards Palestinians.

Following Palestinian scholars, I acknowledge and emphasise the importance of locating phenomena, in this case, the Israeli asylum regime, within the larger structure within which they are situated (Abdo 2011, 10; Sa'ar 2007). Nahla Abdo (2011) argues that in scholarly writing we need to pay attention to a central feature of the Israeli state, namely its settler-colonial character. She reminds us that the settler-colonial policies on which Zionism is premised should be part of the analyses of the State of Israel. In line with Abdo and many other feminist Palestinian scholars, I understand Israel as a racial settler-

colonial regime and apartheid state and Zionism as a racist exclusionary project (cf. Lentin 2020, 137; Abdo 2011, 44). I understand settler colonialism as a historically and current gendered and racialised process (Arvin et al. 2013, 8). Gender and race are social constructions that deeply impact Black women with often devastating consequences (ibid, 9). I argue in this thesis that the violence perpetuated through the Israeli asylum regime needs to be understood through the inherent epistemic violence in gender binaries in society at large (Davis 2016, 105), global migration regimes and systemic social injustices and human rights violations deeply rooted in Israel's settler colonial history (Lijnders 2017). Chapter Three of this PhD thesis further explores my conceptualisation of how infrastructures of apartheid and occupation are utilised to exclude, violate, and criminalise asylum seekers.

I rely on the academic work of Palestinian feminist scholars to understand the workings of the Israeli settler colonial states and its treatment of Palestinians with Israel citizenship and Palestinians in the occupied territories (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Wahab and Al-Issa 2022; Elia 2017; Abdo 2011, Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2015). I complement these with reports by Palestinian, Israeli and international human rights organisations. I argue that we cannot look at the plight of Eritrean women without, as is often the case even in radical feminist circles, making central the plight of Palestinians (cf. Abu-Assab and Nasser-Eddin 2019; Elia 2017, 46; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2015; Abdo 2011), Israel's occupation, and its harsh discriminatory measures (Elia 2017, 51). Justice for Palestine is a feminist issue (Abu-Assab and Nasser-Eddin 2019; Elia 2017, 47;). Just like justice for asylum seeking women is a feminist issue too. Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck and Angie Morrill (2013, 11), native feminist theorists, demonstrate that "feminisms, when allied with other key

causes, hold a unique potential to decolonise the ascendancy of whiteness in many global contexts”. In my dissertation, the issue of Black non-Jewish migration to Israel is understood within, and as part of, the violence committed every day on Palestinians by state-endorsed settlers and Israel.

Israel has been theorised as a Zionist settler colonial state for many decades (Lentin 2020; Zureik 2016; Abdo 1995; Sayegh 2012). Recently this language has been adopted by established human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Abdo (2011, 11) argues that, in a settler colonial state such as Israel, issues of race and class are fundamental to understanding gender dynamics and women’s positions. Katherine Fobear (2014, 48), in the context of Canada, argues that “to investigate refugee and forced migration without understanding the historical and contextual mechanisms of imperialism and colonialism creates a post-colonial amnesia and a further silencing of ongoing colonial violence”.

Following Nour Abu-Assab and Nof Nasser-Eddin (2019), and taking a scholar-activist, decolonising intersectional feminist approach (Elia 2017, 50; Sharoni et al. 2015, 655), I contextualise and develop an understanding of the experiences of racialised Black, non-Jewish women from Eritrea within the settler colonial state of Israel and its infrastructures and crimes of apartheid and occupation against Palestinian people (Lijnders 2022). Much like Simona Sharoni et al. (2015, 654) argue in understanding Palestinian lived experiences, a feminist response to the treatment of Black, non-Jewish women needs to examine “its root causes, namely Israel’s illegal occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, its violation of Palestinian rights and its apartheid-like policies

toward the Palestinian people” (in Elia 2017, 53). Audre Lorde (2007, 138) asserts that “there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.” Following Angela Davis (2016), I zoom in on the connections between the treatment of Black non-Jewish people living under the Israeli asylum regime and Palestinians living under Israeli settler colonialism: from the occupation of Historic Palestine, the illegal blockade of Gaza (Amnesty International 2018; Human Rights Watch 2018), the unlawful killings of Palestinians including children (Amnesty International 2022a), the forced evictions and demolitions of homes in Silwan, Sheikh Jarrah, Massafer Yatta and elsewhere (Al-Haq 2022a), settler violence committed with impunity and while being aided and abated by Israeli authorities (B’Tselem 2022a), the institutional discrimination of Ethiopian Jews (Abu-RabiaQueder 2019) and other minoritised and marginalised communities such as Mizrahi (Abdo 2011), violence against women, and labour rights abuses against foreign workers (Lijnders 2019; Kav Laoved, 2018). I insist on the connections between the above-mentioned acts of violence as a feminist-activist, decolonial, scholarly process and practice, for how can we speak about Eritrean women without opposing settler colonialism and apartheid of Palestinians?²⁰

Contribution and Originality: Why Study Eritrean Mothers Experiencing Asylum in Settler Colonial Israel?

There are many contexts of forced migration and much has been written about the worsening effects and affects of asylum around the world (Franko 2020; Mountz 2020). Stricter borders have been recorded across the Global North. Why then have I chosen to focus on the settler colonial state of Israel? The answer to this question is

multidimensional. Firstly, I seek to contribute to the body of literature that seeks to better understand the experiences of the asylum regime in Israel. Israel has been framed for decades as a settler colonial state (Al-Haq 2022b). Increasingly scholars are making the connections between violence inflicted on Palestinians across historic Palestine and Black non-Jewish people living under the Israeli asylum regime (Ravid 2022a; Brown 2017; Mesgena and Ramati 2017; Lentin and Moreo 2015; Shapiro 2013; Willen 2018, 2010). However, these scholars do not use the lens of settler colonialism to draw parallels and have yet to deeply zoom in on the infrastructures of apartheid such as the anti-infiltration law, administrative detention, social segregation and the building of security walls. There is a growing body of literature understanding asylum in settler colonial states such as Canada, the United States (U.S.), Australia and New Zealand. My dissertation seeks to develop an understanding of the gendered and racialised experiences of Eritrean women contextualised in the settler colonial state of Israel, building on the above-mentioned scholarly work (Lijnders 2022). The erasures of Palestinian lives cannot be ignored in an analysis of Israel's inhumane asylum regime and their narrow, Jewish supremacist and racialised understanding of who can be recognised as a refugee and a citizen. Scholars have, rightfully so, focused on the Jewish history of persecution on ethnic and religious grounds (Kalir 2015, 580; Yaron, Hashimshony-Yaffe, and Campbell 2013, 145). Yonathan Paz (2011, 13-15) and Sarah Willen (2010) have argued that the "Holocaust discourse" shaped policies and attitudes and created accommodating humanitarian responses, as well as a hierarchy of suffering. Abrehet, an Eritrean woman, also pointed out the Jewish history of persecution. She, however, shared it with a question mark attached:

“Even from the Jewish people I did not expect to treat us like this, like animals. We are people just like them. I studied history, I know the story of the Jews. All the life struggles that they passed. I expected them to welcome us like humans and to accept us as refugees here. But we don’t get anything. I cannot enjoy myself, even when we go out. It never feels like home. I am always stressed, running to survive, always in a hurry, hurrying to work and back home, with a big stress and no feelings. We have no paper. What to do? It doesn’t encourage you to have a vision or to think about your future. The worst life I get is here, not in Eritrea. It is like a closed room, like a prison. I have no paper to go outside of the country. It would have been better for me to stay in my home and to survive with my family, whatever would have happened to me. Here we cannot be stable and live a normal life.”

Israeli refugee support organisations often provoke the “we were all once refugees” slogan. I argue that this slogan, and variations on it, renders invisible indigenous Palestinians who with the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, or the Nakba (also known as the Palestinian catastrophe on which Israel was founded and relies on for its continued existence), became refugees (see Levnad 2016 for an analysis on “we are all boat people” in the Australian context). 750,000 Palestinians were both expelled and internally displaced (Lentin and Moreo 2015, 897; Pappé 2006), with more than 7.5 million Palestinian refugees around the world today (Sayigh and Allan 2021; Sayej 2018). Lisa Anteby-Yemini (2017, 7) argues that the increasing visibility of non-Jewish asylum seekers from East and West Africa “challenges both the territorial borders and the political boundaries of the ethnocratic Israeli regime and raises new issues concerning identity, race, and migrant categories”. Israel, as such, is a complex setting in which to understand asylum due to the various attributes that intersect in this space, such as settler colonialism, Jewish supremacy, racialisation and geography (proximity to Global Majority countries).

Secondly, my thesis centres on empirical data that documents the narratives of those who self-identify as women and mothers. Women have often been studied peripherally in the context of men's lives (Mose Brown and Masi de Casanova 2009, 43; Harding 2004). In migration literature in general (Gerard 2014) and literature on Eritrean migration specifically, the male experience has been prioritised (Ghilazghy, Kuilman, Reim 2017, 222) and the particular gendered experiences of women living under the Israeli asylum regime receive very little in-depth understanding or complexifying except for the work of Tsega Gebreyesus (2015, 2017, 2018) and Habtom Mehari Ghebrezghiabher and Pnina Motzafi-Haller (2015). Women living under the Israeli asylum regime are marginalised not only due to their legal status and nationality but also due to their gender and ethnic background (Kaufman 2014, 3). While most asylum policies in Israel are, in theory, gender-neutral (exclusive of the detention and deportation of single men discussed in Chapter Three), in practice, as Jane Freedman (2015, 138) and Victoria Canning (2017, 48) have illustrated elsewhere, policy application is “filtered through a system of gendered relations of power and inequalities”, which impacts women and men differently (Lijnders 2022). Implications of migration control practices therefore hold distinct, gender-specific, consequences for women seeking asylum (Canning 2017). Therefore, focussing on the experiences of women allows us to learn more about the asylum system than if we would look exclusively at the experiences of men (cf. Davis, 2016, 105). Between early 2000 and 2012 around 47,0000 asylum seekers entered Israel irregularly via the Egyptian border. Over 90% of the men, women and children seeking asylum in Israel are from Eritrea and Sudan. Around 15% of them are women, mainly between the ages of 15-35 (Kaufman 2014, 3), yet they remain understudied. Figures from 2018 show that in

Israel there were about 10,000 children below the age of 10 asylum seekers and migrants, most of whom were born in Israel. Of those about 7,000 children were residing in Tel Aviv, of whom the overwhelming majority, about 6,000 were born in Israel. (ASSAF 2020, 4-5). As such, I have chosen to focus on women, and more specifically Eritrean women as they are the largest group of women experiencing the Israeli asylum regime. The demographic imbalance between men and women produced many challenges. As Selam Kidane, an Eritrean psychologist, activist and scholar explained: “Men are in this constant paranoia about who else is seeing my wife. And that can cause a lot of problems for the women and their children. And then it gives the men the possibility to leave if it gets too much.” This is causing Eritrean mothers not only instability due to the Israeli asylum regime, but also deeply impacts and infiltrates family life. Academic literature on the migration of people from Eritrea seeking asylum in Israel either focuses on the journey to Israel (Lijnders and Robinson 2013; Rozen 2012; Van Reisen et al. 2012; Hotline for Migrant Workers 2011) or the asylum regime in Israel (Müller 2018; Ravid 2018; Ramati 2017; Kalir 2015; Kritzman-Amir 2015 2009; Sabar and Tsurkov 2015; Yaron, Hashimshony-Yaffe and Campbell 2013; Paz 2011; Yacobi 2010; Yaron 2009), but rarely offers a historical, intersectional feminist understanding that bring the women’s histories, presents and futures together (see also Ghebrezghiabher and Motzafi-Haller 2015). I understand the Eritrean women who are the heart of this thesis as complex human beings who are classed, racialised and gendered persons, who are defined by herstory as well as their current living conditions and future aspirations. I hone in on both the external conditions and personal circumstances that structure the women’s everyday lives and mothering practices (Chakkour and de Koning 2022). On an epistemic level, women are often constructed as a homogenous group of ‘refugee’ women. As feminist

activist and facilitator Ursula Santa Cruz (in Braun and Pagano 2018) argues, this construction entails “victimising and infantilising” women, and is accompanied by “symbolic racism and exoticization”. When victimised and infantilised, women are denied their experiences, capacities, knowledge, aspirations and needs (ibid.).

Thirdly, Eritrean and Sudanese women are a growing group of women giving birth in Israel. The UNHCR office in Israel estimates that half of the women living under the Israeli asylum regime have given birth. Hagar and Miriam, a support centre for pregnant women and new mothers from the asylum seeking and refugee communities in Israel, estimated that each year, approximately 500 infants are born to asylum seeking women. Many more women have left children behind in Eritrea, with grandparents and other family members. The asylum regime deeply impacts mothering practices and intimate ties and yet there is no in-depth research exploring Eritrean women who identify as mothers in Israel, despite the overwhelming majority of women from Eritrea (and Sudan) being mothers. The women’s practices and experiences as mothers shape their migration trajectory and vice versa the Israeli asylum regime shapes their practices and experience of motherhood (cf. Suerbaum 2022b; Cochrane 2020). All but one of the women I engaged with have identified as mothers and hold mothering responsibilities, and all are related to the children they care for and birthed, and I will therefore refer to them using these terms. All except one of the women interviewed are biological mothers from diverse ethnic, religious, educational and class backgrounds. The variety of mothering experiences not based on blood relations (cf. Balakian 2022; Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022;), are beyond the scope of this dissertation, however, Chapter Five briefly discusses the limitations of heteronormative categories of gender and sexuality, as well as the need

to not reduce women to their reproductive capacities. I argue that by applying the lens of motherhood to the study of migration, forced displacement, and asylum in a settler colonial state, different perspectives and insights emerge on women's decision-making processes and strategies (cf. Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022). This lens gives us insights into how forced migration reconfigures women's kin ties, senses of personhood, and belonging (Grotti 2017). Intersecting factors reconfigure women's relations with their children, kin ties, sense of personhood, intimacies, belonging and political subjecthood (ibid.). Tracey Reynolds (2020) focuses on Black mothers "with the intention to move them from the margins to the centre of maternal studies". She explains that Black mothers operate at the intersections of race, class and gender and as such inhabit and navigate motherhood differently and that "the practice of Black mothering signifies a political act of resistance against intersecting inequalities". While existing scholarship has paid increasing attention to mothering and care work in migration contexts as well as about racialised definitions of citizenship (Erel and Reynolds 2018), intersectional analyses of the overlapping experiences of gendered racialisations and legal precarity, migrant mothers' navigations of these, and attention to the political dimensions of mothering and carework require further scholarly attention (Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022). I show how women are racialised as refugees and mothers relating not only to phenotype but also to religion, national origin, class, language, legal status and colonial histories (Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022). I seek to challenge public narratives that conceive Eritrean mothers experiencing the Israeli asylum regime as "outsiders", as being at the same time oppressed by the men in their communities as well as seen as potentially a threat to social cohesion (cf. Erel, Reynolds and Kaptani 2018, 61) of the state of Israel. I hope to undo some of the "prevalent representation of migrant mothers as either constituting a problem or having

problems” (ibid, 62). I use motherhood as an empirical lens to discuss its practices at the intersection of gender, race and legal status (cf. Tschalaer 2022a; Suerbaum 2022a; Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022) and to explore the complex emotional terrains that shape the asylum experiences of Eritrean mothers in Israel (cf. Tschalaer 2022a in the context of lesbian asylum seeking women in Berlin). I suggest that the study of the interconnection of motherhood, legal precarity, gendered racialisation, and asylum in a settler colonial state sheds light on new and important aspects of inequality and resistance: from emotional and psychological challenges to everyday realities, from the intimate to the public sphere; from larger structural processes, such as apartheid and occupation of Palestinians and their land, to personal lived experiences, and everything in between (cf. Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022).

Finally, Eritrean women have been living with protracted legal precarity – 10 to 15 years – under a temporary protection policy, violent and constantly changing asylum policies and directives, and no access to legal, social and economic rights. With the border hermetically sealed off by a high-security wall in 2013, a unique situation has been created where people seeking asylum are unable to enter and those inside experience “stuckedness” or a sense of existential immobility (Hage 2009). There is no pathway to citizenship (Lentin and Moreo 2015, 7), and no option for family reunification and it is constantly made clear that settling permanently and building a stable future for themselves and their children is out of the question. Increasingly, literature on asylum seekers in Israel focuses on “voluntary” or forced departure from Israel (Birger, Shoham and Bolzman 2018 and 2018a; ASSAF, 2015; Hotline for Refugees and Migrants, 2015; International Rights Initiative, 2015; Lijnders 2013). However, there is no research on

how women circumvent border regimes. Therefore, I conclude the dissertation by looking at three women's irregular navigations of global apartheid to escape the Israeli asylum regime. The term 'global apartheid' defines a system of heightened immigration restrictions set up in countries of the global north which does not give non-nationals the stability of permanent legal status in the respective country of (temporary) settlement based on classed, racialised and gendered criteria (Besteman 2020; Horton 2020; de Genova 2018; Sharma 2007 in Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022).

By doing the above, this dissertation seeks to contribute to academic debates and literature on forced migration, settler colonialism and racialised motherhood. My thesis has been influenced by and brings into dialogue diverse methodological and theoretical approaches and disciplines including women and gender studies, migration studies, refugee studies, social anthropology, settler colonial studies, critical race studies and native studies. My analysis is committed to a nuanced reading of women's predicaments, migration trajectories and mundane experiences of legal precarity, and views women's experiences as key to knowledge production on these issues.

Thesis Outline

Chapter one: Trajectories of Violence: Exploring Eritrean Women's Experiences Through a Temporal Lens provides a feminist analysis of Eritrea and im/mobility. Following Victoria Canning (2017, 27) I focus on the trajectories of violence that women seeking asylum face before, during and post their migratory journeys. By doing so, I highlight the gendered implications and consequences of violence. I stress the

importance of recognising intersectional experiences within these continuums of violence as Black women experiencing legal precarity. I present deeper insight into the prevalent forms of violence women experience within these continuums and the strategies they adopt to face and navigate gendered and racialised violence (cf. Santa Cruz in Braun and Pagano 2018). Within these migratory continuums, women asylum seekers endure gendered vulnerabilities (Richter-Devroe 2022) including sexual and physical violence, emotional distress, the absence and/or severing of social support and kinship ties, poor living conditions, the lack of protection in countries of origin or any other institutional or legal recourse (Gebreyesus et al. 2018, 2; Grotti et al. 2018, 21).

Chapter Two: Putting Eritrean Mothers at the Centre: A Feminist Activist

Ethnography sets out how the dissertation is based on long-term, feminist-activist ethnographic research with Eritrean women and their families who experienced the Israeli regime. I place the experiences of women facing asylum and border regimes at the centre of my inquiry and the thesis, as much as possible, is written in the voice of women with my analysis, as a woman ethnographer, added (cf. Abu-Lughod 1993, 3). I conducted ethnographic research, at intervals, between September 2016 and September 2018, with Eritrean women who held a variety of legal statuses in Israel and the UK. From Israel, I followed women who moved to the United Kingdom and Canada either irregularly or through sponsorship or resettlement processes. My PhD thesis zooms in on the biographical narratives and lived experiences of 30 Eritrean women who self-identify as mothers, who described racialising treatment as non-Jewish and Black women in the settler colonial state. I conducted in-depth and narrative biography interviews, informal conversations and ethnographic observations, and documented arguments and songs²¹ in

Israel and the UK in both English and Tigrinya. The PhD thesis focusses on their life worlds, their engagement in and impact on reproductive and mothering practices (both local and transnational), while navigating Israeli state bureaucracy, facing widespread racism, and experiencing legal precarity for themselves and their undocumented children. In foregrounding their experiences and lived realities, I respond to Nicholas De Genova's (2002, 421) call for "densely descriptive and textured interpretive representations of [the] everyday life" of people living with legal precarity, in this case, women from Eritrea living with temporary protection under Israel's collective non-removal policy. I amplify the women's stories of creativity, imagination and resistance (cf. Canning 2017) in and towards the Israeli asylum regime. In addition, the thesis is based on interviews with Eritrean, Israeli and international staff at refugee support organisations in Israel and the UK.

Chapter Three: Mothering Against the Israeli Asylum Regime: The Making and Unmaking of Intimate Ties in Settler Colonial Israel explores hierarchies of gendered racialisation in the settler colonial state of Israel, followed by an intersectional feminist analysis of the Israeli asylum regime. Chapter Three is concerned with developing an understanding of the asylum regime and Israel's treatment of asylum seekers by understanding it within the settler colonial project and the occupation of and apartheid policies towards Palestinians. I use Palestinian and Israeli considerations and academic understandings of settler colonialism in other contexts such as the U.S., Canada, Australia and New Zealand to develop a deeper understanding. The settler colonial logic of the Israeli asylum regime emerges from the occupation of Palestinian land as an ongoing and historic entanglement (cf. Madrigal 2019, 23). Settler colonialism

continues to shape both Palestinian sovereignty and access to rights and legal status for people living under the Israeli asylum regime (cf. Fobear 2014, 49). Israel's national identity and its asylum regime are informed through ongoing settler colonialism in which the erasure of Palestinians and the control of Black non-Jewish people go hand-in-hand with the creation of the Israeli Zionist and Jewish Supremacist state and the solidifying of its borders (cf. Fobear 2014). Israel has enacted a series of laws under the Anti-Infiltration Law (1954) aimed at preventing people it contentiously calls "infiltrators" (*mistanením*), rather than asylum seekers, from entering the state. The term "infiltrators" was used in the 1950s to describe Palestinians attempting to return to the lands they were expelled from in 1948 (Lentin 2018, 115; Willen 2018, 20).

I then seek to reveal how migration and border regimes affect kinship practices, and how Eritrean women navigate, resist and respond to the overlap of gendered racialisation and legal precarity they encounter. I explore the women's everyday experiences of their gendered, racialised bodies entering institutions and public spaces where they were ignored or "not welcomed" (cf. Erel, Reynolds and Kaptani 2018, 61). I complexify how Israel's asylum regime influences and disrupts everyday intimacies on different relational and familial levels and how the constant change in policy and insecurity is part of these disruptions as the policies become more violent and racist. I examine how an Eritrean mother, Tsenayet, and her intimate ties experienced the Israeli asylum regime, were impacted by, and subsequently challenged, three policies under the Israeli asylum regime: the detention of single men in Holot Detention Centre; the "Voluntary Departure" Scheme and economic violence under the taxation policy or 'deposit' law.

Chapter Four: Navigating Legal Precarity and Intimate Ties: Maintaining Families Transnationally seeks to contribute to a growing body of literature understanding transnational motherhood in contexts of forced migration and asylum regimes (Shobiye and Parker 2022; Massa 2017, 2020a,b; Madziva and Zontini 2012; Kofman 2004). Whereas most European countries allow for family reunification between parents and underage children (Alkan 2022; Ferreri 2022; Palmberger 2022), this is not an option in Israel whatsoever. Israel, directly and indirectly, polices the bodies of racialised women within their immigration systems and structures and restricts family reunification. As such the only way women separated from their children or spouses can reunite is through either creative migration projects or family reunification, resettlement or refugee sponsorship programmes to countries in Europe, Canada, the U.S. or Australia (cf. Haround and Walker 2019, 12) or “self-deportation” to third or home countries under the “Voluntary Departure” Scheme. Following six Eritrean mothers, Semhar, Regat, Natsenet, Haben, Abrehet and Samrawit, who transnationally mother children left behind in Eritrea and the wider diaspora and children in Israel, I explore the felt impact of mothering across borders.

Chapter Five: “We Have to Separate So We Can be Together Again”: Family Separation as a Strategy for Togetherness and Doing Family is ultimately concerned with the “ways in which bodies and worlds take shape; and how power is secured and challenged in everyday life worlds” (Ahmed 2018) as well as by and within border and asylum regimes and the manifold ways Eritrean mothers engage with these. Through the narratives and experiences of Alem, Fatima, and Hiwet, Chapter Five explores how living with legal precarity affects women’s intimate bonds to the children

they care for, transforms how women do family, and motivates women to engage in various forms of resistance. By doing so, my PhD thesis zooms in on the experiences of mothering in waithood while faced with protracted uncertainty, gendered and racialised legal precarity and prolonged separation from their children (Lijnders 2022).

Chapter Five focuses on how women resist the Israeli asylum regime and wider global border and asylum regimes and practices. The adoption of Jewish Ethiopian Israeli identities by Eritrean non-Jewish asylum seekers exposes hierarchies of racialisation in Israel at the intersection of religion, ethnicity and asylum status. I use a complex, intersectional approach to develop an understanding of the gendered racialised legal precarity Eritrean women, who are mothers, experience in Israel and the UK. I examine Eritrean mothers' lived experiences of prolonged separation from their children within the context of immigration policies in Israel and the UK that enforce such separations (cf. Horton, 2008). I document how women go through extensive lengths to secure safety for their (unborn) children and themselves and how asylum regimes and bordering practices disrupt and restrict reproductive freedoms. I explore mothers' experiences of prolonged separation from children (Coe 2013; Baldasar 2007; Parrenas 2001; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997;) and the implications of ongoing geographical distance between mothers who left their children in Israel. Additionally, I explore how legal precarity can infringe on women's reproductive rights and ability to become pregnant.



Chapter One

Chapter One: Trajectories of Violence: Exploring Eritrean Women's Experiences Through a Temporal Lens

The Eritrean women whose experiences are recounted in this dissertation were caught up in multiple, often interlocking, patriarchal structures of oppression and power (Lijnders 2017) and were repeatedly subjected to attacks against their lives and bodily rights. Assaults repeated whether living under dispossession and severe deprivation in Eritrea while moving across borders irregularly, or when they were rebuilding their lives in countries of transit and settlement (ibid.). Fleeing Eritrea was a form of resistance to the dictatorial regime and its associated gendered processes and patriarchal realities. However, for many women leaving Eritrea was not synonymous with an end to violence, abuse and exploitation (Alkarib 2013).

Women's lives and processes of decision-making around family-making, are intimately influenced by everyday human rights violations that continued on their journey to Israel and lives in the country. To understand the present racialised and gendered experiences of the asylum regime in Israel, it is important to pay attention to earlier trajectories of violence (Sakti and Amrith 2022; Lubit 2022; Ghebrezghiabher and Motzafi-Haller 2015). Many women faced a chain of abuse that began in Eritrea, through various forms of persecution, human rights abuses, and sexual and gender-based violence in the military and society at large (Lijnders 2019; Baillit 2007). Abuses took a different shape along the

migration route - in refugee camps and urban areas – and experiences in Sudan and Egypt of kidnapping, human trafficking²², torture, sexual violence, unwanted pregnancies, extortion and imprisonment in the Sinai desert (Lijnders 2022; Ghebreyesus et al. 2019; Ghebrezghiabher and Motzafi-Haller 2015, 1; Van Reisen et al. 2013). Structural violence and oppression inherent in Israeli migration control and asylum systems further exacerbate the earlier harms that women experienced (Gebreyesus 2017, 2018, 2019; Alkarib 2013). Gendered and racialised violence continued to affect women’s lives in Israel. Border and asylum practices were put in place to intentionally harm them, activated patriarchy in the wider Eritrean society, and led to incidences of intimate partner violence and femicide (Lijnders 2019).

This chapter examines trajectories of violence as a continuum. I apply a temporal lens to analyse women’s experiences and understandings of displacement, and their transformation over time and generations (Lubit 2022; Sakti and Amrith 2022). Feminist activist and facilitator Urusala Santa Cruz (in Braun and Pagano 2018) argues that violence against women on the move “has to be thought of as a continuum of colonial-capitalist, racist and heteronormative domination, and as a result of the policies of the neoliberal-western world”. I implement this approach throughout this first chapter and expand on it in Chapters Four and Five to advance a complex understanding of how these experiences influence life in the settler colonial state of Israel.

Displacement as an Ongoing Condition: Disrupting Binaries, Categorisations and Definitions

My thesis is concerned with Eritrean women who moved, crossed international borders and settled (temporarily) in unfamiliar spaces. It deals with women who have engaged in

so-called 'irregular', 'transit' and 'asylum' migration and thus prioritises the analysis of cases in which the experience of displacement is connected to forced movement (Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022). Heath Cabot and Georgina Ramsay's (2021, 288) conceptualisation of displacement helps to describe what the women whose situations feature in my dissertation faced: "displacement pulls a person out of alignment with their sense of the world, their expectations of the future, and the solidity of the places in which they are situated". My thesis reveals that forced displacement affects women's sense of and trust in time and place, belonging, and the self; and deeply impacts their connections with the children they care for (Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022).

When thinking, speaking and writing about Eritrean women who are Black, non-Jewish and experiencing the Israeli asylum regime, a question around categorisation comes up. How do the women refer to themselves? How should I refer to them in my dissertation? Refugees? Asylum seekers? Migrants? Women? Mothers? This chapter begins with a conceptualisation of displacement as an ongoing condition and contributes to debates about categorisations that develop within it, before focusing on continuums of violence. A substantial body of academic literature has shown how conceptual, legal, and policy categories do not convey the lived experiences of people on the move (Crawley and Skleparis 2018, 59; Becker 2014; Collyer and de Haas 2012; Bakewell 2011; Koser and Martin 2011; Scherschel 2011; Gupte and Mehta 2007; Zetter 2007). Heaven Crawley and Dimitris Skleparis (2018, 59) remind us that the lives of people on the move are complex and that their legal statuses and categories shift as they travel through space and time. They add that people on the move "are not simply a sum of the categories that are constructed around them" and that their lived experiences cannot "always easily be

dropped into one or other category intended to contain and make sense of the world". As the focus of my dissertation is the lived experiences of women, it should be emphasised here that there is no universal women's experience (Abu-Lughod 1993, 4). Women have had different ways of reacting to the violence and displacement they experienced. Displaced women in general, and survivors of human trafficking and rape in particular, are people who are forced to deal with abnormal and traumatic situations (Lijnders 2017). Considering the complexity and diversity of experiences and effects on women's lives counters politically and socially constructed images of women as dependent victims that are widely in use. Refugee women's subjectivities are particularly complex due to the multiplicity of contexts and intensity of circumstances which they encounter during their journeys (Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Khanlou and Moussa 2008, 14). Women should be defined by what they do as social actors not by what is done to them (Sherene Razack 1999, 98).

The women in the dissertation had multi-layered and multifaceted identities before they left Eritrea (cf. Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Khanlou and Moussa 2008, 1). Experiences of the interlocutors differed widely and included both negative and positive aspects, losses and gains. Displacement, as Jason Hart (2014, 389) argues, opens space for renegotiating traditional hierarchies around gender, age, and socio-economic class and creates new possibilities and opportunities. Displacement is understood in this chapter as a lived experience, an ongoing condition and a "multi-directional process that stretches out over time, space and generations" (Sakti and Amrith 2022; Askland 2018, Feldman-Savelsberg 2018; Ramsay 2017; Fobear 2014, 51), not a momentary event. It is often a continuous struggle (Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022; Luibhéid 2013). Claiming asylum encompasses a

large range of social, political and legal processes (Fobear 2014, 48). There is no such thing as a “linear, uninterrupted flow” (Crawley and Skleparis 2018, 49) of people moving across borders, nor was this the case in Israel. All the women I interviewed have experienced multiple migrations - historic and recent; internal and transnational; re-migration, return, and multiple displacements. Some women were internally displaced with or without their families during the border conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia between 1998-2000 (Zegeye and Tegegn 2008). Others, who had lived in Ethiopia, were arrested, detained, and deported to Eritrea during the 1998 border war (Riggan 2011; Kibreab 2003).

A few of the women I interviewed never lived in Eritrea. They were born and raised in the diaspora to parents who had fled during the war for independence and lived in either refugee camps or cities in Sudan (cf. Kibreab 1996, 2000). Eritrea’s Independence did not stop the flow of new refugees, nor did it lead to the return of those displaced before and during the long war of independence to Sudan (Hassanen 2009, 47). Women raised in the diaspora, are now raising their children in the diaspora. Their connections to Eritrea are established through stories and memories of family and community members. Others returned to Eritrea from Sudan with their families, only to flee the country once more after 2001 (Hassanen 2009; Kibreab 2009).

Mothering in Israel was experienced differently by women raised in the diaspora, as a result of their positions in the wider diasporic community. Samrawit for example was born in Khartoum, Sudan. Her family returned to Eritrea in 1991 after the country gained independence, moving from Khartoum to Shagarab refugee camp, onwards to Kassala,

and then across the border to Eritrea. Samrawit was about 5 years old at that time and does not remember her time in Sudan. The family is originally from Keren, but when they returned to Eritrea they were given land in Barentu. Her father built a home on the land they were given. Samrawit, who was hoping to go to Canada, recently asked her father why they did not go to America or Canada from Sudan, as many Eritreans were resettled during that time. Her father told her that he did not want to join his friends. He always believed that his country would gain independence, and he wanted to go back and see his family. *“Now when I speak to my family on the phone they often cry, they tell me to be careful. My parents know very well what it is like to be a refugee. They know that you can only truly be free in your own country”*.²³ Lauren Heidbrink (2022) emphasises the importance of paying attention to “the existential dynamics of displacement as experienced through intergenerational memories” and in the context of indigenous youth in Guatemala, and understands migration as “an intergenerational ‘survival strategy’”. Such strategies can be observed in the context of Eritrea's reckoning with a long history of colonisation by Ethiopia for over three decades, and the border conflict between 1998 and 2000 which led many people to flee the country and settle temporarily and permanently in the wider diaspora. For many Eritreans, migration is intergenerational and a repeated or ongoing occurrence throughout their lives.

The women I engaged with left Eritrea via the border with Sudan or Ethiopia. Before arriving in Israel, they spent weeks, months, or years in refugee camps or cities before continuing to Egypt. Some women gained refugee status in refugee camps if they stayed long enough in Sudan or Ethiopia. Others moved on to capital cities like Addis Ababa and Khartoum – despite strict encampment policies and restrictive access to refugee status

and services in cities. Maria De Angelis (2019, 3) argues that both on a global and local level camps have as their purpose the “sovereign management of migrant bodies” which are racialised and see their movement restricted. As women moved, their legal status changed according to the borders they crossed, it was never static or permanent. Some never planned to leave Sudan or Ethiopia but were kidnapped by human traffickers and taken by force to the Sinai desert in Egypt. Other women were arrested and imprisoned in Egypt before being returned to Ethiopia. While policy categories are fixed in time and space, zooming in on the motivations and experiences of those on the move through a temporal lens opens new possibilities for understanding migratory processes (Crawley and Skleparis 2018, 55). Fatima’s narration of her migration journey makes clear that forces out of her control dictated her journey and forced her to adjust:

“I planned to search for a job and work in Sudan. But under that situation, there was an experience of round-ups of Eritrean nationals and deporting them back to Eritrea, so I decided to leave for Egypt. And the plan was to go to Israel. Along the journey, I was caught in Egypt and I was in prison for one year and seven months in a detention facility. And then I was deported back to Ethiopia. After arriving in Ethiopia, I stayed in Addis Ababa for some time and again we left for Sudan.”

Crawley and Skleparis (2018, 55) remind us that we need to pay attention to how womens’ changing conditions and circumstances along their migratory journeys impact their “series of separate migration decisions” shaped by the changing circumstances in which an individual finds him/herself”. Samrawit’s narration of her migration decision-making practices emphasises the importance of paying attention to the role or the lack of intimate ties. She left Eritrea to join her husband in the Shagarab refugee camp in Sudan, where they decided on their move to Israel. Another interlocutor explained that after a year and

a half in Khartoum, she decided to leave for Israel due to a lack of intimate ties. With nobody to help her, and her inability to find work and a “proper life” in Khartoum (without refugee status), she decided to come to Israel. Choices between legal and self-identified statuses, and other decision-making processes are thus influenced by intimate ties and bonds that motivate and shape mobility.

The multiple migrations and legal statuses and processes described above remind us to engage with the complex political, economic and social realities of the ‘in between’ (Crawley and Skleparis 2018, 49). The Israeli asylum regime caused prolonged suffering, reinforcing women’s continued family separation, repeated displacement, poverty, and substandard living conditions, while waiting for a legal resolution that never arrived (cf. Lubit 2022). There is a need to think about displacement beyond how people settle or negotiate life in the ‘destination’ (Sakti and Amrith 2022), as the (longed-for) destination is constantly shifting. For many of the women interviewed, Israel, over time, was no longer seen as a viable ‘destination,’ and they actively searched for or engaged in onward migration opportunities. Upon my return to Israel at the start of 2022, I found that several of the women I engaged with in 2017 had either left or were set to leave through sponsorship processes for Canada and other countries. For example, in the summer of 2022, four Eritrean women who took leadership roles in their communities left Israel for Canada and Australia, triggering a great sense of loss, alongside joy and wishes for their new lives. In addition, as Chapter Five makes clear, several women chose to “self-il/legalise” (Richter-Devroe 2022), deliberately placing themselves outside of or between legal categories. Their political subjecthood and migration strategies show how legal status is adopted, co-opted and shed. Women navigate these opportunities as political

agents, but also through conscious decision-making within families, communities, at home and the wider diaspora.

Refugees? Asylum Seekers? Migrants? Women? Mothers?: Naming the Interlocutors

When choosing the terms to describe the interlocutors of this work I join earlier discussions that warn against the use of dominant categories such as refugee and migrant to form the basis of our analysis, lest we unintentionally contribute to political processes that vilify, stigmatise and take away the rights of people on the move (Crawley and Skleparis 2018, 50; Zetter 2015; Bakewell 2008). Seeking to avoid such stigmatisation, and what Rala Apostolova (2015) has called ‘categorical fetishism’, I adopt Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. (2014) and Monika Palmberger’s (2022) use of the term ‘refugee’ as a category based on the experience of forced migration, thus including asylum seekers, those granted asylum who have the legal status of refugees, and those granted subsidiary protection. This is especially important in an environment where people experiencing the asylum regime in Israel are constructed as criminals, labour infiltrators, and a demographic threat.

The women whose experiences are central to my PhD thesis were never officially recognised as refugees by Israel. In fact, as of August 2020 (the latest figures I had access to), 0.06% of asylum claimants were recognised as refugees, while 73,889 asylum applications had been submitted to the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) unit at the Immigration Authority (HIAS 2020). The Population, Immigration and Border Authority (PIBA) based in Israel’s Ministry of Interior has been responsible for asylum proceedings

since 2009 (UNHCR 2022). Of the claims submitted, 16,149 claims (22%) were made by Eritreans and 6,782 (9%) were made by Sudanese claimants. The remaining claims were made by people from Ukraine (24%), Georgia (9%), Russia (7%) and nationals from other African countries such as Nigeria (4%), Ethiopia (3%), and Ghana (2%) who do not fall under the temporary protection policy that is applied to Eritreans and Sudanese.²⁴ Women made 30% of the claims (HIAS 2020). As of May 2020, 17 Eritreans and 1 Sudanese were recognised by the Israeli government as refugees (PIBA 2020). It is unclear if there are any women amongst them, what is clear is that none of the women that are at the forefront of my dissertation has received refugee status in Israel. Eritrean women have not been officially recognised as asylum seekers – whether in public and political statements or policies making up the Israeli asylum regime, they are referred to and criminalised as infiltrators.

I could refer to the women as refugees, in line with their self-definition (cf. Bloch 2022). Through public protests, as well as private conversations and interviews, the women repeatedly identified as refugees. In the introduction to this dissertation, I shared the women's plea to be recognised as refugees and not infiltrators. Referring to the women as refugees in this dissertation would be a political statement in line with their claim-making and rights-taking practice, discussed in the introduction. However, in conversations conducted eight years after these early protests took place, several women remarked that referring to them as refugees is misleading, as it implies that they have been recognised, and have been granted rights and access to services accordingly. Thus, many women preferred to relate to themselves as asylum seekers to reflect the gap in recognition and treatment.²⁵ Alem, when talking about self-definition as a refugee, was not only concerned

with how she is defined but also the assumptions that come with such definitions: *“The worst thing is, the most hurtful thing is, people think I chose to be a refugee, I chose to be in this situation. I will never ever choose anything that is going on in my life, except my son.”*²⁶ Interestingly, she contrasts her definition as a refugee, to her experience as a mother. Alem is an Eritrean woman in her twenties. She is the mother of a nine-year-old son who was born in Israel soon after she married in May 2012. She arrived in Israel in November 2010, at the age of 17, a year and a half after crossing from Eritrea into Sudan. Alem lived in a refugee camp in Eastern Sudan before deciding to continue to Israel. Before crossing the border with Egypt, she spent a month in the Sinai Peninsula in a human trafficking camp. After paying the agreed-upon fee for being smuggled from Sudan to Egypt, Alem was taken to the border with Israel, where at the time Egypt operated a shoot-to-kill policy. Alem crossed safely into Israel and was taken by the Israeli military to Saharonim Prison, located in the Southern Negev or Naqab desert, close to the Egypt-Israel border.

Neither the term asylum seeker nor refugee encompasses the complexities of life under the asylum regime in Israel. Women’s sense of being in the world, their mothering practices, and their relationships with their children were shaped by their migration trajectories, the decisions they made, and the labels they received (Suerbaum 2022b; Willen 2014). A focus on lived experiences extends beyond their legal or self-defined status, to include various aspects, among them legal status, positions as mothers, socio-economic situations, nationality, marital status, and the racialised ways in which they were perceived in the Israeli public sphere as Black women (cf. Suerbaum 2022b). I thus refer to the women as ‘women experiencing the Israeli asylum regime’, to be clear about

the complexities of legal categorisations, but also to convey that women are more than their legal status. From here on out, when I refer in the text to Eritrean women or mothers (or Eritreans and Sudanese), I mean those living under the Israeli asylum regime, unless I state otherwise. They experience life as women, mothers, sisters, cousins, aunties, neighbours, friends, workers and more while living under the Israeli asylum regime. When referring to the women as experiencing the asylum regime, I seek to encompass all these past, present and future identifications. I thus join earlier critiques of labels and categories such as ‘refugees’, ‘non-citizens’, ‘asylum-seekers’, ‘migrants’, and other people on the move (see also Suerbaum and Richter-Devroe 2022; Anderson 2019, 2013; Crawley and Skleparis 2018; Zetter 2007), in hopes of producing scholarship that centres on lived experiences.

I use the term asylum regime to refer to Israel’s set of policies applied to people from Eritrea and Sudan who entered Israel by foot through its Southern border and are collectively termed infiltrators, while people seeking asylum from other countries are regulated according to different migration policies. Asylum regimes across the globe are inherently linked with conditions of precarity. Veronica Federico and Sabine Hess (2020, 6) describe a regime in the context of asylum as a: “system of principles, legal norms, administrative procedures and practical processes”. The Israeli asylum regime is comprised of myriad processes and fixtures including status determination, types of status (e.g. refugee status, conditional non-removal (2a5), temporary residence status (a5), differing procedures of decision over asylum claims (distinct in duration, process, interviews), and subsequent rights and entitlements.

The Israeli asylum regime was shaped by multiple actors and their ever-changing policies and practices (cf. Sarı and Dinçer 2017). These include enhanced border enforcement and control, detention, deportation, lack of family reunification, and restrictions on and regulations of movement in and out of Israel. Taken together, these serve to exclude Black, non-Jewish, non-citizens from the country. These measures express that such people are considered undesirable and are perceived as security threats, they are thus criminalised, and racialised by the system.

I use asylum and not migration to refer to this regime, as Israel has a specific set of laws for acceptable permanent migration, which is “religiously based and enshrined in the Law of Return”, which allows for Jewish people to “return” and ensures that Eritreans and Sudanese “who are outside the discursive remit of Jewishness – ever becoming candidates for citizenship” (Lentin and Moreo 2015, 904). Israel’s asylum regime cannot be examined as separate from the apartheid and settler colonial regime. Additionally, local and global apartheid regimes increasingly construct and enforce borders that shape unequal systems of (im)mobility and movement. These all work together to exclude Black non-Jewish people.

In the next sub-chapter, I provide historical and contextual information about Eritrea. I focus on the distinct reasons that cause women to leave, including experiences of sexual violence, being punished for their husband’s departure, lack of economic opportunities, and the inability to care for their children. I ask the following questions: In what ways have women and men been affected differently by the dictatorial regime? How have

patriarchal structures been defined by decades of militarisation? And how have these processes affected women's social and reproductive rights and family-making practices?

A Feminist Analysis of Eritrea

The dictatorial regime in Eritrea intimately infiltrated women's everyday lives and intimate ties, taking away social, cultural, religious, political and economic freedoms and rights. Much has been written about the situation in Eritrea leading to large numbers of people leaving the country. In my analysis, I focus on the gendered layers of the dictatorial regime. In 2016, Eritrea was the largest per capita producer of people seeking asylum in the world (Connel 2016, 218). Colonised by Italy in the 1890s, occupied by Britain in the 1940s and annexed by Ethiopia in the 1950s (ibid, 219), Eritrean people have gone through many struggles for independence. Eritrea is a diverse society, with nine ethnic groups, accompanied by a diversity of religions, ideologies and traditional norms (Hirt and Mohammad 2013, 145; Alkarib 2013, 7).

Since independence from Ethiopia in 1991, Eritrea has been a one-party state led by President Isaias Afewerki who rules the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). The constitution was never implemented. Since independence, there have been no national elections. Since the end of the 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia, freedom of speech has been under fire, all non-government media outlets have been closed and government critics and military deserters have been arrested without due legal process and have been put away as traitors (Alkarib 2013, 7). There is no religious freedom, with all but four religious denominations banned, and those that are permitted continue to

have had their leadership put under house arrest (Connell 2016, 220; Tronvoll & Mekonnen 2014; Kibreab 2010). All these restrictions are enforced through an extensive surveillance network (Bozzini 2017, 52; Alkibir 2013, 6).

The Eritrean government imposed compulsory and unlimited national military service for all citizens after the border war with Ethiopia (1998-2000). All Eritreans, women and men, regardless of family responsibility, between the ages of 18 and 40, are required to participate in the National Service (Kibreab 2014, 1). Through the Warsai-Yikealo Development Campaign (WYDC), implemented in 2002, large parts of the newly militarised society were forced to live as National Service conscripts indefinitely (rather than the initial 18 months). While implemented after the end of the 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia, hostile relations between both countries continue to be used as an excuse to maintain prolonged militarisation of Eritrean society (Hirt and Mohammad 2013, 146; Bozzini 2011, 96). In the National Service women are regulated through numerous techniques that subjugate and control them.

Since Eritrea's autocratic turn (Hepner, O'Kane 2009), hundreds of thousands of young women and men have fled the country under the threat of being arrested, tortured, shot or killed (Hirt and Mohammad 2013). Most of them initially seek asylum in neighbouring Ethiopia or Sudan, and subsequently in the rest of the world including onward to Europe via Libya; throughout the Middle East, South East Asia and South and North America (Adugna, Rudolf and Getachew 2022). Despite all the aforementioned risks, mass exodus from Eritrea has been a continued phenomenon for more than two decades. Selam

Kidane, an Eritrean scholar, activist and psychologist living in the UK sums up the reasons why women leave as follows:

“Most women leave because of the abject poverty and the lack of prospects. Women leave to avoid the National Military service, or they escape from the National Service. Many leave to join a partner, possibly the father of their child/children.”²⁷

The women I engaged with left for a multitude of reasons: some were National Service recruits, others were not recruited for the National Service themselves but had husbands who were soldiers, some were grade-eleven students who avoided going to Sawa Military Training Camp, others had limited to no formal education and dropped out to get married or avoid military training. Some were housewives or maids, others worked illegally before being conscripted in round-ups by the military regime. In the sub-chapters that follow, I explore the main reasons why the interlocutors of this dissertation left Eritrea.

Lack of a Future: Interrupted Education and National Service Recruitment

To complete their High School education, Eritrean students, whether male or female, have to go through Sawa Military Training Camp where they undergo military training and political socialisation alongside their final year of high school studies. Students are automatically conscripted from across the country through the Warsai School at Sawa when they complete the 11th grade, where under military discipline and in combination with military training they finish the twelfth grade (Kibreab 2014). As a result, education lost its value for many students (Riggan 2009).²⁸ Below I lay out three reasons why the

interlocutors of my dissertation left their education – either in elementary or secondary school. First, women left their education to get married. Secondly, they left their education to seek employment and support their families. Thirdly, they left their education to avoid having to go to Sawa Military Training Camp and serve in the National Service (cf. Ghebrezghiabher and Motzafi-Haller 2015; Alkarib 2013, 8; Hirt and Mohammad 2013; Riggan 2009), which Eritrean scholar Gaim Kibreab (2014) has referred to as an “indefinite obligation and modern form of slavery”. It has been reported that some students chose to fail their school exams to repeat a year, as a strategy to avoid going to Sawa for their twelfth school year (Hirt and Mohammad 2013). For the women I engaged with, leaving their education, eventually resulted in leaving the country altogether.

Several of the interlocutors of my dissertation stopped their education to get married. Traditionally, it has not been uncommon for women to marry at the age of 14 or 15 years old, especially in the rural areas of Eritrea (Alkarib 2013, 9). As a result, some of the interlocutors did not attend school in Eritrea beyond the lower grades of education. As marriage is an informal way of getting out of the national and military service, women, either on their own volition or encouraged by their parents, married young as a strategy to unofficially allow them a way out of military service (Lijnders 2017). Abrehet, after completing her university degree married her husband. Following their graduation from university, her husband was appointed as a teacher 200 kilometres away from her. She equated being married with “not being owned by the government”:

“I was not owned by the government, because I was married. There is a rule in the country that if you are married they do not owe you. As a woman, if you finish your national Service you have options to choose from. But for men, they have no choice, so we were separated”.

Getting married was also a strategic decision made to protect women, among other things, from the rampant sexual and gendered violence that women face in the military (UN Human Rights Report 2016), whether during their military training at Sawa Military Training Camp when stationed after completing their schooling, or when in military prison (Abdulkadir 2008, 86; Hirt and Mohammad 2013). Women are also at risk of gender and sexual violence in the wider Eritrean society: including in their marriages and communities. An environment of impunity surrounds violence against women (Lijnders 2017; Alkarib 2013, 8). Women resist sexual violence at great risk to their lives²⁹ as they can be sent to one of Eritrea’s more than three-hundred prisons, located either underground or in shipping containers, where they are repeatedly tortured and raped. Women are unable to seek recourse to justice due to the absence of a genuine rule of law (Lijnders 2017).

Several of the women I engaged with spoke to the rampant sexual violence experienced by female recruits, in military training at Sawa (and other military training camps), and throughout the National Service at large. Senior officers exploit their positions of power and the vulnerability of women, who fear that refusing advances might get them framed as dissidents and arrested (Alkarib 2013, 8). Rapists conveniently used a culture of shame and the structures of the dictatorial regime to silence survivors. Hala Alkarib argues that “the value of a girl was tied to her virginity and perception of purity, rape renders a woman

un-pure, “unmarriageable” and subsequently of lesser value.” One woman, who is now a recognised refugee in the UK, spoke about the sexual violence she experienced from a military commander while at Sawa Military Training Camp. She relayed the impact the sexual violence continued to have on her sense of safety as a whole, and also her connection to her body.³⁰ Fatima spoke indirectly about the psycho-social impact of sexual violence on women recruits without mentioning sexual violence:

“For women, even for boys, it is so difficult. When women go to Sawa they bring some sickness, different sickness. They say it is stress, you cannot control. They want to go in the front, but the leg they move backwards, they can walk normally but when you see these things, you cannot imagine going to Sawa. And for women as well. Only girls have this sickness. When they are stressed or sick, they get that sickness.”

Women and girls who are pregnant or have children are usually exempt from military training and National Service (Lijnders 2017). Women frequently got pregnant as a form of resistance, or a strategy to avoid conscription, at times without being married (Ghebrezghiabher and Motzafi-Haller 2015; Treiber 2009). Fatima explained how her older sisters “*married and had children so they don’t have to go military service.*” While becoming a wife or mother allows women to be temporarily relieved from military service, they continue to be regulated through numerous techniques that subjugate and control them. In a context where fathers, brothers, uncles, husbands and sons are militarily enslaved, women continue to be intimately impacted by the National Service. Women are rarely granted formal discharge papers which impact their education opportunities, access to land, or State-sanctioned employment. As a result, most women do not have access to travel permits which results in severe restrictions on their freedom of movement

(Lijnders 2017). Wives or mothers occasionally continue to be conscripted through *giffas*, (round-ups) or are assigned to civil service.³¹

Other gendered results of the dictatorial regime and National Service include abuse within various institutions, such as the state, religion, and family. As a result, women experience financial violence and dependency and become increasingly reliant on patriarchal structures. Women lose their rights to land when their husbands leave the country (as is the case of divorce), often forcing them to return to their father's village. Additionally, they have had to leave their homes and challenge traditional roles by engaging in employment (Hirt and Mohammad 2013). Women have few rights or protection mechanisms to fall back on. For the Eritrean women that I engaged in early marriage, domestic violence and female genital mutilation were widespread (cf. Alkarib 2013).³²

Several women interrupted their education in Eritrea to help their parents and/or their siblings by finding illegal employment as housekeepers or waitresses in bars and restaurants. Employment outside the National Service, in the private sector, is severely restricted (Hirt and Mohammad 2013, 165). As a result, the women I engaged with often worked irregularly in Eritrea so that they could ensure the survival of their families (ibid, 147). Women often took on employment at a young age as the direct result of the father or older brothers being conscripted into indefinite military service.

