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Eritrean? Italian? British? Adaptive transnationalism and identity negotiation among Eritrean second generations in London and Milan

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the transnational engagement of Eritrean second generations (ESG) in London and Milan, analysing how family, community, and host-society dynamics shape their identities and practices. Drawing on a multi-sited ethnographic approach, this study explores the roles of family socialisation, language maintenance, and experiences of racial discrimination, in shaping emerging practices in political participation and civic engagement. Findings reveal that ESGs engage in what can be referred to as 'adaptive transnationalism'. They construct diasporic identities through selective engagement with their heritage, balancing cultural loyalty with personal beliefs in response to the distinct socio-political environments of their host societies. By focusing on the experiences of second generations within a refugee diaspora, this study challenges traditional notions of transnationalism, highlighting how second generations actively negotiate identity, belonging, and community solidarity across local and transnational spaces. These insights underscore the complexity of second-generation transnationalism, emphasising agency and adaptation within diverse European contexts.

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Second generations; Eritrean diaspora; Black Italians; Black British; adaptive transnationalism

Introduction

The transnational engagement of second generations, the children of immigrant parents, has garnered increasing scholarly attention over the last 15 years. Many European and North American countries now host significant populations of second generations, especially from countries in the Global South (Andall 2002; Christou and King 2010; Fokkema et al. 2012; Haikkola 2013; Hess and Korf 2014). Early research on this group focused on defining the prevalence and characteristics of transnational activities among them, often in comparison to their first-generation immigrant parents (Haikkola 2013). While much of this work explored the continuation of practices such as remittances, the unique positionality of the second generations has been underexplored, especially when it comes to refugee communities (Al-Ali, Black, and Koser 2001a; Bloch and Hirsch 2017; Chimienti et al. 2019; Mason 2007).

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This paper addresses this gap by examining the transnational engagement of Eritrean second generations (ESGs) in London and Milan. Eritrean refugee communities, which have contributed significantly to their home country's independence struggle and nation-building, remain under-researched in the context of second-generation transnationalism (Al-Ali, Black, and Koser 2001a; Campbell and Afework 2015; Hepner 2015). Eritrean second generations, often raised in highly transnational environments, navigate multiple cultural, social, and political identities across their host countries and Eritrea. This paper seeks to understand how these second generations negotiate their sense of belonging and identity in light of concurrent local and transnational dynamics.

While prior studies on transnationalism have largely focused on labour migrants or first-generation immigrants, fewer have examined how second generations from refugee backgrounds maintain and create new transnational connections (Bloch and Hirsch 2017; Gowricharn 2009; Viruell-Fuentes 2006). Second generations, face distinct social conditions in their host countries and often encounter systemic challenges, including discrimination and exclusion, which may prompt different forms of engagement with their country of origin. This paper explores how political changes at both local (Italy, UK) and transnational (Eritrea) levels shape the transnational practices of second-generation Eritreans and how they understand and negotiate their citizenship.

To answer this, the paper draws on 14 months of multi-sited fieldwork conducted in London and Milan. Using a transnational lens, this study analyses how ESGs in these two cities are involved in transnational activities that have a local and diasporic trajectory, and how these are shaped by their distinct experiences of growing up in diasporic communities. The central research question I address in this paper is how do Eritrean second generations in London and Milan negotiate their sense of belonging across multiple points of reference – Eritrea, the UK, and Italy? And what can it tell us about the impact of exclusionary and discriminatory policies in the host country on how they construct their sense of belonging? By examining the factors that influence transnational engagement among ESGs, this paper contributes to broader debates on second-generation transnationalism, refugee diasporas, and the intersections of local and transnational citizenship.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, the context and rationale for the study are established, positioning its theoretical foundation at the intersection of transnationalism, diaspora studies, and multi-layered citizenship theories. Next, the research methods employed for data collection are briefly outlined. The findings are then presented, focusing on (i) shaping factors, such as family socialisation, language maintenance, and racial discrimination, and (ii) emerging transnational practices, focusing on political participation and civic engagement. The conclusion addresses broader implications, emphasising the adaptive and selective nature of second-generation transnationalism within European diaspora settings.

Theoretical framework and context

This study builds on key concepts from transnationalism, diaspora studies, and citizenship theories to examine how Eritrean second generations navigate identity and belonging across national and diasporic spaces in London and Milan. Scholars have broadly defined transnationalism as a process by which migrants establish and sustain cross-

border ties that connect their countries of origin and residence (Glick-Schiller, Basch, and Blanc 1995; Vertovec 2001). However, research has primarily focused on first-generation migrants, whose connection to the homeland is often expressed through remittances, political engagement, and periodic return visits (Bauböck and Faist 2010; Gowricharn 2009; Guarnizo, Portes, and Haller 2003). For second generations – children born or raised in the host country – the dynamics of transnational engagement are uniquely shaped by both the host society and their country of heritage, which complicates and diversifies their identity formation (Child 1943; Lee 2011; Levitt 2009).