Hiwet, an Eritrean woman in her twenties, whose experiences are at the centre of Chapter Five, recounted why she left Eritrea for Ethiopia. Hiwet arrived in Israel at the end of

2012. Hiwet's father was serving in the indefinite military service in Assab, Eritrea. Hiwet did not see her father, apart from rare occasions when he would return home for a leave. Hiwet's father's salary from the National Service was insufficient to support their family. During one period of leave, soldiers came to their home in Senafe and forcibly took her father when he overstayed his leave. Hiwet with her mother, older brother, twin brother and younger brother looked for him at the local police station and beyond but no one told them about his whereabouts. Two years later, her family was informed that he had died. Years later, her older brother, who had looked after the family upon the father's disappearance, was conscripted into indefinite military service. Her mother fell ill following the death of her husband and the loss of her son. As a result, Hiwet was forced to leave secondary school in the eighth grade to support her mother. Hiwet sold vegetables at a street market in Senafe. However, leaving education to work is not without risks and women were either actively pursued by the military or arrested in round-ups (cf. Ghebrezghiabher and Motzafi-Haller 2015; Hirt and Mohammad 2013, 156). After two years of working irregularly, Hiwet was arrested in a *giffa* (round-up) by the authorities. At 18 years old, she was given a paper that she must report to *Wiya* Military Training Camp.³³

For those students who completed their education at Sawa Military Training Camp, a matriculation exam defined their future in Eritrea. Those who passed the exam were arbitrarily assigned to military colleges, and forced to study a topic at a location assigned by the military registration. Failing the matriculation exam means assignment to the National Service, where young people are placed in different ministries, regional governments and PFDJ firms without their own choice. The majority of young people are

assigned to the armed forces, either the army, navy, air force or people's militia (Kibreab 2014). Several interlocutors explained that the stress of having to complete the final year of their education at Sawa impacted their ability and willingness to study, and resulted in failing the exam. For many, this was a reason to leave the country and several interlocutors fled from Sawa – either before or after the matriculation exam - across the border with Sudan (in part due to its proximity to the border).

Some young women never made it to Sawa Military Training Camp, as they decided to flee before they were drafted (Ghebrezghiabher and Motzafi-Haller 2015, 580-81). Fatima, whose mothering practices are highlighted in Chapter Five, dropped out of school after she completed the 11th grade:

“I did not want to go to Sawa. If you finish your school card, you can't even go to the toilet. If you want to go anywhere, you have to show the school card. So before I got the school card I left because I could still travel. You don't have any future if you go to Sawa. If you finish the military education, you join unlimited National Service, you don't have college or university. There is no point, if you go that boss can make you a slave. No one wants to go to Sawa.”

Fatima, who was most outspoken against the Eritrean regime of all my interlocutors continued by saying:

“No one supports the HGDEF government. He is a real dictator, if you live inside you can feel. He is a real dictator. People can be taken like a thief in the nighttime. They can arrest you even if they did not do anything. They take your son and daughter. I don't know how until now, he [Isayas Afwerki] is still there. So many young people, if they reach 14 or 16, they want to come out. Everyone wants to come out. Education

has no meaning. There is not even a university. Did you listen to some Eritrea and who say they attended university? No, there are none.”

At the start of 2003, the Eritrean regime responded to students dropping out of school to avoid conscription into the National Service by requiring parents to register their children on their identity documents (Amnesty International 2015). As a result, the parents of students who dodged conscription were punished by being denied the right to food coupons (Ghebrezghiabher and Motzafi-Haller 2015, 580; Bozzini 2012; Muller 2004). Fiyori explained how her mother was forced to sign for her when she started her university degree in biology at Asmara University: *“They make your parents sign so in case you escape or do something they can charge you or them. If your parents don’t sign for you they don’t allow you to graduate.”*³⁴ Despite completing her university studies in 2006³⁵ - the same year as Asmara University was closed indefinitely - she never received her university diploma.³⁶ After having worked as a teacher in a high school with little pay and in dire working conditions, she became disillusioned about building a future in Eritrea. She fled the country and her mother was arrested and imprisoned for a month. She knew that leaving the country could result in her mother’s arrest, but she did not imagine the mistreatment her mother would face while in prison. Either people who desert the National Service/leave the country or their intimate ties are searched for and/or arrested (Bozzini 2011, 106) by what Hirt and Mohammad (2013, 150) describe as “various overlapping security systems of the military, the police, the regional and local administrations, the President’s Office, the PFDJ and the mass organisations”. Parents whose children leave face accusations of “facilitating the escape”, which is seen as an “act of treason” (ibid.). Parents are then given the “choice” between paying 50,000 Nakfa (about 2500 euros) or going to prison (Connell 2016, 217). Hirt and Mohammad (2013,

155) understand the punishment of parents and spouses as “a subtle weapon to generate a moral conflict for those who feel responsible towards their relatives.” Fiyori however decided to leave regardless, as she saw no future for herself in Eritrea.

Arbitrary Arrests and Intimate Ties

A handful of the women I engaged with throughout my research left Eritrea after their husbands were arrested by the Eritrean regime, oftentimes without warning, and with no access to legal recourse.³⁷ Others were arrested because their husbands left their military posts or the country.³⁸ As the wives of deserters, they faced the state’s subsequent punishment, including harassment and imprisonment and the resulting impact on family life and mothering practices. It is well documented that the Eritrean regime systematically uses arrests and torture to control Eritrean society (Belloni 2018; Treiber 2017; Hirt and Mohammad 2013; Kibreab 2013). In 2005, the Eritrean state implemented regulations to punish relatives – either parents or spouses - when conscripts deserted the National Service (Bozzini 2017, 52; Ghebrezghiabher and Motzafi-Haller 2015, 580; Alkarib 2013, 8; Hirt 2010). Wives and mothers, at times with infants and young children, have been arrested or imprisoned for periods of up to several weeks and sometimes months, after their husbands or children deserted the National Service, resisted the regime, attempted to cross the border, or left the country (Lijnders 2017). In the case of married people, it is spouses who become responsible and are forced to pay the high fine or be imprisoned.³⁹ In reality, due to the gendered and patriarchal nature of Eritrean society, women are often punished as it is men who evade the National Service or leave the country first. Selam Kidane further explains this policy and its wider impact on women:

“Women do face everything that men face. They are imprisoned, they are beaten up or chased, they are shot at the border. Whatever happens to men also happens to women. But in addition, when men get taken to prison, wives lose the right to the land. If the man leaves the country, then the woman gets imprisoned or if the man disappears the woman gets in prison until they find out what has happened. If he has left the country, they would let her out. But if he hasn’t, then they would arrest her and she would stay in prison, sometimes with her children. They would fine her a lot. If her husband is somebody who has left a government position, then they would take everything: their house, car, whatever properties he had. All of that for reprisal.”

For numerous other women, family life was cut short when their husbands died at the military front, they were arrested for resisting the dictatorial regime, crossed the border irregularly or were caught in the process. Samrawit, at 17 years old, fell in love with a man she met working at her father’s metal shop. Samrawit got pregnant and the couple decided to get married. The pregnancy caused upheaval in the family:

“My father was not happy. He was a teacher and both he and my mum valued education very much. He cried when I told him. He wanted me to graduate first. After I gave birth to my son, I returned to my studies. I willingly went to Sawa to complete my matriculation exam.”

This is in contrast with other women’s decision-making processes, but the only way for Samrawit to complete her high school education and go on to study at one of the military colleges. It shows the extent to which she was willing to get her education. *“I left my son in the care of my mother. Once I completed Sawa, I studied Mathematics at college. I wanted to study. Even now, I want to study. I did not manage to complete my studies. I*

had to return to take care of my son.” Despite not completing her studies, Samrawit got a job at a bank in a city in the Gash-Barka region in North-Western Eritrea. Her husband, who continued working in the metal shop, eventually got conscripted when Samrawit was pregnant with their daughter and was assigned as a soldier to the border with Sudan. He saw his baby daughter for the first time when he was granted leave from the army. The baby was already one year old when she first saw her father. Dissatisfied with his life as a soldier, Samrawit’s husband fled to Sudan. She followed him two years later:

“What can I do in Eritrea? There is nothing to live for. My husband is in Sudan. I am in Eritrea with our two kids. I was imprisoned with my daughter for two months by his military regiment. They were asking me to pay. They came to me and asked me where my husband went. They came to look for him and I told them I didn’t know where he was, he was with you. They told me that as his wife I know everything. Then they said OK if you do not know then let us ask until you know. They took me with my daughter and my mother came along as well. I had to take my daughter with me, she was still breastfeeding.”

Young mothers are forced to serve these sentences with their children if no suitable temporary guardian is found (Ghebrezghiabher and Motzafi-Haller 2015). Samrawit continued:

“I could not leave her behind, what was she going to eat? They do not care whether you have children or not. My son had to stay with my family. My mother did not want to let me go on my own. I told my mother not to cry, and that God would help us. They took me to the place where my husband was serving and kept me there for two months. I had to sleep on the floor. There are wild animals there such as snakes and a lot of rats. There was not enough food to eat. I could not sleep at night. I was too afraid. I was the only woman there. I was afraid that someone would come to

me in the night and do something to me [referring to sexual violence]. My father went to them and begged them to let me go. He asked them what they needed from me. One of my uncles also got involved and eventually, they let me go. But then they came back for me again. They took me to my husband's father this time because they needed money. They needed 50,000 Nakfa. We could not pay this much money. So, they put his father in prison."

When women are faced with this impending imprisonment, like Samrawit, they are left to make a dramatic decision: to endure whatever happens in Eritrea or to flee the country and face myriad threats of potential violence, sexual and otherwise, from law enforcement officials, people smugglers and human traffickers, and fellow travellers (Lijnders 2017).

Married women, who as a result of their marriage or motherhood avoided indefinite military service, faced family life and motherhood in state-induced poverty due to an intentionally crippled economy. This included the blocking of all imports and exports, prevention of international aid, and forced drafting of all working-age men with little to no pay. As a result, farms were left to be tended by the female relatives who remained. By militarising society, the state controls citizens', and especially women's, access to resources such as land, agricultural fields, civic employment and rations. Women are left to single-handedly care for their children, surviving on their husbands' meagre military salaries. If the husband deserts his military service, the woman's situation gets even worse - without his salary, she and her children are at the mercy of the state. Should a woman's husband divorce her, or desert his military service, she would be blocked from receiving vital rations as punishment for her husband's defiance. Men leave Eritrea to better support their wives, children and extended ties, due to near total prohibition on work in Eritrea outside of the National Service between the ages of 18 and 65 (Hirt and

Mohammad 2013, 156; Treiber 2009, 95). With limited economic opportunities, and with key wage-earners conscripted, families struggle to survive. (Lijnders 2017; Amnesty International 2015, 16).

The absence of fathers from families, and men from society, has had profound impacts on family-making and reproductive freedoms. Many women, before fleeing across the border were forced to raise children on their own, as well as taking over men's traditional responsibilities.⁴⁰ Like fathers, mothers also reported leaving the country to create a better life for themselves and their children, and to follow their husbands. Many left their children in the care of grandparents and hoped that they could send for them once they reached a secure place. As Chapter Four shows, this is often not the case. Many children have been driven out of the country for similar reasons and ramifications, as a result, high numbers of unaccompanied minors from Eritrea arrive on their own in Sudan and Ethiopia, sometimes as young as 8 (Van Reisen & Al-Qasim 2017).

When women recounted their reasons for leaving Eritrea, they did not only relate their situation or that of their spouses, but also their wider family ties including elderly parents, imprisoned brothers, and sisters being married to avoid conscription. Fatima spoke at length about the multitude of events that impacted her family and eventually led her to flee Eritrea:

“I was born in Senafe and I grew up in Senafe. In 1997 my brother was taken by the authorities, and I don't know his whereabouts. I don't know if he is in prison or not. I have no idea. I have no clue about where he is and whether he is alive. We had a shortage of resources. Our father was a local trader. My mother was also involved

in the business. My father died from an unspecified sickness in 1994. I grew up in that situation, my father died, and my brother disappeared. The situation was like that until I was in grade 11 in 2006. Afterwards, I did not go to the Sawa Military training camp. I did not want to go. So, because I did not want to go to Sawa I dropped out six months before completion of the 11th grade and went to stay with my auntie in Golij. I stayed there in a hide-out for about three years. They imprisoned my mother as a result and pressured her to reveal my whereabouts. She was imprisoned for about 25 days. My mother was sick. I added to it by getting her imprisoned. She died in June 2009. After two months, in August 2009, I crossed the border and left for Sudan.”

Fatima experienced deep feelings of guilt around her mother’s death, linking it to her imprisonment as punishment for Fatima’s refusal to report for National Service. She watched her mother’s funeral from a distance as she feared arrest.

Most of the women reported leaving Eritrea in connection to their husbands, partners, or male and female siblings being arrested or leaving the country before them. Genet, a young Eritrean mother who left her one-year-old daughter in the care of her grandmother when she left Eritrea, for example, explained that she had left Eritrea because of the general atmosphere in the country, but connected it also to the imprisonment of her father and grandfather after the war for independence, and the arrest of her youngest sister. Women often followed male relatives and other intimate ties out of Eritrea because of the harassment they faced after the men departed, and their inability to support their families without the men. Gendered consequences of the National Services thus shaped women’s lives in dramatic ways (Ghebrezghiabher and Motzafi-Haller 2015, 11). Aurora Massa (2020b, 140) argues that the dictatorial regime is not the only reason why people leave, she also points to a “culture of migration”, rooted within “the long history of

Eritrean transnational migration (Kibreab 1987; Hepner 2009), and which shapes the aspirations of would-be migrants and the expectations of those left behind” affecting both the nuclear family and extended family.

Family-Making and Breaking in Eritrea

Refugee situations vastly impact gender relations, as conflict and flight often destroy the fabric of communities and families, and result in rearrangements of social relations under new and different conditions (Turner 1999; Martin 2004, 15; Carlson 2005). For many Eritrean women such processes have been ongoing in Eritrea for over two decades, as prolonged conflict and indefinite military service have destroyed or deferred family making. To understand diasporic mothering practices and strategies for negotiating mobility, in Israel and beyond, one has to look at women’s lives holistically. Rather than focusing only on experiences outside of Eritrea, one has to consider how the dictatorial regime in Eritrea, and human rights abuses committed within the National Service and beyond, influenced family life. Abuse along the migration route must also be considered. Many women have been unable to establish or maintain a family, care for and live with their husbands and children, or their elderly parents and this reflects a rapid process of family disintegration that destabilised the fabric of society (Hirt and Mohammad 2013, 139). Yohannes Hyab Teklehaimanot (2021, 2) traces the disintegration back to well before the current dictatorial regime and argues that “Eritreans are born into, and live in, conditions of lawlessness and rightlessness that began with the colonial occupation of what is now known as Eritrea”. Long-established gendered roles are eroded as a result, and freedoms to decide over one’s own lives are severely restricted. People have faced

increasingly limited options and had little say in shaping their own, and their children's future.

Women's familial relations have also been limited, with husbands and children mandatorily and indefinitely conscripted. Spouses, parents and children have little or no contact with each other outside of limited periods of home leave for conscripts (Lijnders 2017). National Service thus created fragmented families. Divorce or separation is frequent, as well as women who are widowed when their husbands die at the front or while trying to cross the border to avoid military life (cf. Hirt and Mohammad 2013, 152). Hirt and Mohammad (2013, 141-142) have referred to this as "social anomie" a concept through which they seek to render visible how it becomes "impossible to reconcile private norms and values, creating a highly anomic situation in which traditional and national norms and demands are incompatible". They argue that the "interference in the private lives of people has a strong impact on the fabric of society, rendering individuals unable to follow long-established role expectations" (ibid.). Militarisation has far-reaching consequences on family and care practices in Eritrea - for men who are trapped in National Service and are therefore unable to look after their wives and children, but also for parents, siblings and those left behind. National Service has deeply impacted marriage practices and seen many men neglect their families altogether (ibid.). These developments, when understood in a continuum, offer some explanations as to why Eritrean men in Israel frequently leave their wives and children, further discussed in Chapters Three, Four and Five.

The dictatorial regime in Eritrea has had a deep impact on familial relations, family practices and land practices. With family separation already a common occurrence inside Eritrea due to mandatory National Service (see also Massa 2020b), transnational parenting and marriage have become common as people navigate separation over time. New forms of family making, keeping, or disintegration are produced between those who are left behind in Eritrea, remain in refugee camps in Ethiopia and Sudan, or reach the wider diaspora.

Leaving Eritrea

For many women, leaving Eritrea irregularly is an act of resistance against the dictatorial regime, and a strategy to preserve their lives, the lives of their children and their extended families. Genet was arrested by the military while travelling to Golij, a border town in Eritrea, as they suspected her movement in the direction of the border. She had connected to a people smuggler living in Golij through a neighbour who had already successfully crossed into Sudan. Genet's experience illustrates the risks involved in crossing the border:

“All my money, all that I had, everything was taken by the government. All the clothes that were bought for me by my uncle from Canada, all these kinds of stuff. Plus, I was detained and beaten by the prison officers and then at last they asked me to pay twenty-five thousand Nakfa and they released me. Again I wanted to leave Eritrea, but I had to work for six months I managed to collect some money and I wanted to try another trip to cross the border to Sudan. And when we crossed the border we were met by Eritrean security. They caught us and I was very scared. After all, I am going to be sent to the same prison that I was sent to before and for sure it will be the most critical time for me because this is my second time.”⁴¹

After bribing security guards with their gold jewellery, the group was allowed to continue on their way.

There is a long history of forced displacement and irregular movement from Eritrea (Adugna, Rudolf and Getachew 2022). Just seven years after their struggle for independence (1961-1991) ended in victory Eritreans were displaced to neighbouring countries and beyond during the border war with Ethiopia (1998-2000). Since then, the border between the two countries has been highly militarised, making it risky and difficult to escape due to a high presence of soldiers along the border and a shoot-to-kill policy, to stop draft evaders and deserters from leaving the country. Current migrations rely on earlier migration routes, networks, knowledge and sources of finance established by generations of Eritrean people who left during the independence war (Hassanen 2009, 46) and subsequent border war, as well as those leaving for economic opportunities (Massa 2020b, 137). While fleeing the country, women risk violence and extortion at the hands of government officials, people smugglers, human traffickers and middlemen (Alkarib 2013, 9; Hassanen 2009, 47). As there are no legal migratory routes for most Eritreans, they face many obstacles along the way (Massa 2020b, 137). Alem spoke of these obstacles:

“I left Eritrea on foot. I did not have papers to move around. I went from Dekamhare to Barentu and then I went to Alobo. It is a very secure place and I sat there for two months, and I worked there in a coffee place, from there I met people and from there I went with them to Golij and then I went back to Tesseney and then from there I met people and came to Ali Geder. I stayed there for six months and then I left. I was 15 when I left Dekamhare. I was tall and I looked like a boy, with short hair and my

trousers were like boys' trousers and I wore boys' T-shirts. I didn't like girl clothes. Most people must have thought I was a boy, I did not have tits and my hair was short like I cut it like a boy cut and wear boy clothes. I didn't like to be seen as a girl. I used to feel comfortable, I used to think I was protecting myself."

Alem was well aware of the gendered risks she faced as a young woman in Eritrea and crossing into Sudan, and therefore pretended to be a boy.

"I would have problems as a girl, I was feeling safer in a boy's character. I was planning everything tactically, sitting with the people, planning what was next, there was no time to have fun or laugh, I was serious. I worked to have money. God has given me one gift, that for me it is easy to make friends, to come to strange people and put myself in there."

The majority of the women I interviewed either followed their husbands to Israel or arrived as single women and married once they were released from the prison camps where they were held after they crossed the border into Israel (Chapter Five contains a detailed exploration of how marriage practices were influenced by the Israeli asylum regime). Selam Kidane elaborated on the reasons why men would often travel ahead:

"A single man, a single man can travel, but a woman with children will all have to pay. It's expensive. And it is also about the survival rate. There is the perception that if a man gets out, then it would be easier for him to get to Europe and then send back to them. So the preference is given to men leaving. If it's two of your children, the boy leaves, because it's in the survival rate, it seems to be much more for men."

However, a small number of women came ahead of their husbands. Samrawit travelled ahead of her now ex-husband with their two young kids who at the time were six and a half, and two years and eight months old. The older son tells his sister about this experience, narrating to her: *"You were a baby. We risked paying a lot of money.*

Someday there was nothing and I was hungry and I was crying.” Samrawit recalls how she crossed the border with her two children:

“We walked on foot with smugglers. It took us 21 hours to get to Sudan. It was so hard. I kept all the water we carried with us for the children. I did not eat for 21 hours. My son walked some parts and was carried by the smuggler. I carried my daughter for 21 hours.”

Once reunited with her husband and the father of her children in Sudan, they decided to go to Israel. Samrawit said:

“I had to take a chance. I was lucky. We were in the Sahara for 7 days only. Many people are there for months. God, God helped me. My husband wanted to send me to Libya, but I did not want to go there. I don’t like the way of the sea. Even when I go to the beach here, I don’t swim. I am afraid of the sea.”

As both her father and brother were victimised by the military regime in Eritrea, Hiwet refused to go to military training and instead was imprisoned in Senafe at a prison called *Kambo*. Hiwet was imprisoned for three weeks under inhumane conditions (see also Hirt and Mohammad 2013, 156). She recalls being humiliated, verbally abused and starved. Hiwet managed to escape during one of the evening toilet breaks. She narrated how she hid in a jungle of cactus trees before making her way toward the Eritrean-Ethiopian border, to the village where her grandparents originated called *Enda Dashim*. Hiwet was familiar with the way, having visited her grandparents before, which helped her navigate in the dark. Her familiarity with the area also meant that she did not have to rely on people smugglers to help her cross into Ethiopia. Crossing around *Zalambessa*, she was received by Ethiopian Soldiers, before being taken to Endabaguna Reception Centre for newly

arrived Eritreans that crossed the border. She was then transferred to Mai Aini Refugee Camp.

Trajectories of Violence: Life and Risks in Refugee Camps in Sudan, Ethiopia and Along the Migration Route

The absence of legal and safe passage out of Eritrea rendered women on the move vulnerable to numerous perils, including physical and sexual violence, separation from loved ones and the inability to plan or control the circumstances of their journey (Grotti et al. 2018, 11). Geopolitical events too had a deep impact on the reasons why women leave and how they leave. The Tigray war which came to an end at the end of 2022, for example, made it increasingly dangerous to cross into Ethiopia. Similarly, the escalation of conflicts in Sudan made it complicated to cross into Sudan. These shifting political realities, past and present, and the resulting restrictions on movement meant that people smugglers were essential to guide women wishing to leave Eritrea.

Women I engaged with left Eritrea via both Sudan and Ethiopia, and all spent time in refugee camps before moving on either to cities or continued migration. The women, like most Eritreans, funded these journeys with financial support from family members or acquaintances already in the diaspora, or by working along the route. Hiwet spent several months in *Mai Aini* Refugee Camp, living under difficult conditions with scarce food, supported by her brother who was already in Israel before she travelled to Sudan. She illegally crossed the border into Sudan from Ethiopia in 2011 and remained in *Shagarab* Refugee Camp for several weeks. She felt unsafe in *Shagarab*, due to incidents of kidnapping and human trafficking of Eritreans on their way into and out of the camp.

Human traffickers from the Rashaida ethnic group would enter the camp and kidnap Eritrean refugees, taking them to trafficking camps around the city of Kassala before selling them through a transnational network of human traffickers to Egypt. People smuggling often turned into human trafficking, exploitation and violence, exploiting Eritrean's vulnerabilities as refugees. Someone who might have agreed on a destination and price with a people smuggler might find themselves sold to human traffickers who changed the destination and demanded a ransom payment. People on the move were also abducted in Eastern Sudan near the border with Eritrea and Ethiopia and then sold to human trafficking gangs along the Sudan-Egypt border (Lijnders and Robinson 2013) by Sudanese Security Forces or local communities living along the border.

Many women did not speak the languages spoken in the countries they migrated through and as such were limited in their communication with authorities, people smugglers and the local society. Sexual violence occurred along the migration journey, perpetrated by smugglers, fellow refugees, people with an official mandate to protect (such as security forces or government employees), and residents of the local community, often exploiting their power and the dependency of their victims (cf. Ferris 2007; Freedman 2015, 60–68). Several of the women I engaged with were kidnapped in Sudan and trafficked to Egypt by human traffickers. However, very few shared their experiences of violence for a variety of reasons including post-traumatic stress, shame, and a desire to avoid difficult memories.

Eritreans who arrived in refugee camps in Eastern Sudan and Northern Ethiopia were restricted to live under strict encampment policies, with restrictions on their freedom of

movement, for example, to capital cities. Inside refugee camps, Eritreans had limited opportunities for education and training programmes, or access to income-generating activities (Connell 2016, 221). For many mothers, there was no access to formal education for their children along the migration route. As such, they had very few economic opportunities available to them (Alkarib 2013, 11). Many people in the refugee camps lived off support from family members (Connell 2016, 218; Belloni 2018b, 62). As a result, Ethiopia and Sudan were not viable destination countries for many, but rather “way stations”, before continuing onward to secondary migration (Connell 2016, 223).

Eritreans in Sudan faced arrests and deportation back to Eritrea due to improved relations between both governments and the presence of Eritrean Security Forces in Sudan. In such cases, they were denied access to the refugee status determination process and protections (Connell 2016, 221; Alkarib 2013, 11; Van Riesen et al. 2012, 2013). Those who returned to Eritrea faced imprisonment. Several of the women I engaged with experienced imprisonment with their children in Sudan or Egypt.

Hiwet’s brother in Israel paid 3,200 USD for people smugglers to take her to Israel via Egypt. Hiwet travelled with hundreds of other Eritreans, it took them three months to reach the Sinai Peninsula. Hiwet narrated to me how five people lost their lives along the migration route with her, the lack of food and water, and how girls and women were sexually abused. Hiwet recounted how she weighed 60 kg in Sudan, and only 30 kg when she arrived in Israel. 42 people who travelled with her from Sudan were kidnapped in Egypt’s Sinai desert and paid 40,000 USD for their release. After two weeks in the Sinai desert, Hiwet and her group were driven closer to the border by people smugglers and

were instructed to walk across a mountain to Israel. They spotted a military vehicle and proceeded to run away from it all night, unsure if it belonged to the Egyptian or Israeli army until eventually they were picked up by the Israeli army. Hiwet was taken to Saharonim prison and spent a little over two weeks in the women's section (*agaf 5*) of the prison. All women were imprisoned upon arrival in Israel, whether with children or not. After a medical assessment and an interview, Hiwet was released and taken by bus to Levinsky Park, Tel Aviv. Her older brother was already in Israel, and he came to pick her up from the park. She lived with him for two years, before marrying her husband.

Alem too chose to recall her journey to Israel. She never planned to travel to Israel, but was taken by force to the Sinai desert by human traffickers:

"I left Eritrea when I was 16 years old. I was in Sudan until I was 17. I was in a refugee place called Shagarab. Everyone had some member of the family outside, like in England or somewhere else who sent them money. I didn't have anybody so I used to work in coffee places and get some money to live. When I was trying to go to Khartoum from Shagarab there were people they call them Rashaida or something, they live in the desert, they took us like you know, they used to take people in the middle, when you are going they just come with their guns, they have something in their faces. They took us and I saw myself after one month in Sinai. [silence] We struggled a lot on the way we were going to Sinai. They treat you like you are an animal, not a person. They beat you. You don't eat, you don't drink. They don't care. They used to give us saltwater because we kept asking for water and so you can't drink too much. And if somebody falls from the car when they are driving, because it is an open car, they don't stop, they just continue. If you shout they come and they have pistols, they beat us. I was sitting in the back of the car next to the spare petrol and the car was going very fast up the road, so the petrol spilt on my back. The whole of my back was peeled, and my skin was red, I asked for help but nobody cared. It was too hot and I kept bashing like this and then I begged them to change my place.

Then they changed me in the front. When they changed me in the front, you know they try to touch me and everything and I don't know anything at that moment. I was just praying and when I prayed I didn't know for whom I was praying which God. and I remember myself I was saying I don't know who are you, but there is one God who created me, I don't know the Muslim or the Christian one, but you know the one that created me. I think that saved me. After a lot of struggle, a lot of struggle we finally came to Israel. We saw people dying. They killed them in front of us. Every week one person. They said if you don't pay, you are going to be the next person. I was lucky, I paid 2700 USD. Some of the people that were with me, after I left told them to pay 50,000 USD and half of them died there. They take their [Alem pointed at her belly] I don't know how to say this in English. Yes, they take their organs. And some girls that came with me, the same age, they raped them and they get pregnant.”

Experiences along the route to Israel via Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt had a deep impact on many women, some of whom entered Israel pregnant as a result of rape during the journey and went on to have children in Israel.

Between 2009 and 2012, the Northern Sinai Peninsula developed into a transit area along the smuggling route to Israel. Until 2009, irregular persons on the move were held by people smugglers for several hours up to several days along the Egypt-Israel border in smuggling camps until the route was clear of Egyptian border patrols for the crossing. For Abrehet, and other women, something as everyday as menstruating, while along their migratory journeys and in the desert caused great challenges. However, in 2009 a human trafficking and extortion network developed along the migration route to Israel. Human trafficking gangs forcibly held people captive in Eastern Sudan and the Northern Sinai desert, where they were subjected to brutal treatment including gang rape of both women and men, whipping, and various other methods of physical and psychological torture

(Lijnders 2016). Many asylum seekers lost their lives, many more were released only after paying a ransom of up to 50,000 USD (Lijnders and Robinson 2013, 137-38).

One of the ways in which women employed agency as social actors along the migration journey was by using contraceptive injections before starting the migration journey.⁴² Sexual violence and rape were expected by women who used these injections to prevent unwanted pregnancies.⁴³ Other women, like Berhane, brought Holy Water along with them on the migration route to ward off any evil. These practices continued inside Israel, with Holy Water used in women's homes and Holy Oil used to treat and protect their children from illnesses. Others engaged in partnerships as a form of protection, enduring the risk of violence or unwanted pregnancies within them. Selam Kidane explained that coming into the protection of a male figure is often not an act of love, but rather a necessity to stay safe. These relationships, despite being short-term solutions, often have long-term consequences. Selam Kidane explained:

“Sometimes women do know that somebody already got a relationship and a child, a family elsewhere. But that doesn't matter because, that's the situation, it's today, and who knows about tomorrow, but today she's safe. In a sense, the patriarchal structures in society and also the dangers make for a situation where their gender puts them at a disadvantage. Women are sometimes forced to turn that around and use it. So, you consider the worst of all the outcomes and, you know, the best of the worst kind of situation. So, you know, the worst is where everybody takes advantage of you and the best is you let one person take advantage of you and you get protection from all this. It's like this crisis mode. [...] It's not something they would have considered, had it not been for the crisis. [...] The bad becomes the best solution. But then it also becomes a permanent situation. I bought you out. I rescued you. I could have picked anybody, you know, and then they deliberately keep them at home, because they know that, she did not choose him, but the situation made it so.

They don't allow them to go out and they don't want them to have an education. They don't allow them.... It's not a marriage of equals, two consenting adults that have chosen to do this. It's the situation that has dictated it. I think the situation in Eritrea has made the Eritrean society regressed, in terms of gender equality and family relationships. I think that this society has regressed more and more in a kind of utilitarian mode where everything is about survival, nothing is about love, beauty and something to celebrate. Something to aspire or something to be proud of."

Before the Security Wall was built along the border with Egypt, between 1,000-1,500 people from mainly Eritrea and Sudan entered Israel each month (PHR-Israel 2013). While Hiwet decided to go to Israel because her brother was already there, women's motivations for coming to Israel were varied, complex, and shifting (cf. Shandy 2008, 312). First, a significant number of refugees were kidnapped and had no desire to reach Israel. Secondly, strict border enforcement policies along Europe's border in 2008 also contributed to the development of new migration routes to countries such as Israel. However, since the construction and completion of a security fence along the Israel-Egypt border in 2012, and enhanced enforcement of the anti-infiltration law, new arrivals to Israel drastically reduced (Lijnders 2016). Until mid-2013 only 34 asylum seekers from Africa entered Israel through the Sinai desert route. Thus, Israel externalised its border into Egyptian territory, keeping survivors of kidnappings and human trafficking held in Sinai and out of the country. Many Eritreans were arrested by Egyptian border guards and imprisoned in Sinai's police stations and prisons. Others made their way to Cairo (ibid.). The construction of the border fence effectively closed the migration route, as few people were willing to take the arduous journey considering the low possibility of success and the dangers along the way (Ravid 2022b, 3).

Mothering Through Migration and Legal Precarity

In a dissertation on mothering practices and experiences, I zoom in on the experiences of pregnant women and mothers, as they tended to be treated similarly to other hostages in the Sinai desert, including being tortured. This treatment did not change while in labour or after birth. Ransom would double once their baby was born (Reisen, Estefanos, Rijken 2012, 12). Women and children were tortured in front of each other. Medical attention was not provided for children, pregnant women, or those who were seriously injured as a result of their torture (ibid.). The abuses that mothers experienced included having their children removed; threats to kill their young children; being kicked in or stomped on their stomachs; being deprived of food for days or being given only very small amounts of food. This affected pregnant women and nursing mothers the most. Withholding of (clean) water was also reported including for medical reasons such as cleaning serious injuries and for women in labour (Reisen, Estefanos, Rijken 2013, 72-73).

Once in Israel, many women reached organisations such as Physicians for Human Rights Open Clinic in Tel Aviv, Hagar & Miriam, and Refugee clinics with requests for abortions, as a result of being raped by human traffickers. Some women underwent late termination of their pregnancy following a sexual assault during their journey (Michaan et al. 2014, 371). Others gave children up for adoption (Mymin-Khan 2013). Yet other women raised their children; although conceived through rape. This impacted the women on many levels, including fears of social stigmatisation by their community (ibid, 72). The widespread experience of rape brought questions of paternity in the Eritrean communities into doubt, and as a result, some husbands abandoned their wives (ibid, 78).

I argue that researching motherhood, necessarily includes experiences of unwanted pregnancies, women who became mothers against their will through rape, and women whose reproductive organs are damaged in such ways that childbearing becomes impossible.

Stressed by everyday border and asylum policies in Israel, many women were pressured into partnership and family-making as a means of survival (Lijnders 2018). The settler colonial state created an environment where women, without the support of men, were unable to survive and would end up on the streets of Tel Aviv. Such an environment emboldens patriarchal structures within society and disempowers women. The ongoing institutional neglect of these mothers and children perpetuates further distress (Drori-Avraham 2016). With an increasing number of women finding themselves again to be victims of violence and exploitation, trajectories of gendered violence continue to unfold.

Other women were reunited with their husbands in Israel but did not speak of the experiences of rape for fear of social stigmatisation. Many found it difficult to have sexual relationships with their partners and husbands due to the sexual violence they endured during the journey, and pregnancy and birth were experienced as traumatic. Sexual violence thus continues to shape the lives of women seeking asylum in Israel. Its lasting effects continue long after the traumatic events occur, as sexual violence influences how women remake their worlds (Scarry 1985). Effects are felt on various levels, as women who experience human trafficking often end up with significant financial debt, emotional or physical hurts and social isolation. A decade after arriving, some women were still paying off their debts to social networks around the world.

Since 2009, an estimated 7,000 people from East Africa have been extorted for ransom or tortured for ransom in the Sinai Peninsula (PHR 2013). Approximately 4,000 Eritreans and Sudanese were tortured en route to Israel. Whilst a small number of women have been recognised as survivors of human trafficking, the majority received no state support for violence experienced before or during their migration to Israel (Lijnders 2019; Hotline for Refugees and Migrants 2022, 5). Instead, the state of Israel and its institutions practised additional forms of sovereign violence, oppression and degradation over people experiencing the Israel asylum regime (Lijnders 2018).

Whether struggling to raise a family because of torture-related trauma, forced to leave children behind so they could leave the country or left to fend for themselves and their children after their husbands fled Eritrea, all women experienced family disruption. These disruptions included the loss of traditional support systems or networks that were based around families, communities and villages or cities, often led by elders from their communities. Women were affected by the changes in family structures, but also values, and expectations. Abrehet, an Eritrean mother to one son in Eritrea and two sons in Israel explained these changes:

“The women, when they came to Israel, they changed their culture. They developed faster. This has caused misunderstandings between men and women. There are many problems and disagreements. They are busy with work. They have no time together. They don’t know how to challenge it together. Because of this, many women have become single mothers. They divorced. It is not official, because we don’t have any rules here or any committee but what I know is that a woman will bring three relatives from her side and they make an agreement and separate. Especially the

children are a victim of these divorces because here it is hard to survive. It is not easy for a single mother to look after her children on her own. The children are the real victims. No father, no love, and no time for their kids. Most of the women will have another husband because there are a majority of men here. They are looking. If someone has a divorce they will jump on her. The men want a child because their age is going. They don't think about the future, about the conflict that might arise, about what might happen, they just really want a child. Our culture says they need to have children. It is almost like an epidemic. So many families have fallen apart. Some men killed their wives because of this conflict. All of this is because of the stress of the policies, of the living conditions. They work from early morning until late evening because they don't have any future tomorrow. There are three issues, the parenting issue, the work issue and the women's sexual fulfilment."

Within this environment, Eritrean mothers often took on additional roles in caring for family members, maintaining the family, and the communities they belonged to, while also fulfilling new roles they were forced to take up. In these ways and others, displacement created challenges but also opened up new possibilities.

With these trajectories of violence in mind, the following three chapters dive even deeper into my empirical data and explore mothering practices under the Israeli asylum regime and beyond.



Chapter Two

Chapter Two: Putting Eritrean Mothers at the Centre: A Feminist Activist Ethnography

In Chapter Two, I outline the methods and methodological challenges of studying Eritrean women experiencing the Israeli asylum regime. This study relied on ethnographic research methods from the field of anthropology, a grounded approach to data collection and sociological analysis, and theories from gender and women's studies, forced migration studies, scholarship on settler colonialism, and related disciplines to evaluate the research findings. Critical strands in all these disciplines emphasise the importance of reflexive processes that scrutinise researcher positionality, ethics, and emotions. I explore and navigate these complexities by employing a feminist-activist approach. Therefore, in this chapter, I set out why I have chosen a decolonial, intersectional feminist, and scholar-activist approach to my research. As this thesis is an ethnography embedded in feminist scholarship, I explore how theory and epistemology are intertwined with activism, research practice and everyday life.

Ethnographic methods rely on long-term, deep, and continued interaction with the communities and research contexts to produce situated, experience-based knowledge (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007, 163–65; Haraway 1988). Data gathered for this thesis through ethnographic research is therefore aimed at authentically reflecting my interlocutors' subjective, personal experiences to produce a comprehensive account of seeking asylum in Israel as Black non-Jewish mothers. This chapter sets out how the

research unfolded to further my understanding of racialised and gendered experiences of seeking asylum.

As Umut Erel, Tracey Reynolds and Erene Kaptani (2018, 60) argue, as researchers, we are also positioned within the “social realities of racialised citizenship”. I am a non-Jewish migrant in Israel and a Dutch-European migrant in the UK and in our conversations, my own experiences with migration would inevitably come up (Lijnders 2022). Being non-Jewish and non-Israeli, impacted the women’s ability/freedom to speak openly about and against the Israeli asylum regime. Being a migrant to the country myself, when speaking with me women did not have to censor their opinions of the state of Israel, its government and their interactions with the host community, employers and other services such as nurseries, schools and healthcare providers. I experienced immigration processes through my husband’s quest to secure status as an Eritrean asylum seeker and for myself and my daughter going through the EU settlement process to obtain legal status in the UK in the light of Brexit. However, my experiences with migration bureaucracies were very different as a White European migrant with a passport and a safe country to return to. As a white researcher holding a higher education degree, I am positioned as advantaged in social class and educational terms. At the same time, I shared motherhood with the interlocutors of my research (cf. Lijnders 2022; Suerbaum 2022a; Tschalaer 2022). Being a woman, wife and mother in my thirties allowed for the creation and development of bonds with women/mothers who were all of a similar age and allowed us to discuss marriage, mothering and family and friendships.

Approaching the Research: Legal Precarity, Everyday Realities and Motherhood

The women displayed an extraordinary ability to challenge, resist and cope with the persisting manifestations of precarity. I acknowledge their resourcefulness, creativity, imagination and agency in finding alternatives to the restrictive and violent systems in which their movement and choices are monitored and controlled without losing sight of how they are aggressed and harmed (Lijnders 2022). Each of these women responded to the everyday struggles for survival and violence in her way (Lijnders 2019). As Feldman-Savelsberg (2016, x) has shown in her research, women share common predicaments of belonging, reproduction, and connection engendered by migration. Their personal stories differ within their shared experiences and the larger social and political power structures surrounding them. Eritrean mothers in Israel are not made up of a homogeneous group; instead, they have different classes, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, various levels of education and come from diverse economic and social conditions (cf. Kačkutė 2018). Accounts shared in my thesis are not representative of all Eritrean women in Israel and beyond. Instead, they represent the intimate and individual. In the various parts of the dissertation, I zoom in on a small number of women and their narratives and lived experiences to offer a nuanced, intimate, and in-depth insight into the women's experiences and predicaments of legal precarity in settler colonial Israel, across militarised border regimes, and how these influence their being and mothering practices (cf. Lijnders 2022; Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022). Following Palestinian scholar, Nadia Elia (2017, 48), I will not decontextualise the experiences of women in the asylum regime and analyse them at a micro-level only, as the Eritrean mothers do not function in a space on their own, immune to settler colonialism and apartheid. I do this to document how

women, at a personal and intimate level, are impacted by the Israeli asylum regime and global apartheid and to reveal how the Israeli settler colonial state operates and comes to direct the women's lives (cf. Farinha 2022; Richter-Devroe 2022; Suerbaum 2022b; Trouillot 2003). Annika Lems (2019) has called this a "radical empirical reading". Following Sophie Richter-Devroe (2022) "to widen and contextualise this frame on the individual, but without making any claims to generalisability", I also complement these small number of personal, in-depth biographical narratives – collected over time and space through long-term, multi-sited ethnographic research - with interview data and participant observation with other Eritrean women. From these select accounts, we can learn about the wider phenomena and impacts on women, their families and extended social networks. Focusing on individual accounts adds depth and nuance to our understanding of how policies affect the mothers' lives in the most intimate ways and how they – in connection with their children - navigate them.

I conducted this ethnographic research with approval from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), at the University of London between 2016 and 2018. I returned to Israel to work for Kuchinate, a psychosocial, economic re-empowerment collective for asylum seeking women, at the start of 2022. This allowed me to reconnect with a substantial number of my interlocutors while writing my dissertation. By following the lives of the women over an extended period in several locations, their gendered and racialised experiences of seeking asylum as Black women and mothers in Israel are analysed in their temporal and spatial dimensions (Lijnders 2022; cf. Tschalaer 2022; Grabska, 2019).

I am committed to analysing the women's life worlds, how legal precarity defines their everyday realities and how they make sense of it in their daily lives. I am inspired by phenomenological approaches to migration (Jackson 2012) and motherhood, paying attention to the intersubjective space between separated mothers and children (Horton 2009) and the meaning of motherhood as a carved out, "inhabitable space of welcome" (Willen 2014, 86) in an otherwise hostile context (cf. Lijnders 2022; Shobiye and Parker 2022; Suerbaum 2022a; Tschalaer 2022). I reflect on my positionality as a woman and mother in the research process, identifying motherhood as constituting common ground from which conversations developed. At the same time, however, I acknowledge that researching mothering practices sheds light on prejudice, stereotypes, hierarchies, asymmetries and different positionalities inherent in the research process (cf. Lijnders 2022; Suerbaum 2022a; Tschalaer 2022).

At the women's request, and to protect their identities and ongoing claims for refugee status in the UK, I use fictitious names (Lijnders 2022). Because of their precarious legal status, the detailed descriptions of the legal situations they provided and the irregular undertakings of migratory journeys I have prioritised the women's anonymity. I have reduced all identifying factors to a minimum (cf. Suerbaum 2022a). I offered the women this option and left them the choice. All women decided they did not want to be known by their real names or other identifying factors. Some women suggested pseudonyms for themselves and others, I have come up with pseudonyms (ibid.). As some of the women were engaged in asylum procedures at the time of the interviews, and to navigate fears about their information coming into the hands of immigration officials, I emphasised their right to withdraw from the research at any time (cf. De Angelis 2019, 7).

Women at the Centre: Introducing the Research Interlocutors

The interlocutors of my research range in age from 20 to 40. The women come from different ethnic, class, religious and educational backgrounds in Eritrea and the Eritrean diaspora migration history, family status and composition. All but one of the women had given birth. The women had between zero to five children. The children's ages ranged from under a year old to teenagers. All women arrived in Israel between 2009 and 2012 and entered Israel irregularly via the Egypt-Israel border. The number of children changed during the research period, as did the women's relationship status. All women had spent time in detention centres after crossing into Israel. Some women migrated with, or followed their partner/husband; while others formed new relationships and established families in Israel. All women were partnered in one way or another, either in marriage/divorce or in relationships with Eritrean men. Except for two women, these marriages were with men of the same religion. One of the women, converted from Christianity to Islam and another from Islam to Christianity. Most of the women did not travel with their children but rather left them with their parents in Eritrea. In Chapters Four and Five, I examine how pressures from state policies are intertwined with mothers' daily lives even if children are not in their immediate care (cf. Cochrane 2020). Others travelled with their children, often without the father. Many of the women came to Israel to reunite with their husbands or married in Israel. Some of the women were pregnant during or following their migratory journeys – not all of these pregnancies came about following consensual sex.

I interviewed women positioned along the documented/undocumented continuum (cf. Grotti et al. 2018, 8). None of the women received refugee status in Israel, yet several had applied for refugee status when this process became available at the end of 2013, instead, they were all residing in Israel under a temporary protection policy and received visas they had to renew every one to two months. In the spring of 2017, women with children were forced to bring their children along to renew their visas. Abrehet explained how their experiences of the racialised Israeli asylum regime were also intimately experienced through and by their children:

“Some of our people have four kids, six kids, some of them live in Ashdod. Imagine, if they have to come to Bnei Brak⁴⁴ to renew their visa every two months with all of their kids how much money that would cost? How much stress do they have? All the shouting. It is traumatic. They treat us like this in front of our kids. Which country does that? They do this to humiliate us. They humiliate us in front of our kids. It would be better if they would throw us. This is a systematic way of showing us that this is not our home. Of saying: “Try us””

The women I interviewed who had left Israel either had refugee status, preliminary legal status as part of their sponsorship programmes to Canada or through marriage or were in the asylum process (whether with first-time application or submitting fresh claims). Exploring the experiences of women who left Israel allowed me to put the situation in Israel in a global context of increasingly restrictive refugee policies.

All women interviewed in Israel lived in South Tel Aviv at the time of my interaction with them, where the majority of asylum seekers settled after being released from detention upon arriving in Israel. Several women had lived in other parts of Israel before moving to

or returning to Tel Aviv. Upon my return to Israel at the start of 2022 a growing number of women and families had moved out of Tel Aviv to neighbouring cities such as Holon to escape the high rent prices, to be able to accommodate their expanding families. These moves came at a time when Tel Aviv ranked as the most expensive city in the world (EIU 2021). Leaving Tel Aviv was also a way to avoid segregated education for their children as there are no separate schools in cities where fewer Eritreans are hoping for better educational opportunities for their children. This geographical concentration of my research did not include the very different experiences of women outside of Tel Aviv, in areas that lack access to support organisations, and employment opportunities and are disconnected from the concentration of asylum seeking communities. Due to unclear workers' rights, many of the women worked in low-paid and manual jobs such as cleaning or factory jobs – the two most common kinds of employment available for women from Eritrea in Israel (cf. Gebreyesus 2015). The women's long and inflexible working hours in the informal sector, along with their mothering responsibilities, made it difficult to organise a convenient time to meet. I met women after work, or at the weekend, which was often occupied with preparing for and attending religious and cultural events, marriages, and baptisms.

Some women completed high school and continued to university and college in Eritrea, while others only attended school for several years and then dropped out due to a variety of reasons discussed in Chapter One. Some of the women, especially those with positions in refugee support organisations were fluent in English. Others on the other hand had limited English language competency and as such the interviews and conversations were held in Tigrinya. Other women choose to speak a mix of Tigrinya and English. Although

women often spoke other ethnic languages such as Saho, Tigre, Bilen and local languages such as Arabic and Hebrew, due to my language limitations, we agreed to communicate in Tigrinya and/or English – both of which I speak.

Most of the women were in a marriage with a man living in Israel, often from their communities. Others were separated or their husbands had left Israel as part of the “Voluntary Departure” Scheme (see Chapter Three). In some of these cases, it was unclear whether the women were still together with their husbands and if they would be included in family reunification processes once their husbands arrived in the global North, or if they had been abandoned by their husbands.

The women were all part of the wider Eritrean communities which are often seen as one community, whilst also being organised into separate and overlapping networks of religious, social, and regional organisations. I acknowledge that within the Eritrean community, there are multiple sub-communities. Some women would identify with people from their village or area, others with people who had the same religious background, went to the same church or went to similar military colleges or Asmara University. The majority of the women I engaged with throughout my research were Tigrinya Orthodox Christians. I did however also engage with Saho Muslim women and a woman belonging to the Bilen ethnic group in Eritrea. The women engaged with religious practices in a variety of ways, from being extremely active within their church community to attending infrequently. Some women, because of marriage, converted from Christianity to Islam or changed from attending Catholic church to Orthodox or Protestant church. Many of the women found belonging, community and care in their religious communities

(see also Chapter Three). Religion came up in many of the conversations. One of the women was born to a Muslim mother and a Christian father and experienced and expressed conflict when it came to her religious identity. A small group of women I engaged with were Catholic. I was introduced to these women through my partner and his family and village network from a part of Eritrea that is mainly Catholic. I too was baptised Catholic but do now identify as atheist. Being perceived as a Christian, or perhaps non-Jewish, impacted my research in a variety of ways – I was invited to participate in religious ceremonies and rituals, and I was asked to be the godmother of the daughter of one of my interlocutors. Due to my own (perceived) identity, I was presented with a critique of the Israeli asylum regime without a filter. Although the focus on Tigrinya Orthodox Christians reflects the majority of Eritreans in Israel, I acknowledge that this overrepresentation impacted the findings of my research as people from different ethnic groups and with different religious affiliations have different experiences in Eritrea, along the migration route, and in Israel.

Throughout my research, I interviewed three women and engaged with several others who made their way from Israel to the United Kingdom. Some used forged identity documents to travel to the UK, as discussed in Chapter Five of the thesis, others followed husbands who left for Uganda or Rwanda under the “Voluntary Departure” Scheme and made their way to Europe via Libya. While some women left children behind in Israel with their husbands, other women were unable to become mothers as they so wished, and others followed their husbands to the UK with their children. Their husbands had gone ahead from Israel by self-deporting to Uganda or Rwanda and then made their way irregularly via East Africa, onwards to Libya and across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. Only very

few women left for Uganda and Rwanda in similar ways and initiated bureaucratic processes to be reunited with their partners and/or children. In Chapter Three, I refer to the gendered nature of the “self-deportation” programme by the Israeli Ministry of Interior.

None of the women I engaged with or interviewed were granted refugee status in Israel, and overall less than 1 percent of people who have applied for refugee status have been granted it. This is in stark contrast with countries around the world who do recognise that returning Eritreans to Eritrea would result in significant risks to their lives (Belloni 2018b, 69). Between 2015 and 2021, up to 89 per cent of Eritreans applying for asylum in Europe were granted refugee status under other asylum regimes across the globe (European Union Agency for Asylum 2021).

Eritreans make up the largest asylum-seeking community in Israel, followed by Sudanese people. Eritrean and Sudanese women entered the country in similar ways, using similar migration routes through the Sinai desert into Israel across the border. Up until 2022 Sudanese and Eritreans in Israel had 2A5 visas under the same temporary protection policy, and as such experienced the asylum regime in similar ways. However, this changed as Sudanese people from Darfur, Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile regions were granted A5 visas, which is equal to temporary residence status (Samber 2022). This new status allowed women the legal right to work, entitlement to social benefits, an Israeli identity card, and National Insurance benefits. Additionally, A5 holders can travel outside of Israel, and many have flown to countries like Ethiopia and South Sudan to reunite with family members and return to Israel without impacting their status. Although my

research focussed on Eritrean women, I also interviewed two women from Darfur, Sudan and engaged with many more during celebrations and other public interactions in Tel Aviv. However, for this thesis, I decided to focus on Eritrean women because of the above-described differences (cf. Gebreyesus 2015, xi). Eritrean women lived alongside Sudanese women in Southern Tel Aviv as neighbours and accessed similar refugee support organisations, migrant clinics, and hospitals. In addition, Eritrean and Sudanese women have protested alongside each other for refugee rights – as described in the introduction to this thesis - and meet in public spaces like Levinsky Park.

Throughout my interactions with women and their families in Israel, I was constantly reminded of their endeavours to leave the country. Many were either involved in family reunification processes to Europe, the USA, or Canada; sponsorship programmes to Canada; or, through the “Voluntary Departure” Scheme sought access once again to people smugglers to reach Europe. Others were involved in irregular means to leave Israel and enter Europe, for example, by adopting the identity of Ethiopian Israelis with forged documents (see Chapter Five) or by engaging in marriages for the sake of regular migration avenues and circumventing irregular routes. These attempts at leaving the country introduced additional challenges and violence into women’s lives. Throughout my engagement with the Eritrean communities living in Israel between 2011 and 2022, I observed many changes. Leaving Israel in September 2014 to start my PhD and returning in the summer of 2017 for my research, I found the size of the Eritrean community had diminished considerably as many had chosen to leave due to the increasingly punitive Israeli policies. Returning to South Tel Aviv again in 2022 enhanced my understanding of how women’s lives developed, progressed and changed on an

intimate level. Many of the women had in the space of six years given birth to one or more children or were pregnant. One of my interlocutors gave birth to her third child and first son, and left for Canada several months later, after navigating both pregnancy and COVID-19 delays.

Introducing the Research Contexts: Setting the Scene

I conducted interviews and participant observation in two different countries across several locations: Tel Aviv, Israel and the UK. Research began in 2016, and continued through online communication and several research visits until the end of 2022. Next, I describe each of the research contexts and their specificities.

Tel Aviv, Israel

At the start of 2021, Tel Aviv was home to approximately 19,000 people living under the Israeli asylum regime, with around 7,000 children under the age of 18 (ASSAF 2021). I engaged with the women in three neighbourhoods: Shapira, Neve Shanan and Hatikva, all located around the Central Bus Station, or *Takhana Merkazit*, in South Tel Aviv (Willen 2005, 74). Rachel Brown (2017, 35) argues that in the area around the Central Bus Station, “the spatial dynamics of race, class, gender, and religion were often clearly pronounced”. I conducted most of my research activities in women’s homes. The women preferred these private settings over public places, where they could freely continue their mothering practices. I was often invited to stay the night with the women and their families, and as such, my daughter and I slept in many different homes. Spending the night with the women offered valuable insights into their daily routines. When we did not

stay over with Eritrean women, we would stay at the home of our friend, an Israeli activist and refugee support worker, along with her daughter. Due to financial constraints, we were unable to rent a place of our own, and as such we were unable to invite women into our own space. Weekends were also a good time to meet women as we were often invited to join them in their visits of family and friends, and to religious and celebratory events. These celebrations often lasted the entire day and well into the evening. I would also frequent the playgrounds in South Tel Aviv with my daughter as a way of meeting Eritrean mothers and their children.

I gained additional engagement and observation through interaction with two support organisations: the Eritrean Women's Community Centre (EWCC) and Kuchinate. Kuchinate, which means crochet in Tigrinya, is a collective made up of over 350 women from Eritrean, Ethiopian, Sudan, South Sudan and several West African countries, such as Ivory Coast and Nigeria. Kuchinate has a studio/workshop on HarTsiyon Street in South Tel Aviv, where the women come to design and make various handicrafts. Kuchinate is a socio-psychological project and about 60 per cent of the women are survivors of human trafficking, torture and sexual abuse along their migratory journeys (as set out in Chapter One). Women work both in the studio and at home, allowing them to work alongside their responsibilities as mothers. In January 2022 I returned to Tel Aviv to work with Kuchinate as their Educational Director.

EWCC was an initiative designed and run independently by a group of Eritrean women. The Centre aimed to provide Eritrean women with a safe space to meet, as well as to gain access to important services. While the centre closed at the start of 2022, from July 2012

it was a unique grassroots initiative run by and for Eritrean women. The Centre was founded by Zebib Sultan, an Eritrean woman. Zebib worked with women in Eritrea and utilised her experience to the benefit of Eritrean women living under the Israeli asylum regime. The Centre was not only a safe space, one where women felt a sense of belonging, but women also received support with navigating the Israeli bureaucracy in their language, attended language and vocational classes and offered women the ability to work as they also ran a nursery for several years. The Centre also had outreach activities on domestic abuse, prostitution, and family planning. About 100 women attended the Centre every week. In 2013, I was the observing deputy director at the centre. Many of the women who attended the centre came at the end of long and hard work days, they needed to juggle domestic duties and brought their children along to classes.

South Tel Aviv, which has a large undocumented immigrant and East African asylum seeking community, is a colonial settlement built on the lands of Palestinians displaced during the 1948 Nakba. Maya Shapiro (2013, 180) describes how the contemporary city of Tel Aviv grew out of Yaffa, one of the world's oldest and Palestine's biggest ports. In the run-up to and during and after the 1948 Nakba many Palestinians in Yaffa were violently removed from their homes and city. The neighbourhoods that are these days known as Neve Sha'anani and Shapira – the neighbourhoods in which most Eritreans and Sudanese live - were built on Palestinian orange orchards (ibid, 150).⁴⁵ Settlers of Tel Aviv's southern neighbourhoods included working-class Mizrahi families. The area around Neve Sha'anani Street is now frequented by drug addicts and sex workers who use the streets as their homes. In addition, more and more young Israelis moved into the neighbourhoods, including those with young families, contributing to ongoing gentrification.

United Kingdom

I conducted interviews in the United Kingdom with three women who had managed to leave Israel using forged identity documents – Alem, Fatima, and Hiwet (pseudonyms). I engaged with several others who had made their way through family reunification in the UK from Israel. I had met Alem and Hiwet in Israel before their travel to the UK. One was at a protest, while the other was introduced to me at a wedding. Fatima was introduced to me by Alem. My interactions with Fatima and Alem took place in Alem's home, a room in a hostel for refugees provided by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). I also spent time with Alem in her local park, at an Eritrean restaurant, and at events organised by the Network of Eritrean Women – a UK-based women's led support organisation by and for Eritrean women with branches in other European and African countries, and later in her new home. When her son joined her, they were moved from one temporary accommodation to another. I last visited Alem in April 2021. By then, she had been allotted a two-bedroom flat for her and her son. I brought my daughter along for most of these visits. As of 2022, Fatima moved from her immigration accommodation to a suburban area with her husband and their two children. They are both attending college. I interviewed with Hiwet over the phone. She was staying at a friend's house as her initial asylum claim had been rejected and she was preparing for what is called a 'fresh claim' - working with a lawyer to put in a new claim for herself. Hiwet did not receive any support during this period and relied on the help of people from the Eritrean community. She was sofa-surfing between different homes.

During the research period, I supported Fatima and Hiwet with their communication with their immigration lawyers. Fatima granted me access to the written communication between her lawyer and the Home Office and asked me to help her write to her local Member of Parliament. I provided an expert opinion for Hiwet and was in frequent contact with her immigration lawyer. I also shared my experience and knowledge of the education system and directed the women to other sources of support when they requested this. Once Alem's son had arrived she started a struggle for their shared life in the UK. I accompanied her to her local housing office as she was about to be kicked out of her accommodation which was deemed unsuitable for a mother with her son, yet no new accommodation was provided. Later, I accompanied her to her landlord's office to get a written statement that she would get kicked out of the flat if she let her son sleep there.

I also conducted participant observations and interviews with staff members and volunteers at the Network of Eritrean Women, the only specialist organisation in the UK supporting Eritrean asylum seeking and refugee women and providing cultural and linguistic advice, information, advocacy, workshops and wellbeing support. During the time of my research, I was also a volunteer and board member of the Network of Eritrean Women.

Research Methods and Choices

I conducted ethnographic research over two years with several intense periods of data gathering. During the two years of research visits, and the continuous years of writing my thesis, I stayed in touch with women via social media, including Facebook, Instagram and

WhatsApp, and continued our conversations online and in person when I returned in 2022 and as such I was followed and traced the women's lived experiences and trajectories for up to eight years (see also Suerbaum 2022a; Tschalaer 2022).

I relied on my extensive network of Eritrean women in Israel and beyond to identify participants for my research. As I lived and worked in Tel Aviv with asylum seeking communities between February 2011 and September 2014, I had an extensive network to work with. Due to these engagements, I had unique access and had already established trust with the women and in the wider refugee communities. I contacted women ahead of my travel to Tel Aviv, to let them know my plans. As much as possible, I scheduled meetings and interviews with the women in advance. I initially met with community leaders or women working for grassroots and Israeli refugee support organisations. Based on these pre-planned meetings and using a snowball sampling method, I was then introduced to additional women whom I subsequently interviewed.

I conducted research in various public and private environments in all research contexts. Jo Woodiwiss et al. (2017, 3) emphasise the importance of “recognising the context of telling and hearing stories and the location of both tellers and listeners of contemporary stories”. Stories, they claim in their feminist narrative research, “are differentially available to different individuals both in terms of being told and being heard”. Using research methods, I conducted biographical narrative interviews with 30 Eritrean women, and 10 semi-structured interviews with staff at refugee support organisations in Tel Aviv, and the UK. I have followed eight of these women over time and across place through continued engagement, facilitated by both a visit to Canada in the summer of

2018 and my return to Israel in 2022. Later visits allowed for the continuation of face-to-face relationships with these women. This allowed not only for long-term relationship building and increased trust but also allowed me to see these women's lives in a more complex and ongoing way. As Maya Shapiro (2013, 11) reminds us that:

“naming people's experiences as well as categorising, analysing and contextualising them in theory, the social institutions that they have created around them and the lives of these individuals and societies are always in a state of flux. What was once observed about them is, therefore, already in the past, particularly in the ever-shifting political landscape of Tel Aviv where the social and political structures relevant to migrants, and especially asylum seekers, have changed significantly since 2011.”

In addition to biographical narrative interviews, I also conducted participant observations in public spaces such as Levinsky Park - a park in South Tel Aviv frequented by the migrant communities that live in the city - Eritrean-owned restaurants and shops, women's homes, refugee support organisations, and during religious and other celebrations. Being present in everyday aspects of the women's lives allowed me to get a deep sense of their emotions, worries, and aspirations and how they were directly and indirectly forged by their contact with Israeli government authorities and host communities (see also Bloch 2022; Palmberger 2022; Suerbaum 2022a). Many of the insights and knowledge I gained were not obtained in formal interviews but rather in everyday encounters with these women as they went about their lives and tasks - cooking food, caring for their children, dropping their children off at nursery or school, attending community centres and while engaging in religious and celebratory activities such as baptisms and weddings and at protests (Lijnders 2022). Through these everyday

activities, I also met their wider intimate ties, such as spouses, children, family members, friends and neighbours. Following Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2015, 2):

“ Everyday life is profoundly related to all political constraints, social relations and activities (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Allen, 2008). The politics of everydayness enables a feminist reading of conflict because it draws our awareness to routine, intimate and private sites where power is both reproduced and contested (e.g., Alexander, 2005; hooks, 2000; Stoler, 2002). Attention to mundane and routine activities reiterates the feminist notion that the “personal is political” and alludes to how the everyday is a space for oppression and domination, but also subversion and creativity emerge.”

Informal interactions complemented and at times counteracted the data I obtained through more formal biographical narrative interviews. Often, the moment the recorder was turned off, the conversation would deepen and issues that were rather left unspoken, came to the surface.

Beyond the 30 narrative interviews that form the empirical bedrock of this thesis, I spoke to various women who support Eritrean women through their organisations. These include three Eritrean women working in community organisations - the Network of Eritrean Women, the Eritrean Women’s Community Centre, and Kuchinate and two Eritrean women who explore the experiences of Eritrean refugees through academic and activist positions. I also interviewed five non-Eritrean women who support women from Eritrea seeking asylum in Israel and beyond, at Physicians for Human Rights, ASSAF Aid Organisation for Refugees and Asylum Seekers, Kav Laoved (the Worker’s Hotline), and Gynaecologists Without Borders operating in what was then ‘the Jungle’ and other informal camps along the French border with the UK for asylum seekers seeking to reach the UK. I conducted an exploratory research visit in Calais, France in the summer of 2016

that included interviews with five women from Eritrea and Sudan, charity staff, and activists. I decided against further research in France for a variety of reasons, including my childcare responsibilities, housing and travel. Nonetheless, these initial interviews and observations impacted my thinking and writing and influenced the decision to do further research in Israel.

Narrative Biography Interviews: Historically Situated Subjectivity

Following Maroussia Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Nazilla Khanlou and Helene Moussa (2008), rather than asking my 30 women interlocutors questions guided by my research agenda, I engaged the women in an open dialogue in the hope of eliciting personal stories that would enable the women's voices to be clearly 'heard' (ibid.). By doing so, I followed Brandy Cochrane (2016, 11) in centring "lived experiences and personal views, meanings and practices, while additionally allowing such subjective conceptions to be linked with wider social and historical contexts". By engaging in narrative biography interviews, I "moved beyond the question-and-response structure and instead used everyday conversational interaction, storytelling and listening, to produce rich interview data" (Bauer & Gaskell 2000 in Cochrane 2016, 11). Most narrative biography interviews lasted between one and three hours, with the latter being more common. I often interacted with each of the women multiple times, either in their homes, public spaces, or refugee support organisations, before inviting them to be interviewed. I interviewed some of the women several times, over prolonged periods. The interviews were conducted, as much as possible, in a private space, where the women felt safe and secure. The women themselves would choose a location and time for the recorded interviews and would decide who would

be present and how long the interview would be. I told women at the start of the interview that they could end it at any time or change the line of discussion (Gerard 2014, 15). I took the biographic narrative approach with the intention that this would give women the power to decide what they did and did not want to share, and decide on the topics of conversation. I did not ask any leading questions but rather would follow up on issues that they brought up (Roseneil 2012, 2). This allowed me to focus on “an exploration of life histories, lived situations, and personal meanings in their socio-historical context, and its attention to the complexity and specificity of lived experience and to “historically situated subjectivity” (Wengraf 2009 in Roseneil 2012, 3).

The main purpose of this research is to explore the women’s experiences and resistance strategies during their journeys towards, life in, and their way out of settler colonial Israel (cf. Nyamwathi Lønning 2020). As such, I approached the biographical narrative interviews with the following main question: “I would like to hear about your experiences of being a mother in Israel. Could you please tell me about your life from whatever point you would like to start?” As such, different entry points were used by the women to introduce their personal stories. In their narratives, the women spoke to the past, present and anticipated future (ibid, 322). The experiences shared in this thesis are not representative of all women from Eritrea, rather they represent the intimate, individual, subjective accounts of some that add nuance to our understanding of the wider phenomena (Lijnders 2018).

Most of the women started their narrative in Eritrea, locating themselves in the area in which they grew up. They would often start with their own families, their youth and

upbringing. Several women started telling their own stories from their mother's narrative. For example, Alem starts from her mother's experience of displacement during what she calls "Ethiopian colonisation":

"I will start from my mum. My mum used to live in the country in a place near Senafe and when she was twelve she went to the city with her big brother. And you know by that time Eritrea was colonised by Ethiopia so there was a lot of war and they killed my uncle when they were going to the city and she was left there. She saw when they killed him and she ran away. And when she ran away after two days, finally the Eritrean army found her and then she joined the army. She was only twelve years old. She met my dad in 89 and then they liked each other when it was Independence Day in 1991 she was pregnant and I was born in 91. Because my dad was Christian and my mum was Muslim and already we had freedom by then and my mum was going to go back to her family and my dad too and they knew they couldn't continue because they had separate religions, so when I was born my dad and my mum they were separated already. But I grew up knowing my stepdad as my dad."

Natsenet too, proudly shared how she was born during the struggle for independence as a "red flower" to revolutionary parents in the field. In their interviews, women would not follow a linear and chronological order but skip back and forth between life experiences and times.

Many women experienced gendered violence, including rape and gang rape, and intimate partner violence in Eritrea, along the migration route, and in Israel. I deliberately did not ask questions about experiences of gendered violence and throughout the interview, I would repeat to the women that they were in charge and did not have to share anything

they felt uncomfortable sharing. Yet as Alem explained, experiences of sexual violence followed women well into their lives in Israel and marital relations:

“It is almost a given as a woman that you have been raped, or sexually abused, every woman has passed through something horrendous and yet there are so many judgements. We don’t say as a woman what happened to us in Sinai, we are afraid, the first time we tell them they would say oh sorry, but then when he becomes your husband they would say: who do you think you are? Arabic people, they played with you over there in the desert, you are here with me, you should be proud that I accept you. If they have these things the women would not even talk about it. Also, people in the community would say, you know this girl, people they did this to her in Sinai.”

Only three women brought up, in passing, what happened to them in Sinai and I left it at that. As I found in my research between 2011 and 2014 with asylum-seeking women in Israel, women would share their narratives in both first and second person, often speaking about others as a method to share their own experiences (Gebreyesus 2015, 36; Lijnders 2011). As explained in Chapter One, it is nonetheless important to understand their experiences through a temporal lens and trajectories of violence as it “illuminates the many social intersections and webs of meaning in which migrant mothers are enmeshed” (Feldman-Savelsberg 2022).

The women also chose whether or not they would invite me or let me participate in gatherings with friends and family, which they often did, including family get-togethers, meetings with friends, dropping off children at school, meetings at their children’s nurseries, and social events. Similarly to Pamela Feldman-Savelsberg’s (2016, 22) approach to her research with migrants in Berlin, I made sure not to talk about my

interviews with others within the small, and thus easily exposed, Eritrean communities in Tel Aviv. Most of the interviews were recorded with a voice recorder, with the approval of participants, and later transcribed verbatim. In preparation for my research, I undertook formal Tigrinya lessons which followed up on years of informal Tigrinya learning. Interviews were conducted in Tigrinya or a mix of Tigrinya and English and were translated to English during the transcription process with the support of a native Tigrinya speaker with a BA in Social and Economic Policy and lived experience of the Israeli asylum regime after the interviews were conducted. In some interactions, members from the community who were present and spoke English offered ad hoc interpretation, this included husbands, brothers, and friends but also Sister Aziza, the founder and Co-Director of Kuchinate. I instructed formal and informal interpreters to ensure confidentiality and be part of safeguarding the interlocutors.

I then analysed the interviews by first reading them over and identifying themes. I re-read the main interviews several times throughout the writing process. I returned to find new meanings and different emphases and to make sure that I had represented their words as truthfully as possible. These findings are interpreted drawing on broader research experiences in Israel (February-May 2011, December-October 2012, September 2014), Ethiopia and Sudan (2013), Egypt (2011 and 2013), and the UK (2014-2021) (cf. Shandy 2008, 810).

Tracing migration over time, place, and legal status: A multi-sited ethnography of motherhood

Transnational family life and mothering practices across borders have been studied at length through multi-sited ethnography (Massa 2020b; Boccagni 2016, 2014). Conducting long-term research in the different contexts, allowed me to move across, what Aurora Massa (2020b, 143) has called a “hierarchy of destination countries”. Starting with the least desirable country: Israel, I followed Eritrean women as they moved on using irregular means to the UK and sponsorship programmes to Canada. Following Paolo Boccagni (2016, 14), Massa (2020b, 143) argues that the relevance of multi-sited ethnography lies in the “ties that enable a relation interdependence between them” and emphasise how social relations correlate with a multitude of territorial spaces (Falzon, 2009; Marcus, 1995). Boccagni (2014, 2) argues that:

“Migrants’ life experiences are emblematic of movement and cannot be addressed through a ‘territorialist’ lens. However, migrants’ life spaces are not limited to societal spaces either. Rather, they involve fragmented and plurilocally situated networks, at least whilst family members live far away”.

I did not initially set out to conduct multi-sited research. Before departing from the UK for research in Tel Aviv, I was re-introduced to an Eritrean woman I had met several years earlier at a wedding in Israel. Through that encounter I decided to include the UK in my research, to provide a deeper understanding of the creative migration strategies women used to leave Israel, and their continued struggles to be together with their children. Exploring the experiences of women who left Israel allowed me to place the Israeli asylum regime in a global context of increasingly restrictive refugee policies.

I used communication technology such as WhatsApp and Facebook to observe and stay in touch with some of the women over nearly a decade. Being a part of the women's lives, both physically and online helped me piece together and gain a dynamic understanding of their life histories and experiences (cf. Tschalaer 2022, 5). Especially in the realm of motherhood, pictures and videos of baby showers, in the hospital bed with their newborns, baptisms, and birthday parties allowed me to follow the women's major life events such as birth. It also allowed me to see how the women presented themselves online and how this might add to, or contradict, what I observed and heard from them in our real-life engagements. With every encounter, whether formal or informal, I understood and was informed about various aspects of women's lives. As time progressed, and we got to know each other better, women volunteered more and more pieces of information about their lives.

In 2022, upon returning to Israel I reconnected with the women who still lived in the country. I gained an in-depth perspective, beyond media platforms, to how their lives had changed over more than a decade of communication. Women married, separated and remarried. They had more children, lost children, and some had had abortions. Their children had grown and started school, and their relationships with their children had changed. As their children grew, so did their needs and their mothers' worries about undocumented life in Israel. Long-term engagement with the women allowed me to develop a detailed account of their everyday experiences as women with mothering responsibilities, within complex social and political contexts.

Long Term Relationship Building, Establishing Truth and Ethical Considerations

Although my doctoral journey at SOAS started in September 2014, I have been involved in the struggle for asylum and refugee rights in Israel and beyond since Early 2011. I have known many of the women whose experiences make up these pages for many years, some over a decade. Although the interviews and research were conducted in a specific, contained period, the writing has been informed by volunteering, working and activism for refugee rights in Israel, Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan and the UK. As such, my PhD research is influenced by and builds on ethnographic research conducted for my MA in Social Anthropology and research done with the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants, Physicians for Human Rights Israel, and the African Refugee Development Centre in Israel between 2011 and 2014. This focussed on communities from Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Guinea-Conakry and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Additionally, I conducted research with refugees from Eritrea in Israel and Ethiopia for the Feinstein Institute at Tufts University; research with Eritrean refugees in Sudan for the UNHCR and International Organisation for Migration (IOM); and research with Amnesty International Israel. My academic work on gender, human trafficking, asylum, border regimes, and violence along migration routes from the Horn of Africa to the Middle East and Europe, also runs parallel with 13 years of activism for the rights of people on the move (Lijnders 2018). I was involved in grassroots activism to end refugee detention and deportation and for refugee rights at the end of 2013 and early 2014 in Tel Aviv, Israel. The environment has become increasingly hostile and the policies more violent, racist, fascist, poverty-inducing and life-threatening for asylum seekers. The hope we felt at the end of 2013 and early 2014 turned into fear, anger and frustration. I also volunteered in

Israel with several refugee and refugee support organisations, including the African Refugee Development Center (ARDC), the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants (the Hotline), Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), and the Eritrean Women’s Community Center (EWCC). I have produced several country expert witness reports relating to Eritrean asylum clients. My thesis has also been influenced by my work in the UK with Race on the Agenda, a race equality organisation and the Women and Girls Network, an intersectional Black and minoritised-led feminist therapy network. Additionally, I spent the final year of writing my thesis back in Israel, working with Kuchinate, a psycho-social and economic re-empowerment collective for asylum seeking women from various African countries. One of my interlocutors, Alem, reflected on this long-term involvement and how it impacted her interactions with me: *“I know you, you have been there for a long time. You did not know me well there, but I know you and Kidane and you were so involved. You were helping so many people, you helped Kidane and so many others, like me and like him. You understand me better than anyone because you have seen a lot of situations like me.”* I did however also notice that this familiarity often impacted the women’s explanations of the Israeli asylum regime as they assumed that I already knew what they were talking about.

My biography also stood out during my research, as it remains unusual for an Eritrean man to marry a non-Eritrean, white-European woman and as such our marriage in Tel Aviv in 2014 was an unusual occurrence that was widely spoken about and attended. Furthermore, Kidane, my partner, has been a community leader and activist and as such was well-known by the Eritrean communities in Israel. When I left Israel in September 2014, I was heavily pregnant with our daughter Tsigereda, a pregnancy that was also

intimately followed by Eritrean communities in Tel Aviv. I would often meet women in the street and be invited to their homes. These meetings would often turn into opportunities for more formal interviews. I always ensured that I made the women aware of shifting from a social meeting into a formal interview and re-established consent from the women. In selecting women for biographical narrative interviews, I ensured a diversity of interlocutors, interviewing women from a variety of backgrounds, including ethnic, religious, educational, and class, from cities or villages in Eritrea. I included women who were involved in grassroots and political activism, as well as women who did not engage in such activities. Several of the women were either distant relatives or former villagers/fellow students of my partner. I reflect on my positionality, including my marriage to an Eritrean man and my motherhood of our mixed heritage children, later in this chapter.

Women would often go about their everyday tasks while sharing their histories and experiences, and children were often present during interviews. The presence of children brings up ethical considerations and made me wonder if and how this could impact the children, as they might overhear the recounting of painful experiences and the mothers, as the presence of their children might have influenced how women presented themselves in their narratives. As we often spoke a mix of English and Tigrinya, women would cook, make coffee and care for their children. Interviews were often interrupted by us sharing a meal and drinking coffee. At times, interviews were interrupted by unexpected guests calling at their homes. When conducting interviews at refugee support organisations like Kuchinate and the EWCC, we would seek out a private room to conduct the interviews, but still faced interruptions and distractions. I believe disruptions to women's narratives

do not take away from their accounts but instead honestly reflect the hectic pace of lives in perpetual movement, across borders, juggling efforts to survive and provide care.

Another challenge presented on occasions when the husbands of the women I spoke with were present during the interview. This changed the interview atmosphere, especially when the husband spoke English and the wifeless fluently or not at all. Yet, at the same time, it offered valuable insights into family dynamics, gendered role divisions, and parenting responsibilities. As I will argue later in this thesis, the policies that make up the Israeli asylum regime had distinct direct and indirect consequences for women, but also for familial and intimate relations.

Throughout the writing, I was concerned with how to write about or reveal insights that may potentially be harmful if read by policymakers or asylum officials. These issues are pertinent to a full and complex account of women's experiences, however, if they were not already known by governments, I did not include them. Confidentiality is always an issue in research on forced displacement and with women living under asylum regimes, it is even more urgent for women engaged in refugee status determination processes, especially in a controlled state like Israel. As such, I have not shared all the research data I collected, or only parts of the biographical narratives collected to safeguard the interests of families, and individuals (cf. Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2015).

Especially for the women I engaged with in the UK, it became clear that they self-censored the information shared in the interview because of ongoing asylum and family reunification cases (cf. DeAngelis 2019, 9; Bosworth and Kellezi 2016). The women

arrived in the UK with forged identity documents and then applied for asylum. After spending the afternoon with Alem in her asylum accommodation, where we conducted her biographical narrative interview, she walked me and my daughter to the bus stop. By this time Alem and I had met several times since we both moved to the UK from Israel. The first time I met her was at an Eritrean women's event. Sometime later, we met at a women's conference discussing asylum regimes. We both spoke at the event about the Israeli asylum regime. She told the audience about her harrowing experience migrating to Israel and how, after having lived a legally precarious life in Israel, she self-deported to Uganda under the agreement made with the country by the State of Israel. She explained how she then made her way to the UK via Sudan, Libya, across the Mediterranean Sea, Italy and finally France. In our initial recorded interview, she maintained this story. As we were waiting for the bus, she turned to me and said:

“I have been lying to you. I want to tell you the truth. You are a good person and you deserve to know the truth. I did not self-deport to Uganda. I came to the UK using a fake passport. I have to tell everyone the Uganda story because that is what I told the Home Office when I claimed asylum, but that is not what happened. I paid a smuggler to get a passport and pretended to be an Ethiopian. That is how I got to the UK.”

She told me something can start as a small thing, but then it becomes bigger and bigger and she felt bad about having had to lie about her actual experiences. However, she felt there was no other choice than to do so, to receive refugee status and bring her son and ex-husband to the UK. She said that every time people ask her about this she would feel uncomfortable. The way she arrived in the UK years ago will forever be part of her official story. These revelations come with their ethical considerations. What is to be shared in

my writing, and what should remain hidden? I have chosen to share her experiences in my thesis in consultation with her.

As Maayan Ravid (2021, 127) has set out in her doctoral thesis, being present as a researcher in communities where you were previously a volunteer or activist emphasises the importance of transparency and clarity and the need for an understanding of the conditions, aims, uses outcomes and limitations of the research. I obtained oral consent from the women before turning on my voice recorder – if they had agreed to this and explained data protection to them. I also had it written down in Tigrinya. I never asked the women for written consent as I knew from previous research experiences that they would be reluctant to sign papers as this reminded them of the legal bureaucracies and institutions intimately impacting their everyday lives in their home countries, along the migration route and in Israel. I also made notes during the interview on the women's emotional expressions and the environment in which I conducted the interviews. I would either make notes during participant observations and informal conversations or I would record these in my research diary after returning home. Following Pamela Feldman-Savelsberg (2016, x) I make a distinction between the narratives women shared with me about their lives and the story I am writing based on this. To make these distinctions clear, verbatim quotations taken from audio-recorded interview transcriptions are in italics and quotations written in research notebooks in regular typeface. I continuously ensured that the women were aware that I was not just participating or observing, but that whatever was said during these conversations could later become part of my written thesis.

Pnina Motzafi-Haller (2011, 129) insists that “the terrain of subjugated knowledge is often not readily available in interviews and must be culled from moments of silence; from deconstructing the coded behaviour of our subjects and not merely through listening to their statements”. As Aurora Massa (2016) observed, in her research with Eritreans, informal conversations “emerged as a powerful tool of investigation in a community where discomfort towards direct questions, mistrust and suspicion are historically rooted attitudes, fuelled recently by the authoritarian government they have escaped and their condition as refugees”.

Researching Asylum in a Settler Colonial State: Activism, Research Practice and Everyday Life

Following feminist activist practice, I want to start by acknowledging that my research has been conducted in 1948 Historic Palestine. When you read Israel in this thesis, I want you to read and understand it, like I do, as a racialised settler colonial state and apartheid regime. Canada too is a settler colonial state, and as such, some of the women moved and experienced asylum regimes, from one settler colonial state to another. Following Kashyap (2019, 575-6) and others, I understand that “while land acknowledgements expose settler colonialism’s ongoing policies of Indigenous elimination – without accompanying decolonial action, land acknowledgements are stripped of their disruptive power” (ibid.). As such, through this research and as an ongoing process, I continue learning about settler colonialism, building connections with Palestinian people and communities, and aligning myself with the Palestinian and other struggles for self-determination and decolonisation (ibid.; Koleszar-Green 2018, 174). In an Open Letter and Call to Action “Palestine and Praxis: Scholarship for Freedom”, Nour Joudah, Randa M. Wahbe, Tareq Radi, and Dina Omar (2021) argue that “Scholarship without action

normalises the status quo and reinforces Israel’s impunity”. On an everyday level, and as part of solidarity action and decolonisation practices, I continue to support, as much as possible, Palestinian-owned businesses, donate to Palestinian-run charities operating inside Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, and never shy away from difficult conversations with Israeli colleagues and others about settler colonialism and apartheid. In addition, living and working in Israel, I understand and sit with my own uncomfortable and unethical complicity and “settler responsibility” in settler colonialism (Walia 2013) by my presence in Israel. I understand this position following Beenash Jafri’s (2012) suggestion that we “think about settlerhood not as an object that we possess, but as a field of operation into which we become socially positioned and implicated”. Through this realisation, my understanding of the role of refugee support organisations has changed drastically, and I now see the need to steer “away from seeking greater recognition from a colonial system and go beyond demanding citizenship rights from a settler state” (Nobe-Ghelani and Lumor 2022). I see my role as a feminist-activist scholar as both recording the oppression and positioning myself and my scholarship in direct opposition to the violence implemented on Palestinians through settler colonialism and apartheid (cf. Wolfe in Barakat 2017, 6).

My research and writing are rooted in a commitment to the rights of refugees and asylum seekers. I draw together contexts of forced migration, settler colonialism and mothering practices to gain a deeper understanding of the intersection between race, gender and status. An anti-racist, anti-oppression, anti-colonial, and anti-Zionist feminist methodology and practice has informed the writing of my dissertation. I relate to Abdo’s use of the term ‘militant ethnography’, coined by Jeffrey Juris (2008) to refer to a research

approach that connects to “global justice movements in which the author/researcher is placed inside the social movement and is actively involved in it” (Abdo 2011, 50-51). My involvement in Eritrean asylum seekers’ struggles in Israel over the last decade has been a major source of information for this thesis. Knowledge gained through my engagement with women’s groups and refugee support organisations, especially among Eritrean women, reflects the community’s internal discussions and aims, to which I am closely committed. In other words, this is a politically engaged thesis which is based on my long-term involvement in activism among various asylum-seeking communities’ struggles. Hence, the positioning of this research lies not only within the critical feminist anti-colonial school but also in movements for refugee rights involved in changing asylum and border regimes around the world.

My collaboration with people experiencing the border and asylum policies in Israel started as academic during my ethnographic MA research but soon became political and personal. I consider research as a form of activism and through my academic writing I addressed human rights abuses of people who experienced border and asylum policies in Israel, in their home countries, and along the migration route. What started as an academic interest in the movement of people seeking rights, turned over time into a lived experience. The research and writing coincided with my own multiple experiences of voluntary migration as a woman, pregnant woman, wife and mother. The insecurities about my partner’s immigration status in the UK, our separation during the birth of our daughter, our reunion as our daughter was six weeks old, and our struggle and fear around Brexit deeply impacted my research. I acknowledge that these experiences are very different from the women whose stories are at the forefront of my academic work.

However, I believe it is important to share these here as my personal experiences do inform my interests and have influenced both knowledge production and my emotional well-being as I researched and wrote. Magdalena Suerbaum (2022a) argues that researching motherhood as an (expecting) mother was an intensely emotional experience that impacted the way she read, analysed, and understood the data she collected. The presence of children, including my child, in the research process did not only appear as a question of the child being a door opener or collaborator in the research process (see Korpela et al. 2016; Mose Brown & De Casanova 2009). Rather, it created an emotional intensity that affected the whole research process (Suerbaum 2022). These experiences have also interfered with my research and have made it challenging to complete. I gave birth to our daughter three weeks into the PhD, struggled for the first year with postnatal depression, lived with the fear of not being able to pay rent and sustain my family, and engaged with the Home Office to regulate my Eritrean partner's stay with us in the UK.

In essence, the research allowed us to be together as a family. It was a pathway to family reunification, not nearly as creative or risky as those taken by the women whose experiences animate these pages. My specific positionality – white, middle class, educated, European citizen enhanced privilege and choices while navigating around or against the global migration regime. It offered us a chance very few of my interlocutors had. Having had to deal with immigration regimes did allow me to gain a deeper understanding, and ability to come closer to the daily life of Eritrean women. My partner's migration status was often the topic of conversation when I returned to Israel for my research without him, and his inability to travel with me was noted widely.

Researching Motherhood while Mothering

Joanna Dreby and Tamara Mose Brown (2013, 7) frame roles in families as key components, along with race, class, and gender, that shape researchers' positionality. Heeding the advice of feminist reflexivity and taking it a step further they argue that the roles we undertake as women and mothers define ethnographers' relationships with those in their studies (ibid.). Motherhood shaped the nature and the quality of data collection and is a critical piece of the research process that has so often been overlooked, under-emphasised, or simply ignored by scholars (ibid.). My daughter was present for all the interviews, and so were the children of most of my interlocutors. Their voices, laughter, demands, songs, upsets and distresses are very much present in the recordings of the biographical narrative interviews I conducted. Our interactions were frequently interrupted so that we could tend to our children's needs, often helping each other feed, change, play with and clothe our children. Anthropologists have written extensively about how their pregnancy or motherhood shaped, enabled, and affected the encounters, interactions and relationships between them as researchers and their interlocutors (Lijnders 2022; Tschalaer 2022; Suerbaum 2022a, 2022b; Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022; Shandy 2008, 810; Feldman-Savelsberg 2016, 15; Dreby and Brown 2013). Carol Warren (2001) has pointed out that "motherhood is a key marker of mutual identification between women researchers and participants" and provides a "unique opportunity to analyse the effects of motherhood in the research process and relationships with interlocutors" (Mose Brown and Masi de Casanova 2009, 42).

Not only did being a mother influence my interactions with my interlocutors, but more explicitly, being the mother of a mixed Eritrean-Dutch heritage daughter and the wife of a former Eritrean asylum seeker in Tel Aviv brought us closer. Being caught up in the process of gaining status for my husband gave me insights into, but also was often a topic of conversation with my interlocutors. For example, Fatima who herself was entangled in a process to gain legal status in the UK, commented on and advised about the legal process we should engage in. Engaging in everyday mothering activities, such as clothing, changing and feeding my children, often leads to intimate conversations about the practice of mothering. One illustration of this is the time I was breastfeeding my baby boy Tsinay in the living room of Kuchinate while one of the women, Haben, was doing the dishes. Seeing me breastfeed brought her back to her first experience nursing her now 12-year-old daughter in public in Israel. She told me:

“My daughter was Tsinay’s age when I was released from the prison camp. I was put on a bus with my daughter. In Eritrea, it is normal to feed your child wherever you find yourself with them being hungry. I took out my boob and started feeding my daughter and the person next to me started shouting loh, loh, loh – no, no, no in Hebrew – and I had no idea what was happening. I was just released from the prison camp, I did not know anything, I did not understand the language, nor what was expected of me in public spaces. I continued feeding her, confused, but the person kept on shouting at me and started pointing at my daughter. I felt scared and covered her with my scarf.”⁴⁶

This was her first experience with Israeli society, other than with the soldiers who met her at the border with Egypt and the prison guards in Saharonim Prison. This memory of breastfeeding her daughter in public is inherently linked to the 13 days that she did not have access to food and water and her milk almost dried up together:

“You know, when we were coming across the desert from Sudan to Egypt we did not have any water or food. I had nothing to eat. My daughter could no longer drink any milk as it had completely dried up. I was so worried for her. She kept on sucking on my nipple but nothing came out. I followed my husband who made his way to Israel before me. I married [for the first time] when I was only 14 years old. My first husband was not a good man. We separated, but we have one son together. He is in Eritrea. I remarried and when I left Eritrea brought our daughter with me.”

Today Haben has 6 children, the youngest just over one year old. I would argue that what happened on the bus was both a racialised and gendered experience. As a Black woman, her body was sexualised for feeding her daughter in public.

I started this doctoral process seven months pregnant with our daughter and I am completing the process while raising her as a pre-teen with our infant son. My own experiences of pregnancy in Israel as a non-Jewish migrant without health insurance, birth in the Netherlands without my partner due to immigration restrictions, and motherhood in the UK as a European migrant without British citizenship during Brexit, deeply informed the focus of my research and the development of my research questions. It connected me with women and provided grounds to return to Israel 2.5 years later with my daughter. My research then was also a way to introduce our daughter to the community my partner and I had built intentionally before leaving for the UK. Yet, I also considered my privileged position as a White European migrant in the UK and Israel. While being mothers undoubtedly created a common ground and a foundation for conversations, our relationships were defined by, what Magdalena Suerbaum (2022a, 3) has called “adamant differences” between the precarity most women experienced under

the Israeli asylum regime and beyond and my experiences with migrant motherhood (see also Suerbaum 2022b; Tschalaer, 2022).

In Chapter Two, I described methodological choices regarding research interlocutors and ethnographic engagements, as well as interviews and data analysis. I explored the settings of ethnographic research in each of the countries. I introduced the women whose experiences, relational practices and resistance strategies form the core of my thesis. I also reflected on the challenges, limitations, and sensitivities of the work. The study of Eritrean mothers who experienced the Israeli asylum regime involves the investigation of several perspectives: life in Israel while seeking asylum, experiences of mothering transnationally, and migration to other locales. In Chapter Three, I zoom in on mothering practices under the Israeli asylum regime.



Chapter Three

Chapter Three: Mothering Against the Israeli Asylum Regime: The Making and Unmaking of Intimate Ties in Settler Colonial Israel

Chapter Three explores mothering practices in the context of the exclusionary policy of ‘temporary protection’ in the settler colonial state of Israel, and the complex and constantly changing systems of harm and violence. Exploring the significant impact on women and their families’ everyday lives, hopes, dreams and fears, Chapter Three complexifies how Israel’s asylum regime and processes of criminalisation and legalisation influence and disrupt everyday intimacies on various relational and familial levels, and across borders. I explore how bureaucratic inscriptions alongside family and kin relations, and community and religious practices politicise family making and breaking. While people experiencing the Israeli asylum regime struggle for but do not acquire, refugee status and are not granted access to rights and services, one urgent question keeps surfacing: will Israel’s racialised exclusion of Eritreans and Sudanese ever end without the dismantling of the settler colonial state? Can it be separated from struggles to, stop the violence towards and killing of Palestinian people, end of apartheid policies, and what Rana Barakat (2017, 1) has referred to as the “ongoing Zionist settler colonial occupation of Palestine” (cf. Madrigal 2019, 176, 177)?

I open Chapter Three with the premise that Israel is a settler colonial state and its asylum policies reflect this state of affairs. I focus on how settler colonialism and apartheid come

into force through the Israeli asylum regime to impact Black non-Jewish people from Eritrea and Sudan. What is presented is therefore by no means an in-depth analysis of Zionist settler colonialism and Israel's apartheid regime, both historically and as an ongoing process. Palestinian and other scholars continue to analyse and provide insights into this issue, and I rely on their theoretical frameworks for my analysis. However, this dissertation cannot be written without positioning my analysis of the Israeli asylum regime within the settler colonial framework.

In my analysis of Israel as a racialised and Zionist settler colonial state, I prioritise the academic and activist work of feminist Palestinian scholars such as Lila Abu-Lughod (1993, 2007, 2020), Nahla Abdo (2002, 2011, 2014) Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2003, 2009, 2015), Rhoda Ann Kanaaneh (2002), Isis Nusair (2010), Fatma Kassem (2011), Areej Sabbagh-Khoury (2011, 2015, 2018), Nadim N. Rouhana (2018) and others. Following Nahla Abdo (2011, 76), I argue that any analysis of the Israeli asylum regime, “without taking into account the context of the colonised Palestinians and the colonial European Jewish (Zionist) settler movement will necessarily be misleading”. As Leila Abu-Lughod (2020) argues, “the concept of settler colonialism opens up possibilities for thinking differently about Palestine’s political present and future”.

Applying a settler colonial framework to my analysis of the Israeli asylum regime involves the acknowledgements of ongoing violence of settler colonialism including elimination, subordination, racialisation, criminalisation, and exploitation (cf. Kashyap 2019, 569). Equally, making a refugee claim in a settler colonial Israel cannot be seen as separate from the racial, gender, class and sexual dichotomies and hierarchies that stem from ongoing

settler colonialism (cf. Fobear 2014). I unpack the racialised asylum policies that follow from settler colonialism – policies that are always also gendered, just as all asylum policies globally are. It is through Katherine Fobear’s (2014, 47) work on the connections between settler colonialism and asylum and settlement processes in Canada, that I have arrived at the following question: What does it mean to seek asylum in settler colonial and apartheid Israel in which there is ongoing racialisation, legal exclusion and state violence against Palestinians?

I explore the experiences of racialised women from Eritrea whose lives are intimately impacted by the Israeli asylum regime that both maintains processes of Palestinian elimination and subordination of racialised outsiders like asylum seekers and migrant workers. Settler colonialism in Israel is reproduced through discriminatory legislation and exclusionary practices towards Black non-Jewish people (cf. Ma 2020), the settler colonial logic of Israel’s asylum regime and its accompanying violence emerges from the logic of occupation (cf. Madrigal 2019, 23). I start with a brief review of settler colonialism in the context of asylum and migration in countries such as Canada, Australia and the U.S. Then throughout the chapter, I spell out how infrastructures of apartheid against Palestinians are used to exclude, criminalise and violate people living under the Israeli asylum regime.

Following this analysis, and against the backdrop of settler colonialism and apartheid, I ask how we can make sense of the mothering practices and experiences of Eritrean non-Jewish women living with precarious legal status. How do women, for whom legal precarity “penetrates virtually every sphere of life, craft “inhabitable spaces of welcome”

in which their existential imperatives and moral commitments are sustained despite the abjection they daily confront” (cf. Willen 2007, 86)? Through the case study of Tsenayet⁴⁷, an Eritrean mother, I explore how one navigates and challenges legal precarity while focusing on care for children, families and other intimate ties in South Tel Aviv and beyond. By sharing their personal experiences, I am careful to understand these within the interlocking systems of oppression (Nasser-Eddin and Abu-Assab 2020, 193) I examine how Tsenayet and other mothers and their intimate ties have been impacted and challenged by three state policies, all of which have been annulled by now: The first is the detention of men considered single by the state in Holot Detention Centre under an amendment to the Anti-Infiltration Law (2013). The second is the “Voluntary Departure” Scheme (2015) (“self-deportation” from hereon) also aimed at single men. The detention of single men in Holot and the “self-deportation” campaign were racialised and gendered policies, as they only applied to men from Eritrea and Sudan. The third was the taxation policy or ‘deposit’ law under an amendment to the Foreign Workers Law in 2014 which came into effect in 2017. At the centre of these policies, which were all interconnected and have come into force jointly, was the aim to coerce people to leave Israel to a third country (Uganda or Rwanda) or their origin country (Eritrea and Sudan). Whereas these policies have been studied widely to understand how men from the Eritrean and Sudanese communities were impacted (Fennig 2021; Ravid 2021, 2022a; Birger, Shoham and Boltzman 2018; Mesgena and Ramati 2017, Rozen 2015), there is little analysis of the impact these policies had on women. I therefore seek to highlight the racialised and gendered consequences of these policies on Eritrean women and their children.

Policies of withholding rights, the severing of intimate ties, and group criminalisation were deliberate acts and outcomes forged by the Israeli state that created inequalities and

reinforced the exclusion of Eritrean and Sudanese people. They further created and maintained precariousness in the everyday lives of Eritrean mothers. These systemic practices had specific gendered consequences and invaded women and their families' privacy and intimate space (cf. Cochrane 2020; Canning 2017). Women and children, although they experienced detention when first crossing the border into Israel irregularly, were not targeted in these amendments to the Anti-Infiltration Law (1954) for detention in Holot. Women and children only sporadically accessed the "self-deportation" scheme. However, through intimate ties with the male members of their communities, women were deeply affected by these policies. Through Tsenayet's lived experiences I seek to highlight how she was intimately impacted by the new detention policy for men as both her new partner and brother were summoned to report to Holot Detention Centre. In line with Eithne Luibhéid, Rosi Andrade, and Sally Stevens (2018, 2) I explore Tsenayet's intimate ties – with her new partner, brother, daughter in Israel and son in Eritrea - as "paradoxical sites" through which women and mothers in Israel seek to renegotiate exclusionary policies. Through her experience, I seek to explore "the complexities of intimate ties as sites" through which Eritrean mothers engage in navigating and challenging legal precarity, whilst also experiencing dispossession (ibid.). The policies discussed in this and the following chapters all serve to exemplify how control is asserted over women's bodies in the name of securing the Israeli settler colonial state.

First, I begin by situating the analysis within the academic debates on settler colonialism and migration in other contexts such as the U.S., Canada, and Australia. I explore how and if insights from other settler colonial states can be translated into Israel. In particular, I look at how the female body, with its capacity for reproduction, is seen as a threat. By

zooming in on Tsenayet's lived experience, I point out connections between the Israeli asylum regime and settler colonialism.

Settler Colonialism and Immigration: Looking to Other Settler Colonial States for Insights

There is a growing body of literature that explores asylum and forced migration in settler colonial states such as Australia, the U.S., New Zealand and Canada, ranging from critical ethnic studies to native studies, critical race theory studies, Chicana studies, and postcolonial studies. I engage with this scholarship to trace connections between conditions of oppression faced by undocumented persons, refugees and migrants under settler nation regimes elsewhere with those in Palestine (cf. Madrigal 2019, 157).

In the context of Canada, Harald Bauder (2011) argues that immigration policies are a “key instrument of ongoing settler colonialism” (Bauder 2011). Maggie Pezyna and Harald Bauder (2022) point to the similarities that exist between how Indigenous Peoples, asylum seeking people and refugees have been racialised, criminalised, delegitimised and constructed as the ‘Other’. These groups have been constructed as threats to the sovereignty, security and economic integrity of Canada, posing a danger to the ‘common good’. They add that immigration policies reproduce “the racialized injustices and inequalities of ongoing settler colonialism”. Amar Bhatia (2020), again in the context of Canada, also points to the intersection of migration law and policy with settler colonialism.

Monika Batra Kashyap (2019) and Harald Bauder and Rebecca Green (2022) locate the U.S. immigration legal system, and Canadian immigration policies respectively at the heart of the settler colonial project and as a “key instrument of ongoing settler colonialism” (Kashyap 2019) and “historically closely connected to land appropriation and the oppression of Indigenous peoples” (Bauder and Green 2022). Raquel A. Madrigal, in the context of the U.S., argues that “fundamental structures of violence against undocumented immigrant and migrant lives are the more evolved, and ever ongoing settler colonial nation building designs used to continually remove Native populations and dispossess them from their land” (Madrigal 2019, 10). Madrigal seeks “to understand how the violence of settler borders and the dehumanization of immigrants and migrants critically relate to and is undergirded by the ongoing removal of Native peoples, denial of Native sovereignty, and dispossession of Native land” (ibid, 11). Kashyap (2019, 564) asserts how criminalisation, detention, deportation and exclusion are tools used to support settler colonialism’s foundational mechanism of subordinating racialised outsiders.

Gendered Racialisation and the Settler Colonial State: A Brief Analysis of the Israeli Asylum Regime

I offer a brief intersectional feminist and decolonial analysis of the Israeli asylum regime next and argue that how people experiencing that regime are racialised, criminalised, violated and excluded are built upon the infrastructures of settler colonialism and apartheid regulating and targeting the lives of Palestinians. Sarah Willen (2018, 119) describes people living under the Israeli asylum regime as a “new kind of national abject”, in the hierarchies of racialisation in settler colonial Israel. Centring settler colonialism

exposes its still-existing structures and powerful effects on Palestinians and other racialised people (cf. Arvin et al. 2013, 9), such as women from Eritrea who are at the heart of my thesis. At the same time it avoids relegating “Indigeneity rather than blackness to the “position of unthought” (Day 2016).

Policies and infrastructures of apartheid, including the Anti-Infiltration Law (1954); the building of security (or apartheid) walls; prolonged administrative detention; economic violence; social segregation and exclusion; and finally, expulsion are all state policies and practices established and implemented to support processes of settler colonialism, but also to exclude and control Black non-Jewish people arriving in Israel to seek asylum (cf. Kayshap 2019, 559). These policies have been referred to by Israeli politicians as the “infiltrator” deterrence policies (UNHCR n.d.). Israel has enacted a series of laws aimed at preventing people it calls “infiltrators” (*mistanením*) from entering the state. The use of the term “infiltrators” to describe people from Eritrea and Sudan makes the link between settler colonialism and the asylum regime evident. The term “infiltrators” was originally forged under the Anti-Infiltration Law to describe Palestinians attempting to return to the lands they had been expelled from in the 1948 Nakba (Lijnders 2022; Ravid 2022a; Lentin 2018, 115; Willen 2018, 20; Mesgena and Ranati 2017). Hadas Yaron Mesgena and Oran Ramati (2017, 7) combine the study of non-Jewish migration and asylum and what they refer to as the “Israel-Palestine conflict” in the context of detention in Holot, an “open facility” for single men from Sudan and Eritrea and the Anti-Infiltration Law (1954) to shed light on the specificity of Israel’s anti-migration and asylum policy. Maayan Ravid (2022a, 135-36) explains how the Anti-Infiltration Law was used for the administrative detention of displaced Palestinian refugees returning to their

land, serving as an “early form of population management and border control”. Ravid (2022a, 130) contextualises “discriminatory treatment in colonial racism” and places “exclusionary state practices of migration control in Israel’s racialised social dynamics, contextualised in Israel’s origins as a settler society” and “subsequent national and racialised social ordering”. Ravid (ibid, 143) links state violence inflicted upon Palestinians with the exclusion and racialisation of people living under the Israeli asylum regime and understands these as “injurious outcomes produced by the state”. Ronit Lentin and Elena Moreo (2015, 7) argue that the term ‘infiltrators’ and the templates used to control people living under the Israeli asylum regime “follow Israel’s domination of Palestinian citizens and occupied subjects, singling it out from other receiving countries.” All the above authors link people living under the Israeli asylum regime to perceived security threats, in connection to Palestinians. Rachel Brown (2017, iv) “contextualises the reproductive labour done by migrant caregivers within Israel’s broader ethno-racial Zionist project of nation building, and the ongoing occupation and colonisation of Palestinian land”. Maya Shapiro (2013, 9) explores how “migration and their outcomes must be understood as operating within the framework of Israel’s primary political and social conflict - the military occupation of Palestinian lands in Gaza and the West Bank, and the relationship with Palestinian residents of these occupied territories”. However, these scholars do not use the lens of settler colonialism to draw parallels and have yet to deeply zoom in on the infrastructures of apartheid such as the anti-infiltration law, administrative detention, social segregation and the building of security walls. It is the above and other laws and practices that were established to facilitate ongoing settler colonial nation-building. Infrastructures and foundations constructed to exclude and control Palestinians are now used towards racialised people experiencing the Israeli

asylum regime from a variety of countries in Africa (cf. Madrigal 2019, 6 in the context of the US). In the context of irregular migrant workers in Israel, Sarah Willen (2010, 268) described how policies of exclusion directed at non-Jewish people come together in Israel to form an “unwritten governmental template”.