Before engaging with the theoretical framework, however, it is essential to critically interrogate the concept of 'second generation,' addressing its contested nature and the justification for its use in this paper. As scholars have noted, the increasing prominence of the term coincided with the rise of significant migration flows from the Global South to the Global North in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly in European and North American contexts (Chimienti et al. 2019; Kebede 2019; Portes and Zhou 1993). Rather than emerging from self-identification, the category has largely been externally imposed through the lens of integration, often functioning as a mechanism of racial differentiation that distinguishes the children of racialized immigrants from the dominant national population (Andall 2002; Beaman 2015; Creese 2019; Yuval-Davis 2007). In many contexts, this designation has served not only to mark difference but also to reinforce social and legal exclusions. This is particularly evident in European countries such as Italy, where legal frameworks continue to tie nationality to ancestry rather than birthplace, rendering many second-generation individuals effectively foreign despite being culturally and socially embedded in their countries of residence (Andall 2002; Grimaldi 2018; Hawthorne 2022; Woldu 2021)

Despite these critiques, this article employs the term 'second generation' as a conceptual tool to examine the experiences of individuals born to Eritrean immigrant parents in Italy and the UK. While alternative classifications, such as 'Black Italians' (Hawthorne 2022) or hyphenated identities like 'Ethiopian-American' (Kebede 2017), foreground racial or national affiliations, the choice to use 'second generations' in this study is informed by the ways in which participants articulated their own sense of identity. Respondents consistently expressed an ambivalence toward claims to 'Italianess' or 'Britishness,' revealing a complex negotiation of belonging that extends beyond racial identification to encompass heritage, migration histories, and transnational ties. The use of the term 'second generation' in this article is therefore not intended to reify fixed identity categories but rather to critically engage with the ways in which these individuals navigate their positionality.

In the context of refugee communities like the Eritrean diaspora, the dynamics of transnationalism are particularly complex. Scholars have noted that, compared to labour migrants, refugees are often driven by political circumstances that shape their transnational engagement differently (Al-Ali, Black, and Koser 2001b; Bloch and Hirsch 2017). Eritrea's political and social history has produced a highly mobilised and politically engaged diaspora, often referred to as one of the quintessential 'transnational nation-states' due to the diaspora's integral role in supporting Eritrea's independence struggle and subsequent nation-building efforts (Arnone 2010; Belloni 2019; Hepner 2015; Conrad 2005; Iyob 1995). The Eritrean independence movement, which spanned from 1961 to 1991, relied heavily on financial contributions, political advocacy,

and logistical support from Eritreans in the diaspora, who were dispersed across Europe, North America, and the Middle East. This support contributed significantly to the movement's success, as the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) mobilised a unified political and national identity among Eritreans abroad, emphasising a pan-Eritrean solidarity that transcended religious and ethnic divides (Conrad 2003). This historical backdrop is crucial in understanding the transnational identity of Eritrean second generations, who inherit not only a national identity but also a legacy of diasporic activism and transnational connections. However, the experiences of these second generations are also shaped by the distinct political and social conditions in their countries of residence, particularly in the UK and Italy, where Eritrean communities have established roots with unique challenges and opportunities.

Here, I want to draw the attention to the heterogeneity of experiences that the concept of 'generation', and by extension of 'second generation' reflects. The notion of generation as articulated by Mannheim (1970), refers to the shared experiences of individuals who are situated within a specific social location and embedded in socio-historical processes that have a direct impact on how individuals identify themselves (Berg and Eckstein 2009, 9). A number of scholars have adopted this notion to explore the ways in which changing pre-migration experiences among different waves of migrants from the same country of origin determine distinct forms of transnational engagement, identity construction and experiences of settlement over time (Chryssanthopoulou 2009; Hepner 2015; Kibria 2009; Zhou 2015). Notably Hepner (2015), in her analysis of the political transnational engagement of the global Eritrean diaspora distinguishes between 'generation nationalism', situated within the historical context of the war for independence, and 'generation asylum', marked by repression and militarisation from the state following the 1998–2000 border conflict (Hepner 2015, 186).

Eritrean second generations grow up in highly transnational spaces within the home and Eritrean community networks. However, the nature of those transnational networks and forms of transnational participation are directly affected by the pre-migration experiences of their parents and their immediate social networks. With that in mind, it is important to locate the analysis below within the experiences of the Eritrean second generations who were born and raised within the highly politically charged and transnational spaces of the Eritrean liberation movement, the children of 'generation nationalism' (Hepner 2015). And whilst it is important to consider the pre-migration historical context, the cross-national approach adopted in this research also allowed for a critical analysis of the concurrent political dynamics in the context of residence to account for changing experiences of settlement over time (Foner 2009; Zhou 2015). In other words, while the parents of my respondents in London and Milan might have migrated at similar times and for similar reasons, their identity construction and experiences of settlement will also be impacted by the political context in each country.