Settler colonialism and apartheid are ongoing and continue to shape both Palestinian realities and access to refugee rights and citizenship for people living under the Israeli asylum regime (cf. Fobear 2014, 49). Israel’s national identity and its asylum regime are based on ongoing settler colonialism in which the erasure of Palestinians and the control of non-Jewish migrants go hand-in-hand with the creation of the Israeli Zionist and Jewish Supremacist state and the fortification of its borders. Palestinians - as occupied people - are most affected and violated under the racialised hierarchy stemming from ongoing settler colonialism and apartheid. I argue that the oppression of Eritrean and Sudanese people draws on the same racialised logic and practices. However, while they experience Israel settler colonial violence in the same space and time, their relationality to it is fundamentally different (cf. Madrigal 2019, 149). Rather than comparing these two groups, in line with Madrigal (ibid.) in the U.S., I focus on the “tension, and silences among the differentially devalued conditions” of Indigeneity and legal precarity. Following Madrigal, I use the term “differentially related” to express their relationship. As Danika Medak-Saltzman (2015) asserts: “In no uncertain terms, Indigenous populations remain entrenched in fundamentally different situations than those faced by other racialized groups”. Like Sarah Willen (2010, 267), I am not “proposing a direct analogy between Israel’s systematic and institutionalized discrimination against its Palestinian citizens” and “the protracted and often brutal occupation of Palestinian

people and lands” and Black non-Jewish people. Rather, in this chapter, I argue that one can only truly understand the asylum regime when considering Israel as a Zionist settler colonial and apartheid state. Doing so brings new insights and understanding to how Black, non-Jewish asylum seekers are aggressed, violated, and treated.

Following a recent report by Palestinian human rights organisation Al-Haq (2022b, 3), I understand Zionism as a form of racism and racial discrimination and as a tool of settler colonial domination (Erakat 2021; Abu-Lughod 2020) and Israeli apartheid as a tool of Zionist settler colonialism. Nadim N. Rouhana and Areej Sabbagh-Koury consider Israel’s relationship with its Palestinian citizens as “a special and complex case of settler-colonial control where outsiders come to a populated land that they claim as their own, and displace most of its indigenous inhabitants while granting citizenship to those who are not expelled for reasons related to the international circumstances surrounding the recognition of the settler-colonial state” (Rouhana and Sabbagh-Khoury 2015, 1). Settler colonialism is performed through legal, political, economic, social and cultural institutions. As Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2015, 5) argues “Israeli settler colonialism is a structure reinforced by daily practices of appropriation and erasure, naturalised over time as a constitutive structure reified in Israeli laws and through Zionist ideology and self-narrative.”

The Female Birthing Body: “Infiltration” from ‘within

Women seeking asylum, as mothers, often are of particular interest to states, not only in relation to what is considered legitimate motherhood (Feldman-Savelsberg 2022) but

also due to fear of “exaggerated representations of uncontrolled childbearing by undocumented migrants and asylum seeking women supposedly destroying the state” (Luibhéid 2002, 137). Public anxieties about sexuality and immigration are then easily harnessed together for repressive ends (ibid.). Umut Erel and Tracy Reynolds (2018) argue that “the figure of the maternal immigrant is often represented as insidiously threatening the social reproduction of the nation through bringing in potential cultural, ethnic and racial Otherness” (see also Lentin 2003; Tyler 2010). Migrant women are often constructed as mothers of groups, communities, and nations (e.g. Kanaaneh 2002, Petet 1997; Yuval-Davis 1980) and are then endowed with particular characteristics, imagery, and roles (Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022). The fertility and reproduction of women seeking asylum are seen as posing a risk to nations (Luibhéid 2002, 137). The female border transgressor, in her violation of the masculine militarised border regime, is seen as a double threat, as both a woman and an enemy (Khosravi 2010, 119). Migrant mothers who transgress national and racialised boundaries are symbolically positioned as potentially polluting the reproduction of the nation (Erel, Reynolds and Kaptani 2018, 58; Ahmed 2004). Immigration debates are literally and figuratively inscribed on African women’s bodies, and they are the target of verbal and physical assaults. Dianna J. Shandy (2008, 803) argues, in the context of African mothers in Ireland, that while the mothers were publicly demonised, their children, with their renegotiated status vis-à-vis the state, were feared.

Anteby-Yemini (2017, 7) argues that the increasing visibility of non-Jewish asylum seekers from East and West Africa in Israel “challenges both the territorial borders and the political boundaries of the ethnocratic Israeli regime and raises new issues concerning

identity, race and migrant categories”. Israel’s asylum regime reflects the state’s continuous anxiety over a changing ethnoscape that is perceived as a threat to its Jewish character (Raijman 2010, 90). Israeli government decisions regarding asylum have sought to prevent entry to the state, accumulation of rights, and gaining of status, by individuals who are perceived as threatening the Jewish character and demography of the state (Yaron, Hashimshony-Yaffe, and Campbell 2013, 3; Kritzman-Amir 2009, 606; Willen 2018, 121; Raijman 2010).

Rachel Brown (2017, 69) argues that within the Zionist settler colonial state “Jewish female sexuality is seen as the “vessel of reproduction” of the Jewish body politic, a marker of racial continuity and purity.” Brown adds that the bodies of people living under the Israeli asylum regime as constructed in direct opposition as “alien bodies who wish to enter the body politic from without” (Brown 2017, 69). Black non-Jewish women are specifically seen as a threat to the Jewish identity and character of the settler colonial state (Paz 2011, 9; Yaron et al. 2013, 3; Kalir 2015, 3), not only due to their religion – Muslim or Christian - or because of their ethnic background and the colour of their skin, but because of their reproductive capacities. Black non-Jewish women with childbearing capacities are seen as posing a demographic threat to the Jewish supremacist nation (Lijnders 2022; Khosravi 2010, 119 and Luibhéid 2002, 137 in other contexts). As Rhoda Kanaaneh (2002) has argued, in the context of Palestinians in Israel, the state fears a demographic “time-bomb”, where its lower birth rate will result in a lower Jewish-to-Palestinian ratio. Non-Jewish, Black women are similarly seen as a threat to the demographics of Israel. Zoe Gutzeit, the Director of the Open Clinic at Physicians for Human Rights, speaking about hospital staff’s ideologies on maternity wards said: “I

wouldn't say that on the surface, there is discrimination in maternity wards, but there are tacit undercurrents about this population: "How do they bring up all these kids? They are infiltrators and now the infiltration is from within with all the babies that they are giving birth to."⁴⁸ Similar generalisations were made evident in the way the Director General of Tel Aviv Sourasky (Ichilov) Medical Center described Eritrean and Sudanese women giving birth in his hospital as having "viral infectious diseases—Tuberculosis, Malaria and Aids" (Mesgena and Ramati 2017, 73). Several women spoke about the racialised mistreatment they or other women experienced while giving birth in hospitals around Tel Aviv, from having to labour in the waiting room to being kept separate from the Israeli women giving birth, to accompanying husbands having to undergo Tuberculosis tests and missing the birth as a result. Similarly, Ahberet expressed a common sense of mistrust among Eritrean women:

"The Eritrean women don't trust the Israeli doctors. If they tell them that they need to do surgery they will think in their mind that they will want to experiment on them. They say no, even if they are in difficulty. Most of the time the doctors don't want to take care of them for a long time, they don't want to wait for labour to naturally progress, they just want to cut out the baby and get it over with."

Several women linked these suspicions back to the Israeli medical industrial complex and state involvement in the involuntary sterilisations of Ethiopian Jewish women upon migrating to Israel (Abusneineh 2021; Ellis 2020) and the stealing of babies from Mizrahi mothers (Daniele 2020). Bayan Abusneineh (2021, 96) argues that "the Israeli settler colonial project depends on these forms of gendered anti-Black violence, through the management of Black African bodies". In a conversation with an Eritrean mother of one,

her son's and other children's "out of control" behaviour was explained by the injection they were given soon after birth and which "you cannot refuse if you want your child to leave the hospital". She went on to tell me about an Israeli doctor in the Hatikva neighbourhood who years ago without consent sterilised Eritrean and Sudanese asylum seeking women, several of whom have been unable to conceive as a result. This was a rumour widely shared by other women. Other examples she gives are how the fetuses of women who aborted their children after experiencing sexual violence along the migration route or upon arrival in Israel, were grown in incubators and the children raised to serve in the Israeli military or special security forces "to kill Palestinians". She also told me about a woman whose son was found to have an abnormally high IQ and whom the doctors in the hospital tried to steal away from his parents to use as an experiment and to train for their security purposes.⁴⁹ I am not particularly interested in the truthfulness of these statements. I rather explore the connections that are made with other racialised and marginalised communities in Israel, such as Ethiopian Israelis and Palestinians. At the same time, it points to the extreme mistrust that women inhibit towards the state and its bodies after more than a decade of racialised exclusion and violence.

The act of birthing and raising Black non-Jewish children by Eritrean mothers is seen as a threat to the settler colonial state. Eritrean children, even those born in Israel, are not included in formal state statistics of the number of asylum seekers in the country and are statusless until the age of 18 when they get 2A5 visas, the same as their parents.⁵⁰ This combined with segregated education for children from people living under the Israeli asylum regime is a major cause of distress for mothers. Abrehet, a mother to two sons in Israel expressed her worries for her son's future and their sense of belonging in the world:

“Our kids don’t know Eritrea. They don’t know their country, they know the Israeli flag. Sometimes they sing Israeli songs. They know “Eretz Yisrael sheli yafa vegam porachat Mi bana vemi nata? Kulanu beyachad!” because they learn this in school. What are they doing with our kids? They are innocent, they don’t know nothing.”

The song transliterates to English as follows: “My Israel is beautiful and is flourishing Who built it, and who planted trees? All of us together!”⁵¹ While their children are exposed to Zionist indoctrination in these segregated schools, they are excluded from the body politic and the country that they are taught to sing about. Their children are stuck in a liminal legal space, with no status or ID number, and opportunities to escape legal precarity are almost non-existent.

Inevitably, in a settler colonial state, security fears around Palestinians are also linked to fears that the offering of rights and recognition to people from Eritrea and Sudan “will open up the Pandora’s Box of Palestinian refugees’ claims for territory, compensation and the right of return” (Raijman 2020; Paz 2011, 9). Black non-Jewish people and Palestinians endanger the Zionist project, homogeneity and Jewish dominance, and are therefore a matter of national security (Mesgena and Ramati 2017, 79). Ronit Lentin (2018, 106) argues that “Israel’s deep demographic anxiety and its desire to ensure a Jewish majority has led to immigration policies that discriminate against the arrival and inclusion of non-Jewish people, including migrant workers and asylum seekers”. The settler colonial state wants the women and their communities removed from the state and is using policies to coerce them to self-deport.

The Use of Administrative Detention, Self-Deportation and Economic Exclusion to Criminalise Black Non-Jewish Men

I focus in this section on the detention of single Eritrean and Sudanese men in the Holot Detention Centre. Immigration detention has been used by Israel as a key measure of deterrence since the early 2000s. Sudanese nationals, considered citizens of an enemy state, were held in detention for long periods upon entry.⁵² Immigration detention was later applied to people from Eritrea (Paz 2011, 6), including the Eritrean mothers (and their children) who are at the heart of my thesis. Initially, Eritrean and Sudanese were detained in a separate section of Ketziot Prison, an outdoor military detention centre operated by the Ministry of Defence (Yacobi 2010, 11). The tent prison housed thousands of Palestinian political prisoners during the first Intifada (Cook, Hanieh and Kay 2004, 85) and since reopening in 2002 has been the primary location for Palestinian administrative detainees, with appalling prison conditions and where prisoners face abuse and violence from prison guards (Addameer 2002).⁵³ The detention of Eritrean and Sudanese men in Ketsiot Prison is therefore one example of how the state of Israel is using the infrastructures of settler colonialism and apartheid to exclude and criminalise Eritreans and Sudanese people who crossed the border irregularly.

Detention of single men in Holot Detention Centre was made possible through the fourth (2013), fifth (2014), and sixth (2015) amendments to the Anti-Infiltration Law. Detention under this law was administrative as Eritrean and Sudanese men were not accused of any crime and they did not stand for trial (Raijman 2017, 2; Sabar and Tsurkov 2015; Hotline for Refugees and Migrants 2015). The use of administrative detention of asylum seekers and refugees as part of the state's national security agenda is not unique (Ravid 2021, 48),

and has been applied widely to Palestinians. The Israeli military uses administrative detention to detain thousands of Palestinians from months to several years, without charging them or allowing them to stand trial (B'Tselem 2022b; Addameer 2017). Amnesty International (2022b) argues that administrative detention helps “maintain Israel’s system of apartheid against Palestinians”. The Israel Prison Service classifies Eritrean and Sudanese people as infiltrators, Palestinians as security prisoners and Jewish Israelis as criminals. These definitions indicate the racial overtones and hierarchies attached to people living under the Israeli asylum regime (Mesgena and Ramati 2017, 74). The use of administrative detention of Sudanese and Eritrean men served the purpose of excluding them from the body politic and coercing them to leave the country altogether (Ravid 2021). It is not the sheer fact of immigration and administrative detention that is indicative of Israel as an apartheid regime and settler colonial state. Immigration detention has been used widely by other countries around the world. However, the scope and breadth of detention, its differential enforcement upon racialised people, and the way it allowed for such extreme violations for little purpose, make it specific to Israel as a settler colonial state.

Up to the 10th of December 2013, people from Eritrea and Sudan crossing the border irregularly were detained in Ketsiot and Saharonim prison complex. Saharonim was built in 2007 to detain people irregularly crossing into Israel via the Egyptian border (Kuttner and Rozen 2015, 13). While initially, detainees were held under the Entry of Israel Law (1952), from January 2012 their detention was made possible under the third amendment to the Anti-Infiltration Law, which allowed for up to three years of detention. The fourth amendment to the Law instated the Holot Detention Centre, which was managed by the

Israeli Prison Services and located in the middle of an Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) firing zone (Mesgena and Ramati 2017). This new facility was erected after Israel's Supreme Court ruled that incarcerating asylum seekers without trial for up to three years under the 2012 amendment (third) to the Anti-Infiltration Law was unconstitutional. Under the 2013 version of the law, (the Fourth Amendment) Eritreans and Sudanese who entered Israel would instead be jailed without trial in Saharonim and then transferred to Holot. Detention in Holot was indefinite under the Fourth Amendment until detainees could either be deported following a change in the political situation in their countries of origin, or until they succumbed to the pressure and "self-deport" to their homeland or third countries (Hotline for Refugees and Migrants 2015). It is important to note that the anti-infiltration law and detention facilities of Holot and Saharonim Prison were used exclusively to detain Sudanese and Eritrean men (Kuttner and Rozen 2015, 13)⁵⁴, while other non-Jewish migrants are regulated under the Entry to Israel Law.

Detention in Holot ignored detainee's asylum claims, denied them the basic right to liberty, and violated other international protection principles (Ravid 2022a, 140). Since the completion of the security fence along the border with Egypt in 2013, few people crossed the border irregularly (Ravid 2022a, 133). Therefore most of the detainees in Holot were people who had lived in Israel for several years and were summoned to Holot when they went to renew their temporary protection visa at the Ministry of Interior (Hotline for Refugees and Migrants 2015). The security fence along the border with Egypt, built to deter Eritreans and Sudanese from entering Israel, is one more connection to the infrastructures of apartheid, for their similar purpose. In this case, I refer to the separation barrier, a 700-kilometre-long concrete wall constructed in 2002 (Lentin

2018), that Palestinians refer to as the Apartheid Wall (ibid.) in the occupied territory of the West Bank (Dana 2017).

Between 2013 and 2018 over 13,000 Sudanese and Eritrean refugee men were detained at Holot Detention Facility (Ravid 2021, 20). While Holot was an open facility by name, in reality, it was experienced as a prison where detainees had to show up three times a day for roll call (later reduced to once a day) and spend the night (Mesgena and Ramati 2017). Under the Fifth Amendment to the Anti-Infiltration Law detention was limited to 20 months, and under the Sixth Amendment this was reduced to one year. During this time detainees were forbidden from working (Hotline for Refugees and Migrants 2015). The government was forced to amend the Law several times following petitions made by refugee support organisations at both the Beer Sheva District Court and the Supreme Court in Jerusalem, and Supreme Court decisions on the constitutionality of detention and its conditions. Holot was closed down by the Israeli government on 12 March 2018 following public protests and further legal challenges. The detention of single men in Holot exposed how Israel constructed who was excludable. This was further exemplified through the “Voluntary Deportation” Scheme (2015).

Israel announced the “Voluntary Departure” Scheme in 2015; the Scheme came into effect in 2017. I refer to it here as “self-deportation”, as there was no voluntariness to the departure as men were coerced to choose between detention in Holot (first indefinite, later lengthy) and signing a document to ‘willingly’ leave to third (Uganda or Rwanda) or home (Eritrea or Sudan) countries (Birger, Shoham and Bolzman 2018). Israel cannot deport Eritreans and Sudanese because this would violate the non-refoulement principle

under international human rights law (Hotline for Refugees and Migrants, 2022). Though detention and “self-deportation” policies targeted men, they impacted men’s ties and communities.

Eritrean mothers drew on diverse intimate ties to manage the impact of the detention and deportation of men in their communities (see also Luibhéid, Andrade and Stevens 2018). This policy of targeting men, with direct and indirect consequences on women, was not a new tactic used by Israel. Adrianna Kemp and Nelly Kfir (2016, 381) have argued about the 2009 deportation of migrant workers, that “gendered deportation policies created a large pool of single mothers with children by expelling men in hopes that women and children would follow”. This is very similar to how deportation policies are applied to Eritrean and Sudanese communities and shows how the state replicates practices of criminalisation and deportation between different racialised and non-Jewish groups. Umut Erel and Tracey Reynolds (2018, 13) argue, in the context of the UK, that the “state’s use of intimate attachments to make migrants deportable also reconfigures the meanings and experiences of intimate ties” and this is visible in Tsenayet’s lived experiences. Again, it is impossible not to draw connections between the ongoing Nakba, including home demolitions and forced evictions in East Jerusalem and the Westbank, and the illegal occupation of Gaza when thinking about expulsion policies such as the one described above.

The third policy discussed in this chapter - the deposit law, was announced in December 2014, but put in place in May 2017. It required Israeli employers to deduct 16 per cent of Eritrean and Sudanese employees' salaries as a contribution towards pension and

severance pay, plus 20 per cent of the wages of Eritreans and Sudanese had to be deposited into a designated fund. The funds were only to be returned to people upon leaving Israel (ASSAF 2018). Protests by refugee communities and Israeli citizens, and legal action taken by refugee rights organisations, reduced the deduction percentage for vulnerable groups such as women, survivors of trafficking, and men older than 60, to 6 per cent, but the harm had already been done. Following the global pandemic, in April 2020, the High Court of Justice ruled the scheme unconstitutional and funds were ordered to be returned (Ravid 2022b). This policy was another way in which the state encouraged self-deportation and an ambiguous addition to the policies that made up the racialised criminalisation and exclusion of people living under the Israeli asylum regime, as they were taxed heavily, despite their lack of reciprocal access to state support.

Racialised and Gendered Legal Precarity Resulting from the Israeli Asylum Regime

The policies of detention of single men, voluntary departure and the deposit law, should be understood in the wider context of Eritrean women's intersectional oppression and violence based on their gender, race, class, social and legal status as asylum seekers in a racialised hierarchy of othering set out above (Lijnders 2022). The Israeli asylum regime undermines the everyday security of women in specific ways that are particularly problematic for women with mothering responsibilities (cf. Cochrane 2020), as they affect an integral part of every mother's daily existence: caring for their children. Eritrean women do not receive any support from the Israeli government and have limited access to basic rights. As such they are often pushed into state-induced poverty and poor

housing situations. They have restricted access to health and social services, except in an emergency, like the birth of a child, which was often accompanied by incurring medical bills for the care they received. Many mothers, as a result, did not have the resources to provide consistent food and housing for their children. (Lijnders 2022; Cochrane 2020; Freedman 2015, 173).

Legal precarity grew as women navigated these policies. Anna Tsing (2015, 2) relates precarity to indeterminacy and a “life without the promise of stability”. Ramsay (2020, 3) focuses on the “temporality of uncertainty” and the experience of “non-navigable situations, in which the possibility of a self-directed future is constrained by external forces” (ibid, 4). Following Anne Allison (2016), living a precarious life means that the present is “all-consuming”, taking up women’s time and physical and psychological energy. Apart from the focus on temporal aspects, there is scholarly interest in the existential aspects and emotions that accompany precarity. Teresita Cruz-Del Rosario and Jonathan Rigg (2019, 517), for instance, define precarity as “a specific subjectivity, an existential angst of living a life of ambient insecurity, strongly suggestive of the breakdown of stable social bonds and identities, and the disappearance of old reliances and reciprocities.” The emphasis on precarity as a distinct sense of being, and a break with what has been known, is significant for the realities presented in my thesis. Furthermore, I show a specific exposure to violence and suffering following Judith Butler’s (2009, 25) application of the term precarity. Butler argues that precarity is politically induced and dependent on one’s position in society. It is thus a shared condition that is not natural but constructed, “produced by a power on whose favour [one] depend[s]” (Foster 2009, 207 cited in Vasudevan 2014, 351) (Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022).

Exposure to legal precarity in the form of exclusion, threats and insecurities affected people living under the Israeli asylum regime in various ways. Sarah Willen (2007, 16) argues that the legal positioning of migrants impacts not only how they feel in their bodies, but also how they experience the time and space they live in. Following her reasoning, legal precarity can be described “as a specific mode of being in the world” (Suerbaum 2021, 3) affecting many aspects of life as it is lived physically and emotionally. As a result of their legal precarity, women are exposed to social stigmatisation, poor living conditions and a climate of fear. This may result in women feeling undeserving, trigger psychological pressure and culminate in the worsening of their overall health (Suerbaum 2021; Larchanché 2012; Huschke 2013). Many of these effects are exemplified in the experiences of Tsenayet, discussed next.

The detention and deportation of single men, was one of the sites where settler colonialism and apartheid AND the Israeli asylum regime effectively operated through heteropatriarchy (cf. Arvin et al. 2013, 22), dividing men and women according to their gender and perceived vulnerability. Therefore, these policies should be understood in the wider context of Eritrean women’s experiences of intersectional violence, exclusion and oppression based on their gender, race, class and social and legal status under the Israeli asylum regime and the settler colonial state’s racialised hierarchy of othering (Lijnders 2022).

Tsenayet: Arguing Intimate Ties in the Context of the Detention of Single Men

Tsenayet, a woman in her early thirties from Eritrea, arrived in Israel with her daughter in 2011. She came to Israel following her husband and the father of her children, whom she married in Eritrea, as well as her older brother. Tsenayet had lived in Libya for several years where she tried to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe unsuccessfully. When the situation in Libya became unsustainable due to the uprising against Muammar al-Qaddafi in 2011, her brother paid people smugglers to smuggle her and her daughter from Tripoli to the Sinai desert in Egypt and across the border to Israel. Tsenayet's brother had arrived in Israel in 2009. Earlier that year, he had paid for Tsenayet's husband's journey from Sudan to Israel. When Tsenayet left Eritrea, she left their son in the care of her mother in their village in Eritrea. As such, her intimate ties and mothering practices extended transnationally (cf. Luibhéid, Andrade, and Stevens 2018, 8). Soon after Tsenayet and her daughter arrived in Israel her husband became physically and emotionally abusive, and engaged in gambling and drinking. With the support of her brother and elders from her village living in Israel, Tsenayet left her husband. An Eritrean woman running the Eritrean Women's Community Centre explained this increase in divorces within the Eritrean community in Israel by saying:

*"Women are more interested in getting divorced because they need freedom, you know because they are doing everything. They are working hard and when they return home their men beat them or always fight with them. So they say I need peace, I want to stay alive. They realise they can take care of the children by themselves, they can work. And by sharing a house with others, they can, you know, they can live without any kind of pain."*⁵⁵

However, when Tsenayet requested a divorce, her husband refused to collaborate and as such continued to have power over her. To survive on her own and receive support with

mothering her daughter, she moved in with her unmarried brother and their younger unmarried sister. Together they supported each other with rent, living expenses and childcare. Tsenayet eventually met a new partner, also from their village in Eritrea. Some time into their new relationship, her partner – who was designated by the Israeli government as an unmarried man – was summoned to Holot Detention Centre under the Fifth Amendment to the Anti-Infiltration Law. Detention by then was shorter in length (12 months) but broader in scope, and large numbers of people were summoned to Holot. (Kuttner and Rozen 2015, 14). Tsenayet’s partner was summoned to Holot when he went to renew his temporary protection visa (something all Eritrean and Sudanese had to do every one month to two months under the Temporary Protection Policy)⁵⁶ His detention was made possible under the issuance of broader criteria for detention in Holot in August 2015; all Eritrean men, other than those exempt for particular grounds, were at risk of imminent detention at that time. Magdalena Suerbaum and Sophie Richter-Devroe (2022) assert that mothers “navigate violent bureaucratic and legal encounters through the making and unmaking of intimate ties and relations to significant others.” Tsenayet and her partner had to weigh out their options: either try to challenge his detention order or avoid authorities and try to continue living as illegalised (cf. De Genova, 2002). Richter-Devroe and Suerbaum (ibid.) use the lens of “dynamic relationalities” to analyse “the intersections of law and kin in the context of forced migration and displacement and trace how forced migrants’ and non-citizens’ struggles of ‘doing family’ take place within and against legal and bureaucratic constraints”. The Israeli state, for Tsenayet, became a significant actor that shaped the lived experience of family and kinship relations (cf. Alkan 2022). Women are frequently tasked with balancing continuity in family and communal

life and every day changing realities in the migration country (Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022).

With an open detention order, Tsenayet's partner was at risk of being caught by Immigration Police, and jailed at Saharonim prison for up to three months, before being transferred to the Holot for another 12 months (Mesgena and Ramati 2017, 76). During the lifespan of Holot, Immigration Police were regularly looking for people with open detention summons or without visas in the streets of South Tel Aviv. In addition, Tsenayet's partner would not have been able to renew his visa and as such it would have been difficult to find legal employment. Without a valid visa, he was also unable to access his bank account (Tsurkov 2015). Tsenayet and her partner did not accept the detention order. They resisted it both privately, by engaging with the Ministry of Interior to challenge the summon and publicly by attending the protests organised by the Eritrean and Sudanese communities together with Israeli and international activists and demanding change (see Introduction). Although they challenged the detention order, during the waiting Tsenayet still lived in fear of her partner being arrested and detained, and that he would feel pressured to participate in the "Voluntary Departure" Scheme and "self-deport" to a third country such as Uganda or Rwanda (see also Nyers 2008, 166). While they were challenging the order and attempting to prove their relationship, daily activities such as working, shopping, going to church, dropping her daughter off at school, and visiting family became risky as he could get caught and imprisoned (see also De Genova 2002, 427). Her new partner therefore spent much of his days in their small home. Over several months, they visited the Immigration Office many times to convince

officials that they were in a genuine relationship and that his deportation order should be cancelled.

Encounters with immigration authorities were often accompanied by institutional and structural racism. The vast majority of women participating in my research experienced racism in their daily lives in various contexts such as work, education, healthcare, police and in the neighbourhoods where they lived. Racist acts ranged from racist slurs, the segregation of their children in schools and preschools, and violent attacks, including Molotov cocktails thrown into a childcare facility run by a Nigerian woman and frequented by Eritrean families; but also in more subtle and complex ways. Tsenayet had to accompany her partner on visits to the Ministry of Interior for which they had to leave early in the morning and often wait for hours, and as such lose out on work. As Tsenayet was the only one able to work, this put the couple under even more financial duress. These visits often did not result in anything, and they left feeling frustrated, angry and uncertain as to what step to take next. The visits exhausted Tsenayet's daughter, who had to come along for these visits and lost out on school. In particular, the child-mother relationship is often taken up in border control and migrant mothers need to actively and laboriously challenge racialised representations to present themselves as deserving and capable of 'good mothering' (Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022; Humphris 2017; Ramsay 2017; Horton and Barker 2009).

During the years of detention in Holot, between 2013 and 2018, married men and fathers with children in Israel were exempt from detention. In reality, many families were burdened with the stress of providing official documents to prove their marriage, or

responsibility for underage children (Tsurkov 2015). Proving fatherhood became a difficult task for many due to a Ministry of Interior policy that did not register fathers on birth certificates, the only available documentation of a newborn issued by hospitals where the women gave birth. Until 2017, the Israeli Population and Immigration Authority refused to include the father's name on the birth certificate that it issued and demanded that both parents declare that they were illegal aliens. After a petition at the Supreme Court, this policy was cancelled. Parents were forced to make do with a "Notice of Live Birth" that hospitals issued. However, many new mothers were released from the hospital after giving birth without such Notices because of debts owed to the hospital. Despite explicit instructions from the Ministry of Health in 2013 which forbid denying the document (as it is illegal to render the provision of birth documents conditional on payment), in practice many hospitals withheld this document to pressure new mothers to pay their debts. In addition, hospitals refused to document the father, unless a DNA test was undertaken. As a result, the parents are given a life birth certificate without the father's name, or the infant's nationality. This document was crucial for families, as it was required to prove the existence of a family unit in Israel. In the absence of this document, the father could be sent for detention at Holot.⁵⁷ Additionally, the lack of documents or the registration of the father might cause issues if the family gets an opportunity to leave Israel.

Following the denial of documentation described above, husbands and fathers were summoned to detention in Holot, alongside single men. Elizabeth Tsurkov (2015) explains how even for married couples, proving marriage and parenthood came with challenges that included presenting marriage certificates, but also invasive and

humiliating interviews to examine the validity of their marriage. Fatima, an Eritrean woman married and pregnant, went through this invasive process. Soon after the couple married and when Fatima was pregnant with their son, her husband was summoned to Holot:

“We had to go five times. They did not want to cancel the notification. They give you this, they give you that. You have to translate the marriage certificate and provide a copy of the pregnancy documents. Eventually, they gave me a six-month visa while my husband got only two months. Even though they gave me six months, I had to go with him every two months. I had to go with him to prove our continued marriage”.

Although married men and fathers were in theory exempt from detention and were therefore not directly coerced to self-deport, numerous men abandoned their wives and children for third or home countries. Many mothers were forced to single-handedly care for their children due to the pressures placed on men. For other families, temporary separation through the forced deportation policy became a strategy of “getting out”. Men would self-deport to Sudan, Rwanda or Uganda and then make their way via Libya to Europe to apply for asylum. Once they had received refugee status, they started a process of family reunification for their families in Israel. This left some women to raise children on their own in Israel, while also supporting their husband’s migration journey. With the taxation policy, surviving became even harder. Equally, after ‘Israel’s forced deportation policy came into place, marriage became a strategy especially for men to stop them from being detained in Holot Detention Centre. As such many of the weddings since the detention policy came into place had as an additional or main motive to stop men from being detained in Holot Detention Centre. Some women have been asked or sometimes

coerced into marriages to save men from the threat of detention and deportation, which put further pressure on women.

Women are marginalised within their communities while living under the Israeli asylum regime. The added pressures of "saving" men from detention and self-deportation, and the stress this brought from family and community, compounded the need to survive in a hostile country. Financial hardship meant women in Israel were deeply impacted by their autonomy and freedom to choose and plan their family life, yet another example of how women were affected by immigration policies that did not target them directly. The difficult position women were put into because of the detention and deportation policy, was also turned against them in the public and political discourse. Sheffi Paz, a right-wing activist and aggressor brought up these marriages in the Knesset (the Israeli parliament) and framed the women as (mis)using their bodies to harm the state of Israel.⁵⁸

Getting married was not an option for Tsenayet and her new partner. Tsenayet's former husband refused to divorce, and proof of divorce was required by the Orthodox Church for them to get married. With the Holot Detention Policy, her ex-husband had an additional motive to not end their marriage, as this would put him at risk of being detained, as an unmarried man. The fact that they had a daughter together could have ensured his security, however since the daughter was born in Eritrea, they had no documents to prove his paternity.

Families who followed less traditional paths, living together outside marriage, also lacked necessary legal documentation. Luibhéid, Andrade and Stevens (2018, 1) argue that

“recognition of intimate ties can offer routes for marginalized people to claim rights and protections, yet at the same time subjects them to surveillance, regulation, criminalization, and dispossession”. This is not only stressful for men, but also for their wives and the mothers of their children, as they suffer from state interference in their intimate relationships. Luibhéid, Andrade, and Stevens (2018, 8) also argue that the “question of which intimacies get recognized by states as constituting “family” is deeply political. As we see in the case of Tsenayet, intimate ties, or the lack thereof, are used to exclude, detain and deport Eritrean men. Because Tsenayet and her partner’s relationship is not recognised by the state of Israel because it is not through an official marriage, her partner is not deserving of protection from detention. This does however not take away, that for Tsenayet their relationship is important for navigating life under the Israeli asylum regime.

Migration affects families as a whole and in gender-specific ways. Throughout research engagements, it was not uncommon to be reminded that in “Eritrean culture”, “women should remarry after a divorce. They cannot stay on their own.”⁵⁹ Tsenayet was not only forced to conform with legal conceptions of family and relatedness, and restricted ideas of relationality imposed by the state, but also cultural ideas around marriage. Sophia Balakian (2022) challenges our view on bureaucratic norms that take the nuclear family and biogenetic parenthood as fundamental to the ‘family’. Motherhood in Balakian’s (ibid.) work is a “bureaucratic category” that women encounter in their engagements with the refugee resettlement process. For Tsenayet, the policy became inscribed on her body as her inability to give birth changed her partner’s bureaucratic category to detainable and deportable.

Birthing a Status: Avoiding Detention Through Motherhood

Having a child together would keep Tsenayet's new partner from having to report to Holot Detention Centre. The couple tried to get pregnant, in part to stop her new partner's detention and also because they wanted to have children together, however, this put a strain on their relationship. Inka Stock (2012, 1580) highlights that migrant women's mothering practices and decisions depend on the space they inhabit and their participation in social networks. Lucy Lowe (2019) stresses that fertility, reproduction, and motherhood are charged with new meanings in contexts of displacement. She illustrates how Somali women's refusal of caesarean delivery gives them a better position to strategise and navigate their future and potential onward migration. Motherhood then becomes a status, a social process, and a technique (ibid, 199).

Where Tsenayet desperately tried to get pregnant, other Eritrean women told me how they avoided getting pregnant out of fear of how they would raise kids in Israel, despite their wish to have children. Berhana, for example, waited seven years after having her first child, to have her next. In those years, she and her husband tried to leave Israel but failed. Fed up with waiting for the asylum regime to change, and for opportunities for departure to arise, they agreed to have another child. Eventually, in 2022 they managed to leave Israel through a sponsorship agreement. Talking about their imminent move, Berhana said: "Once we live in a country where we have status and we can build a future, we can also start thinking about having more children again". Sara and her husband decided to wait for seven years after their marriage to have their first child: "First, it was

part of my agreement with my husband to settle in the economy to get to know each other well and not to avoid having a problem in the middle which with kids would have been life disruptive. But the conditions in Israel did not change, several years passed and everything went from bad to worse.” While Sara was ready to have a child after five years of marriage, her husband did not want to bring a child into the world while they remained in Israel:

“In the middle there was a lot of pressure from our families, especially from my family, to bring a child. I understand their concerns because for a woman, especially an Eritrean woman, in our culture it is unheard of to make the decision not to have a child for such a long period. They were worried that my husband would throw me out. A lot of people bad-mouthed us and there were a lot of rumours as to why we were unable to have a kid. They could not believe it was our choice.”⁶⁰

Sara was caught between the Israeli asylum regime, her husband, and her extended family’s expectations and wishes. While some women deliberated about having a first child or having more children, Tsenayet was desperate to get pregnant. Another way in which Tsenayet was trying to conceive was through the healthcare services provided by Physicians for Human Rights. She tried to gain medical clarification regarding her inability to become pregnant, so she could overcome it and protect her partner from detention and the risk of deportation. Without access to public medical services (other than emergencies), and unable to afford private health insurance, Tsenayet was unable to access the services available to Israeli women facing fertility issues.

In contrast to Israeli residents, Eritrean mothers are not insured through the national health insurance system. Employment is the only way through which she could access

minimal healthcare through private health insurance (Kaufman 2014). Although insurance arrangements are the responsibility of employers under the Foreign Workers Act, in practice, many employers fail to provide them (Willen 2005, 67). Tsenayet's employer, like many, had refused to insure her. A survey done by Kav Laoved, a labour rights organisation, found that nearly 40 per cent of Eritreans and Sudanese were either uninsured, unsure if their employer had insured them, or had issues with their insurance (Kaufman 2014, 14). Instead, Tsenayet attended the Open Clinic run by PHR-Israel, but the clinic could not help her, as support with fertility issues was beyond their remit. Thus, motherhood can become a "disciplining institution of biopolitics" through which women's potential to integrate is forged (Ramsay 2017, 766). Unwilling to give up, Tsenayet engaged in religious practices with the hope that these would help her conceive.

A Renewed Baptism in the Jordan River: Religious Practices and Hopes for Fertility

Tsenayet, her daughter, my daughter, and I shared two seats on the way to the Jordan River as part of a baptism party for her friend and former village mate. First, we attended a lengthy church service at an Eritrean-run Orthodox church in South Tel Aviv (see Prologue). Eritreans, from various villages and cities, re-envisioned 'church' as a religious space in a Jewish Supremacy state.⁶¹ Held in a church in a residential building, the baptism ceremony did not only speak to the "intimate ties" (Luibhéid, Andrade, and Stevens 2018, 8) and intergenerational relations in displacement, and wider diasporic social networks, but it also showed how these religious and social spaces are gendered and racialised. The church they created is a place where the women and the wider community temporarily did not have to face the racist and hostile city. It was a sanctuary

where they connected with God and religious practices from home. The church was a space of relationship-making and the maintenance of home society's religious and cultural beliefs and practices. Faith then connected people both in prayer and practically to their communities from home, tightening old ties and establishing new ones (see also De Angelis 2019, 17 on the role of faith in immigration detention in the UK).

Engagement with religion bound people both to their pre-migration backgrounds and migratory histories (Bosworth and Kellezi 2016 in the context of religious engagement in immigration detention in the UK). In an ever-changing landscape of violent and hostile asylum policies, their church and their faith offered structure, stability, and community. Selam Kidane, an Eritrean activist and scholar based in the UK, observed that some Eritrean women become ultra-religious in the face of ever-changing asylum policies. This observation was shared by an Eritrean activist and staff of an Eritrean-run support organisation for women. Selam Kidane observed that religion can:

“take up time and draw people in, rather than connecting them with the wider world. Patriarchal society advantages men. Everything is used to reinstate that to make sure that that becomes the status quo. So here are women with an opportunity to go out and be something different, but religion reinstates that they stay small. Where there is no religion to reinstate that, then the tradition reinstates that, if there's nothing, then the man himself reinstates that by being abusive, by restricting the woman's movements.”

Selam Kidane speaks to a top-down patriarchal hierarchy that starts with the church, extends to culture and tradition, and trickles down to the interpersonal level with husbands. Community and the family are not included in her analysis, which in the context of migration – for better or worse – have been changed and disrupted.

Religion also played a healing role for the women. Weekly Saturday services, evening services throughout the week, and religious outings for baptisms, weddings and holidays rooted the women in their transient lives, where family life had often been disrupted. Sharing their spiritual beliefs in the context of Jewish Supremacy, legal precarity, and prolonged waitness, the religious community stood in contrast to their criminalisation, exclusion, and the unethical and uncaring tenets of the Israeli asylum regime (see also De Angelis 2019, 16). They also offered children a place to go after school to learn Tigrinya and attend religious classes.

After the church service, we all boarded a hired bus, driven by a Palestinian driver with Israeli citizenship, full of Eritrean men, women, and children who joined the new parents in the celebration of their newborn daughter. Attendees included family members, fellow villagers from Eritrea, and people from the wider Eritrean refugee communities in Israel. While the rest of the bus sang religious songs, slept, or conversed, Tsenayet told me that she wanted to get pregnant, not only “to secure her partner’s status”, but also because she wanted “to strengthen their new relationship with a child”. Then she looked over at her daughter and said “I want her to have a sibling too”.⁶² Dressed in traditional Eritrean clothing we arrived at the Jordan River. Our group announced itself with traditional and religious drumming and singing *Mezmur*, Eritrean religious songs, as we made our way to the river from the car park to the surprise of tourists and staff. We changed into white, loose-fitting garments, and one by one immersed ourselves in the water. Tsenayet got in too and let herself fall back into the river, dipping her head underwater.

Tsenayet tried various kinds of religious practices to increase her fertility, such as mixing white stone from the Milk Grotto Church in Bethlehem into water and drinking it.⁶³ She hoped that immersing herself in the Jordan River would “increase her chances of pregnancy”. Through her engagement in these religious rituals and places, Tsenayet took up space in Israel. She was able to take up space along with her community, but also for a site-specific reason: the Christian sites and heritage of Israel, which transcends the state and offers other forms of belonging to the place. Tsenayet’s religious “quest” to get pregnant took her beyond the separation lines to Bethlehem. Women maintained cultural traditions from Eritrea and performed rituals around pregnancy, birth and the postnatal period, expressed through food, and other ceremonies. These traditions are often not just private acts but are performed in the public sphere. By doing so, Tsenayet and her community members articulated their right to public space, the right to be present and visible, and the right to be represented with dignity (cf. O’Neill 2018, 82).

State-Induced Poverty: The Deposit Law

While Tsenayet and her partner were busy trying to get his detention order revoked, the deposit law was adopted. The law facilitated state-induced poverty and economic violence as yet another policy of oppression and coercion used by Israel to criminalise Eritreans and Sudanese and push them into leaving for third or home countries. These policies intersected and challenged Eritrean mothers’ livelihoods. Due to legal precariousness in the workforce, women often worked in the informal economy and experienced exploitation (Kaufman 2014), working long hours. The policy forced women to work longer hours, saw families struggle to survive, and pushed many to state-induced poverty

and distress. This not only had a big impact on Eritrean mothers but also on their children as a result. Single-mother households were the worst affected (ASSAF 2020). Once all deductions and taxes were withdrawn, women took home only half of their earned wages (ASSAF 2020). State-induced poverty and economic violence were yet another policy used by Israel that had gender-specific consequences, as poor housing and lack of income severely impacted women as the main carers for children (Freedman 2015, 173).

Tsenayet's partner, who had lost his long-term job due to his detention order and lack of legal status, was financially dependent on Tsenayet. He managed to contribute to their household finance only sporadically, with odd irregular jobs. As such, the new family relied on Tsenayet to earn most of their living. After the deposit law came into force, they feared that they would be unable to make ends meet. While 2a5 visas gave people only precarious and unclear access to worker's rights, a legal compromise allowed Eritreans and Sudanese to work without a work permit. This was convenient for Israel as a racialised capitalist state as it stopped asylum seekers from becoming a "burden" on the welfare system, as they did not have access to state support, and kept them as a temporary unprotected workforce.

For Tsenayet, surviving and bringing up a family under these exclusionary circumstances is an act of resistance. Tsenayet was compelled to work to raise her children and support her intimate ties in the absence of government support. By resisting the limitations put in place by the Israeli state, she took up space and rights in the ways that she found. Another way in which the couple forged a space for themselves, on an intimate level, was through sharing their home, and the care for their children, with another family. This was a

strategy widely used by other Eritreans and Sudanese in Israel. Tsenayet and her new partner shared a small flat in South Tel Aviv with another couple and their child. They shared the kitchen and living room and had separate bedrooms for each family. Other families shared homes with single men. Tsenayet's single brother for example shared a room with five single men from his village in a home shared with a family with three children.

The Role of Brothers: Dismantling Support Networks

Family, in all its dimensions and forms, constitutes a core source of support for people on the move (Kofman 2004). Sophie Richter-Devroe (2022), quoting Janet Carsten (2020, 321) argues that kinship can “provide a dynamic reservoir of resources with which to creatively imagine and put into practice ideas and visions that enable moving to and living in new worlds”. Detention policy influenced kinship and relational practices beyond marriage and sexual relationships, as many women relied on the support of brothers and other men in their community for survival, a support that was lost when the men were detained or “self-deported” (Drori-Avraham, 2016). Alongside Tsenayet's new partner, her older brother was also summoned to Holot and was later detained. As such, Tsenayet stopped receiving his much-needed emotional, financial, and practical support.

Single men released from Holot faced geographical limitations on residency and work in Tel Aviv (Hotline for Refugees and Migrants, 2017), which further influenced women's access to support systems. Geographical restrictions are common measures in the Israeli asylum regime. Between 2009 and 2010 the Gedera-Hadera policy restricted people who

entered Israel irregularly through the Egyptian border from living in the centre of Israel (Paz 2011, 6-7; Afeef 2009, 13). Other efforts at exclusion included pushback attempts at the Egyptian border through a policy of “Hot Returns” (Afeef 2009, 12–13). At the end of June 2022, new geographical restrictions on workplaces for asylum seekers were announced by the Population and Immigration Authority. At the time of submitting this dissertation in December 2022, these have not come into effect yet and are being challenged in the courts. If they come into force, people with a 2A5 visa, which is the majority of Eritrean asylum seekers, will be restricted from working in major cities,⁶⁴ where employment opportunities are most available. Jobs that are exempt from the new proposed directive include construction, agriculture, institutional nursing, and hotels and restaurants⁶⁵. The restrictions do not apply to minors (under the age of 18), parents supporting minors who study in the Israeli education system, and adults over the age of 60. The restrictions place employment restrictions on childless men and women, or parents of children no longer in the education system (Refugee Forum 2022). The new directive will disproportionately affect those women who are childless by choice and those who are unable to reproduce, confronting these women with their inability to birth children. It will also affect mothers of children who are over 18 and are no longer studying (which would apply to most, as higher education is virtually inaccessible to children of asylum seekers). These new restrictions are another active way of reducing Black, non-Jewish people living under the Israeli asylum regime into a cheap and exploitable workforce, restricting their development into other positions.

Geographical restrictions are the basic tenets on which the settler colonial state is built, from the Westbank to Gaza. Within the settler colonial state of Israel, Palestinians with

Israeli citizenship are also geographically confined, excluded and to a large extent separated from Jewish residential locations (Abdo 2011, 41). Racialised settler colonialism does not only impact Palestinians and racialised outsiders such as asylum seekers and migrant workers, but also racialised Jewish settlers such as Ethiopians and Mizrahi people, whose policies of segregation to limited geographical areas (especially upon initial arrival) continue to impact them through what Nahla Abdo (ibid, 30) calls “racialized geography”. As such, geographical restrictions are another example of how Israel is using the infrastructures of apartheid for people living under the Israeli asylum regime.

Shared Vulnerabilities and Intimate Interdependencies

As Sarah Horton (2020) argues, ‘illegality’ does not structure individual experience alone, but sets in motion “a concatenation of shared vulnerabilities and intimate interdependencies between family members”. I reinforce the study of racism and gendered racialisation in contexts of legal precarity in Israel, as Eritrean women are differentially positioned under multiple, and at times contradictory, regimes of domination. Illegalisation and bordering regimes are sites of racialisation reinforcing divisions between citizens and others (De Genova 2002). The relation between racialisation and legal precarity occurs through everyday encounters with civil society and institutional actors penetrating the most intimate spheres of women’s lives (cf. Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022). Tsenayet’s experience shows what Horton (ibid.) calls “the intersubjective dimensions of social suffering” and how this affects family members near and far. In the case of Tsenayet - her daughter in Israel, her son in Eritrea (and the people

in whose care she left him), her brother and sister in Israel, her ex-husband and her new partner were all affected. Yet, amidst the separation and exclusion, Tracey Reynolds and Umut Erel (2018) stress mothers can connect, create community and belonging and through this also support their children.

Tsenayet built on existing familial and community relationships from Eritrea, such as her brother and sister, but also women and men from her village and region, their religious community and church. She expanded her support with Israeli refugee support structures, such as Kuchinate and Physicians for Human Rights-Israel. Tsenayet's brother was detained while already in the process of reuniting with his wife in the U.S., and eventually managed to leave Israel. His departure made their physical separation final. Tsenayet's ex-husband eventually agreed to a divorce. Tsenayet could finally marry her new partner, became pregnant and gave birth to a son.⁶⁶ Tsenayet and her family were looking for ways to leave Israel so that they could be reunited with Tsenayet's older son, who remained in Eritrea when she fled. When I reconnected with Tsenayet in 2022 all hope for a departure from Israel had faded, as there seemed no way for them to leave.

Prolonged family separations from children left behind in Eritrea, or neighbouring countries, are the focus of Chapter Four. I explore how Eritrean mothers maintain familial relationships with their children and other intimate ties they left behind.

Limbo as Policy

Measures such as detention, deportation and (geographical) restrictions on movement are part of asylum regimes and have increasingly become the norm in countries around the world (Mountz 2020). What is unique in Israel, and indicative of its settler colonial and apartheid regime is the fact that the policy of temporary protection and the measures inflicted on those under this policy, including the Anti-Infiltration Law, are exclusively applied to Black non-Jewish people from Eritrea and Sudan. The Israeli asylum regime affects all members of the Eritrean and Sudanese communities under this policy, whether they are children, adults, men, women, Muslim or Christian. At the heart of these policies are racism and racialised hierarchies of exclusion. Eritreans and Sudanese are legally segregated and discriminated against under different policies, laws and regulations, their legal entities are fragmented, as it were, between them. They are excluded and criminalised under a law used to punish Palestinians returning to their lands after the 1948 Nakba. In the anti-infiltration law, they are referred to as infiltrators; in the law on Workers' Rights and National Insurance they appear as workers; on some ministerial directives and court proceedings they are Foreigners who Cannot be Removed (in line with the *non-refoulement* protection); nowhere do they appear as refugees or asylum seekers, as people whose rights and protections are due. Their humaneness is seen as a threat and erased. The state of Israel uses violence in the form of racist policies including detention and deportation and uses infrastructures and practices of apartheid such as its prison system and administrative detention to remove those it excludes from the public eye. They have no democratic rights or access to citizenship. They do not have political rights, or access to basic rights, services and freedoms, instead, every aspect of their lives is controlled by the Israeli asylum regime. Their bureaucratic encounters with the state are steeped in racism, violence and exclusion. Importantly, these restrictions are not

conditioned on a future resolution. Temporary protection documents that need to be renewed every few months represent their limited presents and closed futures. Looking at the case of Eritrean women living in Israel alongside its ongoing policies of occupation restrict and control movement until a future deportation becomes possible (or offers sporadic resolutions in individual cases). Limbo has thus become the official policy, to maintain a status quo of subjugation of a racialised group and individuals. They have no freedom of movement, are unable to leave Israel and face geographical restrictions within. Israel controls and denies their rights in the name of security. Within this environment of exclusions and restrictions, Eritrean mothers cannot plan their futures. They have lost all hope that things will change as there is no indication that things might become different anytime soon. Rather, with the election of extreme right-wing politicians and illegal settlers into the government in November 2022, people are bracing themselves for what is yet to come.



Chapter Four

Chapter Four: Navigating Legal Precarity and Intimate Ties: Maintaining Families Transnationally

The smell of *buna* (coffee) being roasted on a charcoal fire filled the small room in the Hatikva neighbourhood in South Tel Aviv, Israel. On the 24th of May 2017, I was invited by Semhar, a 26-year-old woman from Eritrea, to join her, her neighbours and her friends in observing the Independence Day celebrations in Eritrea on television via satellite. On that day in 1991, 26 years ago, Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia. Semhar came to pick me up from the Central Bus Station in South Tel Aviv and directed me to her home through the narrow quarters of the Hatikva neighbourhood, a neighbourhood shared between Israelis of Mizrahi origin and a diverse number of migrant communities. She had just returned from the offices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in central Tel Aviv. Semhar was about to be resettled to Sweden with her children, and she went there to take passport pictures of her, her five-year-old son and her newborn daughter. I met Semhar three years earlier when I was volunteering at the Eritrean Women's Community Centre and she needed support with her children after her husband, who committed intimate partner violence, had abandoned her. I reconnected with Semhar a day earlier at Kuchinate, a psychosocial and economic empowerment organisation for women living under the Israeli asylum regime, when she invited me to visit her home. Semhar had not been to Kuchinate for almost a year and came to introduce her daughter to the women of the collective. Soon after reconnecting with her, Semhar

said that the baby was conceived through rape by an Eritrean man in Israel she knew from her home region.⁶⁷ Semhar was one of the few hundred women who had been offered an opportunity to be resettled through the UNHCR. Resettlement was only offered to women deemed to be the most “vulnerable” in Israel by UNHCR⁶⁸, and Semhar checked multiple boxes. Semhar was HIV positive, one of her children died in Israel, her husband abandoned her and used the “Voluntary Departure” Scheme to go to Uganda, and she conceived her baby, who at the time of meeting was 17 days old, through rape. Semhar was also raising her oldest son transnationally as he remained in the care of her mother in Eritrea, although this is not a reason for the UNHCR to resettle women. Throughout my research, several women complained about the UNHCR. Samrawit and Berhana, at the Eritrean Women’s Community Centre after supporting a woman with a child with Down syndrome who is hoping to be resettled by the UNHCR said: “The UNHCR is incredibly slow. They are like a business, they do not care about us. Rather they profit from our presence here and make money over our backs.”⁶⁹

Semhar’s home was made up of a small improvised kitchen, a small bathroom, and a living room that also served as their bedroom. We sat in the living room, where there was one bed, a couch, and a coffee table. Semhar sat on the bed with her newborn daughter, who spent the majority of the afternoon sleeping. There was a poster of her son’s fifth birthday announcement on the wall, as is customary in many Eritrean homes I visited. Against the same wall was a little side table covered with colourful fake flowers and family photos, which gave the otherwise empty room a homey feeling. One of the pictures was of her deceased son. She picked up the picture and showed it to me. She kissed the picture and said a little prayer Before putting it aside again.⁷⁰ Her son died about two years earlier.

He tragically drowned in a pool of water caused by heavy rain when playing with his older brother. Semhar was not working at the time of his death, due to a weakened immune system caused by HIV AIDS. She and her ex-husband were living in a makeshift home on a construction site near Jerusalem. The death of her son set in motion a series of events, including her and her children being abandoned by her ex-husband, compelling Semhar to move to South Tel Aviv, and closer to people from her village in Eritrea. Despite finding more support, she was raped by a man from her community. On her own, suffering from chronic health issues and unable to maintain a job, Semhar struggled to keep her and her children financially afloat and earn enough money to pay for rent and food. With no access to healthcare and no health insurance, Semhar relied on Physicians for Human Rights, an NGO-run clinic in Yaffa, and the Aids Task Force, a non-profit organisation in Tel Aviv to receive her medication. While Semhar opened up about the challenges she faced emotionally after losing her son and her husband, being raped, and then falling pregnant, we are joined by her neighbour Almaz and two of Semhar's friends, Titi and Nazareth. Although Semhar is a single mother to a five-year-old son and a newborn daughter, she has many Eritrean neighbours and friends from back home in Israel who look out for her. We sat around a big television screen watching EriTV, the national television channel in Eritrea broadcasting through satellite. EriTV is operated by the Ministry of Information. Media within Eritrea is owned, closely supervised, and controlled by the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) regime ruled by President Isaias Afewerki and is used as an instrument of propaganda (Bernal 2013; Hepner and O'Kane 2009; Kibreab 2009). There is no independent media in Eritrea (Bernal 2013). As Isayas Afeworki, the dictatorial leader of Eritrea, appears on stage for his yearly speech, Semhar exclaims to nobody in particular "Stupid". As she had hardly used any English in our conversations, I

assume it was intended to communicate to me her political standpoint on the country she fled. The Eritrean communities were divided among supporters of the Eritrean regime and its opponents. Uttering such words of opposition is unthinkable within Eritrea, where control and surveillance govern the public space (Bozzini 2011) and neighbours have been known to report any form of dissent or bad-mouthing of the regime. Semhar's neighbour Almaz further responds by saying: "Eritrea is a beautiful country. We had a wonderful life in Eritrea, but the government is not good. The government and this one man have forced us to leave our beloved home behind. We did not want to leave."⁷¹ As children born right before, during and after Eritrea gained independence, the women present share an overall sentiment that although Eritrea has gained its independence from Ethiopia, there is still no freedom.

As we drank coffee and ate injera, EriTV remained on the entire afternoon, and we watched not only Isayas Afwerki's speech but also the military parade that followed and many cultural performances. At times, Semhar was so immersed that it felt like she forgot about her baby daughter whom she had moved to her cot. Her son was running around the house, finding it hard to sit still and watch the festivities. Semhar commented on his high energy by saying: "He has had a very difficult time growing up. From an abusive father to a sick mother, and then losing his brother, it has been challenging for him."⁷² As we drank coffee the conversation turned to her imminent departure to Sweden. Semhar wondered what life would be like for her and her children: "Will it be cold?" Like many others who were in the process of relocating to Canada or elsewhere, she was full of questions about her upcoming life. She reflected that it would be like starting a new life. 26-year-old Semhar joked that she would start counting her age from zero again, a

sentiment shared widely by those who left Israel ahead of her. Semhar had no idea where she was going in Sweden and she didn't know anyone there. But none of that mattered to her. What mattered was that going to Sweden was synonymous with a reunion with her son whom she left behind in Eritrea when she fled and signalled an end to living under the Israeli asylum regime.

As we watched on TV Eritrean youth march in the military parade, the women spoke about the children they left behind. Something about seeing young boys and girls triggered this conversation. Semhar married her ex-husband in an arranged marriage when she was only 15 years old.⁷³ When she fled Eritrea, she left their child, then two years old, with her brother in Asmara. As is the case for many Eritrean women leaving the country, Semhar's ex-husband, together with his friends, deserted from the military and fled across the border to Sudan. The government then came to the women's homes to harass them. The military salary Semhar and her ex-husband had survived on until he left was already insufficient, but without it, Semhar was unable to feed her family. Instead, she decided to escape Eritrea and follow him to Israel. Out of the four women present at the coffee ceremony in Semhar's home in Tel Aviv, three had children in Eritrea and neighbouring countries. Titi's children were with her brother in the May Aini refugee camp in Ethiopia. In 2017, they were 11 and 12 years old. After reuniting with her husband in Israel, she had two more children: a two-year-old and two months old. As Titi was making coffee she breastfed her baby to sleep in her lap. The babies moved between the women's arms and the bed as they cared for their children jointly. Nazareth, another of Semhar's friends, left her 19-year-old son with her mother in Eritrea. He left for Sudan without informing her and she lost contact with him for several months, fearing that he

was either imprisoned or dead. When Nazareth last spoke to her son on the phone he was in Libya hoping to board a boat to Europe. As he was no longer a minor, he would not be able to sponsor his mother to join him if he survived the boat journey.⁷⁴ Nazareth was full of worry about the risks, but she also realised that with the distance, she had lost her grip on him. Paolo Boccagni (2012) has called this an “ambivalent commitment”, where time as well as earning enough money to pay for rent and food mean parents try to control their children’s daily lives, whilst realising that their attempts are insufficient. While the Eritrean mothers originally envisioned the separations from their children as only temporary when they left Eritrea, their separations have now dragged on for 10-15 years which is much longer than either the mothers or their children had expected (cf. Horton 2009; Menjivar 2006). Like Semhar, Titi and Nazareth, several of my interlocutors left their children behind in Eritrea in the care of family members when they decided to leave Eritrea.⁷⁵

Mothing Transnationally under the Constraints of the Israeli Asylum Regime

For all the women I engaged with, intimate ties needed to be sustained over geographical distances for unknown periods (cf. Palmberger 2022), with children, parents, grandparents, siblings and other family members either left behind in Eritrea or across the wider diaspora. For most of the women, these separations hurt and were a cause for great sadness. Prolonged separations and the inability to leave Israel and return home meant that many women either feared or had to mourn the death of intimate ties, particularly elderly grandparents and parents, without being able to say farewell in person, pay their respects and attend the funeral. Instead mourning rituals were

performed in Israel, either at homes or in public parks such as Levinsky Park. Old and new intimate ties would attend these mourning ceremonies, their shoulders wrapped in white towels as is custom. An even greater cause of distress, anxiety and guilt was the long separations from biological children for unknown lengths of time and without the possibility of family reunification. The mothers I engaged with had no guarantee that they would see their children again (cf. Massa 2020b). Mengia Tschalaer's (2022) research with West African asylum seeker interlocutors in Germany described these separations as "Half of you is back home and half of you is here. You are thinking about the children all the time". This was a description that was felt deeply and was expressed similarly by the women I engaged with. While in many countries around the world, the birth of a child can affect a mother's relationship with the state (Chakkour and de Koning 2022; Suerbaum 2022b; Luibhéid, Andrade, and Stevens 2018; Luibhéid 2013, 78; Shandy 2008, 813), in Israel parents do not derive any status through their Israel-born children and face only constraints. Having been born in Israel makes little difference for the children as well: when they reach the age of 18, they receive the same precarious legal status as their parents, and up until then are statusless (Lijnders 2022).

Despite ever-tightening rules and regulations for family reunification in countries in the Global North⁷⁶, most countries continue to allow recognised refugees to apply for family reunification with children under 18 (Massa 2020b).⁷⁷ However, first of all, the Eritrean mothers were not recognised as refugees by the state of Israel. Secondly, family reunification inside Israel is not a legal option for Eritrean mothers even if they would have been recognised as refugees due to the Israeli asylum regime (and Eritrea's heavily policed border regime). The inability for family reunification in Israel influenced the

experiences of care work of many Eritrean mothers and caused protracted family separations (10 to 15 years).⁷⁸

The way for Eritrean mothers to reunite with their children is to leave Israel, either irregularly, through a resettlement programme or government-led programmes for family or community reunification such as to Canada (cf. Belloni 2019). Movement through official government channels takes time, and the quotas in such programmes are low and they are not widely available. (Lijnders 2022). Other “options” for families wishing to reunite is to either self-deport to Eritrea or third countries such as Uganda and Rwanda under the “Voluntary Departure” Scheme discussed in Chapter Three, although the latter was only available to men as women and children were only sporadically allowed to leave Israel under this scheme.⁷⁹ In such a case the father would try to make his way from Uganda or Rwanda to Europe. If he survives the migration journey and reaches safely, he can exercise his family unity rights once he becomes a recognised refugee in a European country. One final option, which was discussed by the women I engaged with throughout my research, was returning to Eritrea directly through the Eritrean embassy in Tel Aviv. Although I did not meet any women who decided to return to Eritrea, I was told about a woman who decided to do so. Alem, an Eritrean woman whose experiences are the focus of Chapter Five, shared the story of a close friend who returned to Eritrea to be reunited with her son and then irregularly left the country for a second time to secure a future for them both:

“She used to be a single mum, she left her child in Eritrea. She had the same situation as me. She had to survive in the desert of Sinai, she was in Israel, but she decided to

go back to Eritrea. She went to the Eritrean embassy. She wrote a letter of regret. She said she was sorry [for irregularly crossing the border, which is considered an act of treason by the Eritrean regime]. She didn't mean it, but she wanted to see her son. She went back to Eritrea, took her son and left again. She went to Sudan, then to Libya with her son and she is finally in Holland with him. That is the only way she could be reunited with her son. She had no choice but to return to Eritrea. She is a woman made of stone. She is strong."

The story of Alem's friend shows that some women were willing to go through great hardship to reunite with the children they left behind, including returning to Eritrea and facing all the risks and consequences of such decisions. Daniel Mekonnen and Sara Palacios Arapiles (2021, 56) explain that in a letter of regret, draft evaders or border dodgers "accept punishment for not having completed their military and national service" and "being guilty of treason" and "pledge to pay the tax" (Hirt and Mohammad 2018, 120). Alem's friend was also forced to pay a 2 per cent "diaspora" tax to the Eritrean government on all income earned while living abroad following signing the letter of regret (Hirt and Mohammad 2018, 105; Hirt 2015, 133; Bozzini 2015; Hepner 2015). At the same time, approaching an Eritrean embassy can put the family left behind in Eritrea at risk of repercussions such as the deprivation of liberty (Mekonnen and Arapiles 2021).

Chapter Four outlines the lived experiences and narratives of Eritrean women who mothered their children transnationally while living under the constraints of the Israeli asylum regime. Following Semhar's vignette, and by focusing on the lived experiences of Eritrean mothers Regat, Natsenet, Abrehet, Samrawit, Tsega, and Haben, I explore the strategies mothers used for navigating their prolonged separations across geographical distance and their attempts at finding opportunities to reunite with them. Throughout

this dissertation, I focus on the narratives of a small number of women in an attempt to capture the intimate ways in which legal precarity disrupts mothering practices. Their experiences are complemented by additional data and engagement with women who left their children behind in Eritrea. After a decade or more of separation, the task of gathering and holding their families together becomes increasingly challenging (cf. Allan 2021) for Eritrean mothers. Chapter Four explores the emotions and practicalities that come with maintaining families transnationally. It asks what it means to sustain and care for children in, through and against conditions of protracted displacement and crisis, where the future appears foreclosed (cf. *ibid.*). Comparatively, it also examines the decision-making process around family separation and togetherness by further exploring the narrative of Samrawit who brought her children along to Israel. The first part of the chapter reviews the existing literature on transnational mothering, followed by a focus on the shape this takes in Israel. The final part shares the ethnographic examples of mothering across borders through the narratives and lived experiences of Eritrean mothers Regat, Haben, Abrehet and Natsenet.

Prolonged Family Separations in the Context of Forced Migration

Although there is a vast body of scholarly work on family separation in the context of labour migration (Abrego 2014; Coe 2013; Lutz and Palenga-Mollenbeck 2012; Merla 2012; Goulbourne et al. 2010; Zontini 2004; Fresnoza-Flot 2009; Gedalof 2009; Baldassar et al. 2007; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1997; Parreñas 2005; Kofman 2004) and undocumented migrants (Horton 2009; Menjívar 2006), there is less research on transnational mothering among mothers living with legal precarity under asylum regimes

(Lijnders 2022; Shobiye and Parker 2022; Madziva and Zontini 2012). I hope to contribute to this growing body of literature on understanding transnational motherhood in contexts of forced migration and asylum regimes (Lijnders 2022). Both legal precarity and prolonged family separation are equal to “temporal violence” (Heidbrink 2022) compelling mothers to live in the here and now (cf. Sakti and Amrith 2022). Within these contexts of temporal violence, I seek to demonstrate the interconnected disruptions of legal precarity and prolonged separation of familial relationships and joint orientations towards a shared future.

Diana Keown Allan (2021), in the context of Palestinian mothers who are refugees in Lebanon, argues that in situations of protracted displacement “mothers are often imagined as a centripetal force that brings and holds the family together and is tasked with managing survival and building futures for their children”. But what happens when mothers are physically separated from their children and restricted in their ability to move across borders or move their children across borders? How do they maintain their intimate ties and fulfil the role of bringing and holding the family together? As discussed in Chapter One, decades of conflict (Independence War and a border war) and dictatorial rule in Eritrea have caused the disintegration of family life and home (cf. Hirt and Mohammad 2013). Flight and diasporic living further contributed to mother’s separations from their children. In addition, for Eritrean mothers in Israel, the asylum regime has played a major role in shaping and reshaping familial roles, intimate ties and gendered roles. Aurora Massa (2020b, 136) argues that “Eritreans are a geographically dispersed community, bonded together by solidarities, feelings of belonging and kinship relationships”. Both temporary and indefinite separation have not been unusual in the

context of Eritrean motherhood, not now and not in Eritrea's history of both peace and war time. Whether through war, displacement, dictatorial regime or death, many children have been and continue to be raised by grandparents and other family members such as aunts and uncles (cf. Balakian 2022; Coe 2014 in other contexts). Grandmothers, in particular, have played an important role in child rearing through time and across many societies (Balakian 2022; Kramer 2009; Sear and Mace 2009), including in Eritrea and for the women at the centre of my dissertation. While numerous mothers in Israel maintain familial relations with their children transnationally (Lijnders 2022), they by no means have relinquished their mothering duties or simply have passed them down to other family members following migration from Eritrea (cf. Madziva and Zontini 2012). Transnational mothers retain and maintain their gendered roles and continue to provide their children with (financial) support and emotional care (cf. Lutz and Palenga-Mollenbeck 2012; Dreby 2009; Parreñas 2005; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997).

Engaging in mothering practices in migration contexts does not always mean that women are accompanied by the children they care for. Migrant mothers often experience prolonged separation from children and need to become invested in parenting from a distance (Coe 2013; Baldassar 2007; Parreñas 2001; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997). Forced migration and the situation in Eritrea, force many women to juggle not only their childcare responsibilities for children in Eritrea and children in Israel but also their children in neighbouring countries such as Ethiopia and Sudan and onward to Libya and beyond. Being separated from children weighs on women's shoulders as they experience stigmatisation and the moral burden of leaving their children behind. However, it is often

through migration that women seek to realise what they perceive to be in the best interest of their children (Suerbaum 2022b; Abrego 2014; Dreby 2010).

Roda Madziva and Elisabetta Zontini (2012) foreground the experiences of women who seek asylum while being separated from their children. They reveal that Zimbabwean mothers could not fulfil what they considered vital mothering responsibilities because of the legal precarity they experienced under the UK hostile environment (ibid, 440). As they lacked social and political rights and were not allowed to work, the women struggled to send remittances and maintain ongoing communications to show their commitment to their children and substitute carers (ibid, 441). As shown further on in this chapter, this was also the case for the women at the centre of my dissertation.

Across the world, refugee women are forced to endure prolonged separation from their children while experiencing severe forms of legal precarity in the context of (temporary) settlement. Women's ongoing legal precarity in Israel, where they are stuck in limbo, affected their mothering practices and burdened the relationships they were able to form with the children from whom they were separated (Lijnders 2022; Shobiye and Parker 2022). When living under the rules, laws and policies of the Israeli asylum regime women experienced the fracturing of their families and, ultimately, their motherhood and the harms mothers experience were often reproduced toward their children (ibid.). Nevertheless, migrant women, as Laura Shobiye and Samuel Parker (ibid.) emphasise in the context of the UK, engage in various forms of resistance (Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022).

Caught between the Israeli Asylum Regime and the Dictatorial Regime in Eritrea

As Madziva and Zontini (2012, 438-440) show, unlike women migrating for work opportunities, asylum seekers often leave their children behind as a result of experiencing persecution and danger to their lives and this influences their ability to put in place alternative care arrangements and plan their migration and reunion. The women's reasons for leaving children behind varied from fearing their children would not be able to challenge or survive crossing the militarised borders, life in refugee camps, the migration journey, and the gendered violence they may face.⁸⁰ When the women exited Eritrea and left their children in the care of family members, they imagined that they would be able to reunite with them shortly after. While the separation from their children was accompanied by hope for a speedy reunion, the mothers did not have set plans for when they fled Eritrea. Many women did not leave Eritrea intending to arrive in Israel, their destination was decided along the migration route (as explained in Chapter One). Thus, when leaving their children behind, they did not know that they would arrive in a country with no prospects for regularised legal status, no path to citizenship and no possibility for family reunification, either legally or irregularly. When the Israel-Egypt border closed in 2013 after the building of a high-security wall – intended to keep out Black non-Jewish people seeking asylum - it was no longer possible for children to join their parents in Israel irregularly. As such, Eritrean mothers expressed a sense of “moral failure” as they were unable to quickly and easily reunite with their children (ibid, 436). The Eritrean mothers in Chapter Four have multiple caring responsibilities across borders, for children born in Israel or along the route, and those left in the care of family members in Eritrea. This often creates tensions between children, partners and family

members in whose care they left their children. Eritrean women in Israel, but also elsewhere in the diaspora, do not only maintain intimate ties transnationally with their children but also with brothers, sisters, parents, uncles, aunties, cousins, friends, village mates and so on (cf. Massa 2020b) in Eritrea and the wider diaspora. Eritrean mothers therefore have to engage in the emotional labour of maintaining family relationships and intimate ties across borders, but also the financial labour of maintaining two (or more) families (cf. Belloni 2018, 296; Lindley 2010; Peter 2009). Milena Belloni (2018a, 296) found that Eritrean refugees often struggled to fulfil their family expectations and as a result had to bear a high social price. In the context of Zimbabwean mothers seeking asylum in the UK, Madziva and Zontini (2012) observed that “asylum policies that refuse parents the rights to work and to family reunification equally deny them the right to successful transnational parenthood”. With vague workers’ rights, low pay and manual labour, mothers in Israel who raise children transnationally often struggle to balance the financial expectations of various intimate ties. Living under impoverished conditions in Israel, Eritrean mothers often send much-needed money elsewhere. Milena Belloni, Valentina Fusari, and Aurora Massa (2022) have argued that remittances play a crucial and shifting role in Eritrea and its diaspora. Nicole Hirt and Abdulkader Saleh Mohammad (2018, 118) assert that many Eritreans in the diaspora send financial support to their extended families trapped in the National Service. As others have argued, Eritreans often feel morally obligated to support their extended intimate ties, either in Eritrea or to support their migratory aspirations (Massa 2020b, 140; Treiber 2014; Costantini 2017). Not all my interlocutors agreed with this widespread practice. Abrehet, instead, decided to focus on her kids:

“Do you know where the money is spent? It is crazy. They sent it straight to Eritrea. They won’t buy new clothes for their kids or themselves or even food, it goes to their families back home. I don’t know what the culture is. It is not easy, as an Eritrean, no one can break it, but we break it. First are my kids and my life. Of course, if my parents need it, I will give them. But for the other issues, your relatives, your families, your neighbours. How can you finish them? How can you give all of them? How long you can give them service? They come to Sinai and Libya, how much money will you pay for them? All the while your kids are in a prison. You leave them. They are in the daycare all the time, in a smelly overcrowded place? With many kids. No sunlight. You don’t pay for your kid’s health insurance. And you give others service. It is a sin that they do that. I don’t agree. I am odd. I cannot do that. You will work day and night. For whom will I work? My husband tells me: “No one can break the culture. You are isolated. You are out of the norms.” But there is culture you have to throw and there is culture you have to keep.”

As Abrehet showed, the moral obligations and solidarities that bound Eritreans, while helpful and life-saving for some, constrain others (Belloni 2019, Massa 2020b, 140). Additionally, for Eritrean mothers, caring responsibilities are not limited to the more everyday aspects of looking after children such as feeding, clothing, loving and supporting them in their education, but also include supporting children in navigating prolonged separation, life under the dictatorial rule in Eritrea and helping them with irregular border crossings and life in refugee camps. At the same time, the Eritrean mothers were supporting children in Israel through segregated education, racism from the host society, as well as isolation and loneliness as they were away for long work days from their children. Abrehet, a mother of two sons in Israel and transnationally mothering her son from Eritrea shared great worries about the racialised education system, the teachers’ racist attitudes and her children’s future:

“If all the children are foreigners and the teachers are from Israel, I can’t trust them because they say also “You people, you don’t wash your body” when we hug your kids they smell bad, our way of doing things is better for your kids, you can’t arrange your kids, you throw them in the bus, this, this, this, this. So all the time I am worried about my sons. I don’t know what will happen tomorrow, what will their future be like, how will they learn? They won’t get any citizenship, let alone they don’t have any paper and they were born here. Still, they did not recognize who they were. They ask me: “Who am I? They know that they don’t want us”.

Other mothers also shared their children’s experiences with racism in the segregated education system in Tel Aviv. One mother’s child had been told by his teacher when in grade three that in Africa “where you are from” people don’t wear clothes and live in trees.⁸¹ The Israeli asylum regime, and the absolute absence of any state support, have forced asylum seeking men and women to work long hours in often low-paid, exploitative jobs to pay for their and their children’s basic needs. As a result, children spent long hours in childcare facilities, schools and Eritrean or NGO-run after-school programmes. It is also not unusual for children to spend hours unattended, roaming the streets on their own while their parents are at work. Managing employment and childcare is especially taxing for single mothers. About the above, and encounters with state institutions and the public narrative, mothers are frequently targeted with ‘deficit rhetoric’ because of their migration circumstances and their exclusion under the Israeli asylum regime, they seem not to meet the criteria of ‘good mothering’ (cf. Manzo and Deeb-Sossa 2018).

Over the past 12 years, I have had many conversations with mothers whose children are not with them and observed the impact these separations had on their health and mental health, their sleep, appetite, lives, and their relationships with their children, both those

left behind and in Israel. Uncertainties were an integral part of their mothering practices (cf. Suerbaum 2022a). Mothering transnationally was an ongoing, fluid and constantly changing process that required immense energy and effort. The connection with their children was constantly struggled over, changed, and remade as mothers' and children's situations change (mothers remarry, have more children, separate from their partners, become ill, have mental health challenges: children move away from Eritrea). Women often emphasised time passing by and their children growing from the babies and toddlers they left behind into teenagers (cf. Madziva and Zontini 2012, 436).

Impossible Choices: Leaving or Bringing Your Child Along

“The moment I crossed the border into Ethiopia, I regretted leaving my son behind. I decided to leave my country, but to leave my son was my own decision. He was one year and four months old. It would not have been easy to bring him. I was worried about what would happen to him, no medication, no food. But to decide to leave him, your child, with someone else, for an unknown time, what is this? That was a big decision. It looked easy when I decided, but when I look back it is my future, it is my life. How long will it be until I meet him? Maybe the world will end like this, just in a phone call, without seeing him grow, without seeing how he is.”

Abrehet, like many Eritrean women with children, when leaving Eritrea had to make a life-altering decision: leave their child(ren) behind or bring them along? While the experiences of women who did not bring their children along are at the forefront of this chapter, I also want to examine why some women took the risk and brought their children along. Samrawit, through her narrative, offered some insights as she decided to bring her two children along with her rather than leave them in the care of her mother, even though

Samrawit's mother begged her to leave one of her children with her in Eritrea. Samrawit recalled how she stood up to her mother and told her:

"It is my life. If I continue this life, I want to do so with my children. I will either live with them, or I will die with my kids. I don't want them to not be with me."

Samrawit's experience shows that intimate ties with parents and siblings have influenced the decision to leave or take her children. When I ask her if she feels this was the right decision she pauses: *"It is not right sometimes, sometimes it is. It is half"*. Samrawit followed this statement by telling me a story about her friend from high school who left for Libya with three of her kids. She died in the Mediterranean Sea with one of her sons, leaving behind two of her kids. The women who brought their children to Israel dwelled on the challenges and risks of the migration route and how they prepared for the journey from Sudan. Samrawit walked with her two children across the border to Sudan with the support of people smugglers. They walked for 21 hours, and she carried her daughter, who was one year old at the time, on her back. In Sudan, they reunited with her husband and the father of the children in the Shagarab refugee camp. After four months, Samrawit and her husband decided that Samrawit and the children should go ahead to Israel and that he would remain behind to work in a metal shop and fund their migration journey. Samrawit took with her a lot of medicine she purchased in the refugee camp's pharmacy, such as tablets for headaches, fever, cold and eyedrops for the sand and wind they would have to face along the journey. *"With the grace of God"*, they made it safely to Israel. However, it is not just the risks of the migration journey that Samrawit was not sure about her decision, but also how her children have been harmed through her and in

their rights by the Israeli asylum regime, and the racism that they have experienced in a segregated education system and Israeli society at large. Abrehet added that the segregated education and the exclusion of children will be a black spot in the history of Israel:

“This is not only the problem of our community. We came to Israel. The Israeli government has a responsibility to the kids that were born here. They have to settle a room for them. They have to treat them the same way they treat the Israeli kids. What will they be tomorrow? They will be druggists? They will be in the Israeli streets. It is not a good story for Israel also. They have to treat us straight, they have to give us rights. They have to do their duties. But they don’t do this. And so our people go like people without roots.”

Some mothers who have multiple children decided to leave one child in Eritrea and take another along for the journey. Haben for example travelled with her one-year-old daughter from Eritrea and left her son in the care of her mother. About maintaining a relationship with him she said:

“It is so hard. At first, he used to call and he would ask when we would come back or when I would take him, but now he stopped asking. After all these years, I no longer know what to tell him. He gave up. Now most of the time he does not want to talk to me any longer.”

Haben remarried, followed her new husband to Israel and has had four more children since. Her son in Eritrea comes up in most of our conversations. Haben has many restless nights, not only because of her one-year-old daughter who wakes frequently, but mostly because of her worries about how and when she will be able to reunite with her son.

One of the women pointed out the fact that most of the women left their children in the care of ageing parents. Tsega recently lost her mother in Eritrea.⁸² When she left, her mother took over the care of her children. Now that she has passed away, they are left with her father, who himself is not well. Tsega's worries have increased and caused her many sleepless nights as she was not sure how he would care for her children if he was capable of looking after them in the same way her mother did and what would happen when he too was gone. Not only did Tsega mourn her mother's death and her inability to meet her once more before she passed, but with her death came a host of logistical nightmares and a confrontation with the fact that soon there would be no one left in Eritrea to look after her children. Whether it is ageing grandparents, with ailments and death, or fear of children being recruited into the indefinite military service - especially with the war with Tigray - or having to care for children as they flee the country, the unstable political and economic climate in Eritrea, makes it challenging to continue "protecting, caring and providing for children left behind" (Madziva and Zontini 2012, 438-40).

I now turn to the lived experiences of Regat and Natsenet to gain an intimate insight into the practices of mothering transnationally.

A Vanished Husband and Children Left Behind

For many Eritrean women, loss and separation are an intimate part of their lives, and different losses are often linked to one another. I met Regat⁸³, an Eritrean woman in her

thirties and a mother to six children, at Kuchinate, a women's collective in the South of Tel Aviv, that provides women from different African countries with job opportunities. Set in an industrial building along HarTsiyon Road, the collective is a warm, colourful space. Tigrinya *mezmur*, or religious song, is played through a speaker. Along the wall, white metallic cupboards display the crocheted baskets in many different colours. The work is for sale and the women of the collective earn their living by making the handcrafts. Regat has been crocheting baskets at Kuchinate for several years to top up her unstable income as she finds it challenging to maintain a job because of her mental health. When I interview her, Regat fondly remembers her life in Eritrea before her husband's arrest:

"I was really happy with my husband. I was a father and mother to him. We would eat, play and joke. This was our life. He was a very good man. I would never dream of going out [...] In Eritrea I was at home, he was working, he had a good salary and the house was a government house, there was no problem. We did not have any problem."

Her husband was a part of the maritime force (*Haile Bahri*). The unexpected and unwarranted arrest of Regat's husband in Massawa set in motion a chain of separations from her intimate ties. One night, one hour after midnight, masked men barged into their home in Massawa, and took her husband away. Regat remembers this vividly: "I left the country because they disturbed me to know where my husband is, but they took him at night and until now no one knows where he is. There is no news from him. It has been 10 years since they took him." Regat has not given up hope that he might still be alive:

"I never heard, 'This is his fault, for this reason, he is in prison'. He was never judged, if he was, we would know where he was and we could go and see him or at least the

children or somebody could go and see him. That would be normal. We don't know why he is in prison. And they came back to ask me where is your husband, but they were the ones to take him from us. There is no chance to look for him, even like a snake, going under the holes, but there is no way I can do that."

Regat still has nightmares about her husband's disappearance, waking frequently in the night and reliving the ordeal all over again. She vividly remembers, ten years later, how he was taken from her. She has searched for him around the country:

"I even went to Isayas Afwerki [the president of Eritrea], I shouted at him and held his legs, I asked him to tell me who took my husband. Who did this thing? I was a very strong woman, but what to do? The guards wanted to beat me, but I went in to speak to Isayas Afwerki. He gave me 500 nakfas. I told him his mother and father were martyred during the independence war. So he [Isayas Afwerki] asked me, where do you think he went, let us talk. I told him whatever I told you. I don't know whom to ask, I came to you. I told him, I did not come for 500 nakfa. I went to the police but they didn't give me an answer, so I came to you. I have in my pocket only 60 nakfa. I thought he would call someone and ask around. I came out crying."

Unsure why he was taken, and without a fair trial or due process, she looked for him in prisons and military bases around the country. She does not know if he has died or not. At the time of his disappearance, Regat was three months pregnant with their second daughter. As Ruba Salih (2017) has found in the case of Palestinian refugee women, memories of pregnancy and care work are intimately linked to stressful memories of loss, fear, uncertainty and displacement. When after a year she still had no news from her husband, but with the government harassing her for his disappearance, she decided to leave her two daughters in the care of her mother and crossed into Sudan. About her decision to leave the country and not take her children, she said:

“It was very hard to leave them. Until now it is hard. The youngest was 1 year old and the other one was 7 years old. The older one understood that I was leaving. I told her I was going to Tesseney⁸⁴ and that I would come back, but I planned to leave the country.”

Regat could not tell her daughter the truth about leaving her behind in Eritrea as she was worried that her daughter would be unable to bear her leaving. She also feared that others would find out about her plan to leave the country and feared the risk of imprisonment if she was found crossing the border irregularly. Regat always assumed that their separation would be temporary. She explained that she thought she would leave, then get her children and keep them safe for her husband. She left hoping that she would be able to reunite with her children in Israel, but only upon arrival realised that this was not an option. She added how everything went wrong: *“His children are not with me”*. She still hopes that one day she will be reunited with her husband. The choices she makes now are for him and that possible reunion with him: *“What can I tell her? There is no hope I can give her. There is no way to bring her to Israel or be reunited with her here.”* Regat is unable to leave Israel and so far she has not found any ways to reunite with her children elsewhere: *“My aim is, for somebody to help me to be united with my children, the ones here and the one in Eritrea and the one in Ethiopia. For all my children to be together again.”* Regat is constantly looking for a way out. Organisations like Kuchinate play a role in finding resettlement opportunities for the most vulnerable women in their collective. Many of the women join Kuchinate with the hope that their association could facilitate such a process but are often disappointed to find that Kuchinate has little power in this

and are at the mercy of the UNHCR, which facilitates the process of resettlement to various host states and that opportunities are very limited.

Transnational Motherhood: From Israel to Eritrea to refugee camps in Ethiopia

Regat's eldest daughter is now 14 years old and left for Ethiopia six months ago where she is staying in a refugee camp. Her nine-year-old daughter is in Eritrea with Regat's mother, who is in her seventies and takes care of her. Regat is in touch with them via telephone. Her eldest daughter left for Ethiopia without informing her, she is sure her youngest daughter will follow:

“The other one, for sure will go as well, she will not remain with my mother by herself. My daughter went on her own, with other children, the big ones already left, and now it is the small ones that are leaving. I did not know my daughter was leaving Eritrea, my mother called me from Eritrea to tell me that my daughter had gone missing. Then I started to call all my relatives and people from my village in the different refugee camps and then I found her. I did not have her phone number and she did not have mine. This was very stressful, I thought I had lost my daughter. I was crying on the street. It was the question of her father, what would I answer if he asked me about our daughter? He is always on my mind. I am still living for him.”

While literature on mothering under conditions of legal precarity often emphasises the bond between mother and child, Regat is occupied with her and her children's bond to their father, despite not knowing whether he is alive or not and despite not having had any news. The separations and losses have a major impact on her mental health:

“I cannot say that I am managing. I have been under a lot of stress. Now you see me, I go like any human person, but my brain, with my children, and this one and the one in here, where is he, is he dead or alive, but with all these problems I walk like nothing is happening, but my brain is divided in two, three, four. I want to be with my children, to be united with my children. How they can do when they came to take him from my house, and then came and asked me where is my husband? If they are capable of that, how can I go back there? Even if I want to, I cannot go back to Eritrea.”

About her children, Regat said:

“My children are my happiness, I am not a good worker, if I was like I was in the street if I was becoming mad, at least I have my children, they give me hope. But at the same time, when I think about everything, I get stressed. My children in Eritrea, I cannot sleep, when I think about them, I stay awake.”

In Israel, to sustain herself and her children Regat engaged in a relationship with a man. They never married. She never divorced her husband and her new partner and father of her four children in Israel is still married to his wife in Eritrea and has one child with her:

“He is responsible, he is taking care of his children and he has a wife and a child. This doesn’t give me peace, because he has a wife at home. We did not marry because he had a wife. I cannot marry him. I was not divorced and he was not divorced, so we cannot marry. We are helping each other.”

As Selam Kidane pointed out, forced displacement has deeply impacted and disrupted family-making practices. Long-term planning has been replaced with ad-hoc decisions without considering the long-term consequences and the impact on the newly formed couple and their intimate ties back in Eritrea or the wider diaspora. Despite this, in the

short term, the couple give each other hope, company, and a continuation of life by bringing children into the world together. Engaging in a partnership or marrying for survival is a common practice among Eritrean women who newly arrived in Israel and something several interviewees talked about. This strategy is further discussed in Chapter Five. Regat is originally from the town *Adi Keih* and a substantial number of the asylum seekers from Eritrea in Israel come from there. Regat said:

“My main problem is that I did not find anyone to come near to me, to help me. So I found this person to help me. I didn’t even have clothes to wear when I arrived, or to change. I am really...I couldn’t find a job, I was sleeping and staying in Levinsky Park. So I was staying in their home, the home of people from my village, they did not give me a key, I would stay until they came back from work. This is how I got to know him and started thinking, why don’t I marry him? I didn’t have a choice but to marry him, to accept to be with this guy, otherwise, I would be in trouble, with no support. This is my life.”

Duplicate Families

Sarah Horton (2009), in her research with Salvadorian migrant mothers, documented the strategy of what she called “duplicate families”. Horton (ibid.) observed that women formed “duplicate families” not only to secure a male breadwinner who might help their children left behind but also to salve the “ambiguous loss” (Falicov 2002, 274 in Horton 2009). Horton documented how “duplicate families” in turn “create strains within immigrants’ original families, as they lead to contestations of maternal loyalty”. Some mothers would postpone telling their children in Eritrea about their new husbands and/or the children born in Israel out of fear of how they would respond to such news. Many of the women I interviewed in Israel were sending monthly payments to family members in

Ethiopia or Sudan for living expenses or costs of onward migration. These new financial obligations of migration presented further hardships for women. Shifting responsibilities also eroded social structures, family relations, hierarchies and roles of a traditionally gerontocratic and patriarchal society. In addition, while for some mothers remarrying guarantees continued financial care for their children, for others remarrying or having children with new husbands is often a cause for arguments and disagreements. In cases of financial oppression and economic violence, women might be unable to send money altogether to their children in Eritrea. Money was sent through unofficial channels that were interrupted by the political situation in the country and as such sending money was unpredictable and dependent on geopolitical events. Regat had three children in Israel - five, four and one and a half years old. At the time of the interview, she was three months pregnant with their fourth and sixth child. Regat talked about how being a mother in Eritrea was so very different from being a mother in Israel. She said:

“I was always with them, watching them, playing with them, spending time with them. Instead, here in Israel, there is a great difference. You don’t give time to your children.”

For many women, the arrival in Israel brought a drastic change to their mothering practices. Where those who were mothers in Eritrea often did not work, but rather stayed at home and therefore were full-time mothers, in Israel they often worked long hours. Yet, at the end of the day, they were still expected to cook and clean. Many of the women I interviewed spoke about the differences this brought to their relationship with their children, particularly regarding the time they got to spend with their children. With little rights and protections at work, Regat struggles to

keep a job. To describe life in Israel, Regat uses the word *kebid* - 'difficult' in Tigrinya:

"Here it is hard. I work, but now that I am pregnant I am getting motion sickness, but sometimes I have to stop it, but I am working. My husband is working as well. We are all living together. [...] It is very difficult. How can you? It is not childrearing, at six o'clock we leave them in the gan [nursery]. A mother should take care of her children. It is not easy, even for 10 days she leaves, I come back, I work, I cook for the children. I don't even give my children the time to walk, to be with them, I have to do so many things when I come home. [...] When my children are sick, even for two days or three days, they will fire me from my work, so all these things are not easy. [...] I never had a work that I had for a long time. I work for ten days, then I have to look for another job. I don't have a stable job. [...] I never worked full-time or with a stable contract. I always worked for short-term jobs. The difficulty, if you consider it, I am the woman who is suffering the most, because I never worked, and I have so many children, here and also back home. My husband also has a child at home. I really have the hardest life."

As Regat told me this, she clapped her hand, a gesture signalling that there was nothing left to do. Her hopes for resettlement, tied up in her answer, had so far not been materialised and yet she wanted to make clear that making a life for her family in Israel was impossible. Indirectly, she included a question here: If they do not consider me, as someone who suffers the most, for resettlement, then who will they consider? About her decision to have more children in Israel, she said:

"Even though the children are not with me, I am still living for them. The heaviest ones are not the ones [in Israel], but the ones in Eritrea and Ethiopia. The ones here, have their father and mother, they are growing with us. [...] I didn't want to lose the chances that I had [to become pregnant] because I lost the other ones. I have no

money, everyone here has money, but I have no money. All of them use medicine if they don't want children and they have houses at home in Eritrea. Not to go back there or to live there, but they are making houses. [...] I don't have work, I don't have a monthly job, so why do I have to use medicine not to have children? I prefer to be at home and have my children if I cannot keep my job. I aim to work and have children if I cannot get a job. [...] What can I do? I don't want to lose everything, I want to at least have children."

Regat found solace in her children. Unlike other mothers who because of the Israeli asylum regime under which they lived decided not to have (more) children, Regat felt that living under the constraints of the Israeli asylum regime and having children made sense.

Natsenet: Maintaining Families Over Time and Place

Through the lived realities of Natsenet, an Eritrean mother of a son and two daughters, I further explore the practice of maintaining families over time and place. Natsenet fled Eritrea to Sudan in June 2010 and crossed into Israel in April 2011. She was held in Saharonim prison after crossing the border and after one month was released with a bus ticket for the Central Bus Station in the heart of South Tel Aviv. Natsenet completed the 10th grade in Eritrea and then had her education interrupted and was forced to go to military training. She married her husband in 2003 and soon after they married they had their first daughter. Their lives were changed forever when her husband was arrested and imprisoned without any reason, or access to the rule of law. Natsenet was pregnant at the time. She does not know whether he is still alive or not, and if he is, where he is imprisoned. When Natsenet left Eritrea 12 years ago, their oldest daughter was three years old and their son was just over a year old. Natsenet left her daughter and son in the care

of her mother when she left Eritrea: *“It was very difficult to leave my children behind. To say farewell to her not knowing when I would see her again was a heartbreaking decision to make.”*⁸⁵ Natsenet, unlike most other women, was allowed to leave Eritrea regularly. She finished national service in government offices in Asmara and was discharged when she gave birth to her children. Obtaining a passport was a very lengthy process that took two months to complete. When she finally got her passport, she made up why she needed to leave Eritrea:

“I told them a close family member died and I have to be a witness at the mourning ceremony. I left my daughter with my mother as a guarantee that I would come back to Eritrea. They would not have allowed me to take my daughter with me”.

The Eritrean regimes used her daughter and son as collateral to ensure her return to Eritrea, but she never did. After having spent some time in Sudan with relatives, Natsenet decided to continue to Israel. Throughout the migration journey to Israel, she got in touch with an Eritrean man she knew from her national service. They met in the Sinai Peninsula where she became pregnant. Many women, along the migration route, but also in Israel due to a lack of rights and support through the settler colonial state, feel urged to marry in search of support and protection from men in their communities (Lijnders 2019). The same lack of support sees many women remain in abusive relationships. Natsenet gave birth to another daughter in Israel in June 2012.⁸⁶ For several months Natsenet did not tell her daughter and son in Eritrea that she had a sister out of fear of how she would respond to the news in the light of their prolonged separation and her mother having engaged in a relationship while her father remained missing. When she finally told her

oldest daughter about the relationship, the daughter was understanding of her mother's decisions. Natsenet and her new partner agreed to share the burdens of life in Israel together. He knew that she was married in Eritrea and was aware that her husband was imprisoned without trial. She also told him about her oldest daughter, but not her son, for reasons that remain unclear to me. He too had a wife and child in Eritrea but they separated when the distance migration created between them became unbridgeable. Natsenet, like Regat, entered the relationship to gain a form of protection she did not receive from the State (Lijnders 2022). Although Natsenet did not intend to have more children, forgetting to take her birth control pill one day she became pregnant. She asked her partner to be serious about building a life together and relied heavily on his support to maintain herself in Tel Aviv and her children left behind in Eritrea. Talking about life in Israel Natsenet said:

“From the place where I was it is better, but when you compare it with other western countries it is terrible. We have no rights, we are not recognised as refugees. We are restricted in our movement, we are not allowed to leave the country. We have no access to the social welfare system. It is difficult to raise a child in Israel. Children of refugees have no rights, they are without nationality and religion and their fathers are not recognised in their birth certificates.”

The presence of children in and around women's migration trajectories has various consequences and implications: economic and material scarcity and exploitative labour conditions can make it challenging for mothers to be emotionally available and connected to their children (Suerbaum 2022a; Brouckart and Longman 2018). Mothering in contexts of legal violence means engaging in childrearing practices while living in constant fear and instability (Abrego and Schmalzbauer 2018). Nicole Constable (2015)

shows how the complex entanglements of motherhood, migration and precarious status. We need to take into consideration not only the presence of children in places of women's temporary settlement but also those children left behind. While holding loving relationships with children while living with legal precarity can be meaningful and stabilising (Suerbaum 2022a; Willen 2014; Luibhéid 2013, 75), at the same time when mothering children both transnationally and in Israel this is filled with conflicting emotions. Sarah Willen (2014 93-94) argues that by "pouring herself into the space between them and into her commitment to nurture her child into the future, a mother might find lightness, distraction, comfort, and solace". In her mothering, Natsenet finds the capacity to "preserve herself" and "deploy herself in the world" (ibid.). Furthermore, it is often through their children that migrant mothers overcome the burden of exclusion and forge new layers of belonging (Feldman-Savelsberg 2016). Ultimately, living in legal precarity shapes the bond between women and the children they care for and can create "a concatenation of shared vulnerabilities and intimate interdependencies" (Horton 2009).

The Israeli asylum regime denied Black non-Jewish mothers the right to participate fully in society (cf. Reynolds 2020 in the context of the UK). Public infrastructure in South Tel Aviv is poor, and the area is characterised by homelessness, prostitution, drug use and illegal and violent conduct (Ravid 2022a, 142; Birger 2020, 220-221). Their living conditions were frequently commented on by the Eritrean mothers, albeit being confronted with them daily, they feared how these would impact their children's future. Yerusalem, an Eritrean mother of two children and a university graduate in accounting, as we were walking down to the central bus station from Levinsky Park exclaimed: "I am

afraid that my daughter will turn into an addict. When I see a junky, I see my daughter. I see her future. I am so concerned that the situation in Tel Aviv and the little time I have to spend with my daughter might push her into addiction.”⁸⁷ Yerusalem and her family left for Canada through the sponsorship process in 2019 and she frequently shared pictures of their family adventures and “freedom”, but living in South Tel Aviv, she was daily confronted with what government neglect can lead to.

Natsenet continued living with her daughter in the ransacked building she rented an apartment in with her ex-partner after being released from prison. The building is located a stone's throw from the Central Bus Station in South Tel Aviv along a busy road. Unable to pay the rent of their previous flat on her own, she moved two rooms down to a smaller room after they separated. The entrance to their building was often frequented by drug addicts, passed out on the stairs. She never felt safe in the building, but over time got used to their living conditions. The moment you entered the L-shaped room you stumbled upon a double bed that doubled as a couch, the walls were decorated with a banner from their daughter’s baptism celebration many years ago and religious images of Mary and Jesus. To the left was a small bathroom with a shower over the toilet.

Natsenet struggled as her partner was not living up to their agreement for a shared life. He was verbally abusive to her and her daughter and relied on her to do all the household tasks, such as cleaning and cooking. Hilal Alkan (2022), in the context of Syrian refugees in Turkey, found that patriarchal hierarchies made the care responsibilities unequally distributed among genders, burdening women even more at the intersection of their kin contract and Turkey’s citizenship regime. At times, Natsenet’s partner would also use

physical violence, such as grabbing her throat and hitting her.⁸⁸ In addition, he used financial coercion, as he was in charge of their combined income, using it for whatever he wanted, but increasingly restricting her from sending money to her children in Eritrea. Economic abuse by intimate partners is widely experienced by women stuck in the Israeli asylum regime (Lijnders 2019). In 2014 and 2017, Natsenet would often entrust in me that she would rather leave him, but that she would not know how to look after her children, both in Israel and Eritrea, without his financial contribution. As such, the asylum regime, and a lack of state support, restricted her from leaving her abusive husband and impacted her ability to make decisions regarding marriage and care. Tsega Gebreyesus et al. (2018), in the context of asylum in the settler colonial state of Israel, documented that women's structural vulnerability under the asylum regime increased the risk not just of intimate partner violence (including financial, physical, sexual, and psychological violence) but also of sexual violence and exploitation in their host and home societies. Political and economic exclusion were the two principal factors shaping Eritrean women's risk. As Natsenet's narrative portrays, they found that women were often caught between relying on financial dependence on men and the need to protect themselves from violence.⁸⁹ This will be further discussed in Chapter Five of this thesis. A growing body of migration research argues that one's migration status, or lack thereof, can aggravate the risk of intimate partner and family violence (Pfizner, Fitz-Gibbon, Walklate et al. 2023). Going more in-depth, Romina Istratii et al. (2023) found that migrant communities might be more vulnerable to intimate partner violence due to "migration-related risks/ stresses, colonial legacies/ racism and other structural, systemic and material risk factors". A lack of legal status also impacts their ability to take legal action, including reports of the police not taking women seriously or refusing to intervene.⁹⁰ In Romina Istratii's research on

intimate partner violence amongst Ethiopian migrants, she found few women report their abuse due to a lack of support systems that would mediate in cases of abuse or conflict when it takes place in their home country. Staff at the Eritrean Women's Community Centre found that in Israel abuse is not interrupted due to an absence of elders and/or religious figures to intervene.⁹¹ It is however also important to note that Eritrean women also reported that religious leaders, institutions, or elders advised women to stay with abusive husbands (cf. Tsegay and Tecleberhan 2023). In addition, religious values (Istratii 2021) and the fear of the consequences, such as imprisonment or deportation also explain the hesitation to take formal action (cf. Tsegay and Tecleberhan 2023).⁹² The limiting of rights by the Israeli Government created and maintained precariousness in the everyday lives of Eritrean women. These systemic practices, alongside socialisation processes, institutions, ideas around dominance and practices from the home country, have specific gendered consequences (cf. Cochrane 2020 in the context of the Australian asylum regime; Tsegay and Tecleberhan 2023 in the context of Eritrean refugees in the UK) and influence lived experiences, intimate and relational practices and resistance strategies. In the context of settler colonial Israel, Abu-Assab and Nasser-Eddin (2018) and Dr Yara Hawari (2022) have argued that patriarchal structures in society are reinforced or activated by the apartheid state and Israel's military regime limiting the freedom of Palestinian women. Likewise, I found that the asylum regime plays a role in shaping gender relations within Eritrean families and communities. While there is a connection between the public violence of the asylum regime and violence experienced by women in the domestic sphere, such as intimate partner violence and femicide (Lijnders 2022; cf. Davis 2016, 106), it is not the root cause of it. As set out in Chapter One, Eritrean women experienced domestic and sexual violence in Eritrea, which can be explained

through a multitude of contributing factors. As such, when documenting acts of violence from Eritrean men towards the women in their communities, one should look at multiple factors contributing to such violence and place it within a global framework of violence against women and girls. In addition, Eritrean women's gender socialisation, gender inequalities, historic and current militarization of Eritrean society under the existing dictatorial regime and during the independence war, and the traumatic migration journey as described in Chapter One, are all factors further explaining the violence.

When I returned to Tel Aviv at the start of 2022, Natsenet had separated from her partner after she found out that he was cheating on her. This was the final push she needed to leave him. He is now hardly involved in their lives and does only sporadically spend time with their daughter.

Emotional connection is not sufficient to maintain connections to her children and family left behind. As a transnational mother, Natsenet also had to be in the position to send financial support to her children and her mother, their substitute carer. Grandparents, like Natsenet's mother, are not just receivers of transnational care and remittances, they are also active providers of care (Madziva and Zontini 2012, 430; Lutz and Palenga-Mollenbeck 2012; Merla 2012; Goulbourne et al. 2010; Zontini 2004). Financially maintaining two families across distances meant that Natsenet had to work even more to ensure that she could meet the needs of her intimate ties left behind. However, these financial responsibilities competed with the State's as without health insurance and complications after birth, Natsenet was left to pay a hospital bill of 21,000 ILS. She wondered aloud: "How can I pay this? I do not even have one cent." While children of

Eritrean mothers are entitled to healthcare subsidised by the Ministry of Health, some parents are unable to afford this and their children remain without health coverage (ASSAF 2020, 4). One Saturday afternoon Natsenet called me up distressed. Her daughter was not feeling well and she wondered what to do. Rather than trying to give her medication at home, she asked if I could drive them to the Emergency Room at Ichilov Hospital. Unable to pay for her daughter's monthly health insurance she is uninsured. When we arrived at the ER, rather than seeing her, Natsenet was first asked to pay for the treatment in advance. She had to pay 500 ILS for a doctor to check her.