A further theoretical lens that is useful for this study is Yuval-Davis' (1999) concept of 'multi-layered citizenship', which posits that individuals participate in multiple political and social communities at different levels (local, national, and transnational), thereby navigating diverse forms of belonging. For second-generation Eritreans, multi-layered citizenship provides a lens to understand how they manage their dual affiliations with Eritrea and their countries of residence. Rather than belonging exclusively to either their host country or country of heritage, these individuals often exhibit situational

forms of identity that draw upon both local and transnational resources. This concept allows for an understanding of how second-generation Eritreans, living in highly transnational spaces, construct identities that are both fluid and selective. Citizenship, in this sense, is not merely about rights and duties but about actively negotiating multiple layers of belonging (Bosniak 2017; Yuval-Davis 1999).

By focusing on second generations, this paper also contributes to discussions of 'reactive transnationalism' (Snel, Hart, and Van Bochove 2016), which suggests that experiences of discrimination and social exclusion in the host society often drive second generations to form stronger attachments to their country of heritage or diaspora community. For Eritrean second generations, particularly in Italy where racial and ethnic minorities face institutionalised discrimination and are 'othered' in public discourse, reactive transnationalism serves as a response to local exclusion. In Milan, Eritrean second generations often describe their Eritrean heritage as a source of resilience and belonging, countering their lack of full inclusion in Italian society (Andall 2002; Arnone 2008; Graf 2017). Similarly, in the UK, instances of racial profiling and structural exclusion foster a 'diasporic consciousness' among young people of Black or other racialized background, who engage in forms of transnational activism and community-building that are distinct from their parents' experiences (Christian 2005; Fryer 2018; Gilroy 2004). However, while reactive transnationalism offers a valuable framework for understanding these dynamics, its impact is neither linear nor homogeneous. Experiences of discrimination undoubtedly shape second-generation transnational engagement, but they do so in ways that are contingent on multiple intersecting factors, including local socio-political contexts, diasporic networks, and global events. In this paper, I seek to expand on the concept of reactive transnationalism by proposing a more dynamic and fluid understanding of transnational engagement. Rather than viewing second-generation attachments to their country of heritage solely as reactive, I argue that their transnational practices are adaptive, shaped by interactions across local, transnational, and global scales. This perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of second-generation experiences, avoiding the risk of reifying their engagement as a fixed or uniform response to exclusion.

Contextualising the eritrean diaspora in London and Milan

Italy and the UK offer unique contexts for exploring how local and national policies, as well as diasporic networks, shape transnational practices and Eritrean communities. The UK's relatively liberal asylum system in the 1980s and early 1990s allowed for an easier path to settled status, which contributed to a larger and better supported Eritrean community in London and other major cities. British multicultural policies for refugee communities at the time enabled Eritrean migrants to develop robust support networks, particularly through the establishment of refugee community organisations (RCO) that supported their material settlement in the UK (Bloch 2000a, 2000b; Campbell and Afework 2015). The role of RCOs in supporting refugee settlement in the UK was particularly important in light of the 'front end loading' approach endorsed by governmental agencies such as the Refugee Council, whereby 'resources and support were provided during initial stages of resettlement' with no specialist assistance available thereafter, leaving refugees reliant to mainstream services (Calvar 1999, 130). Language barriers, cultural differences and experiences of discrimination left refuges and asylum seekers

with inadequate tools to settle in British society on their own, and the RCOs were set up to bridge that gap (Castle and Miller 2003; Schuster and Solomos 2004). However, with increasingly tighter immigration policies geared towards reducing the number of new refugees entering the UK and tougher control systems, funding for RCOs were cut, leading to the closure of many by the end of the 1990s (Bloch and Schuster 2005). While growing up, Eritrean second generations in the UK still faced systemic challenges, including racial discrimination, negative media portrayals of Black communities, and increasingly restrictive immigration policies from the early 2000s, which shaped their engagement with both Eritrea and the UK (Wright 2003).

The Eritrean community in Italy faced a different set of structural and social barriers. In Italy, Eritreans were not recognised as refugees in the pre-independence years and many of them lived under a precarious legal status, did not have access to housing and were forced to take on irregular menial jobs. Up until the mid 1980s, there was virtually no public conversation around immigration in Italy, and it was only in 1986 that the first legislation on immigration, was approved (Colombo and Sciortino 2004; Martignoni 2015). The law n. 943 was the first legislation to guarantee 'equal treatment and full equality of rights compared to Italian workers' to all *extracomunitari* (non-EU) workers and their families 'legally resident' in Italy (Law n. 943, 30 December 1986 n.d.). In the 1990s, Italy witnessed a substantial influx of immigrants: from about 400,000 migrants in the early 1980s to over one million in 1997 (Ambroso 1987; Consorti 2009). Although these figures need to be taken with caution, as they are based on the number of residence permits issued to non-EU passport holders (and therefore did not account for European migrants and irregular migrants), they are indicative of changing migration trends. As migrants started to represent a significant segment of the Italian labour market in a number of sectors, including domestic work, construction, agriculture, tourism and seasonal work (Consorti 2009, 125), the need for a more systematic process of regularisation of migrants' status became a pressing issue not only for migrants, but also for employers.