It is against this backdrop, that every day up until the age of three, at 5:30 am, Natsenet would drop her daughter off at a Nigerian-run nursery down the road from where the family lived. She then made her way to her low-paid job in a bakery, where she worked 12 hours every day except on Friday when she had half a day off and on Saturday when she was free. Natsenet felt guilty about leaving her daughter in the care of someone else for so many hours each day in what she does not see as a suitable environment for her daughter, but as it was the only option affordable to her she saw no other choice.⁹³ Lior Birger (2020, 220) found that these nurseries were often overcrowded, understaffed and impacting the children's social, emotional and cognitive development. After she returned home around seven o'clock in the evening, she had to cook and clean and had very little time left to spend with her daughter. Natsenet tried to give her daughter time, but would often be utterly exhausted at the end of a long day and found herself being short with her and unavailable instead. Tine Brouckaert and Chia Longman (2018) stress how for migrant mothers the economic and material scarcity as a result of restricting access to rights and services can make it difficult for mothers to maintain a loving and emotional

connection with their children. Selam Kidane, an Eritrean psychologist and activist has referred to this as parenting from a deficit:

“Parenting is such a challenging role anyway, being responsible for the welfare and the upbringing of a whole other human being. And when you’re doing it from a deficit it is a lot of pressure. When you’re doing it with a lot of unfulfilled means of your own. Which means you have less resilience, you know, that could go to the child, so, you know, you’re uncertain about yourself. You’ve got so many secrets, you’ve got so many questions. You put so many broken bits inside you and yet you are responsible for a child. So you’re not there emotionally. You can be absent. Although you are physically there, emotionally you may not be available for the child, because that child would also touch places in you that you’re trying to avoid”.

When she reached the age of three, Natsenet’s daughter went to a municipality-run nursery school and from there to one of the segregated schools, far away from her home. In Tel Aviv, there are separate schools and kindergartens for Eritrean and Sudanese children (ACRI 2022). These children are educated in 4 elementary schools⁹⁴ and about 60 kindergartens (from the age of three). The Association for Civil Rights in Israel, in December 2022 together with ASSAF and the Garden Library were involved in a petition to the Supreme Court in Jerusalem to challenge segregated education (ACRI 2022). ACRI (2022) adds that:

“The severe damages caused to the children of asylum seekers due to their segregated registration and placement in separate educational institutions include, among other things, severe humiliation and social labelling, educational and cognitive damages, and harmful damage to their healthy development. This policy ignores the circumstances of the lives of the asylum seekers' children and their present situation, and even encourages intolerance and racism towards this population”.

Natsenet would pay a Sudanese driver a monthly fee to bus her in and out of school every day. At an early age, her daughter was diagnosed with learning difficulties and developmental delays, but only at the age of 10 did Natsenet's fight to get her into a special needs school succeed. Her daughter would come home in the afternoon and go to Abu Ghida⁹⁵, an Eritrean-run after-school club where she would learn Tigrinya and English.⁹⁶ After the introduction of the Deposit Law, Natsenet took home even less money. This caused additional stress and also resulted in having to make decisions about how much to keep for her daughter in Israel and how much to send abroad. It often meant that money for renting better accommodation in Israel instead was sent to Eritrea. Natsenet, after separating from her partner, had an accident at work that stopped her from working altogether.

Although Natsenet received some money through her employer following the work accident, her inability to work, followed by the global pandemic, made her commitment to send money to her children in Sudan and Egypt, and her mother in Eritrea hard to keep. Finding herself unable to provide for the children and their carers made her feel like a failure (Madziva and Zontini 2012, 437). She left Eritrea to ensure a better future for them all but she is unable to fulfil this promise. Everyone was struggling under lockdowns and had up until then heavily relied on her financial support. In the winter of 2021, Natsenet joined Kuchinate. She earned enough through Kuchinate to make ends meet.

For Natsenet, mothering transnationally and in Israel has also been about maintaining complicated family secrets. As she did not tell her new partner about her son, her youngest daughter, born in Israel does not know about him either. Natsenet confided in me that

her oldest daughter has a different father. Her youngest daughter does not know this and believes that her father is also her sister's father. Few of her intimate ties in Israel know that she has a son and as such she had to keep him a secret, adding additional stress. While her daughter in Israel is having contact with her sister in Egypt and her grandmother in Eritrea, she never spoke to her brother or knew about his existence. Her daughter in Israel spoke proudly about her older sister, although communicating in Tigrinya was challenging until she started Tigrinya lessons at the Eritrean after-school club. She also often spoke about how much she missed her. It is not only mothers who are deeply impacted by the separation from their children, it is their siblings born in Israel who feel the loss too. Natsenet's daughter never met her sister and brother in person and although she would frequently speak with her sister, she also expressed feeling lonely and alone in the world. When Natsenet lost her father, and her daughter her grandfather this caused an inherent sense of loss and grief and brought home to them the inability to return to Eritrea and the consequences of their prolonged separation, including being unable to say farewell to their father and grandfather. Natsenet's daughter was burdened with the distress her mother experienced due to the Israeli asylum regime and maintaining families across borders. Madziva and Zontini (2012) have noted how the transnational space that undocumented mothers inhabit is one of "an intimately shared space of loss and grief" that not "only produces their own embodied distress, but also produces a continuous feedback loop between their children's grief and their own".

Like many other people living under the asylum regime, Natsenet lived in an illegally subdivided apartment with pirated electricity. Paying rent every month in cash, health and safety requirements were overlooked by her landlord. Natsenet's daughter would

often spend time at my family's home in Yaffa over the weekend to allow her mother to rest. After a minor surgical intervention, Natsenet too spent several nights with us to recover. One Saturday morning, as we were having breakfast, she burst out in tears of shock. Her landlord had sent her a video of their room, destroyed by a fire that erupted in the room next to hers. The wall separating their flat had collapsed in their room, onto their bed. She praised God that both of them were not at home when it happened in the middle of the night and tried not to think about what could have happened if they did. In the days following the fire, she often contemplated the tests that God seemed to make her undergo and wondered what more she would be able to take. When we went to check on her home, it was impossible to get inside the flat, because rubble was blocking the door from inside. As we sat in her dark hallway – the electricity had been switched off by the Firefighters – she jumped into action. She called Kuchinate's social worker to ask her what to do, who advised her to call the municipality. Unable to support her, they advised her to go to Mesila (a Tel Aviv municipality-run unit providing assistance and social services to asylum seekers and undocumented people) the next day. When I met up with her after the visit the next day she came out of their offices visibly upset with dried food and toilet paper in her hands: "Where am I supposed to cook? I just lost my home. I don't have a toilet to sit on and wipe my ass and yet they gave me toilet paper. What am I supposed to do with this? I need a new home." She forwarded the video her landlord had sent her many times to different people she envisioned could help her in this situation. The landlord tried to convince her that he could make the room liveable again in just a matter of days. Natsenet refused to ever live there again. Pressured by Natsenet, the landlord eventually put her up in a hotel until she found a new home: "It is the least he could do, he should be in prison for letting me such an unsafe place to live with my daughter. What

would he have done if it would have killed us?” He also put her in touch with other slum landlords to see if they have a place to live.

Magdalena Suerbaum (2022a) analyses mothering as a form of gendered and racialised hyper-visibility in Berlin’s public sphere. She shows the particular challenges of being a mother with precarious legal status in bureaucratic encounters and deals with levels of interdependence between mothers and children. She discusses how mothering practices do not only need to be directed towards children but also the self since children’s well-being relies on the mother’s actual presence and physical and mental integrity. Suerbaum (ibid.) traces how a mother’s emotions, and mental and bodily responses to her socio-political positionality affect her children’s lifeworld. Ultimately, the mother's emotional struggle is multiplied through the children’s suffering and awareness of living in legal precarity. At the start of August 2022, a young Eritrean woman killed herself. The community was deeply affected and in shock that she took her own life. She left behind three young children. Natsenet, although she did not know the women personally, went to pay her respect, as many others in the communities did. Natsenet told me later that she had several sleepless nights over the suicide and that she had been thinking about it a lot. Rather than judging her for deciding to take her own life, she told me that weeks earlier when she was deep in a crisis after her house got burned down she too thought about taking her own life. She told me that she reached one of the lowest points in her life and that it felt easier to just step out of the world to not have to deal with all of the distress. We embraced each other and I told her I was happy that she chose to live. Eventually, she said, I could not bear to leave my children to struggle through this life on their own. She decided to live for them.

Facing Exclusion Together: New Intimate Ties of Solidarity

After losing her home in the fire, Natsenet searched high and low for a new place to live with her daughter. With high rents, deposits and other fees, she resorted to finding a place online. Using Google translate to help her understand the ads she spent weeks travelling between the neighbourhoods in South Tel Aviv. Visiting several homes that led to nothing, she resorted to more creative means of flat-hunting. When she found a home in the Hatikva neighbourhood that looked promising, she asked an Eritrean friend with good Hebrew to call the landlord. He pretended to be her brother helping his sister look for a home. Other home searches abruptly ended when the landlord found out that she was Eritrean. Landlords have often been unwilling to rent to Black non-Jewish people due to a combination of their precarious legal status and landlord's racist and anti-refugee sentiments (Birger 2020, 231). Other landlords have exploited people living under the asylum regime by renting out poor homes and financially exploiting them. Due to the high costs of living, many families share a home with other families or single men resulting in often over-crowded living conditions (ibid, 231-232). For Natsenet, the trick helped and the landlord invited her to come view the property straight away. When Natsenet went to see the apartment and exposed her true identity, she explained how she lost her previous home in a fire and the landlord agreed to let the home to her. Over weeks, she moved back and forth between her old home and the new one to salvage whatever she could and rebuild their lives once again. Moving eventually also had its benefits, she moved into a bigger, quieter and nicer home with her daughter, and she moved closer to intimate ties who supported her with her daughter during the long summer holiday. Amanda Lubit's

(2022) discussion on solidarity and friendship among female asylum seekers demonstrates how people forge new caring relationships or re-imagine existing ones as a way to confront feelings of loss and loneliness that are often prompted by every day realities marked by hostility, othering, exclusion, bureaucratic murkiness and sometimes violence. Other single mothers shared homes to share the costs of living and childcare responsibilities. On the other hand, moving meant that her daughter could no longer attend the Eritrean-led after-school club and spent her afternoons in their home. Natsenet, who worked until six in the evening, often worried about her safety and encouraged her to go in and close the door behind her, not talk to strangers and not let anyone into the house. Her daughter, at ten years old, is very independent and knows how to cook a simple meal and clean up after herself.

Ensuring Safety from Afar

Mothers were confronted with keeping their children safe, both in Eritrea and after they left Eritrea and had to ensure that they were looked after by trustworthy people, preferably family members. When Natsenet's daughter reached the age to be recruited for military service by completing her final year of high school at Sawa Military training camp, mother and daughter decided together that she should leave Eritrea. She crossed the border irregularly into neighbouring Sudan. Now, fast forward, her daughter is 16 years old and her son who is 14 years old followed his sister out of Eritrea. While she was in contact with her daughter throughout the day via WhatsApp, she lost contact with her son. Her daughter was living in Cairo, where the UNHCR recently granted her a "white paper" or asylum seeker certificate. This paper gave Natsenet new hope for family

reunification, wishing that it would be a start for her daughter to be resettled. However, in reality, a white paper is only valid for 6 months with no associated right of legal residence and offers limited protection (UNHCR 2021). Natsenet teared up when speaking about her children. Her daughter was kidnapped by human traffickers in Sudan and held captive until she paid a high price. Unable to pay this herself she relied on family in Norway to pay the ransom money. After her release, Natsenet facilitated her daughter's journey to Egypt where she has been staying with a relative. Her son, who was living in Khartoum, was arrested by the Sudanese security services and imprisoned for 4 months. He was deported back to Eritrea in October 2022. Natsenet has not been able to speak to him since. Her mother, who in November 2022 was visiting her granddaughter in Egypt, managed to locate him in a prison in *Tesseney* and travelled there from *Keren* to visit him. She described him to Natsenet as having lost weight, stress spots all over his cheeks, and having lost his will and mental health. He seemed as Natsenet narrated to me, "out of it" and "without hope". Natsenet was extremely worried about his well-being and future. She did not know how to support him now that he was in prison, but at the same time, she was relieved that he was found and that he was alive. As a result of his imprisonment in Sudan followed by his deportation to and imprisonment in Eritrea, she has been unable to speak to him for nearly half a year. She was concerned about her mother's health too, as she has aged and been suffering from diabetes. Natsenet's mother was her only link to her son. To ensure her health was checked, Natsenet funded her mother's trip to Cairo, where she visited a private doctor. It was also an opportunity for her to spend time with her daughter and ensure that she was safe.

It is not the geographical distance alone that made it difficult for Natsenet to maintain familial connections across borders (Madziva and Zontini 2012; Goulbourne et al. 2010; Baldassar et al. 2007; Asis et al. 2004), but rather the lack of political, economic and social rights under the Israeli asylum regime but also in Eritrea, Sudan and Egypt where her children and mother lived. It is not just Natsenet's legal precarity and their inability to reunite as a family in Israel, but also human traffickers, Eritrean National Security and other actors along the migration route that impacted their ability to maintain relations as a family and make plans for a shared future.

From Israel, Natsenet has carefully been curating a life for her daughter in Egypt, from ensuring that she was with people that could be trusted and thinking about her future. She enrolled her in a private school in Cairo where she has been studying several afternoons a week, learning subjects such as English and mathematics. After several years of having her education interrupted, Natsenet was keen on getting her back on track so that she could further her studies at some point, hoping that one day she would be able to go to university. For Natsenet, being a transnational mother meant imagining more than one future – that of her daughter in Israel and her children in the diaspora - being invested in more than one context – In Israel, Eritrea, Sudan and Egypt – and being responsible for more than just herself – but also her children, mother and siblings (cf. Gedalof 2009).

Motherhood as an Inhabitable Space of Welcome

Motherhood, anthropologist Sarah Willen (2014, 93) argues, may offer both the mother and her children “a space of relative groundedness, comfort, and intimacy” and children can serve as a “source of interest and investment in life” (ibid.). Willen has called this intimate bond an “inhabitable space of welcome”, “a small zone of familiarity, comfort, meaning, and safety in the shadow of laws, policies, and practices explicitly designed to make people feel unwelcome” (Willen 2007, 161–162). Willen argues that inhabitable spaces of welcome may emerge in physical places, but also alternatively, an inhabitable space of welcome might be a grounding relationship, for instance, with a spouse, a family member, or a young, dependent child. Being a mother allows for a small patch of social ground in which she, and not the socio-political, ideological, and interpersonal chaos swirling around her, guides her moral compass (Willen 2014, 88). Women with children, she alludes, may respond to fragmenting forces—intimate and sociopolitical—by pulling themselves together as a mother. This sentiment was often shared by the women I engaged with in my research. Several mothers said that they were living their lives for their children, often referring not only to the children present in Israel but also to the children left behind in Eritrea. Alem, a mother of one child said:

“As a mother, I force myself to go on with life. I think I am having the same life as my mother. She had me in her twenties, I am her oldest child, and she put her whole life on the line for me, living for me. I am doing the same thing for my son. I don’t know how long this would go on, this repetition.”

Natsenet too shared Willen’s sentiment when I interviewed her in 2017:

“I live my life for my children, they keep me going in this world. It is for my daughter that I left Eritrea, with the hope that we could reunite. I did not want her to have to experience the horrors of the journey. It is now for both my daughters that I work 15 hours every day so that I can support them both. Whenever my husband mistreats me, I manage it for them. When I renew my visa every month and get shouted at, I think about them. When Israelis shout at me in the streets or at my workplace, they pull me together. One day we will all be together and free. I hold on to that thought.”⁹⁷

While Natsenet has not given up on the hope of bringing all of her children together again in a safe and stable place, at the end of 2022 she had not found an opportunity. When Natsenet was still with her partner, they looked into many different regular and irregular ways of “getting out”, but without the financial means and the familial or community networks, they could not succeed. Despite their being only about 750 kilometres between Natsenet and her daughter in Cairo, they were unable to be reunited. Natsenet is living for the day when they can all be together again as a family. Leaving Israel would be the only way in which Natsenet could be with all three of her children. For many women, “getting out” is a wish that will not easily become a reality due to both national and international border and asylum regimes and restrictions on movement. After separating from her husband, her options to leave through resettlement had become even more limited as the UNHCR had an unofficial policy of not resettling single mothers with their children to third countries in case the father was still in Israel, arguing that children needed both their parents. Natsenet would often point out the paradox of such a policy as she left her partner because of intimate partner violence and as she struggled as a single mother, while he had no interest in looking after his daughter. She would swear about him “not getting up his lazy ass and leave already”, but he seemed not to be in a hurry like some other men, to “self-deport” under the “Voluntary Departure” Scheme to Uganda or

Rwanda. Although Natsenet's ex-partner had promised in the past that he would not get in her way if she found a way to leave, she also often spoke about his unpredictability and feared he might backtrack on his promise. This points to the gendered nature of resettlement and sponsorship programmes and how women who mother their children on their own are impacted when the father, while no longer or only partially involved in raising children, when remaining in Israel, still has power over them. Natsenet also saw her ex-partner as responsible for financially assisting her with getting their daughter out of Israel: "He has saved so much money by working like a dog, the least he can do is give us 20,000 USD to go to Canada", she would argue, but without a group of five or a private sponsor she was unable to start this process.

So far, the thesis has explored how women from Eritrea adapt to, experience and resist the Israeli asylum regime in Israel while mothering their children both in Israel and transnationally. The final chapter places their experiences within a global framework of global apartheid and the UK's "hostile environment", by zooming in on how three women circumvent border regimes to enable a future for their children and themselves. Being mindful of the interplay between autonomy and control, Chapter Five further speaks to the "profound effect of legal precarity on the intersection of mothering practices, time orientations, gendered racialization, and belonging across multiple spaces" (cf. Feldman-Savelsberg 2022).



Chapter Five

Chapter Five: “We Have to Separate So We Can Be Together Again”: Family Separation as a Strategy for Togetherness and Doing Family

“My son is finally here”, Alem⁹⁸ proclaimed proudly and full of joy over the phone. After three years of waiting for refugee status, which enabled her to apply for family reunification, her son has finally joined her in the UK from Israel and their physical separation has come to an end. Her happiness radiated through the phone as she told me about their emotional reunion at the airport. After having lived in Israel for three years with legal precarity and no access to rights under the Israeli asylum regime, Alem left her son with her ex-husband in Tel Aviv in 2015. Experiencing the Israeli asylum regime, Alem, a mother with caring responsibilities, faced what Georgina Ramsay calls the “existential experience of contested temporal being, in which a person cannot reconcile the contemporary circumstances of their life with their aspirations for, and sense of, the future” (Ramsay 2020, 388). In Israel, Alem was “stuck in transit”, and her temporary protection status felt permanent with no ability to regularly move across borders. For Alem, and other Black non-Jewish women in Israel, uncertainty and precariousness became part of everyday life. Even the interminable nature of waiting can prompt action, as in the case of Alem. After becoming “tired of waiting,” Alem took on the identity of an Ethiopian Israeli to travel to the UK, gain asylum, and then seek reunification with her son and family. Tired of waiting for policies to change for people living under the Israeli

asylum regime and for her to be recognised as a refugee (cf. Haround and Walker 2019, 12) with access to the rights that come with such recognition, Alem took matters into her own hands. The lack of access to refugee status and the accompanying legal documents, such as travel documents and passports, limited her mobility. Alem, born in Eritrea, did not have many regular options to move across the borders of the racialised global migration regime. “Voluntary” departure (although not available to women); family reunification; resettlement of highly vulnerable groups by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); and sponsorship programmes are the only routes people have to leave the country (Lijnders 2019; Haround and Walker 2019, 12). The legal options available, such as resettlement through the UNHCR and sponsorship programmes for example to Canada are not widely available (HIAS 2020) and have become increasingly stringent, time-consuming, and often require just as much financial resources as irregular migration.⁹⁹ Access to these processes is restricted, either gate-kept by UNHCR or based on existing family connections in these countries, affiliation with a religious institution like the Catholic church, or access to finances. At the same time, restricted definitions of who is considered a family member for purposes of family reunification – defined narrowly as a nuclear heteronormative unit of spouses and dependent underage children (Richter-Devroe 2022) make the right to family extremely weak (cf. Madziva and Zontini 2012; Kofman, 2004). This highlights how family should be performed and function (Strasser et al. 2009, 167-68; Andrikopoulos and Duyvendak 2020, 309) and as such “through their performances of family, love and intimacy, have to prove their adherence to Eurocentric modernist normative values of love, intimacy and family to access mobility, residence or citizenship rights” (Richter-Devroe 2022). Power dynamics that are laid bare in these processes, within humanitarian infrastructures,

families, and wider intimate ties, have the potential to harm women and make them prone to abuse. In addition, a UN deal in 2018 with Prime Minister Netanyahu could have led to the departure of half of Eritrean and Sudanese people to “safe countries”, but a day after the deal was signed it was cancelled due to pressure from the Cabinet regarding the half that would remain in Israel (HIAS 2020).

Therefore, as her legal precarity included the absence of refugee status (Raijman 2017, 3) and a lack of access to a travel document and/or passport, Alem, like many asylum seekers and refugees around the world recruited a people smuggler to enable her to cross borders irregularly (Lijnders 2022; Bloch, Sigona and Zetter 2011, 1292; Khosravi, 2010, 61; Zijlstra and van Liempt 2017, 182). Secondary migration is not a new phenomenon for migrants and refugees. Many of the Eritrean mothers I engaged with lived in Sudan and/or Ethiopia for some time before moving onwards to Israel. Likewise, refugees in Europe move between different European countries to cope with social, legal and economic restrictions in the first country of asylum (Belloni 2018; Brekke and Brochmann 2015; Van Liempt 2011; Schuster, 2005). Milena Belloni (2018, 295) emphasises the importance of the transnational flow of information, images and aspirations between Eritreans in different locations. We need to understand Alem and other Eritrean women’s decisions to irregularly travel from Israel to the UK as a continuation of their fleeing of Eritrea and moving irregularly across borders of neighbouring countries with the help of people smugglers. In Eritrea, the women did not have the freedom to travel across the border regularly but rather had to escape the militarised life imposed on them under the threat of death. Crossing borders irregularly therefore is not a new phenomenon for the women to engage with, they continued doing so after leaving Eritrea, from Sudan to Egypt

and Egypt to Israel. Both leaving Eritrea and then again Israel irregularly, was for the women the only way in which “returning to a life where basic cultural goals such as making a living for oneself and one’s family could be realised” (cf. Hirt and Mohammad 2013, 142). Milena Belloni (2019, 104) has described people smuggling “as a mechanism that facilitates autonomous migration in violation of state regulations” and as a “resistance practice”. I draw on Belloni’s definition of people smuggling to understand Alem’s movement to the UK. Alem left Israel for the UK with the forged identity document of a Jewish Ethiopian Israeli woman¹⁰⁰ to apply for asylum and facilitate a family reunification process with her son. As such, Alem took on the gendered and racialised identity of an Ethiopian Israeli woman, close to her Eritrean nationality, and circumvented global migration regimes. This, in contrast with her legal identity as an Eritrean, non-Jewish asylum seeker, emphasises the illogic of belonging and its effect on mobility. Transforming from Eritrean asylum seeker to Ethiopian Israeli back to Eritrean asylum seeker shows us how legal precarity and borders can be circumvented by the adaptation of legal categories different from the women’s own. Focusing on these irregular practices uncovers their radical political dimension and the fiction of borders (Lijnders 2022). As such, one of the ways that Alem could practice agency was by irregularly migrating, thus changing the conditions under which she cared for her son as well as their prospects (cf. Feldman-Savelsberg 2022). Alem’s decision as such, can be seen as an example of how the relationship with her son promoted her hyperagency rather than abjection while she repeatedly confronted and navigated morally ambiguous choices (ibid.). Alem grappled with the question of whether or not she should subject herself and her son to the trauma of separation with the hope of obtaining a secure future (Feldman-Savelsberg 2022; Lijnders 2022; Tschalaer 2022). However, as Aurora Massa (2020b,

137) shows with Eritrean family reunifications, “separations did not necessarily cause (nor are caused by) a rupture of affective ties but rather bring about their reconfiguration”. Even when putting a distance between herself and her son, Alem did not forgo her roles as a mother but instead reinterpreted them and gave them meaning and practice from afar. Through gaining refugee status in the UK and the family reunification process, Alem was able to stop her son from growing up statusless and without a future in Israel, bringing him to the UK instead.

Alem's pathway to the UK was not unique and other Eritrean women, like Fatima and Hiwet, followed similar routes and strategies. In the final chapter, I explore the ways in which three Eritrean mothers, Alem, Fatima and Hiwet rearrange intimate ties at a distance in the context of the limitations imposed on them by both the Israeli asylum regime, UK hostile environment and global apartheid regimes. While this chapter features three Eritrean women's lived experiences with circumventing borders, the main focus is on Alem. Chapter Five focuses on how mothers navigate intimate ties within restricting asylum and border regimes through “making choices, confronting dilemmas and taking action, thus reshaping their experiences of family” (Massa 2020b, 137).

At the centre of Chapter Five are the biographical narratives and lived experiences of three Black non-Jewish, asylum seeking women from Eritrea: Alem, Fatima and Hiwet and their mothering practices, irregular migration and family reunification strategies. In line with Sarah Horton (2009), I asked Alem and Fatima to explain the circumstances under “which they became separated from their children, how they made sense of the separation, how they dealt with it”, and “how it affected their daily lives and their relations

with their children”. Chapter Five explores the answers to these questions. Alem, Fatima and Hiwet decided to separate from their children, whom they left behind in Israel, for unknown periods to secure refugee status in the UK to enable a process of family reunification (Lijnders 2022). Alem, Fatima and Hiwet tolerated the physical distances from their intimate ties, like many migrants across the world, by holding on to the hope that they would, one day, overcome these distances (cf. Alkan 2022; Schielke 2019; Constable 1999). Chapter Five outlines the women’s gendered and racialised experiences and strategies of engaging in irregular movement with forged Ethiopian Israeli documents and identities to circumvent hostile border regimes (cf. Grabska 2019, 10). Alem, Fatima and Hiwet, once they reached the UK, ended their self-il/legalisation - either by choice or through circumstances - and struggled to obtain refugee status (Alkan 2022; Richter-Devroe 2022; Suerbaum 2022) to enable a process of family reunification. Once Alem entered the UK by air, she destroyed her forged identity document and applied for asylum, returning to her identity as an Eritrean asylum seeker. Her asylum process took over three years to complete (Lijnders 2022). Once she received refugee status, she started the process of family reunification. This too took another year. Alem has endured three years of physical separation from her son to make a better life for both of them.

The act of crossing borders has become greatly differentiated, particularly according to race, class and gender and securitisation is now the dominant paradigm defining border control (Gerard 2014). To gain a deeper understanding of the racist border regimes the women evaded, I build on the contextualisation of the Israeli asylum regime as part of the settler colonial state and its accompanying processes of racialisation, violence and elimination, as discussed in Chapter Three of the dissertation. In the ‘legal’, supposedly

‘rational’ and ‘gender-neutral’ context of the Israeli asylum regime, rather than the system facilitating their irregular movement, the intersections of law and kin heightened the women’s and their children’s vulnerability and led them to adopt a strategy of “self-il/legalisation” (cf. Richter-Devroe 2022). The adoption of Jewish Ethiopian Israeli identities by Eritrean non-Jewish asylum seekers exposes hierarchies of racialisation in the settler colonial state at the intersection of religion, ethnicity and asylum status (Lijnders 2022). Ethiopian Israelis are excluded, discriminated against, and violated in Israeli society because of their race and the colour of their skin, which further exposes Israel’s hierarchy of racialised oppression and racism. As such, despite being citizens of Israel, as Black people they face interrogation, control and racism at the border crossing both in Israel and the UK. There is a complex intra-Jewish racial order, with Ethiopian Jewish people at the bottom of the hierarchy due to racism, followed by Mizrahi Jews from the Middle East. Ethiopian Jewish migrants arrived in Israel starting with the 1984–5 migration (Anteby-Yemini 2017, 15; Mizrahi and Zawdu 2012). Ethiopian Israelis are often portrayed in Israeli society as poor, illiterate, and backward groups and are subject to marginalisation, discrimination and racism (Anteby-Yemini 2017, 15). Despite passing as Ethiopian Israeli citizens, the women faced interrogation, control and racism at the border in Israel and the UK due to racist border control processes. Within this racialised hierarchy, Israel excludes non-Jewish asylum seekers like Alem and Fatima, who are racialised as the “other,” or new “national objects” (Willen 2018, 20), with the Palestinians and other enemy nationals facing maximum exclusion” (Kritzman-Amir 2009, 603) as the country’s “real” Others (Willen 2018, 20). I adopt a complex, intersectional approach to develop an understanding of the gendered, racialised legal precarity Eritrean women, who are mothers, experience in Israel and the UK (Lijnders 2022).

Given the lack of regular migration channels, the journeys of the women I explore in this final chapter are irregular and include risks and experiences of detention, violence and deportation (cf. Nyamwathi Lønning 2020, 318). The women used a hiatus in the border control to use this route. Soon after they left Israel this way, immigration control became stricter, and this route was effectively closed down. Women navigate the ever-changing opportunities and risks of irregular migration and seek out constantly changing alternatives. Alem, Fatima and Hiwet, despite acting within laws, systems and technologies of global apartheid regimes, their “practices of self-il/legalisation speak to the ‘autonomy of migration’ and point to a creative political agency that actively circumvents, rather than reacts, to structural controls governing borders, migration and citizenship” (Richter-Devroe 2022).

I focus on the women’s dreams, hopes and struggles for “*mewtsie mengedi*” or “getting out” of Israel. Close family ties, through family reunification with underage children, can both be a source and resource for mobility (cf. Massa 2020b, 140-141).¹⁰¹ The women and their children show what Madziva and Zontini (2012) and others have called “family resilience”. Despite their separation, the women continued their relationship with their children and spouses by focusing on the common purpose of being reunited. I explore what Massa (2020b, 150) has referred to as “affective geographies” which she understands as the “plurality of localities which are linked by affective relations among dispersed migrant families” in the context of Eritrean migrants in Ethiopia and Southern and Northern Europe. Massa (ibid.) directs our attention, not just to the “landscape of legal structures, constraints and limitations within which migrants try to move, settle and

realise their aspirations” but also to the “forms of agency which emerge in the interconnections between social structures and desires [...] interlaced with migrants’ subjectivities, the emotional and social ties between them and their relatives in their country of origin, as well as with a whole web of values and duties shaping individual and collective expectations, aspirations and moral codes of conduct”.

In Chapter Five, I mobilise academic debates on (transnational) motherhood, legal precarity, temporality and gendered racialisation to analyse the women’s resourcefulness, creativity, imagination and agency in finding alternatives to the restrictive and violent asylum systems in which their mothering practices, movements and choices were monitored and controlled, without losing sight of how the women and their children were aggressed and harmed by such national and global asylum regimes. Ultimately, Chapter Five is concerned with resilience, human creativity and women’s ability to navigate oppressing structures. Mothering practices of Eritrean mothers are a multi-layered and insightful phenomenon through which it is possible to explore gendered and racialised legal precarity and the contradictions and possibilities of the present and future. Mothers focus not only on their own but also on their children’s future and their search to manoeuvre themselves towards an envisioned trajectory (Vigh 2009) of a stable future and a reunion with their children and/or spouses. By doing so, I contribute to a growing body of literature understanding transnational motherhood in contexts of forced migration and asylum regimes (Kofman 2-2004; Madziva and Zontini 2012; Shobiye and Parker 2022). Raising children transnationally, after decades of colonialism, war and a dictatorial regime, is common for Eritrean mothers in the wider diaspora. As seen in Chapter Four, many women left children behind with grandparents or other family

members when fleeing Eritrea. Chapter Four spoke to the widespreadness of Eritrean mothers in Israel who maintain familial relations with their children transnationally as family reunification is not an option due to legal precarity in Israel and Eritrea's heavily policed citizenship and border regime (Lijnders 2022).

Hope for a Better Future

For Alem, Fatima, Hiwet, and many other mothers experiencing asylum and border regimes, a key driver of forced migration is the wish and hope for a better future for one's child(ren) (cf. Shandy 2008; Suerbaum 2022a). The mothering practices and experiences of Alem, Fatima and Hiwet are a rich and conflicting context through which to understand transnational mothering, and further build upon the acts of transnational mothering described in Chapter Four. Their children were born in one context of asylum in Israel and then the women separated from their children to obtain a better future for themselves and their children through applying for asylum in the UK. To start the process of family reunification, they first had to receive refugee status. The complexity of the UK asylum processes lies in that once an asylum claim has been lodged, claimants are expected to wait for their claims to be settled, which depending on individual cases, can take a short or long time as this entirely depends on the Home Office. The absence of any guarantee that asylum claims would be accepted caused the women much anxiety, which was coupled with the inability to financially support the children left behind as they were not allowed to work while in the process (Lijnders 2022; Madziva and Zontini 2014, 435)

The women's struggle for refugee status in the UK – and its accompanying frustrations and distresses - was fuelled by the desire to overcome the self-imposed distances between themselves and their children (Alkan 2022). What attached itself to refugee status in the UK for Alem, Fatima and Hiwet was the hope for a stable future for themselves and their (living and future) children. Refugee status then becomes a promise (Fortier 2016) and an orientation towards the future (Khosravi 2017, 17) deeply entangled with their mother's hope and desire to realise the best life possible for their children (see also Suerbaum 2022b in the context of an asylum seeking mother from an East African country in Berlin). As Magdalena Suerbaum (2022b) argues, the process of getting refugee status is then navigated, assessed and evaluated predominantly through their positions as (future) mothers and what they perceive as their motherly responsibilities. It is not permanent residency and citizenship – although the latter would offer them the sense of stability that made them leave Israel – as their ultimate or only goal for being granted refugee status, but rather the reunification with their children (cf. Alkan 2022 in the context of Syrian migrants in Germany).

The asylum regime in the UK, which has been described by scholars and activists alike as a 'hostile environment' (Shobiye and Parker 2022; Canning 2021; Bloch and Schuster 2005), like its counterparts in Europe, shaped the women's ability to migrate as a family and to bring their children once they arrived in the UK (cf. Kofman, 2004). The hostile environment is a regime that prioritises deterrence, detention and deportation (Shobiye and Parker 2022). In the UK, women were confronted with poor quality of accommodation (Allsopp, Sigona, and Phillimore 2014; Shobiye and Parker 2022) and

while waiting for an outcome in their asylum claims, the women were not allowed to work. Alem described her own experiences of the hostile environment

“Until I received asylum, I could not apply for my son to join me. I had no right to do anything. Not to work, not to do nothing, just stay in the home the whole day. The only thing I did was ESOL classes and I went into the Red Cross to volunteer.”

Social, discursive and political forces underpin women’s lifeworlds and connect, interconnect or disconnect at the intersection of authorities, family and friends, community members and enforcers of often restrictive border and asylum policies (Willen 2014). Scholars have widely documented refugees’ struggles over borders and the political orders they protect (Massa 2020a, 3; Belloni 2019, 101; De Genova et al. 2015). Aurora Massa (2020a, 1) argues that borders are not only obstacles but also can be used as resources for mobility. These uses, Massa shows, are not merely unlawful but activities entangled in complex social, emotional and political worlds and moral economies. Alem, Fatima and Hiwet felt ethically and morally responsible for their children and partners, not militarised borders and the governments protecting these. As Belloni (2019) argues in the context of the use of smuggler’s services and transnational marriages, Eritrean refugees feel accountable to their families and the wider community, rather than those managing the global apartheid structures (102). The women were not concerned with breaking the laws of these regimes, but rather with creating a stable and safe future for themselves and their intimate ties (Lijnders 2022).

The women lived between three to four years in Israel before migrating to the UK. As non-Jewish asylum seekers, Alem, Fatima and Hiwet experienced intersectional oppression and violence in Israel based on their gender, race, class and social and legal status as asylum seekers in a racialised hierarchy of othering (Lijnders 2019). Alem, Fatima and Hiwet lived not just with legal and social precarity, but also faced institutional and everyday racism and had no hope for acquiring security, stability and legal status for themselves and their (living and future) children. Their legal precarity structured not only their own experience but also set in motion “a concatenation of shared vulnerabilities and intimate interdependencies between family members” (cf. Horton 2009), deeply affecting their children, care work and relationship with their partners and the wider community (Lijnders 2022). Alem, Fatima and Hiwet sought a way out and became preoccupied with finding an alternative future for themselves and/or their children both through regular and irregular migration. Alem and Fatima explained their motivation to leave Israel from the perspective of their mothering responsibilities. Hiwet explained her irregular departure, partially, from the viewpoint of her unfulfilled motherhood aspirations. Alem, Fatima and Hiwet believed, based on stories going around the wider Eritrean diaspora, that the UK would be a place with a supportive asylum system where they could find legal security and settlement for themselves and their (living and future) children. Alem, Fatima, and Hiwet acted in the present, by using irregular means and separating from their partner(s) and child(ren), to radically alter their possibilities for a shared and secure future. As documented by Madziva and Zontini (2012) in the context of Zimbabwean asylum-seeking mothers in the UK, the women had high hopes that it would not take long to be reunited. In reality, Alem, Fatima and Hiwet experienced additional legal precarity based on their gender and racial identity, insecurity and prolonged separation from their

partner(s) and child(ren) and exposure to the UK asylum regime. This enforced legal precarity, impacted their mothering practices as their ability to reunite was dependent on receiving refugee status. Alem and Fatima ended up struggling for refugee status in the UK and mothering their children transnationally for nearly three years as their legal precarity was not only prolonged but “migrated” with them and took on a new shape in their changed context of asylum. Applying for refugee status can therefore be understood, not just as a pursuit of an opportunity, but also as (a temporary) hindrance to familial closeness/togetherness (Lijnders 2022).

At the time of our interviews and interactions in 2018, Alem had just received refugee status in the UK and had started the process of bringing her son over through a process of family reunification, whilst still experiencing all kinds of unexpected hurdles lengthening their separation. Fatima was yet to receive a response to her asylum claim after having applied over two years earlier. Hiwet had her first asylum claim rejected by the Home Office and was preparing a new claim with her solicitor. Four years later, at the time of writing up my PhD thesis, Alem and Fatima have now been reunited with their children and (former)husbands in the UK. The last time I had contact with Hiwet, in 2020, she was still waiting for a response from the Home Office after having submitted a fresh asylum claim. I have since been unable to reach her or get news of her situation.

Manoeuvring Hierarchies of Racialisation: Using Forged Ethiopian Israeli Identity Documents and Intimate Ties as a Source and Resource of Mobility

The introduction to this thesis opened with the Women and Children’s protest against indefinite detention and deportation and for refugee rights. Alem, Fatima and Hiwet – the women whose experiences are at the heart of Chapter Five - participated in that protest, as well as other acts of public protest at the end of 2013 and the beginning of 2014. They were part of the thousands of people from various communities who publicly confronted the detention and deportation policies, lack of refugee status, and lack of access to rights with protest marches, sit-ins and strikes. However, as the public acts of protest did not change everyday realities, and left demonstrators disillusioned about the ability to create a future for themselves and their children, the women adopted what Sophie Richter-Devroe (2022, 773) has referred to as “quiet, individual, everyday ways to circumvent and navigate around shifting and intersecting legal and kin structures of control” by engaging in “self-il/legalisation”. Richter-Devroe (ibid.) understands self il/legalisation as a strategy to “temporarily remain outside of legal and kin inscriptions”. Richter-Devroe (ibid. 774) further explains this as an ambivalent and generative political agency that “gives rise to an ambiguous political subjecthood that cannot be captured by neat binaries between the ‘legal/illegal’, the ‘migrant/refugee/citizen’, ‘law/culture’, ‘agency/structure’ and the ‘personal’ and ‘political’” (ibid.). While Richter-Devroe (ibid. 773) argues that by doing so women do not “directly challenge discriminatory legal and bureaucratic state and border systems”, or “adopt or radically confront them”, I see these acts of “rule-breaking” as directly challenging border regimes. By engaging in acts of refusing militarised border regimes, migration enforcement, and their racialised orderings, the women shape a future for themselves and their children (Lijnders 2022).

Israel is not a country where people want to stay, and where the state has actively put pressure on them to leave by giving them the impossible choice between detention and “voluntary deportation”. However, it is a place where people get stuck as there are limited ways of leaving once one has entered Israel, other than to third countries such as Sudan, Rwanda and Uganda. This speaks to the contradictions inherent in global border regimes more generally and the Israeli asylum regime specifically. The state, through the years, has used a “self-deportation” scheme to expel Eritrean and Sudanese people experiencing the asylum regime in Israel by detaining them under a threat of indefinite detention; deporting people to their home countries and third countries such as Uganda and Rwanda; and it continues to financially reward those who manage to leave. However, in a clear contradiction to the stated aim of its past and current asylum-related policies - mainly, to push people out of Israel - Israel does everything in its power to prevent and stop creative and irregular means of migrating. The state does that to uphold its border regime, but also because it is complicit in the global apartheid regimes and cannot be seen as not holding its share of the responsibility for maintaining border violence. “Getting out” for most Eritreans is not equal to the Israeli state policy of returning people to their home or third countries - it means, first and foremost, reaching countries in the global north. Despite being forced out of Israel, they are not given the freedom to leave and move to desired countries due to capitalist and racist border policies. Additionally, “voluntary deportation” was only accessible to men, and only in rare circumstances did the state allow women to use these programmes. This illustrates the importance of studying border regimes as gendered. Alem, Fatima and Hiwet, rather than waiting for official opportunities to arise, used irregular means of movement. The women, while living with protracted legal precarity in Israel, were not only “entangled with forced immobility” they

were also actively seeking out opportunities to create new migration pathways and circumvent the multiple constraints of asylum and border regimes, whether regular or irregular (cf. Adugna, Rudolf and Getachew 2022).

Pretending to be Ethiopian Israeli women, Alem, Fatima and Hiwet had to take on a different identity or change parts of their identity to increase their chances of crossing the border successfully. (cf. Khosravi 2010, 63). The woman never had a “real” passport before, as Fatima said both jokingly and earnestly: “*Never in my life did I have a passport. Can you imagine, I am 30? That is our life.*” And yet, she crossed into the UK with a passport. This exemplifies how documentary practices and papers “both reinforce and undermine attempts to make persons governable” and how they can take “on unpredictable meanings with indeterminate effects, which can disrupt the regulatory functions of the asylum procedure” (Cabot 2012, 11). Or, as Veronica Ferreri (2022) argues, “as crucial ‘paraphernalia of the modern states and legal systems’” (cf. Navaro-Yashin 2012, 114). On the one hand, personal identification papers are a form of state control, but as has been shown by Alem, Fatima and Hiwet can also be a tool of empowerment, as they can be adapted and used creatively.

Yael Navaro-Yashin (2012, 79) argues that documents “generate differential and politically charged affectivities” and should be studied as “effectively loaded phenomena”. Bureaucratic Power is manifested through the complex relationships between persons, documents and institutions (Feldman-Savelsberg 2022; Yaron 2009, 7). At the heart of women’s lived experiences of irregular migration were the forged Ethiopian Israeli documents and the legal and bureaucratic inscriptions they engendered (Richter-Devroe

2022; Horton 2020). By appropriating the documents and identities of Ethiopian Israeli women, they performed and enacted citizenship and political subjecthood, even though they did not hold the legal status of citizens (Isin and Nielsen 2008) while at the same time ‘escaping’ the Israeli asylum regime under which they were excluded, criminalised and violated (cf. Richter-Devroe 2022). Even with these forged documents, the women were not guaranteed safety or success. Alem explained how the night before she travelled, two women using a forged Ethiopian Israeli identity document were captured at Ben Gurion airport. They were arrested and later let go but lost their opportunity to travel to the UK. Alem’s nerves were deeply affected by this incident and made it all the clearer to her that there was a big likelihood of failing. At the same time, it also showed her she had nothing to lose, as the women were not imprisoned or punished for travelling with forged identity documents. However, one of the women who was arrested later had difficulties leaving Israel through a sponsorship programme following the failed attempt. The women also realised that departing from Israel and arriving in the UK would only be the first hurdle to overcome.

Alem, Fatima and Hiwet developed a shared legal consciousness regarding where and how to obtain useful documents (cf. *ibid.*). Alem found out about the people smuggler through word of mouth. One of her friends had crossed the border successfully and put her in touch with the person who facilitated the journey. She paid 12,000 USD, money which she saved by putting part of her salary in a savings bank account with the intention that at some point she would find a way to leave the country and build a future for herself and her son. She asked the man who arranged for the forged passport many questions. So much so that he went back to her friend and asked her “*Who is this woman, she speaks*

Hebrew very well and she asks many questions, are you sure she is not a police officer? Are you sure she is Eritrean?" Alem tells me that at the third meeting, he confessed to her that he did not trust her and she said, *"Well I don't trust you either"*. She was never informed how he got the passport or was not willing to share this information with me. The people smuggler then gave her a piece of paper with all the personal information of the woman whose passport she was using. She had to embody this woman and learn all about her life: *"Can you believe it, she had nine siblings and I had to learn everything about all of them. I even asked the smuggler how on earth this woman had nine siblings. And he replied: "Don't ask me, ask her mother"*. This shows that in their interactions, there was room for humour and that after their initial distrust, they acquired a certain familiarity with each other. Alem had to memorise information about her education and her GP, learn her national insurance number and other information she was then actually asked to provide at the airport. She told me she felt she wasn't ready. As Alem paid in cash, she feared that if she did not succeed, she would lose all that money. She was so worried that she almost did not want to go through with the plan, but the people smuggler convinced her she was ready and knew the woman whose passport she was travelling with, embodied her from the inside out, and that she would make it. Alem, the smuggler said, was different from all the others and that if she did not succeed, he would pay her back the money for the ticket. Eventually, Alem faced a barrage of questions at the airport and she answered them all. However, when the immigration officers were running out of the questions she had prepared for, she started to get very nervous and realised how much this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and how she could not mess up. She took a great risk, and with her heart pounding, she pretended to get angry. She told the border officers: *"Why are you asking me all these questions, am I a terrorist, is it because of the*

colour of my skin, does racism truly exist?”. To which they replied: *“No, no, no this is just for your safety”* ” She went on to say in perfect Hebrew: *“If this is for my safety then how come you are not checking my suitcase or luggage?”*. The border officer went to speak to her supervisor gave her back her passport and said: *“have a happy journey and Shana tova (Happy Jewish New Year).”*

Alem then said proudly: *“Then I went to the duty-free and had sushi for the first time and sent a picture to the smuggler. He could not believe that I got through passport control.”* Fatima too, albeit differently, speaks to race and racialisation: *“In Israel, they did not ask me anything, because I look like an Ethiopian. I am a little bit dark. Eritreans are a little bit light. They only asked me three or four questions: You from where? You are going where?”* Hiwet too paid the same people smuggler (whom she referred to as Doctor) 10,000 USD. Hiwet had to leave her husband in Israel as they did not have enough money to fund both their journeys. Hiwet provided the people smugglers with passport photographs and posed as an Ethiopian Jewish woman. She was told by the people smuggler to memorise the details of the woman whose identity she was taking on. She travelled with another Eritrean man, who posed as her husband, who also travelled with a forged Israeli passport belonging to an Ethiopian Israeli man. Hiwet left Israel for the UK in November 2016. About the process, she said:

“He got a passport of some individual and he gave me two-three weeks to learn who she was, what is her name, her background, learn who she is and make her mine. He paid for our flights and booked a hotel in London and told us we would travel the next morning. He told us that because the Ethiopian Jews don’t go to Canada or European countries, if we travel long distances they might suspect us, so he advised

us to do a transit in Turkey and travel on from there. He gave us all the information about what to do at the airport until the last departure. I had given the Doctor my passport picture, he took out the picture of the girl and put it in mine, but the passport is original.”

Literature in forced migration studies has exposed how papers are adapted, changed and creatively redefined (Khosravi 2010). Hiwet’s choice of words “making her mine”—or “*natey kigebra aleni*” in Tigrinya - show the intimate ways of the process of becoming/adopting a new identity. As part of her creative migration strategy and to increase her chances of succeeding, and not causing suspicion by travelling alone as a woman, Hiwet travelled with an Eritrean man who pretended to be her partner. Her husband stayed behind to work and to continue financing his wife’s journey. This further emphasises how this process is gendered as women who travel as part of a couple are believed to invoke less suspicion at borders than women travelling on their own. This is in tension with what has been widely suggested in the literature, that unaccompanied women refugees obtain services more easily than unaccompanied men or couples with children. However, as Hiwet was pretending to be an Israeli traveller she was subjected to different gendered expectations as a differently classed woman. Sophie Richter-Devroe (2022, 774) has argued that in their encounters with people smugglers, women might “selectively adopt normative kin models to gain access to movement”. In the case of Hiwet, the people smuggler suggested she travels with a man to fit more neatly with the perceived idea of heteronormative patriarchal behaviour. A woman, of Ethiopian descent, travelling alone might have been perceived as unusual by a border regime that holds racialised and gendered prejudices towards these communities. As Sophie Richter-

Devroe (2022, 774) argues in the context of Syrian women's strategies of self-il/legalisation from Greece:

“Their strategies are neither solely integral to, nor entirely autonomous from, these regimes of legal and patriarchal control and they “both resist and reinscribe the power relations associated with contemporary hierarchies of mobility” (McNevin 2013, 183). As such, “female migrants’ strategies of self-il/legalisation constitute an “ambivalent” political agency that is conditioned by, but also pushes beyond, a regime which, owing to its intersecting legal and kin structures, casts them as racialised, non-political outsiders, while also infantilising them as secondary to male political subjects”

Massa (2020a, 1) in the case of Eritrean refugees in the Northern region of Ethiopia, despite in a different context, has shown how the social and cultural similarities between Northern Ethiopia and Southern Eritrea provide people with the opportunity to play around with legal categories. Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia in 1991 after a three-decade war for independence (Kibreab 2013) and as such there are many historical cultural, familial and ethnic connections between Eritreans and Ethiopians (Treiber 2013; Massa 2020a). The women used these similarities and connections and physical likeness to Ethiopian Israeli women to their advantage when being questioned by airport officials at Ben Gurion Airport. The women also used their knowledge of Hebrew, often acquired through interaction with Israeli colleagues at work or language courses offered by Refugee support organisations. Fatima said: *“I found out from some friends. (...) I could look like an Ethiopian woman. I speak Hebrew fluently, not perfect, but enough”*. The women co-opted their racialised identities as black women to look like Ethiopian Israeli women and therefore circumvented the global migration regime.

Equally, Eritrean men in Israel, especially at the height of the detention and deportation of single men, dressed up in a likeness to what they perceived to be the way Ethiopian Jewish men dressed. Some started wearing a kippah on their head. Similarly, non-Jewish Ethiopian asylum seekers, especially Tigrinya speakers from Tigray in Northern Ethiopia have been known to pretend to be Eritrean asylum seekers as being recognised as such would grant them access to temporary protection under the collective non-removal policy to which they do not have access. On the other way around, some Eritreans had their identity ascertained as Ethiopian and lost their protection from deportation under the temporary group protection policy (HIAS 2020). When the recent war broke out in Ethiopia, several people tried to have their identity changed to Ethiopian again as they were now granted protection due to the changing political situation in their home country. These examples show the myriad ways in which the historical connection between Ethiopians and Eritreans is utilised both ways for the obtaining of legal status.

The women all dressed differently from how they would normally dress to create a likeness to Ethiopian Israeli women. This included one of the women piercing and tattooing her body. In preparation for her trip, Alem got a tattoo in Hebrew that says: “Believe in yourself”. She also got herself pierced. About this, she told me:

“I was pretending to be like them, do you remember what I told you? I had it here and here. I removed this one on my eyebrow. But this one in my tongue, I liked it. I wanted it to be 100 percent like them, I was spending a lot of money so I did not want to take any risks to do it. I don’t care about the pain and I did it.”

Katarzyna Grabska (2019, 7) has documented how young Eritrean girls alter their dress to fit into the predominantly Muslim society in Sudan to remain invisible and avoid arrest. Fatima, who as a practising Muslim woman normally covers her hair in public, arrived at the airport uncovered as she understood that this would increase her chances of succeeding:

“I did not do piercing or tattoo, I don’t like it. I said if I pass, I pass, if not, no. I cover, but not all the time. When I came here I didn’t cover. We have to take some risks, to go to change our lives, we don’t have any choice. I could not have covered myself, you cannot, they would not have believed me.”

Adapting the identity of a Jewish Ethiopian Israeli woman, Fatima had to hide her religious identity. How racialised migration control further intersects with gender becomes clear through Fatima’s experience of having to hide, not only her religion but also the fact that she was six months pregnant. Fatima being pregnant did not fit in with the person she was embodying. To have a chance of success, she had to uncover her head and hide her pregnant belly.

Alem, who after arriving in the UK as an Ethiopian Israeli, destroyed her forged document and applied for asylum, told the immigration officials interviewing her that she had made her way from Uganda – to which she self-deported from Israel – via Sudan, Libya, and then the Mediterranean crossing, eventually to the UK. As such, Alem had different public and private identities. This process is not unique, we all engage in this, but for Hiwet, Fatima and Alem it takes extreme forms. Also, due to taking on a different identity and changing her migration history, Alem has to continue a false public identity to continue

receiving rights and status. I would like to frame this as another violence of these asylum regimes. Women often do not realise the long-term impact of these personifications on their mental health and well-being.