In Italy, public discussions around second generations began in the early 2000s, driven by pressure from activist networks like Rete G2, which highlighted issues around access to citizenship (Andall 2002; Zinn 2011). Italian nationality law follows the principle of *ius sanguinis*, granting citizenship based on parentage, unlike *ius soli*, which grants citizenship to all children born in the country. To obtain Italian citizenship, children of immigrants must prove uninterrupted residence in Italy for 18 years and apply within one year after turning 18 (Andall 2002). However, within Eritrean communities, some parents, unaware of the bureaucratic complexities, were caught it the loopholes of the immigration system, leaving their children without citizenship and classified as migrants under Italian law well into adulthood (Andall 2002; Arnone 2008; Grimaldi 2018). Eritrean second generations in Italy thus grew up with a heightened sense of otherness, as they often contend with exclusion from both formal citizenship and a culturally homogeneous Italian identity that associates Italian-ness with whiteness (Hawthorne 2022).

Methods and data

This study employed a multi-sited ethnographic approach to investigate the experiences and transnational practices of Eritrean second generations in London and Milan. Over

the course of 14 months, from September 2015 to November 2016, fieldwork was conducted in both cities.

Data collection involved three primary methods: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and the analysis of secondary data. Participant observation was conducted in community spaces integral to Eritrean diaspora life, including social gatherings, religious services, and cultural events. In London, this fieldwork was largely centred around community centres, Eritrean religious institutions, and educational events in areas such as Lambeth and Southwark, which are known for their Eritrean population. Milan-based observations were primarily conducted in Porta Venezia, a district historically associated with Eritrean political and social life.

The study conducted 30 semi-structured interviews, with 18 participants from Milan and 12 from London, focusing on individuals aged 18–35 to capture a generational perspective on identity and belonging. These interviews were designed to explore how participants understood their identities as both British or Italian citizens and as members of the Eritrean diaspora, with open-ended questions that encouraged reflection on family influences, experiences of discrimination, and involvement in Eritrean community activities. Conducted in English, Italian, Tigrinya[1] or a mixture of those languages, depending on the participants' preference, interviews provided insights into both the personal and collective dimensions of transnational identity. This multilingual approach ensured that cultural nuances were preserved, particularly in Tigrinya, where language carries socially specific meanings. All interviews were transcribed and, where necessary, translated to maintain consistency in analysis.

Given the politically sensitive nature of the Eritrean diaspora and my own positionality as an Italian national of Eritrean heritage, ethical considerations were central to this study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured that their identities would remain anonymized to protect their privacy. Special care was taken to ensure that participants felt comfortable discussing sensitive topics, such as experiences of discrimination and their perspectives on Eritrean politics. The polarised political landscape within the Eritrean diaspora, which includes both supporters and critics of the Eritrean government, necessitated a nuanced approach to addressing participants' narratives. For participants expressing concerns regarding political implications, the study emphasised data confidentiality and clarified that individual views would be separated from any broader political interpretation of the research findings. These precautions were essential in fostering an environment where participants could share openly, ensuring the reliability and depth of the data collected.

Family socialization and language maintenance

Family socialisation serves as a central mechanism through which Eritrean second generations internalise cultural practices, values, and memories associated with Eritrean identity. For many participants, the home environment functioned as a primary site of cultural transmission, where family rituals, stories of Eritrea, and everyday practices fostered an enduring connection to their heritage. Parents played a pivotal role in shaping their children's understanding of Eritrean identity, often emphasising cultural continuity as a response to the challenges of integration and assimilation within European societies.

In this context, Eritrean parents instilled a sense of collective memory and resilience that prepared their children to navigate multiple social worlds.

Participants described various ways in which family life was organised around maintaining Eritrean cultural practices. For example, Yodit, who was raised in Milan, explained that her parents would play Tigrinya music at home, celebrate Eritrean holidays, and participate in Eritrean community gatherings every weekend. These gatherings served as extensions of family socialisation, allowing second generations to observe and participate in the cultural customs upheld by older generations, but also develop their own personal ties. During our interview Yodit recalled her childhood as follows:

> Growing up, much of my everyday interactions were with Italians, like at school, on weekends we would go to the local parish and play there. Even during the summer, we would go to summer camps with the parish. [...] But on Saturdays for instance, I would go to Tigrinya school with Suor Cesarina, that's where I met most of my Eritrean peers. So, although my everyday life was very much [spent] with Italians, we were also exposed to Eritrean culture. Both my parents were very involved, they always have been. Even when the second war broke out, my father was the first one to go around with his van to collect the donations to send back. So yea, we were also very much exposed to our Eritrean heritage (Yodit 2016).

Yodit's account highlights the dual cultural orientation common among Eritrean second generations, where everyday interactions with Italian society coexist with deliberate practices of Eritrean cultural preservation within the family. Yodit's account suggests that second-generation Eritreans' cultural identities are not simply inherited but actively constructed through ongoing, community-based practices that foster a transnational connection to Eritrea.