When Alem arrived, she left their airport as an Ethiopian tourist only to then apply as a newly arrived refugee who “self-deported” from Israel to Uganda and then made her way via Libya to Europe. She could not pretend to have come directly from Eritrea as this would have raised questions about how her son had ended up in Israel. She had to be very careful in maintaining the narrative to uphold her claim for refugee status as a strategy to ensure family reunification with her son. I observed similar practices in Eritrean women arriving in the UK by utilising fake marriages with Eritrean men with either refugee or citizenship status (see also Massa 2020b, 140-41; Belloni 2018; Treiber 2013). At the time of their asylum interview, these men used made-up names for their (future) made-up wives to enable someone to join them in the future. These women and their families paid substantial amounts of money (up to 20,000 UK Pounds) to facilitate these fake marriages and with them regular migration routes. Women would either travel from Eritrea and apply for asylum using these names or would travel from one neighbouring country such as Sudan or Ethiopia to for example Uganda to apply for asylum under this name. They would have to maintain this new name and identity, reflected in their refugee documentation, to ensure arrival in the UK and also continued status in the UK. This intimately emphasises the ludicrous binary between irregular and regular migration that is often maintained in Western media and by political actors.

Navigating Legal Precarity and Family Separations: Impact on Women's Emotional Worlds

Women in Israel dealt with trauma, injury, a breakdown of family structure as well as severe emotional issues, with no support from the state and living under an insecure semi-status (Lijnders 2018). Mengia Tschalaer (2022, 15) found that the asylum process for LGBTQ applicants in Germany had a strong bearing on their mental and physical well-being.

Both being separated from their children and experiencing the UK's hostile environment had a huge impact on the mental health and well-being of my interlocutors too. The women felt worn down by the bureaucratic encounters in the UK's hostile environment (Shobiye and Parker 2022; Suerbaum 2022a). The women emphasised how much they struggled and embodied their distress. Alem took medication for depression and sleep medication to aid her sleeping. Leaving her son, she was torn by guilt, anxiety, stress and self-loathing and she was deeply haunted by the consequences of living in legal precarity, especially in contexts of the extended separation from her son (cf. Suerbaum 2022b; Longman, De Graeve, and Brouckaert 2013; Horton 2009)). The migration journey to Israel, specifically her experiences in the Sinai Peninsula continued to deeply impact her. She could not sleep and would often wake in the middle of the night screaming and shouting. About the emotional impacts of separation on herself and her son, Alem said:

“So I am waiting, I have been here for 2 years and 8 months and every day I am praying my son can be reunited with me. I am on medication, I take pills because I have anxiety and things like that. It is hard, every day I wonder what he is eating, what he is doing if he is playing, and what is happening to him. I am afraid

sometimes he is going in the street, something is happening to him, maybe he is ill and I am not there with him. I talk to him always on the phone. He tells me: Mum, my friends their mum always comes to take them, why don't you come to take me? You don't love me? And I don't have an answer for that, I love him, but he doesn't know why I am here, he doesn't know that I am trying to give him a better life."

Alem's everyday activities, such as eating and sleeping, became preoccupied with her son's well-being. Sarah Horton (2009) has understood prolonged separation from children as a source of distress for mothers. The burdens and uncertainties of legally precarious mothering affected not only their emotional state but also that of their children which in turn impacted the mothers' emotional relationships with their children (Feldman-Savelsberg 2022; Shobiye and Parker 2022; Sigmund 2022; Tschalaer 2022; Horton 2009; Coe 2008). As such, the emotional suffering following prolonged separation is relational and shared and lived and endured in the intersubjective space between mother and child (Horton 2009). Lior Birger (2020, 227) in the context of the Israeli asylum regime argues "living in a state of temporariness was seen as hindering parents' and children's ability to recover from previous traumatic experiences, and as traumatic in and by itself".

Magdalena Suerbaum (2022a) found that legal precarity and the period of legalisation severely affected her interlocutors' sense of bodily integrity penetrating their "inward parts". Being caught in acute and chronic cycles of distress and anxiety affected Suerbaum's interlocutor's body and was expressed in various somatic responses (Suerbaum 2022a). Alem's prolonged separation from her son and the consequences of this separation can be understood as ingraining themselves into her body, thus becoming

the medium for expressing her social distress (Bendixsen 2020, 496 in Suerbaum 2022b). She was worried not only about the here and now of their separation, but also about what would happen when he would eventually join her in the UK:

“When I go in the street and I see these children behaving weird, I am just afraid and like after all this struggle, I don’t want my son to end up like that. I don’t know where to go and provide for him a good place and everything. I can’t, I don’t have the power to provide for him. I feel like I am bad like I am not a good mum, I let my son have the same life as me. You know. And you know, now I work 16 hours a week, so there are, my colleagues my age who talk to me about stress in their lives, and I am like, that is not stress. And I can’t even tell them what is going on in my life, because they will be like: what? I just act like a normal person, that doesn’t have any problems in my life. I don’t think no one remembers me, sometimes I wonder if something happened to me here, I don’t know”.

I told Alem that I would always remember her.

Alem: “Let me not be selfish” – Negotiating Family Separations

Alem is an Eritrean woman in her twenties. She is the mother of a nine-year-old son who was born in Israel soon after she married in May 2012. She arrived in Israel in November 2010, at the age of 17, a year and a half after crossing from Eritrea into Sudan. Alem lived in a refugee camp in Eastern Sudan before deciding to continue to Israel. Before crossing the border with Egypt, she spent a month in the Sinai Peninsula in a human trafficking camp. After paying the agreed-upon fee for being smuggled from Sudan to Egypt, Alem was taken to the border with Israel, where at the time Egypt operated a shoot-to-kill policy. Alem crossed safely into Israel and was taken by the Israeli military to Saharonim

Prison, located in the Southern Negev or Naqab desert, close to the Egypt-Israel border. After about a month in prison, and under Israel's informal policy of encouraging asylum seekers to settle in South Tel Aviv, Alem was given a pre-purchased bus ticket and dropped in Levinsky Park, where she was left to fend for herself with no support from the state and no money, connections or a shelter. This exposed her, and other women who had no existing community of support and protection, to homelessness, and risks of sexual violence and exploitation (cf. Gebreyesus et al. 2018, 4). The threats came not only from the host community but also from fellow asylum seekers. Alem was dependent upon strangers for food, lodging, and employment (ibid, 8): *"I was moving here and there, going to this place, going to that place. You go with these people and then you find your friends you live with. But then they get married and you are left alone and you can no longer pay for the rent and you have to look for another house."* Unable to live on her own, Alem – like many other women I engaged with throughout my research – married an Eritrean man to ensure a form of support and protection she did not receive through the Israeli asylum regime (Lijnders 2022; Ghebrezghiabher and Motzafi Haller, 2015, 19)¹⁰²:

"You know in Israel, you ask for asylum, but they don't accept you, you know they give you nothing, no house, no rights, no benefits, they just throw you in the streets. You have to look for someone to help you or you need to meet someone, so I met my husband there. I wasn't ready to marry him but I didn't have a choice. I needed somewhere to stay."

For some women, experiences in Israel of being left to fend for themselves were experienced as worse than being held captive in the Sinai Peninsula. Alem explains:

“I didn’t know anything about Israel. I had no idea what Israel looked like. But when I came and saw the situation, in my mind Israel became black. When I saw all the people in Tel Aviv I didn’t want to get out of the car. But I didn’t know anything, I didn’t know anyone, so where could I go? I had to stay here, I had to stay in the park without a house. I had to suffer more. I feel like I’ve suffered more in Israel than in Sinai. In Levinsky Park, many things happened to me”.

While intimate ties can offer safety and support (Kofman 2004; Richter-Devroe 2022; Tuckett 2015, 123) they may also come with negative consequences of sociality (Andrikopoulos and Duyvendak 2020, 311 in Richter-Devroe 2022). Richter-Devroe (2022), in the context of young Syrian girls in Athens, and quoting Andrikopoulos and Duyvendak (2020) argues that the negative consequences or “dark side” of heteropatriarchal kin norms disciplines, orders and discriminates along the lines of gender. Alem’s decision to marry derives partially from gendered expectations that travelled with her from Eritrea. She did not want to marry her husband but felt she needed to keep the name of her family and more particularly the name of her deceased mother: *“My family back home, my mum’s family, they knew I was going with him without being married and I did not like the fact that my mum’s name was there so I tried to keep her name clear.”* The intimate ties to her deceased mother impacted her decision-making even while being far away from her extended family and the legal precarities created by the Israeli asylum regime were “infinitely entangled with the entitlements and obligations that arise from the kin-contract she was born into” (Alkan 2022). Alem pointed to something that I observed in Israel and the wider Eritrean diaspora, whether in person or through online communication:

“I had many men come to me, they wanted to marry me. Of course, I mean you know the life, they all want to marry the girls. Everyone wants a girl. I think they see marriage as a business or a sort of plan. They are going to have a woman in the house who is going to clean, cook and work as well. They all want to bring a child because they struggle a lot, they don’t know if they are going to live or die, or if something will happen, so they want to leave a child. That is the way they think. Nothing more, there is nothing emotional or anything, they think only this way. This is all fake. I think men are all fake. I don’t see myself married after this, after things like that. I am better off alone.”

Patriarchal structures in society were further reinforced by the asylum regime and played a role in shaping gender relations within families and communities living under the Israeli asylum regime (Lijnders 2019; Abu-Assab and Nasser-Eddin 2018 in the context of Palestinian families living under settler colonialism in Israel and Palestine). There is an intimate connection between the state’s public violence experienced by people living under the asylum regime and the private violence experienced by women such as Alem in the domestic sphere, such as intimate partner violence and femicide (Lijnders 2019; Davis 2016, 106). Israeli state policies - denying women the hope of stability, status or support - push women into “forced marriages”, as they are unable to survive without the support of men, granting high levels of power to men and allowing for the patriarchal structures dominant in Eritrean society to perdure in Israel.

Marriage and intimate ties are, however, also often a resource for family reunification. Eritrean women engage in marriage – both for reasons of love and sharing a life, as well as facilitating regular movement across otherwise closed-off borders. For many women, marriage has become the only way to move across the borders of the global apartheid regime regularly, rather than travelling irregularly from Eritrea’s neighbouring countries

with all the associated risks discussed in Chapter One (Lijnders 2019). Throughout my research in Israel and the UK, I heard about financial exchanges of between 10,000-30,000 UK Pounds to enable and facilitate these marriages with men who acquired refugee status in the Global North. Following Aurora Massa (2020b, 144), and Helga Eggebø (2013), I seek to deconstruct the idea of what makes up a “pure relationship” in the context of Eritrea, where it is not just love, equality, and intimacy are the only acceptable motive for marriage, but also migration. Massa (ibid.) adds that “the idea of a “pure relationship” contrasts with other conceptualisations of marriage whereby, as in the Eritrean case, arranged marriages are the norm rather than the exception, and marriages for migration become socially legitimated under conditions of migration imaginary”. Massa’s analysis offers a different insight into the types of marriages described in this chapter.

Anthropologist and feminist scholar Ruba Salih (2017) argues that in a liberal feminist discourse, where women’s agency is evaluated against their challenge to ascribed gendered roles, these actions would be confined to invisibility or interpreted through the lens of the women’s subordination to patriarchal orders. Intimate relations, marriage, and motherhood — arising from gendered expectations of marriage — became a strategy for survival for many newly arrived women from Eritrea in Israel (Lijnders 2022; Gebreyesus et al. 2018, 4). However, I argue that marriage was used by Alem, and other women, as a tactic of survival and self-preservation, despite the negative outcomes for Alem and binding her into new structures of dependency and control (cf. Richter-Devroe 2022, Yaman 2020; Alkan 2022). Engaging in marriage was not without risk and exposed Alem to intimate partner violence (Lijnders 2022; Ghebrezghiabher and Motzafi-Haller, 2015,

19). Marriage was what Hilal Alkan (2022, 757), quoting Deniz Kandiyoti (1988), called “serious bargaining with the patriarchy”. Alkan (ibid.), in the context of young Syrian migrants in Turkey, sees women’s decisions around marriage as requiring the “juggling of kinship and familial care with personal ambitions, and within the patriarchal family and citizenship structures”. As such, Alem struggled not only against the asylum policies that caused legal precarity in the settler colonial state but also against the patriarchal Eritrean society (Lijnders 2022):

“I married him and he was violent and beat me, but I could not go anywhere. And then I got pregnant. I wanted to divorce him, but kept on thinking, how am I going to raise this child alone? He was not working, he spent his time drinking. I know he is facing the same problem as me, but because he is a man, he is allowed to drink and shout at me and abuse me. Because I am a woman I had to take it all.”

After a challenging birth, experiences of medical racism, and a long period of hospitalisation Alem was in two minds: *“I was very happy that I had him [the baby], but I knew what was waiting for him outside: two young parents, without papers, without a good quality of life, who struggle every day to eat dinner.”* Despite the challenging living conditions resulting from the asylum regime, Alem felt overjoyed with the arrival of her son and was full of love for him. Choosing her words carefully, and questioning what we know and understand about choice, Alem added:

I will never ever choose anything that is going on in my life, except my son. He came without my choice, but I am happy for that one. Every single thing in my life came without my choice and I never wanted it. I wasn’t preparing to have a baby, I was just surviving. I knew that I had to be with someone to survive, to get a home and I fell pregnant.”

Mothering and having a loving relationship with a child can be stabilizing and give purpose and meaning to the mother in times of uncertainties and loneliness evoked by migration and displacement (Suerbaum 2022a; Willen, 2014; Luibhéid, 2013). A focus on relational subjectivity can provide new insights into women's agency, decision-making processes and community engagement (Gedalof, 2009). Alem reflected on her wish to have a son and not a daughter:

“I would say I don't want him to be a girl, because if it is a girl she is going to suffer. Sometimes this is a men's world. We say everything is changing, but it is a men's world. I always wanted to be a boy, I was only playing with and talking to boys, I just wanted to be with boys, I would cut my hair short to look like a boy because I was feeling comfortable in that way. Men are dominating society in Eritrea. Why did my stepdad think it was ok to beat my mum, why did my ex-husband think it was ok to beat me?”

Alem initially feared leaving her husband and was concerned about whether she would be able to provide for her son on her own. After a violent incident where in a fit of rage he threatened to kill her with a knife, however, she picked up her son and left. Alem feared for her life and worried about her son's safety at a time when femicide was widespread among Eritrean women in Israel. The Eritrean Women's Community Centre estimated that between 2010 and 2015, 11 women were murdered by their husbands or boyfriends (Lijnders 2022; Ghebrezghiabher and Motzafi-Haller, 2015, 19). Alem recalled:

“And do you remember how many girls died in Israel, by knife? Do you know how many times my ex-husband took his knife on me? He didn't put it on me, but he was threatening me, I managed to escape that. I would always say I am sorry, even if I

did not do anything, I used to beg him to let me see my son. He used to do it in front of our son, but he was little, he didn't understand. That is why, as soon as I saw his knife, I tried to make him calm and make him happy and then the last day I said I am sorry I will do everything that you say and the next day I left the house."

Despite having been deeply impacted by the violence she experienced at his hands, Alem is empathetic towards her former husband:

"I understand where it comes from and why Eritrean men are doing these things. When they were younger they took them to the army, they let them suffer. Then they run away and they go through the desert and some die or they see their friends dying. The men, become unemotional people. They have this heat inside them, the same thing that even the girls have, but I think boys take it out on us"

When Alem left her former husband, she was taken in by a friend, who allowed her to stay for six months. Alem cleaned and cooked for her to give her something in return, however tired she would feel after a long day at work. Alem worked very hard and after six months, for the first time, she was able to rent her place. The father of her child continued to threaten her:

"He did so many things, he shouted at me, he searched for me everywhere and I just called the police and they told him not to come around. I don't know if it stopped him, but after a while, he knew I would never come back to him. We never officially divorced. People told him to say [to chant the divorce ritual], but in papers, we are still married. It was in the mosque, but I was never there. They marry you and they divorce you by themselves. I was never there, girls are not allowed. One word he can divorce you, you are just that small, you have no voice."

“Making a Calculation”: Weighing Mothering Responsibilities

When the women were mothering their children in Israel, they got to spend very little time with them. They were separated from their children for most of the day so that they could secure their survival, pay for rent and food and meet their basic needs, as well as save money to fund opportunities to leave Israel. Alem, as a single mother, had to work under especially precarious and exploitative working conditions, earning poverty wages. However, she had to work as she did not receive any support from the state. Alem’s son spent long days at an unregularised daycare centre:

“I used to work 14 hours and he stayed at the babysitter. I hardly saw my son. When he first walked, my babysitter told me he started walking, when he first talked my babysitter told me he was talking. I did not know anything about him. I took him late in the evening and when we got home, we were all tired and we slept. I took him early in the morning, to the gan [day care], and I came back at night. I just felt as if I was losing my son. He didn’t know me, I was always at work. I could not provide for him a home.”

Alem worked many odd jobs. As she quickly learnt the language, she was able to get a job as a receptionist at a municipality-led clinic for undocumented people and as an interpreter for a women’s doctor. Through her work, Alem gets intimate insights into how the Israeli asylum regime impacts women who are mothers:

“I used to hear a lot of things. Pregnant women come there to make abortions because they [the state] don’t provide for them anything. It was hard. You know, they don’t want to bring children because they are in a not good situation so they have abortions. I used to hate Thursdays because I used to get more nervous when they wanted to have abortions because they asked the reason and I had to make

translations and I don't want to tell, I don't like it. I see the women when they come there, they feel so pained, so guilty for doing that, but they have to do it. They are afraid that people judge them and things like that."

The structural racism in the Israeli asylum regime that offered no support and deliberately kept Alem's workers' rights unclear, made adopting strategies to challenge racism and legal precarity in her and her son's life a central component of her mothering (cf. Reynolds 2020). Unable to bear it any longer, Alem said: "*So I chose to go back to Africa and come to the UK. I couldn't take him with me because it is a risk.*" Alem referred to the "Voluntary Departure" Scheme, discussed in Chapter Three when she said, "*I chose to go back to Africa*". During my first few meetings with her, Alem told me she left Israel for Uganda and then made her way to the UK via Libya and the Mediterranean route. We spoke at a feminist event together in the UK, where she told this story in detail. This is also the story she told the Home Office which granted her asylum. One evening, after spending the day with her, and my daughter Tsigereda, she walked us to the bus stop. As we waited for the bus in the busy streets of South London, she turned to me and said: "I need to tell you something. I have to be honest with you. I did not come via Uganda and Libya, I came with a forged passport from Israel." For all these years, she had to maintain this narrative of herself. So much so that during our interview she started telling me the story, out of fear that this would somehow make its way to the Home Office.

Alem never officially divorced her former husband. He was unwilling to cooperate, and Islamic law was on his side. When Alem had the opportunity to leave for the UK, she left her son with her abusive former husband as she did not have the financial means for her son to accompany her. She also feared the risks of taking him as she was worried this

would decrease their chance of succeeding in passing airport security. Again, Alem had to choose between two situations that would impact her future: raising her son in Israel or temporarily separating from him so she could raise him in the UK in the future. By the time Alem left Israel, her son was three years old (Lijnders 2022):

“I just made a calculation. Is it ok being there without papers and working these hours and not seeing my son, for years, and he will be a teenager, 18 years and he would not know who I am? He will say: ‘I don’t know you, who are you?’ And I don’t know what person he will become if he doesn’t grow up with the love and passion of his parents. Maybe life could lead him in the wrong ways, and he will blame me for not being there for him. That is if we would have stayed in Israel. And then I said, if I risk my life, for one or two years I am not going to be with him and come here, but after that, I will be with him, provide him a good life, teach him how to be a good man. So, I was thinking, let me not be selfish.”

Alem’s words show the different layers that motivated her decision to leave her son behind. She referred to her decision “as making a calculation”. Alem exchanged waiting for the asylum regime in Israel to change to her benefit, with waiting for refugee status to be reunited with her child. “Temporal stuckness” (Khosravi 2021, 10) or waiting, is a part of legal precarity and an instrument used by asylum regimes through a hierarchical interwoven complex of gender, race and class. Alem prioritised the needs of her child to grow up with security, and her wish to give him a life of love and passion over her need to be together with him (Lijnders 2022).

By leaving their children in the care of their former husband/husband the women also challenged traditional norms of motherhood and gendered roles (Lijnders 2022; Madziva and Zontini 2012). Within the gendered and patriarchal society of Eritrea, extended in

the diaspora, where it is common for the mothers to look after the children and take up most caring responsibilities, this is unusual. Whereas children left behind in Eritrea are often cared for by grandmothers (see also chapter Four) and other female relatives, Alem and Fatima did not have female relatives in Israel they could rely on. As such, Alem had no choice but to leave her son in the care of her former husband (Lijnders 2022):

“It was hard to leave my son with him. It was hard, but I had no choice. Imagine sitting there with my son, and my son growing up in the babysitter and I know nothing about what is going on with him. There I can’t change my life or his life, nothing. I need to improve my life and his life. Also, I hoped that if he [former-husband] would take his child and get to know him and feel his love, maybe he could change for him. Because I wanted my son to have a parent, not like myself to be without. I wanted him to have some attachment with his dad, because today I am here, but tomorrow that could be different, so I wanted him to have something with his dad. Not like me, I don’t even call my dad, dad. I think now they have a good connection. My son is always jumping on his dad. I don’t know if he is taking good care of him. I don’t feel happy. Maybe it is because I am a mum.”

The responsibility for her son and the uncertainty around when she would be reunited with him made Alem wracked with guilt and anxiety. She was always worried about her son, was continuously haunted by remorse, and wondered whether she made the right decision for him (cf. Suerbaum 2022b). Alem relied on intimate ties she had formed (cf. Lubit 2022; Bloch 2022) with a social worker at Mesila, a municipal unit run by the Tel-Aviv Municipality that provides both social services and assistance to people living under the Israeli asylum regime and undocumented people. The social worker checked in on her son in her absence, and more importantly, for Alem, ensured that his father was taking care of him. This points to an interesting contradiction, as many Eritrean women both

expressed fear about their children being taken away by Mesila as well as relying on their support. As an extension of the Israeli government, Mesila was often approached with suspicion. It is unclear what would have happened if the social worker had found that his father was not taking, in their eyes, sufficient care of his son, and neither do I think that Alem thought that possible scenario through. Pamela Feldman-Savelsberg (2016, 4) found that Cameroonian migrant women in Berlin built networks in and beyond the migrant communities by “capitaliz[ing] on attention their children elicit from various actors”. Her son’s presence allowed Alem to, as Feldman Savelsberg (ibid.) argues “overcome burdens of exclusion and forge new layers of belonging”. Similarly, Alexia Bloch (2022) found that Congolese women in Moscow “foster affective ties with NGO staff and Russian citizens to create a sense of tenuous belonging in a largely unwelcoming place through their reproductive practices”. Alem talked about the social worker:

“There is one lady there every Thursday who goes and sees my son. They give workshops, they are good people. They know it is my son, they keep an eye on him. I asked my son if his dad beat him, but he said no, asur [forbidden in Hebrew]. My son is really fast, he would tell at school what is happening and my husband would be in trouble. Or maybe he likes him and that’s why he doesn’t beat.”

Alem relied on her new affective ties to ensure the safety of her son while she was in the UK. Mesila is also known to facilitate financial arrangements between separated parents. However, not everyone felt comfortable seeking their support as they are an extension of the Israeli state. In acts of solidarity, women would often not report to police or government-run organisations if their husbands or ex-husbands were not keeping arrangements or used violence.

“She Threw Her Son Away”: Navigating Guilt and Shame

For Alem’ realising the best possible life for her son now and in the future included constant reflection and questioning of the decisions she had made in the past (cf. Suerbaum 2022a). Alem tried not to be influenced by other people’s opinions. She did not tell her friends and colleagues in the UK that she had a son until he eventually joined her, as she believed they would not understand her decision to separate from him. During their separation, Alem also stayed away from the Eritrean community in the UK to avoid their negative opinions and judgmental gaze, avoiding certain relationships and spaces, and anticipating the gendered social pressures and control linked to them. Alem stood firm in her decision and believed that in the long run, it would be best for her son. She pointed out that women like her, women who have left their children in Israel to find a more secure life, are seen as “bad mothers”. She said: “*I know that the first thing people will say is she threw her son away*” (Lijnders 2022). Sophie Richter-Devroe (2022) argues that women are often seen as the social, cultural and biological reproducers of the nation (Yuval-Davis 1997) and as such their bodies and behaviours are policed through notions of honour and shame. Laurence J. Kirmayer (2003) calls this a “failure of imagination”, or the ability “to fully grasp the moral ambiguity inherent in the difficult choices presented to immigrant parents” (in Horton 2009). Sarah Horton (ibid.), in the case of Salvadorian undocumented mothers, adds that women experience their separation “with a sense of profound moral failing, their perceived inability to serve as proper parents only extended and reinforced by their inability to succeed economically”. Both Alem and Fatima shared these feelings of being incapable of being the mothers they

wanted to be. For women like Alem and Fatima, who were unable to work while claiming asylum, it became difficult to financially support their children and families. In the UK's hostile environment, they had limited space to make decisions and assert their agency and this impacted their families left behind in Israel. When I asked Alem why she decided to leave, and not, for example, ask her former husband to make the journey out of Israel she answered:

“I could not rely on my ex-husband, he cannot do anything. He could have come here, but that would not mean he would bring us too. He cannot do anything. That is his character. He is the person who blames the world for what happens to him and just stays in one place. He does not know how to move forward. He doesn't believe in himself that he can change his life. I did it, but he cannot do it.”

Alem pointed to a widespread phenomenon amongst Eritrean men, at the time of the “Voluntary Departure” Scheme. Leaving Israel through “self-deportation” to Ugandan or Rwanda and onward to the Global North, men, after arrival, would not send for their wives and children left behind in Israel. This policy coerced not only men to leave Israel, it also indirectly encouraged them to abandon their wives. This is yet another example of how the Israeli asylum regime emboldened patriarchal structures in the Eritrean communities in Israel.

At the time of interviewing Alem in 2018 in the UK, her son was six years old. While waiting to be reunited again, their mother and son bond had developed and been maintained via phone or laptop (Lijnders 2022; see also Acedera and Yeoh 2021; Baldassar et al. 2016; Nedelcu and Wyss 2016; Madziva and Zontini 2012, 429-31; Merla

2013).¹⁰³ This is what Helma Lutz and Ewa Palenga-Möllenbeck, (2012) have called ‘Skype mothering’ (in Madziva and Zontini 2012, 432), of which the more contemporary format would be WhatsApp mothering. This allowed Alem, as a transnational mother, the ability to remain involved in her son’s day-to-day life. Alem and Fatima shared with me pictures of their lives in Israel, those they lived, and those that the children they left behind continued to live. They shared pictures of their weddings, their children and their homes. In Alem’s room, there was a wall with pictures of her new life in the UK, but also pictures of her son soon after birth, and as he was growing up in Israel in the care of his father. Massa (2020b, 149), in the context of Eritrean parents and children, but also siblings, who live their lives transnationally, has referred to how intimate ties are reinforced from afar through WhatsApp and Facebook as a “virtual household”. Digital infrastructures are crucial for Alem’s mothering practices and digital media and communication technologies integrated her geographically distant son into her everyday routines (cf. Palmberger 2022) and allowed for “complex reinventions of everyday practices to produce a sense of identity and belonging that is never fixed and taken for granted” (Gedalof 2009). This is a reminder that their separation did not diminish Alem’s mothering practices and her relationship with her son but rather transformed it (cf. Palmberger 2022; Ahlin 2017; Hromadžić and Palmberger 2018; Merla, Kilkey, and Baldassar 2020; Wilding 2006). About this transformation, Alem said:

“I left him when he was three and yet he remembers every detail of our time together. He speaks with me every day. We call and he speaks to me about his day and then he says: ‘Bye, I love you, mum’. We have this weird connection. Imagine he has been two years without me, he could have forgotten me, but he has not, he always gives me credit, he is the only one that gives me power.”

However, within the time of our interview, Alem goes between celebrating their transformed relationship and fearing her son hates her: “*He thinks I don’t love him. For two years I have not been with him. I have to show him, not just say that I love him. I have to show him. I have to be there for him, but I am not there.*” Her phone is therefore not only a symbol of their transformed relationship, it is also a great source of anxiety. But at the same time, the phone takes on the meaning of the bearer of good news and as such represents impatience and hope: “*I am here, waiting for a call from the embassy any time. I always make sure I charge my phone and make my ringtone loud. Maybe they will call me to let me know success, but no, nothing, no calls.*”

Sarah Horton (2009) argues that transnational separations cannot be viewed solely as affecting mothers and children as isolated individuals but rather, as impacting the intimately experienced bond between them. Family separations are lived and negotiated within the intersubjective space (ibid.). For Alem, this did not only include her relationship with her son but also her former husband. When Alem started the process of family reunification, her former husband threatened her that if she ever wanted to see her son again, she needed to include him in the application too. He also regulated her access to her son and Alem’s ability to mother *in absentia*. She was forced to pretend to be a family unit and could not expose his violence as this would endanger her reunion with her son (Lijnders 2022). Complying with the law and qualifying for family reunification can force women, like Alem, to keep alive (or enter into new) potentially abusive or violent kin relations. Sophie Richter-Devroe (2022) argues that The state and its laws, although “touted as modern, ethical and emancipatory”, are “neither separate from nor superior to

kinship”. Richter-Devroe adds, in the context of young migrants from Syria in Greece that “by defining women socially and legally as addenda to men, the supposedly ‘secular’, ‘rational’ and ‘gender-neutral’ migration/citizenship law capitalises on and reinforces restrictive patriarchal gender norms and institutions, thereby controlling the scope for young migrant women’s agency and movement” (Richter-Devroe 2022). As such, the institutionalisation of patriarchy in the global apartheid regime, including the UK and Israeli asylum regimes, created specific vulnerabilities for Alem as a woman (cf. *ibid.*). For Alem, the reunion with her son was synonymous with the reunion with her abusive ex-husband (Lijnders 2022). Aurora Massa (2020b, 152) argues that family separation “can influence reciprocal expectations among relatives, and how a person can perform a certain role towards her/his family members, such as the one of parent or partner”. She adds that it can create “a disparity of power between couples or siblings to the benefit of the spouse or the brother/sister living in a better country”. Alem, who is in the “better country”, has to navigate the power her husband has over her, while also at the same time holding power over him.

Again, Alem had to make a lot of calculations – she had to navigate this terrain carefully and accept and overcome many challenges to reach the ultimate goal of providing a future for herself and her son in the UK (Lijnders 2022). More than a decade ago, Sarah Horton (2009) identified a lacuna in scholarship addressing families and migration to “fully grasp the moral ambiguity inherent in the difficult choices presented to immigrant parents” (*ibid.*, 27). Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) have argued that migrant mother’s challenges are “Faustian bargains” that are an inherent part of the ultimate aim to provide children with better futures and opportunities. Alem’s life as a mother had been fraught

with making decisions to maintain her life and the security of herself and her son (Lijnders 2022).

Despite him almost killing her and abusing her for years, she still thought about her former husband and how she could ensure that he too would receive a regular status once he got to the UK. In our conversations, she would share her plans for when he would arrive. She was set to help him get his papers, then apply for a divorce under UK law and go their separate ways. While she seemed to have some of these things carefully planned out, Alem was also worried about school and the neighbourhood she would be living in and about the impact it would have on her son. Talking about her future Alem said:

“I told you, when I think about giving him a good life, giving him a good school, I don’t know, because I have never been there, I don’t know how to choose. It is hard for me to know what is better for him.”

Alem had lived in asylum accommodation, in a small room for several years, sharing the kitchen and bathroom with both men and women who were asylum seekers or recognised refugees too. She often complained about the room, having to deal with bed bugs and having her laptop stolen from her room. Alem did not feel safe there, having to share the space with men. She was not allowed to live there with anyone else and specifically had been told she was not allowed to bring children into her room. When her son and her former husband arrived in the UK, she had to find a new place to live. Rather than enjoy her time with her son, she was forced to drag him along to the council and the Housing Association Office for days in a row to sort out their accommodation. I joined her there. The council was forcing her to make herself homeless and provide all kinds of documents

to prove that she could not stay where she was. As such, the first days of their reunion together were structured around these bureaucratic encounters and the worries of ensuring stable housing for her son. Despite the gendered violence Alem experienced, she continued to maintain contact with the father of her son. Her son would meet him frequently at their home and sometimes went over to his house for sleepovers. Although she expressed worries about his behaviour and misuse of alcohol and drugs, she emphasised the importance of her son having his father in his life. This sentiment was in part due to her own experiences with her stepfather the absence of her biological father for most of her youth and the complicated relationship they later established.

Alem, in our interview in 2018, explained how she was not just responsible for the emotional and financial care of her son but needed to care for her siblings who remained in Eritrea too. Chapter Four already spoke to these extended responsibilities of care. Alem was “deeply embedded in a transnational field of relations” (Belloni 2018, 292), both with kin and friends left behind in Israel, in the UK their preferred destination, and their families back home. While those in the diaspora contribute to the reproduction of mobility aspirations, the families in Eritrea link them into a more or less implicit system of expectations (ibid.). Alem was expected to support her siblings financially not just with their everyday survival in Eritrea but also to offer assistance to her sister who wished to leave Eritrea and join her in the UK. Milani Belloni (2018, 307) found that supporting family members to leave Eritrea and join them in the global north was perceived as the “most important duty”. Belloni (2018, 307) adds that this realisation helps understand “family expectations and the pressure experienced by refugees abroad, but also to analyse the relational mechanisms which maintain the flow of refugees moving from Eritrea to

Ethiopia, Sudan, Italy, and beyond”. After more than a decade Alem was able to reunite with her sister.

Alem’s narrative provided an insight into the decision-making and the impacts on the intersubjective space by leaving her son behind with her former husband, and the many times she had to make challenging decisions to keep them both safe. Leaving her son behind impacted how she was seen as a mother by family members and people in her community, and consequently how she saw herself. Her experience also brought to light how gendered violence in intimate relationships intersects with the violence inherent in asylum regimes, and how this impacted her ability to mother her son from a distance once she was reunited with him (Lijnders 2022).

Fatima: Birthing in Detention and the Temporality of Mothering Practices

Migration temporalities, like the one described in this chapter in the context of prolonged family separation, allow for thinking about the working of time, space and power at the intersection of race, border control and immigration politics and policies (Tschalaer 2022, 11). Now, through the narrative and lived experiences of Fatima, I attempt to shed light on the experience of waiting while faced with protracted legal uncertainty and separation from loved ones. The act of waiting while experiencing protracted separation opened up spaces of marginality, liminality, vulnerability and discomfort and could be described as an integral part of migration and asylum legislations and policies used to manage borders through the spatial governmentality of bodies (Tschalaer 2022). I analyse how, for Fatima, gendered and racialised legal precarity and motherhood were

experienced across borders. Through the narrative of Fatima, I have come to understand waiting in the context of migration temporalities as producing hopes, dreams, anticipation and desires alongside fear, isolation and trauma (cf. Tschalaer 2022, 11). Fatima's narrative contributes to discussions of migration temporalities through a racialised mothering lens and is attentive to moments of resistance, whether that is on the minuscule level of a smile (Tschalaer 2022) to the circumventing of global apartheid.

Fatima is married and has one son born in Israel, who is seven years old and a daughter who was born in the UK who was almost two years old when I visited them for an interview in 2018. Fatima left her son in the care of her husband when she used a forged identity document belonging to an Ethiopian Israeli woman to migrate to the UK in July 2016, after having lived in Israel for four years and seven months. She has now been reunited with her husband and son, but when we met in 2018, she was deep in the process of waiting for refugee status which was needed to enable the family's reunification (Lijnders 2022).

Annika Lems (2019, 63) encourages us to “pay attention to the seemingly banal, everyday moments” when an existential sense of forward movement that is often attached to migratory projects “is thrown out of whack and life's flow is suddenly experienced as a standstill”. For Fatima, waiting, while mothering in the UK hostile environment, was not merely a “suspension of time” but required her “agentic action to get through the details of daily life” (Feldman-Savelsberg 2022). Following Lems (2019), I attempt through the narrative of Fatima to “at once capture the complexity and nuances of the subjective and

intimate ways people experience states of movement and stasis, while at the same time linking them to a wider field of forces that has a bearing on these very experiences”.

“*Baba, baba*”, Fatima’s two-year-old daughter shouted as she pointed at her mother’s mobile phone. *Baba* is the Arabic word for father, the language Fatima¹⁰⁴, an Eritrean Muslim, speaks with her daughter. As a result of their separation, Fatima’s mothering of her son and relational practices with her husband takes place via WhatsApp, Viber and other social media platforms. Likewise, her son has never met his sister in person and their sibling bond has been established via the phone which as Fatima said: “*is hard to imagine, but my son doesn’t even know his sister.*” Fatima’s daughter called her mother’s mobile phone *Baba*, as this was the only medium through which she was able to communicate with him (until they were later reunited), due to their prolonged separation. “*If we don’t call before going to sleep at nighttime, she will come to me with the phone and say “baba”. She needs to speak to him before she goes to sleep*”. When Fatima left Israel, she was six months pregnant with their second child. Fatima’s daughter, born in the UK, never met her father and brother in person, all their contact has been via her mother’s mobile phone. About this Fatima says: “*It is very hard to be away from my son. I speak to him on the phone, but sometimes he refuses to speak to me because he misses me so much*” (Lijnders 2022). Several of the mothers I engaged with in Israel also recalled how their children refused to speak to them and how this would break their hearts, although they also understood that not getting any clear answers about their potential for reunification pained them deeply. As Fatima’s son grew older, he started asking more questions, but also his friends started noticing his mother’s absence and it became

increasingly hard for her and her husband to come up with reasons why their separation was not coming to an end:

“My husband explains to my son why I am here and they are there. My son brings new questions every day. He asks why is mama not here. Why doesn’t she come? Why can’t we go there? You can’t find an answer. He asks a lot of questions because now he is growing. The children in his school say: Why does your dad come, where is your mum ever? So he is very angry.”

Being unable to make sense of the lack of progress on her asylum claim herself, it was even harder to communicate this to her son. The lengthy wait period, in part, was because Fatima was arrested at the airport in the UK with her forged identity document when she tried to leave for Canada. Gathering information from friends and Eritreans in the UK she found out that the wait times for asylum claims can run up to three years (cf. Belloni 2018, 292 in her research with Eritrean asylum seekers in Italy). Constantly weighing her options, always with the speedy reunion with her family in mind, Fatima attempted to travel to Canada with the same forged identity document. Fatima thought that this would shorten the waiting time to be reunited with her son and husband (Lijnders 2022). She made this decision with the assumption that, as was the case for Eritreans using forged identity documents in Israel, if she would be arrested she would be let go. Fatima blamed herself for not seeking more information about what would happen to her if she were arrested:

“When I came here, it was my idea to go to Canada. I thought let’s try. I did not know that if they arrest me, they would bring me to court. This is my fault, I didn’t ask”.

Narrating her experience at the airport, Fatima emphasised how the colour of her skin caused suspicion: *“They knew straight away that I was not Israeli. Because they have experience with Eritreans who try to go. Finally, when they made me stressed, I told them I am Eritrean and because of this and this I want to go.”* Despite explaining that she was an asylum seeker from Eritrea, and sharing her experience as a woman living under the Israeli asylum regime, she was arrested at Heathrow Airport and sentenced to one year and six months in prison for holding a forged identity document (ibid.):

“I said I am Eritrean and I want a paper. But they did not leave me, they took me to court, they took me this way, that way. When I told this story no one believed me, but this is my true story.”

Fatima laughed ironically after narrating her interaction with immigration officials and their shock at finding out she left her son and husband in Israel, her baby daughter imitating her laughter. She justified her irregular migration strategies with her mothering responsibilities:

“When you have children, you can cope, you know, you leave everything. You have to look after your children. Even when everything is bad, you have to look after your children, you have to be strong. That is what I am doing. You have to for them. That is how I manage this because of my children to be honest, if I was by myself, long time...”

Fatima clapped her hands in a gesture made to signal that she would be finished and said: *“Children give us hope and strength. You have no choice, you live your life for your children, that is the only thing. Inshallah, we will all soon be together.”*

Fatima meticulously kept track of the time spent separately from her family. The court sentenced her to one year in prison. Six months into her prison sentence, Fatima gave birth to her daughter and one month later they were released:

“Now I have been out of the prison for a year and seven months and I am still waiting for the outcome of my asylum claim, so in total, I have been here for over two years. Sounds quick, but it is not a quick story. There is a lot I have passed through.”

By saying this, Fatima pointed to how time can be experienced and interpreted differently depending on who is going through it. She implied that for people living their lives without the insecurities of gendered and racialised legal precarity and prolonged separation, a year and seven months is nothing, but for her it is.

Fatima spent seven months in an adult and young offender female prison. One month after her daughter was born, they were released on probation into National Asylum Support Service (NASS) accommodation (Lijnders 2022). In 2017 (around the time of Fatima’s arrest), approximately 27,000 migrants entered immigration detention in the UK, making it one of the largest in Western Europe (De Angelis 2019). In 2016, women made up one-sixth of the people in immigration detention with the overwhelming majority applying for asylum at some point during immigration proceedings (ibid, 4). Fatima spoke of the time she gave birth to her daughter in prison:

“I had my room. In the prison compound, they have a little medical centre, where I had my routine check-ups. For the actual birth, I was taken outside of the prison to a bigger hospital. The prison officer was always with me. I was handcuffed to the

hospital bed, but I was freed to deliver. There was the presence of the prison officer and I was treated like a criminal.”

Fatima paused when she recalled being treated like a criminal. Narrating the experience of birthing her daughter in prison she makes an immediate comparison to birthing her son in Israel in the presence of her husband:

“With my daughter, I did not take anything, even gas. I wanted to go to the toilet to wee, but when I stood up she came down. When I said that she was coming down, the nurses didn’t believe me. I had to close my legs to stop her. She gave me an examination and she was shocked. She puts me down. That one she is a blessing. They cut me three times, a big cut. I had to go back to the prison with stitches.”

Despite fondly remembering the kind and gentle care of the hospital staff, having had to birth to her daughter in prison deeply impacted her pregnancy, birth, and postpartum period (Lijnders 2022):

“The first month of my daughter’s life I was in the mother and baby prison ward. It was a very hard experience. You cannot imagine how hard it was. It was very very difficult. I had to go up and down to have food with my baby. It was hard to do this without a pushchair.”

However, nothing compared to the prolonged separation from her son: *“That is OK, I passed it, it was hard, but it is in the past. The worst thing I am experiencing is I am separate from my son.”* Nothing compares to their separation.

Measuring Time by Immigration Reporting

I met Fatima and her daughter in Alem's room in a shared NASS-provided asylum accommodation in the UK at the end of the summer of 2018. Fatima and Alem met each other in Israel, a country they both came to seek asylum after they fled Eritrea. Fatima had come to stay with her friend from Tel Aviv to sign at an Immigration office. Fatima was forced to do this every week with her daughter, a practice which O'Neill (2018, 85), in the context of female asylum seekers in the UK who must sign as part of their refugee claim, contextualises as "racialized practices of subjection and exclusion". It is for unknown reasons, as explained by her immigration solicitor, that Fatima was forced to do this. Fatima believed it was the actions of her caseworker at the Home Office, who arbitrarily decided to force her to sign once a week on a Friday: "*You can't see any Eritrean there, only me; you can only see Asians or Russians there. Only me. They can do, but every month, or every six months.*" For Fatima, this process was made more problematic and dehumanising as she had to bring her daughter along as she queued, often for hours (Lijnders 2022): "*My daughter is used to queuing, she sits in her buggy, she knows. I don't know all these 300-400 people, you can get a maximum of five buggies, so why don't they take us in first? In the winter, in the summer, in the rain, we have to stand there.*" Fatima experienced mistreatment by Home Office officials, and feared the outcome of each visit: would she be detained again, or would she be given a deportation notice? These visits interrupted Fatima and her daughter's daily lives and rhythms, made it hard to maintain a balanced structure to their week, and caused instability and stress. Her encounter with the UK immigration bureaucracy left a clear mark on her day-to-day life as a mother. Fatima said: "*After I passed all these difficulties, these horrendous migration experiences, I still experience the hardship of it, to sign every week, with my child, with no help, it is ridiculous*" (Lijnders 2022). Fatima had to

leave her house every Friday before dawn and wait outside, with hundreds of people, before she would be let in and felt utterly frustrated by the lack of person-to-person communication:

“If you ask a question, they can’t answer. I don’t know who to talk to, that is the problem. In Israel, you know the government will not do anything, that is why you forget about that thing, but here they playing with our mentality, it is very hard. In Israel, it is OK. Two months, six months. It is worse here. Worse. I have to take her with me, who would I leave her with?”

The queuing and signing at the Immigration Office triggered memories of the asylum regime in Israel, where as part of her legal precarity, she had to renew her temporary protection visa between every one and six months (this was arbitrarily decided on the spot by an immigration officer) without any security of being able to renew her, her husband’s and son’s status. Yet, Fatima’s complaints might suggest that she experienced the asylum regime in the UK as worse than in Israel. While there are comparisons, in Israel the women had no prospect of being recognised as refugees. In the UK, despite having to wait for a decision on their asylum request for several years, Fatima and Alem eventually received refugee status. In addition, they received housing, financial support, and access to health services while waiting to receive an answer to their request. This may be lacking and insufficient, but it is more than the state of Israel ever provided them with. However, the separation from her child and husband made being in the UK more unbearable than living with legal precarity in Israel (Lijnders 2022):

“It is very hard. Now is the problem, you passed all these bad things, like nine years you did not get any rest, now I am 30, in our life, we don’t have any rest, back home,

when you get out, every day difficult. When I came here I said now I am going to have a good life and rest, but you still don't have any. That is the problem. It is very difficult. It is more stressful now. Now it is very difficult for me, tired. Very difficult life. You have kids one here and one there. The life is suffering. It is very hard to be separated from him."

The separation became so unbearable that, at times, Fatima was ready to give up and return to Israel: *"I don't have any problem, even now if they decide to send me back to Israel. I don't mind going back to Israel. The only problem I have is with Eritrea. It is very tough. It is too hard to be away from my son."*

Contradicting Statuses: A Survivor of Human Trafficking but Not a Refugee

Despite not having been granted refugee status, Fatima was recognised as a victim of human trafficking by the UK government based on her experiences in the Sinai desert:

"I am recognised as a victim of human trafficking in Sinai by the UK government, but not as a refugee. The decision was later sent to the home office. I have never been recognised as a survivor of human trafficking in Israel. In Israel, no one cares."

While this recognition gave her temporary protection in the UK, it did not allow her to reunite with her son and husband and as such has no value for Fatima. Fatima applied for refugee status while she was imprisoned after being arrested at the airport. At the time of our interview in the summer of 2018, Fatima, was yet to receive a response in her asylum claim, after having waited for two years. Her solicitor explained that her claim was likely complicated by her attempt to leave the UK for Canada (Lijnders 2022).¹⁰⁵ What is most disturbing for Fatima about the wait is her separation from her son:

“The worst thing I am experiencing is that I am separated from my son. The situation in Israel is very hard and the separation aspect is so hard. Life in Israel isn’t easy. His dad must work long hours and no one to look after the child when he goes to work and it is so hard for me to have that experience, knowing how life for my son and husband is. Also, here with my daughter alone is very difficult, no one is offering me any help, so life here is indeed very difficult for me. [...] It is very difficult. I experience more stress now. You have one kid there and one kid here. The life is suffering. It is very hard to be separated”.

Fatima feels like she is at the mercy of the Home Office’s bureaucratic system that governs her mobilities, dreams and hopes. When I interviewed her in the summer of 2018, Fatima felt that it would be too late for her family to have a future, she could not see beyond the time/season of separation. Shahram Khosravi (2012, 14) argues that protracted waiting makes “life unpredictable and engenders uncertainties, generating the feeling that one is not fully in command of one’s life”. He calls this a “race against time, with a sense of being ‘left behind’ of what is assumed to be the natural rhythm of modern life” (Khosravi 2012, 14 in Lijnders 2022). For Fatima, the natural rhythm of modern life was deeply connected to her mothering responsibilities. For Fatima and other Eritrean mothers experiencing prolonged separation from their children, both their experiences of asylum and border regimes, but also mothering and care responsibilities were “embedded within state power and control and governed by policies, laws and legislations” (Tschalaer 2022, 3; Canning 2021; Hage 2009). For Fatima, both the waiting time imposed on her by asylum bureaucracies in Israel where she was waiting for status with her family, as well as the UK, where waiting for status was intimately tied to the separation from her son, controlled her past, present and future life. Her husband’s support kept Fatima together:

“My husband is good. He gives me hope. It is very difficult there, but he, he gives me hope here. He is patient. That is why I don’t feel a lot. It is very stressful, you have to have someone to support you, and you cannot do it alone. He is good. Inshallah, we will be together soon. Now I can’t even imagine, they make me lose hope. They have to say something, it is better for me, even no or yes.”

After Fatima birthed her daughter she imbued her with the hope of a better life, of a reunification for their family, that her new life brought with her. Her daughter’s name, fittingly, means hope in their local language.

Waiting was a racialised and gendered process and affected Fatima’s sense and practice of care work as an important aspect of her life. Katarzyna Grabska (2019, 5), in the context of young refugee women from Eritrea in Khartoum, Sudan, argues that “highlighting the gendered aspect of waiting and waithood nuances our understanding of these concepts and underscores the association of waithood with dominant gender norms”. These gender norms, for Fatima, included expectations around motherhood and reproduction, as discussed later in the chapter. Lauren Berlant (2011) showed how even in situations of great suffering people commit themselves, “only to have their time and energy extracted and to find that the promise of a future of stability is, despite their efforts, out of reach”. A shared future with her son and husband felt very much out of reach for Fatima and the waiting engendered great suffering. Waiting through the asylum process and waiting to be allowed to work and study was combined with protracted separation and mothering. However, the waiting should be understood as active. Synnøve Bendixsen, and Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2018), in the context of irregular Palestinians in Norway point to a transition or distinction between indeterminate, empty waiting time and focused,

activity-driven waiting time. They remind us to zoom in on the fact that even in a position of waiting Fatima raised her daughter and parented her son transnationally (Lijnders 2022). Fatima relied on a transnational network of support, made up of her old network in Israel and new friends and support organisations in the UK. Fatima sought the support of a solicitor in the UK and made sure that he kept on working on her case by reaching out to him regularly or asking others to do so on her behalf. She also wrote to her local MP to ask him to intervene in her asylum claim on her behalf. The couple relied on their connections with the network of refugee support organisations in Israel too. A support worker from the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants, a human rights organisation that utilises direct service provision, litigation, and advocacy, wrote an affidavit explaining the Israeli asylum regime to include in her request for refugee status. In addition, Fatima relied on the support of Alem and other Eritrean women who had made their way to the UK from Israel:

“I have a lot of people around me. But sometimes you don’t want to bother them. Only I come to Alem¹⁰⁶. The ones who came new from Eritrea and the ones who came from Israel have different ideas. Me and Alem we understand each other more. We have a big experience, us Eritreans in Israel. It grounded. See her now, she is young, 24 or 25, but if you speak with her, her experience is more than her age. That is why we can understand each other.”

The process of waiting, whether active or passive, was not linear for Fatima and was made up of sub-processes: from waiting to be released from prison, waiting to receive refugee status, waiting to have her application for family reunification approved, to waiting for her son and husband to join them. Ramsay (2019, 18) calls this the “dispossession of time and anticipated futures”. For Fatima, as a mother, this meant not only losing her own

time: time to work, learn and contribute to her family financially — as she was not allowed to work while waiting for a decision on her asylum claim. She also lost precious time with her son, watching him grow and develop from a toddler into a child. Fatima and her daughter lost out on family time with their son/brother and husband/father. Fatima's life during the time of separation was dominated by external forces: such as signing at the Immigration Office, living in shared refugee accommodation, and waiting for refugee status (Lijnders 2022). While she was waiting for an outcome of her refugee claim, Fatima was housed in shared refugee accommodation on the outskirts of a major city, sharing her and her daughter's space with refugee women from various countries and their children, exposing her and her daughter to isolation. About this time Fatima says:

“Four people are living there with their children. We have different nationalities, one from Nigeria, Congo, and China. They have been asylum seekers for a long time. They have been waiting for the past ten years for their asylum claim. One of them fifteen years, one of them ten years, when I heard about their experiences I got even super depressed, they have had so many rejections from the HO. Even though it is different women and different experiences, it is still depressing to hear about their experiences and all the rejections from the Home Office. And I think because I am from Eritrea the chance of being accepted is higher in the UK, but I suspect that is why they do not want to make a decision, to drag it on. And they know that if they reject me I can do an appeal.”