Within the home, parents' recollections of life in Eritrea and their experiences as refugees provide second generations with a sense of historical perspective. For many participants, who were the children of 'generation nationalism', family stories became a form of cultural currency, linking them to a past they had not experienced directly. Filmon, a participant from London, recounted how his father would share stories of the Eritrean independence struggle, emphasising themes of resistance and pride in Eritrean identity. He noted that his household had always been highly politicised, thanks to his father, who was always up to date with both Eritrean and international politics. In his household, the Eritrean struggle for self-determination was framed within wider pan-African claims of independence from Western colonial and imperial powers, which also shaped how he negotiated his belonging to British society. Specifically, he saw Eritrea as his homeland, as the place where he wished 'to be buried in, alongside his forefathers' (Fieldnotes 2016). Despite holding a British passport, he did not identify as British. He considered Tigrinya to be his mother tongue, and defined English as his second language, even if it was the language he was most proficient in.

Language proficiency played a critical role among ESGs as both a medium for cultural transmission and a marker of belonging within the Eritrean community. Fluency in their mother-tongue held symbolic significance for ESGs, as it connected them not only to family members but also to the broader Eritrean diaspora. It enabled them to engage with community elders, access cultural narratives, and participate in religious and social events that are often conducted in the language. However, language maintenance within the family context can be challenging, especially in societies where assimilation pressures are strong. Among participants both in London and Milan, for instance,

limited exposure to Tigrinya and formal community settings has led to varying degrees of proficiency, with some second generations experiencing a sense of linguistic estrangement. Selam, who grew up in Milan, expressed feeling disconnected from the Eritrean community due to her limited proficiency in Tigrinya: 'My parents tried to teach me, but because I mostly spoke Italian outside, I never became fluent. Sometimes, I feel like I'm missing a part of my heritage' (2015). Within the home, she grew up with the idea that Eritrea was her 'real home'; that there was a place – Eritrea – where she belonged where she looked 'like everybody else'. Soon after independence, she made her first visit to Eritrea with her parents, which brought mixed feelings. On the one hand, she felt an immediate ease and feeling of 'home', but on the other hand there was also an unexpected experience of othering. Her western upbringing and her inability to speak Tigrinya, made her stand-out as different even in Asmara, and it hindered her ability to develop personal relationships with her relatives and the country in general.

The ethnic and religious diversity of the Eritrean communities in London, revealed additional complexities that tie language maintenances with multiple aspects of ESGs' identities. For instance, Semira, a Muslim London-based respondent, used to attend Saturday Tigrinya and Arabic school as a child, which was one of the key moments during childhood where she was able to develop and maintain personal networks of Eritrean friends outside of her family. With most of her family spread across the world, especially in the Middle East, language was a source of detachment at times, as some of her relatives only spoke Arabic, and not Tigrinya, whereas at home she was mostly exposed to Tigrinya. In fact, she recalled that while growing up, although English was the language she spoke the most, especially with her siblings, her parents spoke a mixture of English, Tigrinya and a little Arabic.

Overall, family socialisation and language maintenance emerge as foundational elements of transnational engagement for Eritrean second generations, grounding them in a sense of cultural continuity while enabling connections with the Eritrean diaspora. Through family practices, historical narratives, and language maintenance, second generations develop a multi-layered identity that bridges their lives in the host society with their heritage. However, this process is not without challenges, as they must navigate the cultural and linguistic tensions that arise from living within two distinct cultural contexts. The findings above illustrate how family socialisation and language maintenance shape transnational identity in ways that are both empowering and complex, reflecting a continuous negotiation of belonging within Eritrean, British, and Italian spaces.

Perceptions of host societies and experiences of racial discrimination

The perceptions that Eritrean second generations hold of their host societies are deeply shaped by their experiences of racial discrimination, both overt and systemic. These experiences of exclusion impact not only how they view the societies they live in but also influence their identification with the Eritrean diaspora as a source of solidarity and cultural belonging. The divergent social climates in London and Milan shape these perceptions in distinct ways, but across both contexts, racial discrimination reinforces feelings of otherness, prompting second generations to seek belonging within Eritrean or broader Black diaspora communities.

In Milan, racial discrimination and limited access to Italian citizenship exacerbated this sense of exclusion. Under Italy's ius sanguinis citizenship laws, children born to non-Italian parents do not automatically receive citizenship, leaving many second-generation Eritreans without formal recognition as Italians (Andall 2002). Selam, who only obtained Italian citizenship at the age of 18, shared an example of the kind of othering she experienced in Italy:

> I was offered a job opportunity to travel with a music band that played Italian folk music in music festivals across the world. Imagine the irony! Especially in northern America, where we used to perform quite often, there was never a contestation of how and why I belonged in the band [as a Black person]. I wasn't the exotic element of the band, the band itself was exotic to the American public. However, when we performed in Italy, the question was always there: 'Where are you from? Where are you really really from?' (Selam 2015)

Among ESGs, denial of citizenship was perceived as an institutional rejection of their 'Italianess'. Renewing the residence permit entailed missing school days to go to the *questura* (police station) and join long queues with other – predominantly non-EU – migrants to renew their migration papers at least every two years. As Selam travelled all over the world to perform with her band, she became once again aware that her 'Italianess' was more likely to be challenged 'at home, in Italy' than elsewhere. To be Black and Italian was considered to be an oxymoron, and that perception was strongly shaped by the negative and anti-immigrant narratives perpetuated in the media (Andall 2002). Black men and young Black boys in Milan, were also disproportionally targeted by the police and subjected to continuous harassment. For instance, during an informal conversation, one of Selam's male friends shared an anecdote with us:

> One day I was driving home, and for no reason the police stopped me. They asked me for my driving license and residence permit. I gave them my driving license but told them I did not have a residence permit. They asked me for my residence permit because they assumed that I was an immigrant, but actually, I have had my Italian ID since birth. As a matter of fact, at the time I was working for the Italian Navy! Imagine!? But I did not say anything, and just said that I didn't have a residence permit. They took me to the police station and when they finally checked on the system, they realised that not only was I Italian, but that I was also part of the Navy. They were so embarrassed and asked me why I didn't say anything before. I just wanted them to realise how ignorant and small minded they were. Instead of asking for ID, they just assumed I'd have a residence permit. So backwards (Fieldnotes 2016).

In the UK, where Eritrean second generations are part of a larger and more established Black diaspora, racial discrimination is often felt through microaggressions, stereotypes, and institutional biases within educational and professional settings. Unlike their Milanese counterparts who in the 1980s and 1990s represented the first cohort of Black children to enter the educational system, in London, ESGs experienced a much more multi-cultural and multi-ethnic space. Multi-cultural spaces did not, however, automatically translate into supportive spaces. While ESGs typically valued their Eritrean heritage and cultural traditions, they were also aware that to the dominant White society, they were only Black, and that Blackness was perceived as a marker of criminality and threat (Gilroy 2004). Filmon, who was born and raised in London and worked as an educator, reflected on his experience as a Black man in Britain as follows:

> I was always ascribed an identity, before I was able to choose one: 'black man', 'ni***r', 'you people', 'them' … even the police identifies us as 'IC3', which stands for black man. I was given an identity by the wider society, by the teachers, the policeman who would stop and search you because he is racially profiling you. All of those things (Filmon 2016).

Filmon also noted how second generations who were not exposed to Eritrean communities and had limited access to Eritrean peers while growing up, were more likely to identify with Black Caribbean culture and see themselves as British as opposed to Eritrean. Similarly to Milan, in London young Black boys and men were also disproportionally targeted by police for routine checks, contributing to the growing distrust towards local authorities by ESGs. Distrust between second generations migrants and the local authorities is increasingly receiving scholarly attention, as young Black people, and particularly Black boys, are under the continuous scrutiny from the police and ignored by the schools (Christian 2005; Solomos 1993). Those experiences hold particular weight on the children of refugee parents, as the parents themselves in many cases do not know the system of the country of residence, nor have they the language proficiency and cultural capital to advocate for their children. That was, for example, what Hassan (2014) found in his study with young Somali men in London, where in one case a single mother faced significant institutional challenges in addressing the bullying that her son was experiencing in school. The implications of such discrimination extend beyond educational settings, as these experiences contribute to Eritrean second generations' sense of alienation within British society.

Across both London and Milan, the findings indicate that racial discrimination not only shapes how Eritrean second generations perceive their host societies but also influences their relationship with the Eritrean diaspora. By framing their diasporic identity as a response to exclusion, they cultivate a sense of belonging that is both a reaction against the host society's rejection and an affirmation of their cultural heritage. For Eritrean second generations, the diaspora serves as a cultural and emotional anchor, where shared experiences of exclusion and resilience foster a sense of community that counters the alienation they feel in their host societies.

Homeland politics: between 'fighting the regime' and 'supporting our leader'

Political participation among Eritrean second generations reflects the complexities of diasporic nationalism, where loyalty to Eritrea, family expectations, and individual political beliefs intersect. Many second-generation Eritreans find themselves navigating a fraught political landscape, where expressions of Eritrean identity are often tied to polarised views on the Eritrean government.

The cases of Selam and Filmon, two ESGs born in Milan and London respectively, illustrate how early family socialisation impacts political affiliations in adulthood, often in contrasting directions. Both individuals were born in the early 1980s and raised in households where Eritrean politics held a prominent place, yet they have come to hold sharply different positions regarding the Eritrean government, reflecting a broader division within the Eritrean diaspora.