While she waits for refugee status, Fatima is not allowed to work. This is a big adjustment for her as she worked ten hours a day in Israel in a multitude of jobs. In addition, the deposit law, described in chapter Three, impacted both her and her husband as he is unable to support her financially: *“It is like slaves there. They take 20 per cent and then 16 per cent. They took 36 per cent of my husband's salary. They are cutting, cutting. He*

cannot support me. Before he used to work on weekends, but now, no, he has to be with our son.” This once more shows how the wider intimate ties outside of Israel are impacted by the deposit law. Despite all the challenges, her husband did not regret her moving to the UK. Fatima received 70 Pounds a week from the home office in addition to housing. She cannot afford new clothing.

Returning to Ramsay’s (2019) lens on temporality, the protracted instability that situated Fatima in indefinite indeterminacy — by forces outside of her control — made her unable to project herself into a certain or stable future. Her time, while at once feeling like it had come to a standstill, was also torn apart by caring responsibilities towards her daughter and transnationally her son. What initially was a decision to be reunited with her family sooner (to move on to Canada with the forged identity document) eventually turned into something that would keep them separated longer (Lijnders 2022). Fatima said:

“Here is even worse, the way I am, because I am not allowed to do anything here. Whereas in Israel, even if you do not have a paper or are recognised by the immigration system, you can still do a lot, but here without papers you are in prison. It is a mentally stressful situation. [...] I am in the home all the time. This place is good when you have paper, but if like this, like prison, no, it is very difficult. I don’t want to wait, like five, or six years, it is very difficult, I don’t want, but I don’t know what to do. The system is set up so that I can’t speak to anyone.”

Fatima used the metaphor of a prison to refer to her life, again a reference to temporality. She was not just referring to her experiences of imprisonment in Israel, after crossing the border with Egypt irregularly, and the UK after being caught with forged identity documents, but also the constant monitoring of her life by having to report to an

Immigration Office every week. In addition, she referred to a feeling of being stuck – in a temporal space and time – not only in life but also in her ability to change things and mother her children the way she had imagined and experienced as a child herself. Despite having successfully circumvented restrictive and racialised borders, she had not achieved the freedoms she longed for, for herself and her children. At the same time, Fatima talked about her inability to expand her family. Another way in which time was ticking away, as she aged, was her inability to have another child with her husband. This concerned Fatima greatly as she would like to have three children: two boys and one girl. As Nigerian feminist Oyèrónké Oyéwùmí (2003) argues in the West African context, women’s position in society is largely determined by their status as a mother and not a wife. Fatima added that: “*Basically, Eritrean people, they like children. We have a saying, if you have one child, you have no children, if you have two you have one child, they say like this, but this is before, not now.*” To this end, the structuring power of motherhood is central to Fatima’s decision to have children, despite living in a situation of legal precarity under the Israeli asylum regime and birthing her daughter under the hostile environment in the UK (Tschalaer 2022 in the context of Lesbian asylum mothers in Germany). When she spoke about her wishes to have another child, Fatima was crying. This question tied together the past, present, and future for Fatima, through her son in Israel, her daughter with her in the UK, and her wish for future children. Yet, as long as her husband was unable to join her in the UK, her reproductive freedoms remained restricted. What was ultimately a decision to enable a new future, felt more like a decision she should not have made at all (Lijnders 2022). Yet she was at the same time engaged in planning and envisioning their future in the UK while accepting the challenges that were thrown her way from a religious point of view:

“Because we pass that difficulty, you can’t say the life here is difficult. If you pass that Home Office paper, then life here is easy. You can work, you can plan whatever you want to plan. Everything is good in this country. You can’t feel you are a migrant, but when you go to the Home Office you can feel that you are a migrant. I am Muslim. I have had hard experiences, it is a test from Allah, and you can’t say anything. Alhamdulillah [Praise be to God].”

Fatima, albeit reluctantly, has started planning for their future together in the UK:

“I would like to be a baker. Maybe I can take a course to become one. I have lots of experience, I made cakes for work in Israel. But the Home office is making me feel down. In Eritrea, you don’t have a chance to think about what you want to do. But when you have a good life you start to think. Here, when you have papers your life can go straight, and you can make a plan. But if you don’t have a paper, you don’t have a plan. You cannot plan as well. It is like your life has stopped. That is why I am feeling angry. I have stopped.”

These feelings passed quickly after she gained refugee status, started the family reunification process, and ultimately was reunited with her son and husband. Yet during our interview, Fatima wondered aloud if perhaps she should have stayed in Israel instead of willingly separating from her son. Once her family was reunited in the UK, Fatima started English language classes. She moved to the suburbs of a major city and both she and her husband found work. Reflecting once more on her choice to irregularly migrate to the UK she said:

“We Eritreans, we are very creative. We have no choice. That is why people are taking this risk. No choice. If you have a passport you don’t even need to come to

another country. Our country is beautiful. Eritrea is a rich country. We could have had a beautiful life in Eritrea.”

Yet Fatima saw no future for herself in Eritrea and for herself and her family in Israel. Fatima’s narrative explored how immigration detention is a symptom of gendered and racialised legal precarity and how family separation impacted herself, the daughter growing in her womb, and her son and husband left behind in Israel. Through Fatima’s narrative and her conceptualisation of her life as a prison, I explored how a feeling of being stuck, challenged her notion of time/temporality, especially as a mother being unable to see her son grow, but also to expand her family (Lijnders 2022).

Hiwet: Restricting Mobility, Restricting Reproductive Health and Bodily Autonomy

Hiwet is an Eritrean woman in her twenties. Hiwet arrived in Israel at the end of 2012. Unlike Alem and Fatima, Hiwet’s brother, who had arrived in Israel several years earlier, welcomed her after she was released from prison. She relied on him for support, housing and help with finding work. Hiwet was therefore not pressed to get married in the same way as Alem and Fatima were to fill the void left by the state. Despite her brother’s support, Hiwet looks back at life in Israel as full of challenges: *“Life was really hard in Israel. Like most Eritrean asylum seekers, I was not recognised as a refugee. I lived in Israel for four years. Life in Israel for an Eritrean asylum seeker was tough and there were always threats of deportation and uncertainty.”*¹⁰⁷ After having lived with her older brother for two years, Hiwet married her husband: *“I was always trying to leave the country but I could not succeed. I dropped my wish and got married.”* Unable to fulfil her hopes for leaving Israel, she chooses to settle with her former neighbour whom she

grew up with in Senafe. A substantial number of Eritreans in Israel are from Senafe, a market town in Southern Eritrea.

I met Hiwet during the refugee-led protests organised by Eritrean and Sudanese asylum seekers against their detention and deportation. Hiwet participated, alongside tens of thousands of asylum seekers from Eritrea and Sudan in demonstrations and a general strike. However, as Hiwet saw no tangible changes due to the protests, she continued to seek out regular and irregular opportunities to leave Israel. Hiwet too is introduced to the same people smuggler as Alem and Fatima. Hiwet explains her reason for wanting to leave as connected to a sense of safety: “*All the mistreatment of asylum seekers, the way we are treated at the Ministry of Interior for visa renewals, all the racism, threats of deportation, of sending us back to Africa, made it unsafe to stay in Israel.*” Hiwet, unlike Alem and Fatima who travelled on their own, is encouraged by the people smuggler to travel with a pretend partner to fit in more neatly with the perceived ideas of racialised and heteronormative patriarchal behaviour of Ethiopian women as assumed by the Israeli border regime which is full of racialised and gendered prejudices. As such, Hiwet adopted normative kin models to increase her chances of succeeding in her irregular movement. This shows how Hiwet is neither solely integral to nor entirely autonomous from these regimes of male power and control. Hiwet, both resisted and “reinscribed the power relations associated with contemporary hierarchies of mobility” (cf. McNevin 2013, 183 in Richter-Devroe 2022, 774). Hiwet’s strategy of self-il/legalisation made clear what Sophie Richter-Devroe (ibid.) understand as constituting “an ‘ambivalent’ (McNevin 2013) political agency that is conditioned by, but also pushes beyond, a regime which, owing to its intersecting legal and kin structures, casts them as racialised, non-political

outsiders, while also infantilising them as secondary to the male political subjects.” Hiwet assumed that pretending to be in a relationship with an Ethiopian Israel man would increase her chances of succeeding. While Hiwet and her pretend partner successfully left Israel they were arrested at Heathrow airport. Hiwet, like Alem, hoped to enter the UK and apply for asylum, but she and her pretend partner were stopped by immigration officials. Hiwet explained that they did not believe that she was an Israeli citizen. Hiwet maintained her forged Ethiopian Israeli identity for as long as she could but when threatened with deportation acted:

“They asked us who we were, and we said we were Israelis, we came here to visit and we will be here for two weeks. We have booked a hotel. Then they checked us and everything, they searched us and found our money, and wondered why you had all the money with you for only two weeks, they called the hotel and there were no bookings with our names, there were a lot of suspicions and he told us to remain for further investigation. Then they took us to a place where you stay for 24 hours imprisonment in the airport. They did finger-printing and eye scanning and they started to interview us. She was asking us if we could speak in English and we said we were Israelis, we only speak Hebrew and she called an interpreter. The whole night they were interviewing us and the interpreter from Israel told us that they were suspicious of us and that they might send us back to Israel we said ok because we were sure they would release us and let us out of the airport into the UK. So we bought a free ticket to Israel, [they told us] we are not letting you through, we are suspicious of you, be ready, pack your bags you will board a plane. Then finally because we knew they would send us back we revealed our true identities and that we are Eritreans and bought the passport to come here and we are here to seek asylum. The immigration officer was of Indian nationality. They were very aggressive. They were not friendly at all. They were so upset we did not tell them earlier who we were and they weren’t sure what was going on. I told her I was a refugee, I could not go back to Israel, that they would imprison me and abuse me and that I came here to ask for asylum. They separated us from E. because they saw

we were talking together and she took me somewhere else to a big prison. They did an interview. They gave me a separate room in the prison and I stayed there for a week. And they told me this amount of money will last you for X amount of time, and we will not be responsible for your accommodation.”

While at first immigration officials did not believe that she was an Israeli woman, when she came clean and applied for refugee status as the Eritrean woman she is, she was perceived as Israeli once more. Being Israeli would make her deportable, while as an Eritrean asylum claimant, she had a potential right to protection in the UK. This once more points to the illogical gendered and racialised processes of the UK hostile environment. For years, Hiwet had to engage in a bureaucratic struggle to prove that she was an Eritrean woman living under the Israeli asylum regime and had arrived in the UK to apply for asylum.

With the help of a friendly Ethiopian man she met in the street after being released from prison, she was connected to Eritreans who helped her find a friend. Hiwet tried to apply for asylum unsuccessfully. She didn't give up and continued trying and was eventually invited for an interview. About the asylum process in the UK, she says:

“Then after four months, they called me for an interview. I went to Leeds for the interview. It was four hours. After about a month or two I received a letter that my case was rejected. Then I appealed with my lawyer and came to court in [city omitted]. The Home Office argued that I could be an Eritrean national but have a residency permit in Israel so I could live in Israel so I was rejected. I was very distressed. The lawyer was not cooperative enough. She said your case is dead and I cannot do anything. I was confused and very distressed. Then after a while, they gave me a letter saying that because my case was rejected you are not entitled to any accommodation and I was told to leave. They evicted me from the place and took the

keys, they did not care, that is the law. I was very stressed, I started to visit the Refugee Forum to ask for a flat, but they could not help me, I was on a list, and they could only help me with 20 pounds a month. Then I have been living with Eritreans here and there.”

For nearly a year, after her first refugee claim was rejected, Hiwet lived undocumented, with no recourse to public funds, and relied on her community networks for support and survival. For a long period, Hiwet slept on friends’ sofas and went into hiding to avoid detention and deportation: *“Now I have this new lawyer and they reopened my case. This is not life. I am very stressed. It has been two years like this. E. [the man she travelled with] was arrested for three months. I am afraid the same will happen to me.”*

With the help of a new solicitor, Hiwet reopened her case with the Home Office and put in a new refugee claim. This is how I reconnected with her, as mutual friends approached me to see if there was any way in which I could support her. I wrote an affidavit for the Home Office on her behalf, explaining that I knew her and that she was an asylum seeker in Israel. It is unclear whether she is still waiting for their response or has been granted refugee status as I and the other women lost touch with her.

Through Hiwet’s experience, I return to the lens of temporality and waiting. Due to her failed asylum process in the UK, and the absence of other opportunities for family reunions, Hiwet was unable to reunite with her husband, who remained in Israel. Hiwet explained:

“We do not have children. I did not want to have a child in Israel. For me, let alone for a child it was not a safe, or sane place to live. I want children now, but I never imagined it would take such a long time for us to be reunited. We thought I would bring him here, or he would go somewhere else, and I would join him.”

While Hiwet made a conscious decision not to bring a child into the world while she was living under the Israeli asylum regime in Israel, now that she was in the UK, Hiwet could not fulfil her wish of becoming a mother.

Hiwet’s experiences reiterate that we cannot restrict our understanding of mothering practices to women who birth to children only and need to acknowledge both political and biological factors and barriers to becoming a mother (Balakian 2022). Mothering is not merely a biological condition and as such must not be reduced to the physiological processes of pregnancy, birthing, and lactation (Caballero et al. 2019; Glenn et al. 1994). Motherhood can be experienced in various contexts and relationships, such as ‘othermothering’, adoption, kinning practices, and ‘alloparenting’, some of which were discussed in Chapter Four (Balakian 2022; Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022; Alber and Drotbohm 2015). Motherhood, as Hiwet’s narrative makes clear, can also be experienced in a longing for reproduction that is magnified by a separation from one’s partner. Research on motherhood and migration should also include the aspiration to mother and an understanding of how global migration and border regimes and forces regulate reproductive choices and bodily autonomy. I conclude by reiterating, in line with others, that it is important to conceptualise women as mothers distinct from their reproductive capacities. Through Hiwet’s narrative, I featured the reproductive body and argued that political and emotional factors should be considered when researching motherhood and

migration since it is not only the body that births that matters but also women's aspirations to mother.

Circumventing Global Apartheid

In Chapter Five, I presented an analysis that centred on the various temporalities that Eritrean mothers juggle in the process of their decision-making around family separations and their day-to-day realities under the global apartheid regime. “*We have to separate so we can be together again*”, is how Fatima, a mother from Eritrea explained her motivations for leaving her son in the care of his father in Israel for an unknown period while irregularly migrating to Israel. The Eritrean mothers situated their decision to migrate from and leave their children in Israel within the context of continuing care. Alem, Fatima and Hiwet were well aware that their ability to support their children and offer their children a future outside of Israel precluded their ability to be present with them (Horton 2009).

Chapter Five focussed on the hard decisions Eritrean mothers made. Focusing on the lived reality of women who chose to separate from their children for an unforeseen amount of time, I traced the wide-ranging repercussions on their lives, such as prolonged separation, isolation, fear, shame, emotional distress, and reproductive restrictions. I traced Eritrean women's migration trajectories from Israel to the UK and paid attention to the challenging decisions and risky endeavours the women engaged in by adopting the identities of Ethiopian Israeli women to secure refugee status in the UK and to enable a process of family reunification with their husbands and children (Lijnders 2022). The

women found themselves in a “dialectical interrelationship of mobility and stasis” (Lems 2019). While on the one hand, the Eritrean mothers used “self-il/legalisation” strategies to circumvent asylum and border regimes, and as such took charge of their own and their children’s lives (cf. Richter-Devroe 2022), simultaneously they were acted upon by legal and “bureaucratic inscription” (Horton 2020) through the UK Home Office and asylum and border policies making up the hostile environment in which they had little to no control over the length and the outcome of their asylum and family reunification process (cf. Suerbaum 2022b). Their situation was made all the more challenging due to the caring responsibilities for their children (and other intimate ties such as siblings) across borders while they were at the same time caught between solving immediate challenges, such as regularising their status, securing housing and schooling all related to their and their children’s future. The mothers made, what Pamela Feldman-Savelsberg (2022), in the afterword to a Special Issue on Mothering in Times of Legal Precarity, has called “morally ambiguous choices in situations of extreme structural constraint, practising future-oriented agency in a continual (re)construction of motherhood and family”. Yet, by engaging in irregular movement, the women created “infrastructures of possibility” (Baldwin and Crane 2020) for themselves and their children in the long term: a shared and stable life in the UK, legal security, future opportunities for study and self-development (Lijnders 2022; Ramsay 2019, 18).

Borders are widely understood as a method for (re)producing racialised distinctions (Holzberg et al. 2021). Alem, Fatima and Hiwet’s narratives and lived experiences have shed light on how Eritrean women’s lives are governed and regulated through state control of personal relationships and intimacies (cf. Luibhéid, Andrade, and Stevens

2018). Furthermore, by foregrounding how legal categorisations affect intersubjective spaces and intimate ties, I aimed to bring to the fore “the shared dependencies and vulnerable intimacies between mother and child” (Horton 2009). This perspective on mother’s intimately experienced bond with their children prioritised the existential and moral consequences of migration and motherhood trajectories and navigations of life under the Israeli asylum regime (cf. Suerbaum 2022b; Willen 2014), including guilt, shame and feelings of loss. In the climate of exclusion, the women experienced both in Israel and the UK, it is relevant to understand the dynamics, structures and forces that are at play and influence mothers’ lives and migration trajectories (cf. Lems and Tošić 2020, 8). Within this analysis, it was important to not only show how border and asylum practices impact and define Eritrean mothers’ strategies, navigations and choices but to also present the racialised mother’s visions and enactments of motherhood vis-à-vis the broader structural forces and societal framings that were at play through rich ethnographic material.

In Chapter Five, I have set out how processes of gendered racialisation within the Israeli asylum regime (interconnected with the racialised hierarchy of the settler colonial state); the hostile environment in the UK; and the global apartheid regime regulate im/mobility for Black non-Jewish women and restricted their right to family life. Through the irregular onward migration strategies of Alem, Fatima and Hiwet, three Eritrea women, I traced how engaging in acts of subverting and refusing the global apartheid regime the women exposed the gendered, classed and racialised migration systems and borders, which restricted their right to mobility and family life.

Alem, Fatima and Hiwet, the women whose experiences are at the forefront of Chapter Five shaped a future for their (future) children by circumventing these border regimes, to reach the UK, a country they imagined would offer them and their children a stable future. The Israeli asylum regime and other border and migration regimes structure and shape mothering practices, whether transnationally or not, and play an intimate role in decision-making processes, navigating and maintaining intimate ties, and challenging family separations (Lijnders 2022; Madziva and Zontini 2012; Horton 2009). The global apartheid regime structured the ability of Eritrean women and mothers to migrate as a family and bring children once they received refugee status in the UK (cf. Madziva and Zontini 2012).



Reflections

Reflections: New Beginnings

“I remember the minute I left him, I had a lot of hope, promises and dreams. At the same time, I felt angry, I didn't want to be a refugee anywhere. but I hadn't any choice, headed on my journey to cross the Eritrean border. The minute I crossed the border, I shouted, cried and regretted it because I didn't know when I could see him again. But I had expectations, that Israel could guarantee me a refugee, maybe a year, with that hope crossing the terrible journey I arrived in Israel in 2011. For 12 years Israel denied my asylum request. The 12 years were a life trauma, but I didn't give up, I was sharing my story with anyone who could hear me. [...] Today I want to share my joy with you, my friend, forget all the ups and downs, my family is complete.”¹⁰⁸

The above is a Facebook Post by Abrehet, a woman I engaged with during my research in Israel in 2017. The post is accompanied by pictures and videos of her reunion with her son at an airport in Canada after twelve long years apart from each other. In one of the videos Abrehet, dressed in traditional Eritrean clothes, is running towards her son with a bouquet and a balloon with Canadian maple leaves scattered over it. A little over a year earlier, Abrehet, together with her husband and two sons, both born in Israel, left for Canada. Abrehet and her family were sponsored by a Canadian woman who volunteered at Unitaf, an organisation supporting children of people living under the Israeli asylum regime in Tel Aviv. Their sponsorship to Canada made it possible for the family, as Abrehet writes, to “be complete”. In the post she shared a picture of her son, at the age of one, the last picture she took of him before she left Eritrea, not knowing that they would be separate for 12 years. Abrehet's lived experiences and narratives featured through my dissertation and as such concluding it with Abrehet's emotional reunion with her son, and

for her children to finally meet each other in person seemed most fitting. Their reunion is not only Abrehet's personal story of navigating, challenging and overcoming separation and gendered and racialised exclusion under a trajectory of violence spanning from Eritrea, along the migration route, to Israel and eventually Canada, but it also represents the hope that many Eritrean mothers, whether in Israel or beyond hold on to a shared life with their children in a place where their full humanity is recognised, where they can live a life of security and safety, and experience ease and joy.

Research Findings

Women

Non-Jewish women

Black non-Jewish women

Black non-Jewish women experiencing the Israeli asylum regime

Black non-Jewish women experiencing the Israeli asylum regime while mothering

Black non-Jewish women experiencing the Israeli asylum regime while mothering in a
settler colonial state

From a gendered and racialised point of view, and within a temporal understanding of trajectories of violence, I questioned how the legal precarity inherent in Israel's asylum regime has impacted Black non-Jewish women's perceptions of motherhood, changed their mothering practices, and deeply affected their relationship with the children they cared for. I explored the laws and ideologies of the Israeli asylum regime within the settler colonial state interwoven with ethnographic observations and narrative biography

interviews conducted with Eritrean women who have mothering responsibilities in Israel and the UK.

I hope that through my exploration of the Israeli asylum regime in the settler colonial state, ideas surrounding migration and asylum to Israel have “become unsettled” (cf. Fobear 2014). I explored the detention of single men under the Anti-Infiltration law (1954) between 2013 and 2018 and the “Voluntary Departure” Scheme. With these two policies, specifically applied to single men, the settler colonial state of Israel deviated from their gender-neutral policies, yet regardless of the exemption of women, they were deeply impacted by these policies. The racialised and gendered policies of detention and “self-deportation” of single men to third (Uganda and Rwanda) or home (Eritrea and Sudan) had a deep impact on women's mothering practices and the intimate ties they had with their children, husbands, brothers and other men in their communities who were impacted by such legislation and policy (Lijnders 2019). Although women and children could not be detained, every aspect of their lives was affected by detention. Through Tsenayet's lived experience, I showed how the detention policy of single men interfered with women's intimate ties and policed Tsenayet's mothering and reproductive practices. Tsenayet's experiences showed how she did not only have to navigate through an intersecting net of bureaucratic, political and legal regimes but also kin-related social and cultural regimes to ensure her newly formed family remained together. In their encounters with state authorities, Tsenayet was marked and categorised as a mother and wife, which prevented her from remarrying. At the same time, she was marked as unable to bear more children, a way to prevent her new partner's detention. Above all, she was marked as a gendered, classed and racialised asylum seeker who does not have the right

to live in Israel. Yet, Tsenayet pushed back against a system that excluded her and where marriage and motherhood became a strategy to circumvent these gendered policies. Within the restricting asylum regime, she, and the women engaging in the Women and Children's protest (described in the Introduction), carved out their existence. They were protesting for their families and were forging rights through their intimate ties. Tsenayet's experiences also laid bare the relationalities and dis/continuities produced by displacement and legal uncertainty (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Berg 2018). It unmasked the exclusionary, subjective forces of citizenship and border regimes and how status is continuously "struggled over, changed and remade" (Luibhéid 2013). Tsenayet and her new partner worked through intimate ties to reposition her partner so he could become legally present in the future (see also Luibhéid, Andrade and Stevens 2018, 13).

Rebecca Alexander (2018) coined the term 'bordermothering' to point out how border crossing, including living in illegalisation and facing the continued threat of deportation, becomes an act of parental engagement. While there is a generation of children in Eritrea that has been raised without their mothers and fathers present, their mothers continue to show a deep affective involvement (cf. Boccagni 2012). I pointed out that one of the major ways in which women from Eritrea with mothering responsibilities continue to be harmed by the Israeli asylum regime is through their inability to reunite with their children left behind in Eritrea or elsewhere in the diaspora. Legal precarity and family separation were understood as states of being that are created by asylum and migration regimes, and that create vulnerability and uncertainty around when, where and if the women would be reunited with their children (cf. Tschalaer 2022; Suerbaum 2021). Linking it back to Chapter Three and the fear that Black non-Jewish children seemingly imbue, I argued

that the inability to reunite with children can be traced back to hierarchies of racialisation under the settler colonial state and apartheid regime. While Eritrean mothers are allowed to stay in Israel, they are denied the legal right to family life. Allowing mothers to reunite with their children would mean an increase in Black non-Jewish children in the state and a further perceived threat to the demographic "balance" of the country. This is one of the racialised exclusionary measures that Israel has taken against Eritreans and Sudanese. As such, while the women initially imagined the separations from their children as temporary, the Israeli asylum regime enlengthened these protracting family separations by not granting the women refugee status or the right to family reunification (cf. Madziva and Zontini 2012, 438-40).

I have taken the analysis of transnational mothering one step further, by exploring it within secondary irregular migration practices. It therefore brings together transnational mothering, prolonged separation due to border and asylum regimes, with self-il/legalisation. Through the irregular onward migration strategies of three Eritrean women, Alem, Fatima and Hiwet, I have shown that by engaging in acts of refusing and subverting the global border regime the women exposed the gendered racialisation processes of migration systems and borders, which restricted their right to mobility and family life. In Chapter Five, I have set out how processes of gendered racialisation within the Israeli asylum regime (interconnected with the racialised hierarchy of the settler colonial state); the hostile environment in the UK; and the global apartheid regime regulate im/mobility for Black non-Jewish women and restricts their right to family life. Through the irregular onward migration strategies of Alem, Fatima and Hiwet, three Eritrea women, I traced how engaging in acts of subverting and refusing the global

apartheid regime the women exposed the gendered, classed and racialised migration systems and borders, which restricted their right to mobility and family life. Borders are widely understood as a method for (re)producing racialised distinctions (Holzberg et al. 2021). Alem, Fatima and Hiwet's narratives and lived experiences have shed light on how Eritrean women's lives are governed and regulated through state control of personal relationships and intimacies (cf. Luibhéid, Andrade, and Stevens 2018). Furthermore, by foregrounding how legal categorisations affect intersubjective spaces and intimate ties, I aimed to bring to the fore "the shared dependencies and vulnerable intimacies between mother and child" (Horton 2009). This perspective on mothers' intimately experienced bond with their children prioritised the existential and moral consequences of migration and motherhood trajectories and navigations of life under the Israeli asylum regime (cf. Suerbaum 2022b; Willen 2014), including guilt, shame and feelings of loss. In the climate of exclusion, the women experienced both in Israel and the UK, it is relevant to understand the dynamics, structures and forces that are at play and influence mothers' lives and migration trajectories (cf. Lems and Tošić 2020, 8). Within this analysis, it was important to not only show how border and asylum practices impact and define Eritrean mothers' strategies, navigations and choices but also to present the racialised mothers' visions and enactments of motherhood vis-à-vis the broader structural forces and societal framings that were at play through rich ethnographic material.

Ultimately, I sought to demonstrate that mothering practices are never fixed or static but rather transformative, adaptable, and often messy and contradictory. I paid particular attention to the connectedness, interdependence and relationalities between migrant women and children (Shobiye and Parker 2022; Suerbaum 2022a) and I foregrounded

temporal and spatial aspects (Chakkour and De Koning 2022; Lijnders 2022). I captured the various levels at which gendered and racialised legal precarity is constructed and how it is experienced by women within the settler colonial state. Through ethnographic examples and by zooming in on different policies and bureaucratic processes I drew parallels between the violence experienced by Palestinians and Black non-Jewish women in the settler colonial state. I showed how legal precarity, based on and intertwined with forms of gendered racialisation, became an integral part of women's lives, decisions and relationships. I did not only focus on stories of poverty, loneliness, stress and anxiety but also foregrounded women's various forms of resistance, their coping strategies, creative responses and agency (cf. Balakian 2022; Lanari 2022; Lijnders 2022; Shobiye and Parker 2022; Suerbaum and Lijnders 2022).

Forward Thinking: Further Research

This dissertation offers one set of insights into the Israeli asylum regime. I am left with much ethnographic material and theoretical understandings that did not make their way into the dissertation. I set out four focus points for further research that I would like to engage with in the future.

"I am Eritrean. This is not my country. I am here though, and they are still sending bombs to my house too. I am the same as an Israeli".¹⁰⁹

An Eritrean mother of two children made this statement during the latest peak in settler colonial aggression on Gaza in August 2022. In my research with Eritrean, mostly Christian women, I often sensed an anti-Arab sentiment and many of the women I

interviewed were deeply impacted by Zionist narratives and expressed both fear of and racist stereotypes about Palestinian people. Holding uncomplex understandings of Palestinians' religious diversity, Palestinians often collided with Muslims who were seen as the same people who were part of the human trafficking network that stretched Eritrea, Sudan, Ethiopia, Egypt and Israel.¹¹⁰ Further research could explore how people living under the Israeli asylum regime relate to Palestinians and the other way around. Such research could potentially create a better understanding of their “differentially related” suffering under the settler colonial and apartheid regime and build solidarity between these racialised and criminalised communities.

“I am waiting for the day we can all be together again.”

Abrehet’s recent reunion with her son in Canada, but also the above wish expressed by Natsenet and other mothers, renewed my interest in researching how mothers repair their interrupted relations with their children when they are, for example, reunited after more than a decade in countries such as Canada or after mothers are resettled to third countries from Israel. How do mothers navigate and support the building of relations between those siblings born in Israel and the ones who joined from Eritrea and neighbouring countries? Equally research with young women who travelled as babies, toddlers and children alongside their mothers to Israel and who now, ten to fifteen years down the line, reached adulthood could provide insights into the impact the Israeli asylum regime has longer-term on children raised within it and on the process of identity-formation and belonging.

“I left him when he was one year and four months. He didn’t really know me. He thinks his grandmother is his real mother. He thinks I am the second mother or the next mother. He is OK with my mother. He feels that there is his mother. My mother looks after him well.”

Abrehet told me this in our interview in May 2017. Further research could also explore the role of grandmothers and other, often female, relatives or intimate ties with whom children are left behind when mothers decide to leave Eritrea. Either in Eritrea or neighbouring Sudan and Ethiopia, these “other-mothers” (Balakian 2022) play a crucial role, not only in ensuring children are cared for but also in facilitating connection for Eritrean mothers in Israel.

“Now that I married an Eritrean man with refugee status I can go to Italy with my children. Then I will go to Norway to my brother and apply for refugee status and once I am a recognised refugee myself I will call for my real husband in Israel and we can be together again as a family.”¹¹¹

In the summer of 2013, I was in Ethiopia for research on human trafficking for the Feinstein International Centre. While there, I met with a family I knew from Israel. They invited me to their daughter Selam’s wedding. Selam was getting married, a migratory marriage, with an Eritrean man with refugee status in Italy who had come to Addis Ababa to participate in the wedding ceremony. We went to the local authority to fulfil the marriage practicalities and later had a party at their home. A sheep was slaughtered for the festivities and while we ate, we watched the wedding video of Selam’s marriage to her actual husband, who had remained in Israel. She had left him to come to Ethiopia to engage in a migratory marriage to facilitate her regular movement to Europe and later a

reunion with her husband there. In Chapter Five, I offered a brief analysis of migratory marriages. One day I hope to consolidate research data from the past 12 years with new research to gain a deeper insight into these practices and the intergenerational impact it has on women, marriage practices and how they are perceived and engaged in by Eritreans in Eritrea and the diaspora.

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Endnotes

¹ I could write an entire doctoral thesis about the art work displayed here, which would include reflections on and critique of the male gaze through which Michal Adonai depicted motherhood during times of war and migration. As his artwork is no longer the focus of my thesis, I have decided to use my restricted words for other use. I do not rule out the possibility that one day I will return to these art works and write academically about their purpose, meanings, and social and political significance and meaning-making for Eritreans in the wider diaspora.

² Interview with Fatima on 23 August 2018, United Kingdom. All following quotes come from the same interview.

³ I refer to the Eritrean mothers at the heart of my thesis as experiencing the Israeli asylum regime, rather than labelling them as migrants, asylum seekers or refugees. Chapter One further explains why I have chosen to do so.

⁴ I interviewed and engaged with Sumaya and other Sudanese women for my doctoral research in May 2017 in Tel Aviv.

⁵ Participant observations by the author during the protest.

⁶ Sumaya read this text from the press release that was sent out the night before the protest.

⁷ Participant observations between November 2013 and February 2014. I was present during the 2013-2014 protests and part of the organising leadership as an international activist.

⁸ In the settler colonial narrative, echoing the Zionist settler's reference to Israel as a deserted land with no inhabitants, the area around Holot is set aside as a vast empty and deserted space. However, the Naqab is not only a desert, but a place that has been inhabited for centuries. (Nasasra, Richter-Devroe, Abu-RabiaQueder and Ratcliffe 2015, 3).

⁹ Press briefing released on the 14th of January 2014 by the refugee-led leadership. I shared and analysed parts of the press conference in an article "Resisting Everyday Border Policies and Practices: Eritrean Asylum Seeking Women in Israel" published by University of Oxford, Faculty of Law Blogs "Border Criminologies" on the 10th of October 2018. The article is accessible here: <https://blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2018/10/resisting>

¹⁰ It is not surprising that the settler colonial state of Israel, that has been illegally occupying Palestine for nearly 75 years, is unwilling to fulfil its responsibilities and provide services to racialised asylum seeking people under international law and so despite ratifying the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, Israel never incorporated these into domestic law (Birger 2020, 218; Kritzman-Amir 2015).

¹¹ Press conference released on the 14th of January 2014 by the refugee-led leadership.

¹² Levinsky Park was the stage of a sit-in, in which thousands of Eritreans and Sudanese participated. The sit-in started on the 2nd of February 2014 and lasted for several days and followed a multitude of public protest starting in December 2013, including a walk-out out of Holot Detention Centre to Jerusalem, hunger strikes in Holot Detention Centre, marches to Rabin Square – a central square in Tel Aviv, the Knesset in Jerusalem – Israel's political hub –and a labour strike. 338

¹³ Interview with Zebib Sultan, founder of Eritrean Women’s Community Centre with AP:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBzduEDIne8>

¹⁴ Excerpt from the press release on the 14th of January 2014 by the refugee-led leadership.

¹⁵ Interview with Zebib Sultan, founder of Eritrean Women’s Community Centre with AFP
New Agency: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70VHzsno4S4>

¹⁶ These dimensions have grown out of a Special Issue on Mothering in Times of Legal Precarity that has been published by Ethnic and Racial Studies in December 2022 and that I co-edited with Dr Magdalena Suerbaum. Suerbaum called “Mothering practices in times of legal precarity: activism, care, and resistance in displacement”, Ethnic and Racial Studies. I share parts of the introduction in my PhD thesis.

¹⁷ Interview with Abrehet on 16 May 2017, Tel Aviv, Israel. All following quotes come from the same interview.

¹⁸ In these reports, PIBA refers to Eritreans and Sudanese as infiltrators.

¹⁹ I have been able to publish parts of the dissertation, predominantly from Chapter 5 in the Academic Journal for Ethnic and Racial Studies under “We Have to Separate so We Can Be Together”: Gendered Racialisation and Family Separation of Eritrean Mothers within the Israeli and UK Asylum Regime”, published in a Special Issue on Mothering in Times of Legal Precarity.

²⁰ This understanding came about later on in, in the writing-up stage of my PhD thesis, rather than at the time of researching the experiences of Eritrean women in Israel. As such, I did not have conversations with the interlocutors of my research on life in the Zionist settler colonial state. I acknowledge that if I would have come to this conceptualisation sooner, my research would have looked very different.

²¹ Leila Abu-Lughod (1993, 1) taught me to be attentive to arguments – both amongst themselves and with me - and songs too, not just conversations. narratives and observations.

²² I appreciate that the term human trafficking has been critiqued and challenged, however I have no space to engage with these debates in my thesis as it is not the main focus. I do however think it is important to include a brief explanation of the experiences along the migration route and as such have to refer to it.

²³ Interview with Samrawit on 22 May 2017, Tel Aviv, Israel, Israel. All following quotes come from the same interview.

²⁴ Other countries include Sri Lanka (2%), Moldova (2%), the Philippines (2%), and India (2%).

²⁵ Discussion on the 25th of October 2022 with two community managers at Kuchinate.

²⁶ Interview with Alem on 20 August 2018, United Kingdom. All following quotes come from the same interview.

²⁷ Interview with Selam Kidane on 12 December 2018, London, United Kingdom. All following quotes come from the same interview.

²⁸ The quality of education in Eritrea, depending on rural or urban area, is often quite poor. Due to family circumstances or the availability of places many students reach the age of 18 before they attend the 11th grade and as such as are at risk of being conscripted by age not educational level. Alem left Eritrea for Sudan when she was 16 years old. Due to her mother's death and having moved in with her grandmother for two years following the loss, she had by then only reached grade eight.

²⁹ It is rumoured that there is a torture method named after a woman called Almaz, who when she resisted sexual abuse was tortured in a specific way. This then became a common form and known widely as such.

³⁰ Interview with Sarah on 3 September 2018, London, United Kingdom. All following quotes come from the same interview.

³¹ The government's military security employs a large number of secret agents whose sole task is to search for draft dodgers in streets, in bars, and by collecting information from draft dodgers' neighbours and acquaintances (see Treiber 2005; Bozzini 2011).

³² In addition, women have unequal inheritance rights. Dowry practices, polygamy, honour killings, and femicide remain widespread

³³ Also referred to as Wi'a, Wia or Wie.

³⁴ Interview with Fiyori, 22 May 2017. Tel Aviv, Israel.

³⁵ The Asmara University closed in September 2006 and was dismantled into military colleges and the Institute of Technology. Four of the women I engaged with studied at or completed their university degree at Asmara University.

³⁶ This is the case for the majority of women and men I engaged with over the past decade and a half. Despite completing university or college degrees they are not given their original diploma. For many, after fleeing the country, this has a devastating impact on them continuing their higher education as they cannot prove their level of education. It is speculated that the dictatorial regime deliberately denies students their diploma in order to halt their educational development if they decide to leave the country.

³⁷ At least three women I encountered through my research still do not know the whereabouts of their husbands, and do not know whether they are alive or dead. In

addition, several of the women do not know the whereabouts of their male relatives, such as fathers, brothers, and uncles.

³⁸ These men might have been in hiding after they did not return to their posts after a break or never reported for the National Service to begin with

³⁹ Ghebrezghiabher and Motzafi-Haller (2015, 580) have reported that in order to avoid paying the fine parents started insisting that their male children get married before deserting from the National Service or fleeing the country. This in effect passes the fine or imprisonment to the wife and her family, leaving them with a debt and no real marriage. There is the general idea that it is easier for a young woman to flee the country after she is released from prison than for elderly parents.

⁴⁰ Women also struggle to tend their land in absence of their husbands and children taken up by the mandatory military service. Women are then forced to pay someone, share the profit, if then due to environmental issues harvest fails women have nothing and need to return the land to husband's family.

⁴¹ Interview with Genet on 20 May 2017, Tel Aviv, Israel.

⁴² According to one of my interlocutors, Samrawit, family planning is available in Eritrea, however she had to bring her husband along to the appointment in order to be provided the services. With many husbands away in the mandatory military service, or already having left the country, this made it harder for women to get contraceptives.

⁴³ During my volunteer work at the Open Clinic with Physicians for Human Rights Israel, I noticed many women seeking medical advice regarding their menstrual cycles. Before embarking on their migratory journeys many had taken injections to stop their periods, fearing rape, and not wanting to become pregnant. For many their period did not return, causing fear of being unable to reproduce and feelings of uncleanness. In 2016, during a

pilot research for my PhD in Calais, women confided to be taking the same precautions, as rape is considered inevitable along the migration route.

⁴⁴ There were only two immigration offices (Bnei Brak and Eilat) in the whole of Israel where people were able to renew their visa, which meant that people living outside of the greater Tel Aviv area had to travel far to do this every two to four months.

⁴⁵ Conversation with Rachel Beitarie, Director of Zochrot, 16 June 2022, Yaffa.

⁴⁶ Conversation with Haben on 9 October 2022, Tel Aviv, Israel. The following quotes are all from the same conversation.

⁴⁷ I have known Tsenayet since early 2012, and have spent time with her and her extended family in their home often. I spent several nights with Tsenayet, her daughter and new partner during my research visit in the summer of 2016 and my then two-year-old daughter in the flat they shared with another family in South Tel Aviv. As such, many of the observations in this chapter are based on these intimate moments shared as mothers. I reconnected with Tsenayet after returning to Israel at the start of 2022.

⁴⁸ Interview with Zoe Gutzeit, Director of the Open Clinic, Physicians for Human Rights - Israel, 21 May 2017, Yaffa, Israel.

⁴⁹ Conversations and observations on the 27th of September 2022.

⁵⁰ In the absence of a proper registration system, children have different registration numbers for the different services they are eligible for under the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Social Services and the Ministry of Health (ASSAF 2020, 4, 10).

⁵¹ The transliteration comes from the following website: [Hebrew Children's Songs - ארץ ישראל שלי יפה וגם פורחת \(Eretz yisrael sheli yafa ve'gam porachat\) lyrics + English translation \(lyricstranslate.com\)](https://www.lyricstranslate.com/Hebrew-Childrens-Songs-ארץ-ישראל-שלי-יפה-וגם-פורחת-(Eretz-yisrael-sheli-yafa-ve-gam-porachat)-lyrics-+-English-translation)

⁵² In 2020, a normalisation agreement was signed between Sudan and Israel, but this has not made it any easier for Sudanese national to get status in Israel. If anything, it encouraged talk of deportations to Sudan.

⁵³ For more information see <https://www.addameer.org/prisons-and-detention-centers>

⁵⁴ For more information see Kuttner, Sam and Rozen, Sigal. 2015. *Immigration Detention in Israel Yearly Monitoring Report 2015*

⁵⁵ Interview with Berhana on 17 May 2017, Tel Aviv, Israel.

⁵⁶ Staying in Israel without a valid visa can result in detention in Saharonim Prison for up to 120 days (Hotline for Refugees and Migrants 2015).

⁵⁷ Interview with Zoe Gutzeit, Director of the Open Clinic, Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, 21 May 2017, Yaffa, Israel.

⁵⁸ Conversation with Adi Drori-Avraham, December 2022, Tel Aviv, Israel.

⁵⁹ Observation and conversation on the 17th of November 2022.

⁶⁰ Interview with Sara on 03 June 2017, Tel Aviv, Israel.

⁶¹ There are divisions along political lines. The church where I observed the baptism ceremony of the child of one of the interlocutors is associated with the Eritrean dictatorial regime through the Eritrean embassy in Tel Aviv. Another church in Tel Aviv, on the other hand, is frequented by opposition members and activists against the dictatorial regime. This church and its goers face harassment and feel the lengthy arm of the dictatorial regime all the way in Israel. In order to obtain any documents from the Eritrean embassy in Tel Aviv, sometimes necessary for family reunification processes, but also for building in Eritrea, it is rumoured that one needs to be a member of the Pro-government church. This points to complexities that I have chosen not to address in my thesis, as it is not the

focus of my research. However, these should be researched to gain a further nuanced understanding of the way in which religious practices and structures are impacted by the dictatorial regime.

⁶² Her daughter has an older brother in Eritrea. Their opportunities for family reunification are incredibly slim. She referred to her having a sibling in Israel.

⁶³ Religious tales tell how a drop of the Virgin Mary's milk fell on the floor of the cave while she was nursing baby Jesus, turning the rock white and giving rise to the chalky white stone. It is believed widely that mixing the stone with water increases women's chances of reproduction.

⁶⁴ Or Yehuda, Azor, Eilat, Ashdod, Tel Aviv, Bnei Brak, Bat Yam, Givatayim, Herzilya, Holon, Ramat Hasharon, Jerusalem, Kfar Shmaryahu, Petah Tikva, Kiryat Ono, and Ramat Gan. Many of these cities are in close vicinity to Tel Aviv and have historically been places of work for asylum seekers in Israel.

⁶⁵ However, only people who worked up to 30.06.2022 and if they continued their employment thereafter can be exempt from the directive orders.

⁶⁶ When I reconnected with her in 2022, they had two children together.

⁶⁷ Several women and one member of the support staff at Kuchinate wondered after she had left if she had made up the story in order to be resettled.

⁶⁸ Unlike other women who separated from their partners, Semhar's ex-husband and father of her children left Israel under the "voluntary deportation" scheme and disappeared out of their lives entirely. Otherwise, she would have run the risk of not being considered for resettlement as women whose children's father remains in Israel are, as an unofficial policy by the UNHCR, not resettled as they do not want to separate children

from their fathers. In some cases, if the father is willing to sign that they agree for the mother to take the children, women have been resettled, but this is challenging, causes all kinds of hurdles and is time consuming.

⁶⁹ Participant observation on 23 May 2017, Tel Aviv, Israel at the Eritrean Women's Community Centre.

⁷⁰ I visited several women in their homes where pictures of their deceased children adorned the walls. Some died in car accidents, others in nurseries set up to serve families living under the Israeli asylum regime. One woman lost her infant son, who choked on his milk bottle which he was drinking unassisted in one such understaffed nursery.

⁷¹ Participant observation on 24 May 2017, Tel Aviv, Israel.

⁷² Conversation with Semhar on 24 May 2017, Tel Aviv, Israel.

⁷³ Even though many of the women are in their mid-twenties, early marriages especially in rural villages meant that many women had their first children around 15-16, whether or not as a strategy to avoid indefinite military conscription.

⁷⁴ Selam Kidane explained how, due to restricting border and asylum regimes, and the large number of unaccompanied children arriving in the Global North, some have now been burdened with the bureaucracy of sponsoring their parents to come to the Global North via family reunification processes and the changing family dynamics that these bring.

⁷⁵ When women left Eritrea, and decided to leave their children behind, they often did so thinking that there would be ways to reunite once they had found a safe space to settle. As a result, there are many mothers in Israel who are maintaining two families, those left behind in Eritrea (who have often moved into the diaspora) and those started in Israel. There is no quantitative data around how many women left children behind in Eritrea,

but from conversations with Eritrean women over the past 11 years I estimate that 1/3 of women are mothering transnationally.

⁷⁶ I am using the term for lack of a better one at this point in time, while at the same time questioning the “spatial geographical binaries” these terms create (Nasser-Eddin and Abu-Assab 2020, 194).

⁷⁷ Nonetheless often making people undergo expensive paternity tests to prove the children are theirs.

⁷⁸ Thousands of Eritrean refugees live in protracted conditions in the refugee camps and cities in Ethiopia and Sudan, struggling for decades with immobility, intractable phases of waiting and livelihood insecurity (Adugna, Rudolf and Getachew 2022). The women themselves have intimate understandings of protracted waitness across their migration journey, particularly in Israel.

⁷⁹ Personal communication with Adi Drori-Avraham, former Head of Public Advocacy at ASSAF, 21 May 2017, Yaffa.

⁸⁰ Mothers of girls especially feared their daughters could be exposed to sexual violence.

⁸¹ Conversation with a mother from a West African country in May 2017.

⁸² Conversations with Tsega in September 2022, Tel Aviv, Israel.

⁸³ Interview with Regat on 16 May 2017, Tel Aviv, Israel. All following quotes are from the same interview. It was suggested by Sister Aziza, an Eritrean nun and nurse and co-founder and co-director of Kuchinate that I speak to Regat. At the time of the interview, Regat had been in Tel Aviv for eight years. Regat was in her thirties. The interview was conducted in Tigrinya. Sister Aziza helped with translation from Tigrinya to English. The woman used Hebrew words, such as *ken*, meaning yes as part of her vocabulary. She also

often confirmed things by sucking in breath, a common part of Tigrinya language and communication.

⁸⁴ Tesseney is a town in Western Eritrea bordering Sudan. The town is located south-east of Kassala on the other side of the border. The area around Tesseney is used by many Eritreans to cross into Sudan irregularly.

⁸⁵ Interview with Natsenet on 21 May 2022, Tel Aviv, Israel.

⁸⁶ About her pregnancy, in contrast to the ones she had in Eritrea, Natsenet said: “When you have a good husband and you don't feel stressed the pregnancy is easy. But when your husband is not good and you yourself do not feel calm, but constantly stressed then it is hard.” In the hospital, at the time of the birth, she had a picture of Jesus and prayed to him. She held off four doctors and told them that when God wanted her to give birth that then she would give birth and not sooner. She also refused a C-section. She told me she was new and did not understand the system much.

⁸⁷ Conversation with Yerusalem on 12 May 2017, Tel Aviv, Israel.

⁸⁸ It is important to remember that what affects asylum seeking women, affects the entire community of asylum seekers in Israel. Violence, exclusion and injustices are practised against entire asylum-seeking communities, and are not limited to just women. At the same time, I am careful to repeat a pervasive narrative by Israeli politicians, media and the Israeli host society of Eritrean men as rapists and wife-beaters. Even as we focus on how Israel's policies impact Eritrean women and children we must keep in mind that all people living under the Israeli asylum regime suffer from Israel's apartheid regime.

⁸⁹ This was confirmed by Monaliza Ammanuel, Project Officer at the Network of Eritrean Women UK, in an interview on 24 May 2018.⁸

⁹⁰ Observations at the Eritrean Women’s Community Centre in May 2017.

⁹¹ Conversations with staff in 2014 and 2017.

⁹² Conversations with staff of the Eritrean Women’s Community Centre in 2014 and 2017.

⁹³ The Law of Compulsory Education in Israel only applies to children over the age of three.

⁹⁴ “Hayarden” in Hatikva neighbourhood, “Bialik Rogozin” in Neve Sha’anana and “Keshet” and “Gvanim” on Hamasger Street. In 2018-2019, 1,700 pupils attended the above schools (ASSAF and the Garden Library 2020, 11).

⁹⁵ Several programmes have been set up by NGOs to support working parents, such as the Garden Library and Abu Gida Eritrean Community School. Here children can join in educational and fun activities and stay in a safe environment until seven or eight o’clock while their parents make their way back from work.

⁹⁶ Their living environment is in stark contrast with the life Natsenet had grown up in in Eritrea. Her family owned a big property in Keren, where they grew much of their own food and reared their own animals for milk and meat. She fondly remembered how her father would often come home with fish that would be roasted on a fire and shared with the whole family.

⁹⁷ Interview with Natsenet on 19 May 2017, Tel Aviv.

⁹⁸ I met Alem at an Eritrean wedding in Israel in 2014 and Hiwet in during refugee rights protests against detention and deportation and for a fair RSD process at the end of 2013 and early 2014. I reconnected with Alem after arriving in the UK at a meeting for Eritrean refugee women. Alem then introduced me to Fatima and facilitated the reconnection with Hiwet.

⁹⁹ Especially when through Group of Five sponsorship to Canada. Over the past decade, many Eritreans have made use of the sponsorship programme to Canada, either through private sponsorship or Group of Five. Against the Canadian government's policy, the person organising the group of five in Canada often requests up to 20,000 USD for this to be set up. The money is mostly paid back once the person arrives and is used to prove the sponsor's financial ability to sponsor. However, over the years, there have been many reports of people within the Eritrean and Sudanese communities asking high fees for support with navigating the process, such as finding sponsors, filling out the forms and other bureaucracies. Others made promises for opportunities, preying on people desperate to leave and willing to trust even the dodgiest of persons to make their wish for "mewtsie mengedie" a reality. Even when there is good intent, the process can take up to several years. Between the start of the pandemic and the summer of 2022, hundreds of people saw their processes put on hold. As such, despite the risks, travelling irregularly is a much less time-consuming process, if one does not consider the lengthy periods of waiting once the women reached the UK to gain refugee status and start the process of family reunification.

¹⁰⁰ Ethiopian Jewish migrants arrived in Israel starting with the 1984–5 migration (Anteby-Yemini 2017, 15; Mizrachi and Zawdu 2012).

¹⁰¹ Even with refugee status, the women have limited freedom of movement and transnational mobility as they cannot return for example to Eritrea.

¹⁰² This was also brought up in a conversation with Adi Drori-Avraham, Israeli worker at ASSAF, on 11 May 2017.

¹⁰³ Interestingly they speak to each other in Hebrew. When he joined her in the UK they continued to speak Hebrew with each other. Alem also commented on how she listened

to Israeli videos on YouTube, rather than English or Tigrinya. When her sister joined them, and Tigrinya was spoken more in the household, Hebrew became their “secret language”.

¹⁰⁴ Even with refugee status, the women have limited freedom of movement and transnational mobility as they cannot return for example to Eritrea.

¹⁰⁵ Communication with Fatima’s solicitor in July 2018.

¹⁰⁶ Pseudonym added by the author replacing the real name of Fatima’s friend.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Hiwet on 1 September 2018, United Kingdom. All the following quotes are from the same interview.

¹⁰⁸ Facebook post by one of my interlocutors on the 1st of December 2022

¹⁰⁹ Observation on 16 August 2022, Tel Aviv, Israel.

¹¹⁰ Interview with Kokob, 27 June 2018, Toronto, Canada.

¹¹¹ Conversation with Selam, 2013, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.