Selam, who was raised in Milan, grew up in a household sympathetic to the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), the political party that lost the civil war to the EPLF in the midst

to the war for independence. Her early exposure to Eritrean politics emphasised the struggle for independence but did not foster loyalty to the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), former EPLF. Instead, her family's perspective nurtured a sense of critical engagement with Eritrean politics, which later manifested as opposition to the regime. Filmon, by contrast, grew up in London in a household aligned with the present day PFDJ. For Filmon, Eritrea represented a homeland worthy of allegiance, and this loyalty extended into adulthood. He became an active member of the UK branch of the Young People's Front for Democracy and Justice (YPFDJ), viewing his participation as an extension of his identity and duty as an Eritrean citizen. His engagement with the YPFDJ provided a structured framework for expressing his nationalist sentiments, reinforcing a political identity aligned with the PFDJ's ideology and vision for Eritrea.

The divergence between Selam's and Filmon's political paths reflects the impact of familial socialisation on ESGs' political orientations. While both families nurtured a strong sense of Eritrean identity in their children, the ideologies they transmitted differed significantly. In Selam's case, her family's support for the ELF implicitly encouraged a critical stance toward Eritrean state power. This critical orientation became more pronounced in adulthood, as Selam engaged with newly arrived Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in Milan, whose stories of repression under the PFDJ contrasted sharply with the idealised image of Eritrea from her childhood. Witnessing the hardships of Eritreans fleeing authoritarian rule solidified her opposition to the regime, leading her to participate in protests that were against the PFDJ's human rights abuses. For Selam, political engagement became a means to reconcile her identity with a commitment to justice, informed by the values of her family and shaped by her own experiences within the diaspora.

Filmon's socialisation process, however, cultivated loyalty rather than dissent. The political narratives he absorbed at home emphasised Eritrea's sovereignty and the legitimacy of its government in resisting foreign influence. This pro-government stance was reinforced by the PFDJ's framing of Eritrea's struggles as part of an ongoing fight for self-determination, against perceived external threats. The YPFDJ, in which Filmon became active, builds on these narratives to foster allegiance among second-generation Eritreans, calling on them to support the PFDJ as an act of patriotism and duty. But it is important to note that while Filmon's participation reflected a deep ideological alignment with the PFDJ, most young Eritreans participated in activities organised by YPFDJ primarily for social and cultural reasons. For instance, two of my respondents, Michael (Milan) and Yodit (Milan-London) who had participated in one European YPFDJ conference[2] each, emphasised their satisfaction with the social and cultural aspects of the event, particularly as they developed new friendships with peers from other countries of residence. Helen (Milan), who had never participated in a YPFDJ conference but who had a number of friends who did, noted how most of her friends emphasised the sense of belonging they felt in those conferences: 'everyone recalled the socialising in the evenings, the jokes, the friendships made … those were the things that people remembered the most. It was fun, because it was among other Eritreans, where everyone understood each other's experiences of growing up in the diaspora!' (Fieldnotes 2016).

These contrasting trajectories underscore the role of family influence in shaping ESGs' political identities, especially within a context where state and community discourses around Eritrea are often polarised. While Selam's family socialised her to engage critically

with Eritrean politics, Filmon's upbringing encouraged loyalty to the Eritrean state. Both Selam and Filmon exemplify how ESGs navigate identity and belonging within diaspora communities, negotiating their loyalties through the political narratives inherited from their families and adapting them within the broader diasporic and transnational context. Ultimately, these cases illustrate the dual pressures ESGs face: to remain loyal to a national identity shaped by their parents' generation, and to reconcile that identity with their own evolving political beliefs and experiences within the diaspora.

Civic engagement: building community in London and Milan

Civic engagement among Eritrean second generations represent a significant facet of their transnational identity, as it provides them with a means to address the challenges their communities face in the host society while fostering connections to their cultural heritage. Although only a small number of ESGs actively participate in transnational politics, many feel a sense of responsibility toward their local Eritrean communities. For ESGs like Eden in Milan and Semira in London, this sense of civic duty reflects an ongoing negotiation between their identification with Eritrean heritage and their identities as citizens of their countries of residence. Their engagement in civic activities is shaped by the unique social and political environments of their respective cities and reflects the multi-layered ways in which second-generation identities are constructed.

Eden, born and raised in Italy, experienced a complex journey toward identifying with the Eritrean community. Due to discriminatory housing policies, her mother was unable to secure housing, resulting in Eden being raised in foster care with an Italian family, with minimal exposure to Eritrean culture during her formative years. It was only in her late teens, after reconnecting with her Eritrean siblings, that she began to develop an Eritrean social network in Milan. Although she did not speak Tigrinya, frequent trips to Eritrea as an adult for work-related projects helped her build a sense of transnational belonging that bridged her Italian upbringing and Eritrean heritage. This dual identification motivated Eden to volunteer in Porta Venezia between 2014 and 2016, supporting Eritrean migrants who were transiting through Milan. Her work also involved advocating for the rights of Eritrean business owners who faced discrimination from Italian authorities. Eden observed that political fragmentation within the Eritrean community limited solidarity, which, in turn, weakened collective efforts to support both transiting migrants and longstanding Eritrean residents in Milan. By facilitating communication between Eritrean businesses and the Milan municipality, Eden sought to bridge this gap, driven by a sense of civic duty that embraced both her Italian and Eritrean identities.

Similarly, Semira's sense of civic duty in London was shaped by her upbringing within an Eritrean family actively involved in community events supporting the Eritrean liberation movement. Growing up, she attended Saturday Tigrinya and Arabic school, a space where she built connections with other Eritrean children. However, as she grew older and her university studies and work took her away from London, she found herself increasingly distanced from Eritrean networks outside her family. Returning to London, Semira observed a growing fragmentation within the Eritrean community, with fewer young people attending community events compared to her childhood. To address this, she re-engaged with the Eritrean community by volunteering with an association she had attended as a child, aiming to support younger generations of British-born Eritreans.

By organising culturally relevant activities, Semira hoped to offer a positive example of career and educational opportunities available to them as part of their British-Eritrean identity. Her work reflects her belief that it is her civic duty, as a British-Eritrean, to help the next generation overcome the challenges she herself faced.

The cases of Eden and Semira highlight how ESGs navigate multi-layered identities, balancing local and transnational forms of engagement. Both Eden and Semira see themselves as Italian and British, respectively, while maintaining a strong connection to their Eritrean heritage. They perceive their local and transnational networks as valuable social and cultural capital, which they use to support their communities. Both face contested identities, being viewed as 'too Western' in Eritrea and as 'other' in their countries of birth. Yet, their upbringing in Italy and the UK provides them with resources to navigate these spaces and perform their civic duties. Eden's volunteer work in Milan and her advocacy for Eritrean business owners exemplify her commitment to supporting her local community, while Semira's work with Eritrean youth in London reflects her dedication to fostering a sense of identity and belonging among younger ESGs.

These examples demonstrate that civic engagement for ESGs often transcends transnational politics, embracing localised forms of involvement that address the specific needs of their communities. ESGs' civic engagement is not only a means of affirming their Eritrean identity but also a way to enact citizenship within their local contexts. By viewing citizenship as a multi-layered construct (Yuval-Davis 1999), ESGs' civic duty becomes a situationally driven enactment of citizenship that reflects their identities as Eritreans and as members of their countries of residence. These diverse forms of engagement highlight how ESGs negotiate their sense of belonging within multi-layered, transnational, and trans-local networks, demonstrating how civic duty can be enacted both locally and in connection with their heritage.

Conclusion

This study provides a detailed exploration of the transnational engagement of Eritrean second generations in London and Milan, highlighting how their identities and practices are shaped by the interplay of family, community, and host-society dynamics. Family socialisation and language maintenance emerge as crucial in fostering a sense of Eritrean identity, while experiences of racial discrimination and exclusion in the UK and Italy reinforce connections to the diaspora. These shaping factors, alongside political and civic engagement, reveal a nuanced and selective approach to diasporic identity, where second generations balance cultural loyalty with individual convictions and the socio-political realities of their host societies.

The findings carry significant implications for migration studies, particularly for the understanding and theorisation of second generations within transnationalism and diaspora studies. Traditional models of transnationalism and diaspora often conceptualise second generations as either inheriting their parents' transnational ties or gradually assimilating into the host society. However, this study demonstrates that second generations engage in a dynamic process of identity negotiation, selectively adopting, reinterpreting, or even resisting aspects of their heritage in ways that are influenced by local and transnational pressures. This approach challenges static views of transnationalism and

suggests that second generations engage in what might be termed adaptive transnationalism, where diasporic practices and connections are responsive to both cultural heritage and the specific demands of the host society.

In the realm of diaspora studies, the experiences of Eritrean second generations underscore the importance of viewing diasporic identity as multifaceted and selective, rather than strictly inherited or consistently enacted. These findings suggest that second generations do not merely replicate the diasporic nationalism of their parents but instead navigate a complex terrain, where cultural pride coexists with critical perspectives on homeland politics. The selective and situational engagement observed here indicates that second-generation diasporic identities are shaped by resilience and agency, reflecting individual adaptations to the broader socio-political landscape.

Ultimately, the study invites a reconceptualization of second-generation transnationalism in migration studies, particularly within refugee diasporas, as a form of identity that is not simply a continuation of first-generation transnational practices but a unique negotiation shaped by discrimination, community support, and personal beliefs. By balancing their connections to Eritrea with the demands and opportunities of their host societies, Eritrean second generations embody a flexible and context-responsive form of transnationalism that expands current theoretical frameworks. This adaptive approach to transnational engagement, deeply rooted in both resilience and agency, underscores the importance of host-country contexts in shaping the expressions of diasporic identities across generations.

Notes

1. Tigrinya is one of the nine languages spoken in Eritrea, spoken by the largest ethnic group in Eritrea that goes by the same name.
2. YPFDJ main event in Europe is a yearly conference where delegates from different branches meet to share their annual reports. The location for each conference changes every year and membership to the party is not a requirement for participation.

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